

Ontario teacher protest for better PPE fiercely opposed by education unions

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15 October 2021

A teacher-led protest in Ontario advocating for the right to wear higher quality masks in classrooms has won widespread support from educators, parents, and workers across Canada. Organized independently by rank-and-file teachers, the October 14 protest was bitterly denounced by the education unions, who support the pro-business school reopening policies of the province's Progressive Conservative government.

The protest called for school staff across Ontario to wear superior masks to work, such as N95 respirators, rather than the surgical masks mandated by the provincial government and school boards. As supporters of the protest point out, scientific evidence has established that surgical masks are inadequate to sufficiently protect the wearer from an airborne virus such as SARS-CoV-2, especially in overcrowded classrooms where children under age 12 are unvaccinated.

Since classes resumed for full in-person learning at the beginning of September, thousands of children and hundreds of educators have been infected by the virus. Of the 417 new COVID-19 infections in Ontario reported on Thursday, 126 were school-related. A total of 696 schools have reported at least one case, and four are currently closed because of outbreaks.

Thursday's protest was launched earlier this month by Ryan Imgrund, a biostatistician and high school teacher. Imgrund has gained a large following on Twitter for his detailed daily updates on the pandemic in Ontario, as well as his outspoken opposition to the government's disastrous handling of school reopenings.

The teachers unions' response to Imgrund's appeal was swift and vicious, demonstrating their hostility to any independent action taken by educators to combat the pandemic.

Not long after Imgrund issued the call for school staff to don better masks, he was sent a cease-and-desist letter by his union, the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA). The union censured Imgrund for calling the protest and demanded that he immediately cancel it.

This drew a furious backlash from rank-and-file educators and their supporters. One Twitter user with the alias tru'dat wrote, "OECTA takes \$1000s from teachers over their careers, but during the most severe health crisis of the century, they ACTUALLY THREATEN TEACHERS AGAINST USING THE HIGHEST QUALITY PPE!"

The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) soon weighed in, issuing an advisory to its members urging them not to participate in the October 14 protest. In a statement that sounded more like a threat against teachers than an advisory note, ETFO argued that participating in the protest and wearing superior masks could be deemed by the school boards as insubordination and even an illegal strike, warranting suspension or worse. The ETFO did not offer even token sympathy for the concerns animating the protest. Nor did it indicate that it would so much as lift a finger to defend any teachers victimized by school authorities' for seeking to protect their health and lives and those of their loved ones.

Instead, the advisory instructed union members to lodge their concerns with their school principal or ETFO local. In other words, to appeal to and place their trust in representatives of school boards that are unapologetically supportive of school reopenings, and a union opposed to any teacher action to fight for safer classrooms.

The ETFO advisory also instructed school staff to consult the province's Occupational Health and Safety

Act to address their concerns. Yet all teachers know that the Ontario Ministry of Labour has denied every single work refusal filed by teachers throughout the pandemic, exposing the claims of the unions and their supporters that work refusals are an effective way to secure safe working conditions.

A particularly heated exchange erupted on Twitter around a circular sent to members of Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF) District 24 by its president, Robert Grascho. In the letter, Grascho baselessly accused Imgrund and protest organizers of profiteering from the sale of masks and declared that it was not "practical" to ask administrators to check on the authenticity of non-surgical masks.

Twitter user Mamabear123, responding to Imgrund's citation of Grascho's letter, wrote, "Are YOU actually working in a school Rob? Are you listening to your members? Doesn't sound like it." Another user, Joanna Dent, succinctly replied, "I am a member in his local union and he hasn't asked us what we want."

As protest supporters pointed out in their comments, the unions have responded to the greatest health and social crisis in a century not by fighting for the lives and health of their members and their students, but by staunchly backing the reopening drive of big-business governments at both the provincial and federal levels.

This drive, based on a mitigation framework of extremely limited public health measures that maintains non-essential economic activity and the continuation of in-classroom education, can at best slow the spread of the virus, while perpetuating mass illness and death. This has been most sharply illustrated in Canada's western provinces, British Columbia, Alberta, and Saskatchewan, where daily cases are in the thousands and daily deaths in the dozens as a result of the rollback of public health measures by conservative and union-backed New Democratic Party governments alike.

The teacher unions reject any program of mobilizing their members to oppose these murderous policies. When, as a result, rank-and-file school staff take matters into their own hands, the union bureaucracy responds with unrestrained hostility and threats. Their hostility reflects the fear among the six-figure-earning union officials that any independent protest, no matter how limited, could escape their control and trigger a mass working class-led movement aimed at prioritizing the needs of society instead of the profits of the

corporate elite.

The union bureaucracy represents a section of the affluent middle class that is alienated from and hostile to the rank-and-file. Their material interests are closely aligned with the corporations and the governments that represent them. Schools have been forced open so that parents can continue working, churning out profits for the corporations.

In contrast, leading scientists, such as University of Calgary biologist Dr. Malgorzata Gasperowicz, have convincingly shown that an eradication strategy, including a shutdown of non-essential economic activity and schools lasting only several weeks, coupled with full and adequate compensation for workers and their families, can eliminate the virus.

This is the perspective which guided yesterday's international School Strike called by UK parent Lisa Diaz. Diaz, along with Dr. Gasperowicz and a number of other scientists and workers, are featured speakers in an international webinar scheduled for Sunday, October 24, titled *How to End the Pandemic: The Case for Eradication*.

Hosted by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, the webinar will explain why a global eradication strategy is needed to combat COVID-19 and the urgency of developing an international movement of the working class to enforce a science-based response to the pandemic. We encourage all educators and their supporters in Canada to make plans to attend this important event, and to contact the Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Committee (CERSC) to take up a genuine struggle to eradicate the virus and secure safe working conditions for all. The CERSC can be reached at: cersc.cspnb@gmail.com.



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