

Ontario Education Minister arrogantly demands “stability” in the classroom as contract talks begin

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Before contract negotiations even get under way this week for over 250,000 education workers in Ontario, Education Minister Stephen Lecce has provocatively demanded “stability” for the upcoming school year. This outrageous attempt to intimidate teachers, education assistants, and support staff, coming from a man who has overseen the most unstable years in Ontario’s education system in over a century, underscores that Premier Doug Ford and his hard-right Progressive Conservative government are intent on imposing concessions-filled contracts on education workers and will tolerate no opposition.

In his comments made earlier this month, Lecce declared with a straight face that students in the upcoming 2022/23 school year should return to a “normal learning experience,” which includes, among other things, “extra-curricular activities and sports.”

Education workers hearing these obtuse remarks must have been rubbing their eyes in disbelief. Even before the pandemic hit in March 2020, the Ford government imposed cuts to education budgets that made overcrowded classrooms, a lack of support for special education, and dilapidated school buildings the “normal learning experience” for hundreds of thousands of students across Ontario. Coming on top of over a decade of vicious austerity imposed by trade union-backed Ontario Liberal governments, the Ford government’s elimination of the equivalent of 10,000 full-time teaching positions, under the spending cuts it implemented in early 2019, pushed the entire education system to the brink of collapse.

The ongoing, rapidly evolving and intensifying COVID-19 pandemic has been used by the capitalist elite to accelerate

the war on the working class by promoting and enforcing the pro-business policy of “herd immunity” through mass infection. To keep non-essential businesses operating and ensure an uninterrupted flow of capitalist profits, the Ford government sacrificed children, parents and education staff to infection.

The homicidal mass infection policy has completely destabilized the education system in Ontario. Hundreds of education workers have quit or retired early, thousands more have been disabled by Long COVID, and too many education workers have been sent to an early grave.

Lecce’s insistence on “stability” expresses the demands of his masters in the capitalist elite. They are adamant that schools be kept open for in-class instruction, so parents can be compelled to go to work, even if it means infecting millions more with COVID and now Monkeypox, which is spreading like wildfire with little surveillance. They also support the Ford government’s plans to further slash real-terms per capita public education funding, already among the lowest in Canada, so corporate taxes can be further reduced and the budget “balanced” at the expense of working people.

Lecce’s “stability” declaration was also a none-to-subtle warning that the government will move to illegalize any strike action by teachers, education assistants, janitors, and administrative staff seeking to recoup years of real-terms wage cuts, protect themselves from raging inflation, and oppose the dismantling of public education.

His threat is not directed at the education unions. They are falling over themselves to get round the “bargaining table” with the hated Education Minister, whose party won the support of less than 18 percent of the total electorate in the June 2 provincial elections. Rather, it is aimed at rank-and-file education workers, who are ready for a genuine struggle to secure wage and benefit increases, and a well-funded public education system, but are being shackled by the bureaucratic unions to prevent any serious job action and

challenge to the government's austerity agenda.

Ford, the erstwhile admirer of aspiring fascist dictator Donald Trump, recently stated that education workers will get a wage increase above 1 percent, but warned in the next breath that it won't be "through the roof." This means the contract the government is going to come up with and hoping to force on education workers with the help of the unions will come nowhere near meeting the demands of education workers. Inflation is now galloping at an annual pace of 7.7 percent and there are no signs of it slackening anytime soon. Moreover, education workers have been labouring under the 1 percent per-year wage cap imposed by Bill 124 for the past three years—a real-wage cut that the unions willingly enforced.

The government and their corporate media allies will try to frame their contract offers as a "generous" pay raise compared to the past three years, but in the context of runaway inflation it will amount to a sweeping pay cut.

The Ford government can behave so aggressively because they know that the education unions have no intention of putting up a fight. As talks get under way this week with four of the five unions, none of the bureaucrats in the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF), Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association, or the Association of Franco-Ontarian Teachers have uttered a single word about a strike vote, let alone actual job action. This is despite the fact that, according to a recent Global News report, the union leaders are "expecting talks to drag on well past the expiration of their contracts on Aug. 31." Karen Littlewood, president of OSSTF, asserted, "We are nowhere near a strike vote. It is so premature right now."

In other words, education workers are supposed to sit on their hands and do nothing while Ford and his hard-right ministers issue threats, whip up a vicious campaign against teachers and support staff—accusing them of planning to take kids "hostage" and "disrupt" their education—and "negotiate" a package of real-terms pay cuts behind the scenes with the unions. Education workers will then be called upon to approve these rotten tentative agreements in votes accompanied by a cacophony of propaganda about greedy teachers and education staff endangering the "normal learning experience" of students and childcare provision for working families.

Education workers have seen this game play out before. In 2019, as anger grew across the province over the Ford government's austerity program, the unions delayed calling strike votes until the contracts had expired. With 55,000 support staff set to walk out in early October 2019 after an overwhelming strike vote, CUPE reached an 11th-hour deal with Ford that included the enforcement of Bill 124's wage

cap, even though the law was not yet on the books. The teacher unions were forced by rank-and-file anger to call a series of rotating regional strikes, which were carefully planned to ensure that they never occurred on the same day or at the same time. After months of rank-and-file pressure, the teacher unions finally felt compelled to call out 200,000 teachers for a one-day strike in February 2020, which provoked widespread public enthusiasm. Shocked by the groundswell of popular support, the teacher unions responded by calling off all future strikes, before seizing on the pandemic as an excuse to enforce the 1 percent pay deal in sellout contracts. They then proceeded to denounce all collective action against the mass infection of education workers and students as "illegal."

If Ford and Lecce were genuinely concerned about the "stability" of the education system and ensuring a full learning experience for all, they could start by providing education staff with an immediate 20 percent pay increase to reverse the 19 percent after-inflation pay cut education workers have suffered since 2012. They could then index wage increases to inflation in year two of the upcoming contract and beyond. They could immediately allocate the \$14 billion in outstanding repairs and upgrades to school buildings across the province, make good the \$1.3 billion they cut from the 2021-22 education budget, and make provisions to cover the \$12.3 billion dollars projected by the Financial Accountability Office to be missing from education spending by 2030.

Every education worker knows full well that they will do none of this, because their professed concern for kids' education is a sham. These urgently necessary measures will only be achieved to the extent that teachers, education assistants, caretakers, and support staff unite to organize the mass mobilization of working people in a political struggle to fight for a strong public education system with decent-paying, secure jobs for all, and the return of strict public health measures to stop the spread of COVID-19. Education workers must take up an independent struggle for what they know they deserve and need, not only insofar as wages are concerned, but also to provide the kind of education system needed to teach and raise kids for a fulfilling life.

Education workers who support these demands should join the struggle to build an Ontario educators rank-and-file committee. **Email ontedrhc@gmail.com to get involved.**



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