

With Ontario government plotting to ban education strikes, workers demand to know how unions plan to respond

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Are you an education worker in Ontario? We want to hear what you think of the unions' bargaining strategy and what demands you have in the current contract struggle. To contact the Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee, email ontedrfc@gmail.com.

Ontario's hard-right Doug Ford-led Tory government is determined to impose sweeping concessions on over 250,000 teachers and education support workers, whose contracts expired last month. These include huge real wage cuts and massive reductions in public education funding.

Education Minister Stephen Lecce has vowed that if education workers will not surrender to these attacks, the government will force them to do so by banning all strikes and collective job action.

In an opinion piece for the rabidly right-wing *Toronto Sun* earlier this month, Lecce all but promised strikebreaking legislation, declaring provocatively that students have "a right to learn, from September through to June." This from a minister of a government whose insistence on prioritizing corporate profits over human life during the pandemic has led to seven waves of mass infection, and the deaths of over 14,000 Ontarians.

The five education unions are refusing to warn workers about the threat of back-to-work legislation, let alone spelling out how they intend to mobilize workers to answer it. This is because none of them—be it the Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU), the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario, Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation, Ontario English Catholic Teachers Federation, or the *Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens*—has any intention of defying a back-to-work law. Instead, they are working behind the scenes with Ford and Lecce to keep workers divided so they can impose rotten sellout contracts on them and suppress the education workers' struggle.

The anger among rank-and-file workers over the unions'

refusal to oppose the Ford government's onslaught on their wages and conditions found expression in a recent exchange in the Ontario Education Workers United Facebook group between a school support staff worker and Laura Walton, OSBCU's president and lead negotiator.

The exchange began when the worker posted a *World Socialist Web Site* article from 2019 describing the three-year sellout agreement engineered by OSBCU, which is affiliated with the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). That agreement was the first major contract to enforce Ford's 1 percent per year wage-cap, which the government subsequently enshrined in law under Bill 124 and imposed on over 1 million Ontario public sector workers.

Walton sought to brush aside the article's criticism, pointing out that it was published in 2019, implying that it had no relevance to contract negotiations in 2022.

The worker rejected this, writing in response, "I posted the article about the 2019 sellout—over which you, Laura Walton, presided—because the predicament that support staff and teachers now find themselves in is directly connected with that betrayal.

"Moreover, the CUPE leadership and the teacher unions are today leading us down the same blind alley. As they did in 2019, the various unions are each pursuing their own 'strategy,' dividing workers in the face of a ruthless right-wing government/employer."

The worker then posed a series of questions to Walton, the most important of which was: "Lecce and Ford have all but publicly announced that they intend to illegalize worker job action to ram through a concessions-filled contract. What does CUPE plan to do to mobilize the membership and workers more broadly if and when the government arbitrarily strips us of our democratic rights as workers?"

Walton described the worker's query as the "million dollar question" but refused to provide a direct answer. The best she could offer was a vague commitment to the "need to

organize CUPE education workers ... and the broader labour movement in general."

The worker replied by underlining the meaningless character of Walton's answer, before posing an alternative perspective and strategy for rank-and-file workers:

"You say that 'not only do we need to organize CUPE education workers, but CUPE workers and the broader labour movement in general' against the Ford government, but what does this mean concretely?

"Will CUPE with its hundreds of thousands of members nationally urge education support workers to defy anti-democratic strikebreaking legislation? Will the OSBCU leadership use its access to the media and large social media following to explain the threat of back-to-work legislation and advocate for a broader political struggle to defy it that embraces all workers whose wages and conditions are threatened by Ford, who views our contract as setting a benchmark for savage attacks throughout the public and private sectors?

"This is the course of action I will be fighting for because we are not satisfied with general phrases about the need to 'organize' that are never translated into a real mass mobilization to stop Ford and his big business backers undermining our wages and working conditions."

In the course of the exchange, Walton claimed that the OSBCU leadership had "no power" to accept the 2019 sellout agreement, and that it had only gone along with the deal because there was insufficient "worker power" to fight back.

In response, the worker argued:

"In your reply to me, you suggested that the OSBCU leadership had no control over the 2019 contract and that the union was too weak to take on the Ford government, stating that there was 'not the organizing or worker power built to fight back.' This distorts what really happened.

"When you announced the agreement just hours before we were due to go out on strike, you described it as a great result. More importantly, the OSBCU was the first major union to accept the wage-cutting terms of Bill 124, which wasn't even codified in law when you agreed to it.

"At the time, there was mass anger among hundreds of thousands of teachers, as well as many more public sector workers in health and social services to this draconian law. A powerful strike by us could have served to galvanize this opposition and spearhead a fight to defeat Ford's plans.

"But instead, the OSBCU leadership caved in before the struggle even began and refused to make any appeal for support to other sections of workers facing the same attack. As a result, the wage cap was imposed on more than 1 million public sector workers without a fight.

"I have repeatedly returned to the experience of 2019

because your leadership team is pursuing the same disastrous course this time around. We are being told that we must fight alone, bargaining separately from the teachers even though the problems we face are the same."

Walton also presented the union's responsibility to protect its members and their students from COVID-19 as a strictly local issue over which the bureaucracy's hands were tied. She even shamelessly alleged that CUPE locals disliked "interference" from the union leadership on this question.

Nothing spells out the union bureaucracy's complete political bankruptcy more than such a response, which treats the worst global health crisis in a century by shrugging it off as a local issue. The unions have effectively enforced the Ford government's "profits before life" pandemic policy for over two years. Not only did they refuse to mobilize education workers to oppose school re-openings and demand N95 masks and other essential anti-COVID mitigation measures. When workers took matters into their own hands and organized walkouts, the unions rushed to shut them down, on the grounds all job actions were illegal. This policy of mass infection has turned schools into primary vectors for the community spread of COVID-19 and led to tens of thousands of hospitalizations and deaths.

Education workers who disagree with the sellout strategy of Laura Walton and the rest of the union bureaucracy and recognize the need to mobilize working people in a mass political struggle against the Ford government, should join the Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee today. Help build a movement led by ordinary education workers for significant gains in pay, working conditions and schools free of COVID-19 by emailing ontedrfc@gmail.com.



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