

Mobilize the working class in defence of public education and to stop the pandemic! Build the Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee!

Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee
15 August 2022

The following statement was discussed and approved unanimously at last Sunday's founding meeting of the Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee.

Education workers are on a collision course with the province's hard-right, Doug Ford-led government.

Sunday's meeting took place just days after Education Minister Stephen Lecce threatened to criminalize strike action by any of the 250,000 Ontario teachers and school support staff whose contracts are about to expire. As across Canada, Ontario is preparing to reopen schools next month with no protections in place to stop another devastating wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

On Monday, it was revealed that the government is offering education support workers with annual incomes of less than \$40,000 four years of 2 percent annual pay increases, under conditions where inflation is approaching double digits. Those earning more than \$40,000 are being offered just 1.25 percent per year.

To get involved with the Committee's work, email ontedrfc@gmail.com.

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Dear brothers and sisters,

We Ontario teachers, educational assistants, early childhood educators, administrative support staff, caretakers and bus drivers have formed the Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee. We aim to unite all education workers in the province on a program of political class struggle against years of savage cuts to education funding enforced by Liberal and Progressive Conservative governments alike, real-terms wage cuts and the abandonment of any effort to stop the spread of the deadly COVID-19 pandemic. Education workers cannot and will not accept the rapid erosion of their real wages through below-inflation pay "increases," or having our health and safety imperiled by the government's "profits before lives," "let it rip" COVID-19 policy and its refusal to adequately address the growing threat of monkeypox in our workplaces and communities.

Our committee is made up of rank-and-file education workers. We are organizationally and politically independent of and hostile to all unions and establishment political parties, who have helped bring the public education system to the brink of collapse. We are taking matters into our own hands because we understand that only the mass mobilization of the working class can enforce the changes we must have in our workplace to defend public education, secure decent wages and benefits and protect our health and very lives.

Education workers in Ontario have been divided from each other by our unions and have been ruled over by a succession of right-wing

governments that seek to defund, destroy and privatize public education. This is why it is critical that we have organized ourselves independently from the corporatist trade union apparatuses and political parties that do not serve our interests. We unite as education workers in solidarity across all education sectors, and membership in our committee is open to all workers in the education sector, from child care to university.

Contract negotiations are currently underway for over 250,000 Ontario teachers and education support staff. But what is going on behind the scenes has nothing to do with a real "negotiation." On the contrary, Doug Ford's hated government, which won the support of less than 18 percent of the electorate at the last provincial election, is conspiring with the education unions to conclude yet another round of sellout contracts that will result in real-terms wage and benefit rollbacks for years to come. This has been made clear by the Ford government, which has demanded "stability" in schools this September, i.e., the suppression of any struggle by workers to improve wages and all measures to counter the pandemic.

We reject this demand! We refuse to throw away our health and that of our students in schools that will yet again be infested with COVID-19 and threatened by monkeypox with no mitigations in place to protect students and workers. The absence of elementary health and safety measures is an existential threat to all education workers, students and parents.

What does the OEWRFC fight for?

Many of our brothers and sisters toil for poverty wages and are precariously employed. All of us endure unsafe working conditions. It is time that all education workers wage a united counteroffensive and become the spearhead of a mass working class movement against capitalist austerity and for workplace health and safety grounded in a program of COVID-19 and monkeypox elimination. Over 13,000 Ontarians have needlessly perished from COVID-19. Hundreds of thousands will suffer from Long COVID. New variants and emerging diseases pose a constant threat. Schools are set to open in the fall lacking even basic mitigation measures. Overcrowded classrooms will once again become super-spreaders.

The following demands by our committee are not negotiable. We base these demands on what education workers and students need, not what governments and their big business masters say they can "afford":

*** The immediate repeal of Bill 124, coupled with cost-of-living increases above inflation, retroactive to at least 2012 for all education**

sector workers.

*** An immediate 50 percent wage increase for all education support workers, including educational assistants, caretakers, administrative staff, maintenance workers and bus drivers, who earn \$45,000 per year or less.**

*** Workplace health and safety that is science-based and aimed at COVID-19 and monkeypox elimination policy, including: reinstating basic measures in schools such as mandatory masking and cohorting, vaccine mandates, HEPA filters in every classroom and use of outdoor settings. Switch to remote learning until the twin pandemics of COVID-19 and monkeypox are brought under control, with full compensation to working people forced to stay at home to mind their children. Institute a systematic fully-funded contact tracing program.**

*** The formation of rank-and-file safety committees in all schools and education buildings to oversee workplace safety. These committees shall have the right to immediately close schools if they deem conditions unsafe.**

*** Permanent full-time status for all casual and temporary workers, including occasional teachers and education support workers.**

*** An end to all employment tiers by raising lower-tiered teachers and support workers to top pay and benefits with immediate effect.**

*** The hiring of thousands of additional education workers to reduce class sizes and cope with the increased demands on schools due to social problems like poverty, drug addiction and gang violence.**

*** Billions invested in public education to upgrade school infrastructure and teaching materials. An immediate commitment to cover the \$14 billion backlog for school building repairs.**

*** The reversal of decades of austerity and the devastation it has caused to the public sector. All attempts to privatize education in Ontario must be adamantly opposed and prevented. Free quality education is a basic democratic right!**

We make these demands because they are what is necessary for a vibrant and healthy education system in Ontario that can meet the needs of working people. Society has ample resources to fund them, but the vast wealth created by the labour of our fellow workers is monopolized by a super-rich oligarchy that is concerned only with boosting corporate profits, funding the military to wage war around the world and cutting public spending to the bone so that taxes can be further reduced for the most privileged.

The fight for our demands must therefore involve a frontal assault on the stranglehold exercised by the ruling elite on all aspects of social, economic and political life. Only then can society's vast resources be redirected towards meeting urgent social needs. These needs include a well-funded system of public education, which was and remains a historic achievement of societal progress.

For a political rebellion against the education trade unions

We can win our demands but only through political struggle.

Time and again, CUPE, the OSSTF, the ETFO and the other education unions have used the collective bargaining framework to sabotage job action and suppress workers' struggles. In the name of upholding the "collective bargaining" system, unions have bowed without a fight to anti-democratic legislation illegalizing teacher job actions imposed on teachers by the McGuinty and Wynne Liberals governments; declared any collective action by workers to protect themselves and their students from COVID-19 infection to be "illegal;" and enforced viciously anti-worker legislation like Bill 124, which imposed a 1 percent annual wage cap on over a million public sector workers.

The OEWRFC openly declares that it has no confidence in the collective bargaining framework, which is a rigged system designed to impose the interests of the government and big business. We call for all contract bargaining to be livestreamed so that education workers can follow and resist the betrayals of their demands being carried out by well-paid union officials. We also warn that education workers must make preparations now to defy back-to-work legislation, which the Ford government will use as a bludgeon against us if we take strike action.

These anti-worker policies do not arise from individual mistakes or the bad intentions of top union bureaucrats but from the unions' position as appendages of the state and established pro-austerity, pro-war political parties. The education unions played a decisive role in strangling the mass movement led by teachers against Mike Harris' "Common Sense Revolution" in the late 1990s. In answer to Harris' Thatcher-style class war assault, the unions first limited workers to toothless regional "days of action," then ordered teachers to return to work when their 1997 "illegal" strike staggered the government and threatened to become the catalyst for a general strike. Harris was only able to act so aggressively because his NDP predecessors under Premier Bob Rae had paved the way for him by enforcing austerity in the face of widespread popular anger.

Terrified by the upsurge of working class anger against Harris, the unions developed a close political partnership to suppress the class struggle with the Ontario Liberals, whom they supported in power for 15 years as Premiers McGuinty and Wynne continued to slash public spending and provide big business and the rich with a bonanza of tax cuts. The New Democrats were a crucial part of this conspiracy against working people. The most egregious example of this came when the NDP propped up the minority Liberal government between 2011 and 2014 as it imposed a pay freeze on teachers and cut education budgets. That same Liberal government enforced the despised Bill 115, which included a multi-year pay freeze for teachers.

This union/Liberal/NDP partnership in Ontario became the template for a similar strategy at the federal level. This culminated in March 2022 with the conclusion of a "confidence-and-supply" agreement between the Liberals and NDP, with union approval, to keep Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in power through 2025. His government's program can be summed up as follows: tens of billions of dollars to wage war on Russia and build up the military for future conflicts, austerity for workers and repeated rounds of infection for the working population with COVID-19.

During the current contract negotiations, the union bureaucracy is once again keeping members in the dark. On official union pages, comments from rank-and-file workers voice their disgust with the union bureaucracy's "lack of transparency," "lack of action" and unwillingness to prepare for struggle. Workers are instructed to join "strike committees" which are set up by the union bureaucracy to provide a façade of rank-and-file participation. These are cynical traps meant to contain and douse the simmering anger among the rank and file. The Ontario Education Workers Rank and File Committee will wage a relentless struggle to create a genuine unified education workers movement.

None of the problems our movement fights to resolve—the gutting of public education funding, attacks on wages and conditions and a raging pandemic—can be resolved within the provincial borders of Ontario. We face the same challenges that education workers confront in Quebec, British Columbia, and the rest of Canada. There is no fundamental difference between education workers in various provinces, or, for that matter, in different countries. Everywhere, they confront capitalist ruling elites hell-bent on dismantling education and all public services to enrich the corporations and fund imperialist wars.

Education workers must respond with their own international strategy. The OEWRFC is therefore being established as an organization affiliated to the Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which was formed in 2021 to unify workers from coast to coast against the

capitalist elite's homicidal pandemic policies. Our committee also pledges to support the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), which provides the political leadership and organizational coordination necessary to develop a unified counter-offensive by workers around the world for decent-paying, secure jobs, well-funded public services and an end to the pandemic.

The Ontario Educators Rank-and-File Committee values and accepts workers from all walks of life, regardless of race, nationality, gender or sexual orientation. However, we reject the identity politics that has become rife within the trade unions, who consciously work to divide workers on the basis of arbitrarily defined "communities." The purpose of identity politics is to legitimize a scramble for well-paid positions within the upper echelons of the union bureaucracy and the state, while the vast majority of workers of all races and genders continue to suffer under capitalist austerity.

We begin our struggle for safe workplaces and better compensation from a working class perspective. We hold that the main division in capitalist society is based on class. Our committee fights for the broadest political unity of all workers on the basis of our opposition to the "let it rip" pandemic policy and capitalist austerity that threaten the viability of public education. The decades-long degeneration of the unions, coupled with the intensification of a systemic crisis of global capitalism, is prompting billions of workers to move rapidly to the left. Current labor organizations are incapable of meeting the needs of the working class. Workers are looking for political alternatives and new forms of struggle that unite us beyond provincial and national boundaries and challenge the subordination of basic social needs to capitalist profit. We urge all rank-and-file Ontario education workers to join the OEWRFC.



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