

Union representing 55,000 Ontario, Canada education support workers delays strike vote, as Ford government unveils wage-cutting plan

Sterling Oliver
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Are you an education worker in Ontario? We want to hear what you think of the Ford government's provocative offer and CUPE's stalling tactics. Contact the Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Safety Committee by emailing ontedrfc@gmail.com or joining its Facebook group.

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Ontario's hard-right Progressive Conservative government launched a massive provocation against education workers last week with an offer of a meagre 2 percent wage increase for education support staff earning less than \$40,000 annually. Any caretakers, education assistants, early childhood educators and administrative staff earning more than \$40,000 were offered an even more pathetic 1.25 percent yearly increase, a fraction of the current rate of inflation, which is running at over 8 percent.

The proposed four-year deal is a declaration of war on the working class. The below-inflation pay offer sets the stage for an intensification of the assault on public education and an escalation of attacks on the living standards of all workers. The attack on education workers goes hand in hand with an assault on health care workers and the health care system. Premier Doug Ford's government is preparing a comprehensive health care privatization program aimed at creating a two-tier health care system, with all but the most rudimentary care to be withheld from those who cannot afford it.

Education Minister Stephen Lecce, who has vowed to deploy anti-democratic back-to-work legislation to criminalize strikes, asserted in a statement following the announcement that "the government's proposal is reasonable, fair and provides stability." This statement

flips reality on its head. The provocative and insulting proposal is by design unreasonable, unfair and destabilizes the lives of education workers and the entire public education system.

Over the last 10 years, education workers have had their wages cut by 19 percent. Many older education workers have seen their wages and benefits consistently reduced since the introduction of the social contract in the early 1990s by the hated New Democratic Party government under then Premier Bob Rae. At its current rate, inflation would rise by around 30 percent during the four-year deal proposed by the government. The meagre 8 percent increase over four years would thus amount to a pay cut of more than 20 percent.

In the face of this threat to further decimate the living standards of education workers, the trade unions are focused above all on demobilizing opposition to the Ford government among their members and in the population more generally. The Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU), which is part of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), announced earlier this week that it will not even call a strike vote until September 23. The deliberately drawn-out voting process will only conclude on October 2. Even then, more than a month after contracts have expired for 55,000 education support workers, OSBCU President and lead negotiator Laura Walton stressed that support for a strike in the planned vote would not result in workers immediately walking off the job.

Walton's OSBCU released its initial proposal for an agreement, which contained annual wage increases of 11.7 percent. This demand would barely keep pace with inflation, which is approaching double digits, and would not even make a dent in the wage cuts suffered

by education workers over the past decade.

The OSBCU has no intention of fighting for its own demands, which were largely released for public consumption as part of its bogus “open bargaining” policy. Aimed at militant workers who are skeptical if not outright hostile to the OSBCU leadership due to its series of betrayals, the “open bargaining” procedure amounts to the union releasing a few carefully crafted details, while the real deal-making goes on behind the scenes. None of the “negotiations,” which are in reality discussions between partners on how best to impose attacks on the workers, have been livestreamed for all to see, which would be a prerequisite for rank-and-file control over contract talks.

In an interview with CityNews Ottawa on August 17, Walton appealed to Lecce to “reconsider” the government’s offer and claimed both sides have to get “closer” to reach a deal. She emphasized that no strike would take place if the education minister comes to the table with a “fair deal.” Translated into plain English, this means that Walton will not even fight for the inadequate 11.7 percent proposal widely touted by the OSBCU. If Lecce and company can just come “closer” by offering 3 percent or 4 percent per year, Walton and the OSBCU bureaucrats will capitulate before a strike even begins and hail the result as a “victory” because the original government proposal was averted.

In the same interview, Walton stated that the “ball is in Mr. Lecce’s court.” In other words, the union bureaucracy is ceding political initiative to the hard-right PC government instead of going on the offensive and appealing to the working class for support in their struggle against capitalist austerity policies being imposed by a government that gained the support of less than 18 percent of the electorate in June’s provincial election.

Significantly, the OSBCU does not have a single demand in its bargaining proposals for health and safety measures under conditions of the still raging COVID-19 pandemic. This is hardly surprising when one considers how the education unions all championed the reckless back-to-school campaign spearheaded by Ford as part of his government’s “profits before lives” pandemic policy. The back-to-school campaign was critical to protecting corporate profits, since it freed up parents from child care responsibilities and enabled them to return to work churning out profits for the

corporate elite.

As for the teacher unions, which collectively have over 200,000 members, they insist on bargaining separately with the Ford government at a later date so as to block a unified fight by teachers and support staff for improved wages and conditions. Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation (OSSTF) President Karen Littlewood all but ruled out strike action by Ontario teachers, asserting that “Federation members” would be “in the classroom” come fall.

During each bargaining round, the education unions engage in the same carefully choreographed “collective bargaining” procedure. Education workers who work in the same building and even the same classroom are arbitrarily divided up into profession-based groups so that the unions can sell them out in a backroom conspiracy with government ministers one at a time.

In 2019, for example, the OSBCU sabotaged a strike by its members the night before it was due to start by announcing a contract which accepted the Ford government’s annual 1 percent wage cap for public sector workers, even though the wage cap law was not yet in force at the time. After allowing teachers to blow off steam in a series of regional strikes, the OSSTF and other teachers unions accepted the same wage cap a few months later.

To prevent a similar sellout this time around, education workers must make their fight the spearhead of a political struggle by the entire working class against the policies of capitalist austerity pursued by the Ford government and the Trudeau Liberals at the federal level. The defence of public education is a key element in the independent mobilization of working people to fight for the reorganization of society so its vast resources can be directed to meet burning social needs rather than private profit. Education workers wishing to participate in this struggle should join and build the Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee.



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