

Union bargaining for 55,000 Ontario education support staff strikes militant pose while preparing to sell out

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Education workers in Ontario are working to establish a rank-and-file committee to take forward the struggle to defend public education against the Ford government's attacks and the complicity of the trade unions. Email ontedrjc@gmail.com to get involved.

Bargaining is ongoing between Ontario's hard-right Progressive Conservative government and the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) over a contract for 55,000 education assistants, caretakers, and support staff. Union negotiators recently unveiled a "full package of proposals," which they claim are aimed at achieving a "fair deal" by September and thus averting a possible strike.

The Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU), which operates within CUPE, proposed an 11 percent raise every year of the next contract for education workers. This is equivalent to a \$3.25 raise per hour increase for custodians, education assistants, secretaries, and early childhood educators. On Thursday, the *Toronto Star* reported that CUPE officials plan to meet August 22 to approve a strike vote, which immediately provoked the howls of outrage from Ford's Education Minister, Stephen Lecce. When asked about the prospect of a strike, Lecce refused to rule out using back-to-work legislation to criminalize it.

Another bargaining session between the OSBCU and government is planned for Monday and Tuesday, following another round of bargaining this past week. CUPE has insisted on bargaining separately from the teacher unions, which has the effect of arbitrarily dividing up education workers under conditions where many of the demands they have are the same. Even if the August 22 meeting of union local presidents approves a strike vote, there is no timetable for when such a vote would be held,

never mind when a strike would be called.

Even if the OSBCU's offer is taken at face value, which is ill-advised given CUPE's long record of selling out workers' struggles, it falls well short of what workers actually need to make ends meet. With inflation approaching double digits, an 11 percent per year pay increase would do nothing to reverse the 19 percent pay cut education workers have suffered in Ontario since 2012, a cut that has plunged many of them into poverty. If inflation continues to rise, as is widely projected, 11 percent per year would amount to a real-terms wage cut. And even based on the conservative assumption that inflation stabilizes, education support workers would at best get a real-terms pay freeze.

Overturning the decade of declining wages and securing inflation-busting wage increases would entail a pay increase of at least 40 percent for all support staff during the first year, followed by a cost-of-living adjustment clause for every succeeding year. Moreover, working conditions can only be improved if billions of dollars are invested in upgrading and modernizing Ontario's dilapidated schools, whose budgets have been cut to the bone by successive governments led by the Progressive Conservatives and Liberals, with the support of the New Democratic Party (NDP).

The financial resources to fund such investments exist in abundance, but they are monopolized by a wealthy oligarchy that has enriched itself over the past two-and-a-half years of the pandemic.

If the CUPE bureaucracy remains in control of the negotiations, it will not even succeed in achieving its own inadequate demands. This is because the principal concern of CUPE, like all the teacher unions, is to prevent a genuine struggle for improvements to wages and conditions developing into a direct political confrontation

with the Ford government.

In 2019, the OSBCU struck a militant pose after contracts expired for 55,000 support staff and over 200,000 teachers on August 31. Laura Walton, who remains the OSBCU president to this day, pledged to secure significant gains for workers, who delivered an overwhelming mandate for strike action. But only a few hours before the strike was due to commence, CUPE torpedoed it by reaching a last-minute sellout deal with Lecce. In a flagrant betrayal of rank-and-file workers, the OSBCU negotiators agreed to enforce Ford's proposed 1 percent per year wage cap for public sector workers, despite the fact that it had not yet been passed into law.

Had the strike gone ahead, it could have served as the catalyst for a broad mobilization of working people against the hated Ford government, which had announced hundreds of millions in spending cuts over the preceding months. Hundreds of thousands took part in protests throughout 2019 against the gutting of funding for public education, health care, and other critical social services. As it was, CUPE's capitulation to Ford set the benchmark for all the education unions, who agreed to the same wage-cutting terms after going through the motions of calling a one-day province-wide strike.

The *World Socialist Web Site* warns education support staff and teachers that a similar betrayal is being prepared behind the scenes this time around. Neither Walton nor any other leading CUPE official has warned their members about the imminent threat of back-to-work legislation, let alone said what they would do to resist such anti-democratic methods. This is because CUPE, like the teacher unions in 2015, would serve as enthusiastic enforcers of legislation banning worker opposition to the Ford government's program of public spending austerity and attacks on workers' wages and conditions.

In this regard, the OSBCU's bargaining proposal is revealing for what it omits to mention, more than for what it contains.

As education workers prepare to start a third school year under conditions of a raging pandemic, not one mention of COVID-19 is to be found in the OSBCU bargaining proposal. The omission of demands for COVID protection for education workers is consistent with the unions' enforcement of the criminal back-to-work/back-to-school policies of governments at all levels. The unions accomplished this by sabotaging all workers' struggles for improved health and safety provisions in the workplace, declaring them to be illegal.

The unions are now joining the corporate media to

claim that the pandemic is over, disarming the public to the dangers of COVID-19 and withholding the truth on the devastating consequences of reinfections on the body.

Schools have been shown time and again to be hotbeds of COVID transmission. If no pandemic protections are mandated, education workers and children will be in immense danger of suffering countless COVID infections, which can have catastrophic consequences in the immediate, medium and long term.

CUPE's proposals also omit any mention of the threat posed by monkeypox, which presents huge challenges to the education system because it can be transmitted via contaminated surfaces, which can remain infectious for many days, as well as through the air. The threat of a rapid outbreak of monkeypox in overcrowded places like schools and factories has already been underscored by reports of cases at General Motors' Sterling Heights Assembly Plant in Detroit. The OSBCU's failure to raise any proposed measures to tackle this threat underlines the indifference felt by union bureaucrats towards the health and safety of rank-and-file members.

To take forward their struggle for wage increases, improved conditions, and the defence of public education, education support workers must mobilize support from teachers and broader sections of the working class for a political fight against the Ford government, which won the support of less than 18 percent of the electorate at the last election and has no mandate for its austerity policies.

This requires the building of rank-and-file committees independently of and in opposition to CUPE, the OSBCU and other unions, which are working tirelessly to keep workers confined within the straitjacket of the pro-employer "collective bargaining" system. Above all, it necessitates the unification of Ontario workers' struggles with those of their colleagues across Canada and internationally through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



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