

Ontario education workers speak out against union efforts to intimidate rank and file

Our reporter
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Are you an education worker in Ontario? The Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is holding a meeting this Sunday, September 11, at 1 p.m. Eastern to discuss the way forward in the fight against the pandemic and contract struggles across the country. Email cersc.csppb@gmail.com to attend.

Over 250,000 teachers and education support staff were forced to return to class across Ontario this week without a contract by the education trade unions. Despite overwhelming support among education assistants, caretakers, early childhood educators, teachers and other support staff for a joint struggle to secure above-inflation pay increases and put an end to austerity for public education, the education trade unions allowed the previous contracts to expire August 31 without even holding strike votes and are insisting on bargaining separately.

These delaying tactics, deliberately aimed at demoralizing rank-and-file workers and softening them up for a sellout deal, have allowed the hard-right Ford government to go on the offensive. Education Minister Stephen Lecce has arrogantly declared that he wants “stability” in schools and threatened to criminalize job action with back-to-work legislation.

The Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU), a branch of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), is currently in talks with the Ford government to secure a contract for 55,000 support staff. The main concern of the union leadership is to avoid a strike, as shown by the fact that they have delayed calling a vote until the end of the month. The ballot will close October 2, meaning that the bureaucracy will announce the result almost six weeks after the expiration of the previous contract. As OSBCU lead negotiator Laura Walton has repeatedly stressed, a “yes” vote in the strike ballot will not cause the OSBCU bureaucracy to call immediate job action.

Workers are outraged at the unions’ attempt to block a joint struggle by education workers and are turning to the newly established Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File

Committee (OEWRFC) to guide their struggle. The OEWRFC was set up last month and counts teachers, caretakers and educational assistants among its membership. It is fighting to unify all education workers in a mass political mobilization of the working class against the Ford government’s onslaught on wages and conditions, and gutting of education spending.

The Committee’s development has unnerved the bureaucracy, with the OSBCU issuing a tersely worded statement on Facebook in late August warning workers not to join the OEWRFC’s Facebook discussion group because it has barred union bureaucrats from participating. Responding to this flagrant attempt to intimidate workers, a Toronto-based caretaker commented, “We indeed block union bureaucrats for very important reasons. We want to provide workers regardless of job title with a platform to freely discuss their working conditions, their experience, their demands, etc., without being spied on by union bureaucrats who collect information on the most militant workers.”

He continued, “The OSBCU statement denouncing the rank & file discussion group was filled with hypocrisy and lies. The union claims ‘transparency is not only the foundation of what we do but an expectation that workers should have of their leaders.’ The union bureaucrats have never been transparent. They keep the membership in the dark about all the important issues in regards to bargaining. We do not have access to behind-the-door meetings between government ministers and union bureaucrats. Instead the OSBCU posts carefully edited videos on their YouTube page demonstrating what they supposedly said to the government.”

Earlier this week, the OEWRFC issued a statement providing a political explanation for its decision to bar Walton and other bureaucrats from its online discussion forums:

The Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File

Committee (OEWRFC) has decided as a matter of policy to bar education union bureaucrats from the Facebook discussion group established by us as a forum for education workers to discuss the ongoing contract fight against the hard-right Ford government and the raging COVID-19 pandemic.

We rejected a request to join our group from Laura Walton, the president of CUPE's Ontario School Board Council of Unions and its lead negotiator with the Ford government for a new contract for 55,000 education support workers. We have similarly rejected requests from other union officials. This includes Hermes Azam, a union delegate for CUPE Local 4400 and leading member of the pseudo-left Fightback group.

The OEWRFC was formed to organize and mobilize rank-and-file education workers independently of the trade unions, which for decades have sabotaged and suppressed our struggles. Our Facebook page is a forum for rank-and-file workers, whether members of our committee or not, to speak freely about the demands they wish to fight for and how to fight for them.

If union bureaucrats are now trying to join our committee's discussion group, it is because they fear the development of a rank-and-file rebellion that unifies teachers, support staff, and broader sections of workers. They want to prevent it by identifying who the leading militant workers are.

There is no other credible explanation why these union officials would try to infiltrate our group. If top union officials like Walton really wanted to engage with rank-and-file members, they possess more than enough organizational means—including CUPE's sizable personnel and resources—to do this themselves. What they cannot tolerate is education workers organizing outside of their stifling control to break through the artificial differences created by CUPE and the teacher unions.

Ford has made clear he wants to ram below-inflation pay deals and austerity budgets down our throats, including by criminalizing any job action to prevent us from striking. Walton and CUPE have responded by delaying a strike vote until well into the fall, entering conciliation with the government, and refusing to make any appeal for a joint struggle to the 200,000 teachers facing the same fate. The four teacher unions have helped divide us, leaving us like sitting ducks for Ford's attack. They are insisting on bargaining separately, have pledged à la Lecce to maintain "stability" in schools, and signaled

that they won't take any job action until next winter.

This isn't the first time we have seen this movie. In 2019, Walton and CUPE flagrantly rejected an overwhelming strike mandate by reaching an 11th-hour deal with Ford that included the hated Bill 124 wage cap. The teacher unions followed suit a few months later. Over the subsequent two-and-a-half years, all the education unions blocked us from taking any collective action against the "profits before life" pandemic policy.

Fightback is a loyal servant and cheerleader for the union bureaucracy. In 2019, they hailed the sellout contract that Walton and CUPE cooked up with Ford as a "significant victory," even though it enshrined the one percent per year pay cap in Bill 124.

Fightback is now reprising its role as advocates and apologists for the bureaucracy. Despite Walton and Co's systematic division of support workers from teachers and their maneuvers to forestall a strike, Fightback's latest article, co-written by Azam, gave the union leadership a thumbs-up for an "okay start for the bargaining process." They failed even to mention that Lecce has threatened us with back-to-work legislation, because to do so would require them to acknowledge that we are involved in more than a mere "collective bargaining" fight.

Any serious struggle for inflation-busting pay increases, measures to stop the spread of COVID, and tens of billions in investments for public education will require the mobilization of educators and the working class as a whole in a political class struggle against capitalist austerity and wage-cutting. We encourage all education workers who recognize that we need to break out of the straitjacket imposed by the union bureaucrats and take the struggle into our own hands to join the OEWRFC.



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