Education workers on collision course with Ontario's Doug Ford-led Tory government

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Contracts for 250,000 Ontario education workers—including teachers, teaching assistants, caretakers and school support staff—expire at the end of August, setting the stage for a direct confrontation with the province's hard-right Progressive Conservative government.

Led by the multi-millionaire right-wing populist and erstwhile Trump enthusiast Doug Ford, the Ontario Tory government is determined to impose contracts that will once again slash workers' real wages, enshrine billions in planned budget cuts, and keep schools open for in-class instruction amid continuing waves of the COVID-19 pandemic.

To defeat this assault, education workers must take their struggle into their own hands, by building rank-and-file committees independent of the corporatist trade union apparatuses, which for decades have suppressed the class struggle and imposed one sellout contract after another. Such rank-and-file committees would make explicit the tie between education workers' fight for improved wages and working conditions and the defence of public education and, on this basis, fight to mobilize the working class as a whole against the Ford government and its illegitimate program of austerity for workers and public services.

Education workers, like all Ontario's more than 1 million public and para-public workers, have had their wage "increases" capped at a miserable 1 percent per year since 2019. This is because the unions bowed before, and dutifully-enforced, the Conservatives' Bill 124 during the last bargaining round. The three-years of Bill 124-stipulated real-term pay cuts followed on from years of wage freezes and "wage restraint" under the union-supported Liberal governments of Dalton McGuinty and Kathleen Wynne. As a result, according to one union estimate, education workers will have suffered a 19.5 percent cut in their real wages during the 10-year period ending August 2022.

The Ford government has already served notice that in the name of a "post-pandemic" return to fiscal "prudence" it intends to make sweeping cuts to education, health care and social services. Its much-hyped "pre-election" budget revealed that education spending in the 2021-22 fiscal year was actually $1.3 billion less than budgeted, and outlined plans for years of real-term per capita cuts in education spending.

The recent Ontario elections demonstrated conclusively that Ford and his Tories have no popular mandate for their program of vicious attacks on public spending and workers' wages, and the continued enforcement of a "let it rip" pandemic policy that has already officially claimed the lives of over 13,000 people in Ontario and infected tens of thousands of education staff.

On June 2, the Conservatives secured the support of a mere 17.75 percent of the electorate and polled fewer votes than did the New Democrats when they finished a poor second in the 2018 election. Ford was able to cling to power only because the NDP performed even more miserably, losing 800,000 votes from its 2018 total.

The education unions reacted to this massive vote of no-confidence in the political establishment by grovelling at Ford's feet and pleading for urgent negotiations so as to prevent any job action. The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), which represents 55,000 education support workers, issued a statement the day after the election entitled "Ontario education workers tell Ford to get a fair deal done now." Laura Walton, president of CUPE's Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU), declared, "It's within the re-elected premier's power to avoid more disruption for students this fall." She appealed for Ford to initiate contract talks with OSBCU completely separate from those involving Ontario's teachers. CUPE is thus reprising the role it played in the last round of negotiations. In October 2019, it sabotaged a threatened strike by its members at the 11th hour and reached a deal that included the 1 percent per-year pay cap even though Bill 124 had yet even to be adopted by the Ontario legislature.

When Walton and CUPE talk about avoiding "disruption," what they mean is preventing a strike at all costs. They fear like the plague the prospect of caretakers and support staff unifying with teachers and other education workers in a common struggle that would pose a political challenge to the Ford government's austerity program and the unions' cozy relationship with the state and big business through the anti-worker "collective bargaining" system. This fear is shared by the teacher unions, with the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (EFTO) declaring in its post-election statement that it is "ready to work with this government" to reach a deal.

CUPE's post-election statement also noted: "Years of systemic and structural underfunding by this Conservative government, and the Liberal government before it, have resulted in understaffing and unsustainably low wages for education workers."

This statement is a devastating self-indictment. What have the unions done to oppose understaffing and low wages for education workers? Education workers would unanimously declare that the

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rival union bureaucracies have done nothing to organize opposition to the austerity policies implemented by Liberal and Progressive Conservative governments alike. On the contrary, they have consciously worked to demobilize all resistance. They worked hand-in-glove with the “progressives” McGuinty and Wynne, and while posturing as opponents of Ford and his cuts, they joined the Ontario Federation of Labour and Unifor in blocking any mobilization of working-class power against his government, insisting everyone must wait for the opportunity to elect an alternative NDP or Liberal-led pro-big business, pro-war government on June 2, 2022.

The disastrous consequences of this strategy were especially evident during the pandemic, when CUPE and the teacher unions declared all collective action by workers against the Ford government’s policy of mass infection in schools to be “illegal.”

In an attempt to absolve itself of any responsibility for education workers’ wages falling substantially below inflation, CUPE blamed “legislated interference” by the Liberals and Progressive Conservatives. The statement cited Bill 115, which the minority Liberal government, propped up by the NDP, implemented to freeze educators’ wages between 2012 and 2015, and Bill 124, the 1 percent pay cap.

All that this proves is the bankruptcy of the unions’ policy of begging for talks with government ministers while preventing workers from waging a political struggle against the ruling elite’s austerity program, which all established parties support and enforce using all the legislative and administrative tools of the capitalist state.

Since the first wave of the pandemic, the union bureaucracy has actively promoted the ruling class’ criminal back-to-work/back-to-school campaign that led to the mass infection of students and staff with COVID-19. The ETFO sought in its statement to cover up this record with outright lies, claiming that it is “advocating for more investment in public education” and is “committed to protect workers rights and the human rights of all.” In reality, the ETFO has done the exact opposite during the ongoing pandemic. It and the other teacher unions have ordered teachers to report to work as COVID runs rampant through schools, threatening the lives of students, staff and their families—an egregious violation of workers’ rights if ever there was one.

The experience of the last two-and-a-half years, and more specifically the recent stripping away of all COVID-19 protections by governments across the country, overseen by the union-backed Justin Trudeau-led Liberal government, has revealed for all to see what the true role of the state is. The federal Liberal government, with the backing of the unions and NDP, handed over more than $650 billion to the financial oligarchy and big business at the start of the pandemic, and developed a close partnership with premiers like Ford who were committed to a policy of prioritizing corporate profits over human health and lives.

Ford has made clear his intention to continue his ruinous pandemic policy by reappointing the despised Stephen Lecce as Education Minister, a man associated with ruthless attacks on education workers’ rights and the dismantling of all COVID protections in the classroom.

The years of union-accepted and enforced real wage cuts, burgeoning class sizes and mass COVID-19 infections demonstrate the urgency of education workers building independent rank-and-file committees to lead their struggle to victory. A network of educators rank-and-file committees would provide education workers with a means of uniting across all the arbitrary union-jurisdictional divisions, and a forum to formulate demands based on what they actually need, not what Ford and his collaborators in the union bureaucracy claim is “affordable.” These demands should include an immediate 20 percent pay increase to make up for years of pay freezes and cuts, and the adoption of a science-based strategy to eliminate and eradicate COVID-19, including the temporary shuttering of schools with full compensation for all workers. These measures, and a substantial increase in public education budgets to reduce class sizes and modernize dilapidated school buildings, can be paid for by the confiscation of the vast wealth accumulated by Canada’s pandemic profiteers.

The union bureaucrats are sending signals that they want to bargain over July and August while teachers are on vacation and janitors are busy cleaning furniture, offices and classrooms; stripping and waxing floors; and preparing buildings for the 2022/2023 school year. In this way, they hope to present education workers with a fait accompli when they return from vacation, i.e., another round of sellout contracts.

The most fatal mistake under these conditions would be for teachers, education assistants, janitors and other support staff to take a wait-and-see approach. Nobody should be under any illusion about the rotten terms of employment the union bureaucracy intends to cook up with Ford over the summer break. Instead, education workers should use the coming weeks to organize rank-and-file committees and prepare for a mass political mobilization in the fall to fight for a well-funded public education system with decent-paying, secure jobs for all. This will necessitate a struggle to bring down the widely hated Ford government and replace it with a workers’ government committed to prioritizing the lives and wellbeing of working people over corporate profits.

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