# Why I joined the Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee: Dispatches from a public school teacher

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*The* World Socialist Web Site *received the following letter from a public school teacher in Ontario explaining why she decided to join the recently established Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee (OEWRFC).*

*The OEWRFC was created last month by teachers, caretakers and education assistants to mobilize all education workers in the province in a political struggle independently of the trade unions for an end to the COVID-19 pandemic and in defence of public education. You can read the OEWRFC's founding statementhere and contact the committee at ontedrfc@gmail.com.*

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Dear workers,

I write this letter at a time when elementary and secondary schools across Ontario have returned to another year of in-person learning despite the abandonment of all COVID-19 mitigations, and while cases, hospitalizations and deaths remain unjustifiably high.

While I was overcome with the usual feelings of anxiety and excitement as summer wound down and preparations had begun for the new school year, there was also a looming cloud of fear and uncertainty that was unfamiliar to me, despite being a teacher for almost 10 years. When Premier Doug Ford abandoned the mask mandate across much of Ontario in March of 2022, it was a huge disappointment to educators like myself who were resisting infection and disease at every corner of our personal and professional lives. Sadly, it was a sign of things to come.

As someone with an immunocompromised partner and family members, going into a workplace that I love but that could endanger me or a loved one was an unfair dilemma. Nobody should ever have to be put in such a situation. I was thankful to have worked virtually from home during the 2020–21 school year, taking on the role of virtual school teacher at a time when school boards were rapidly reconfiguring their traditional learning plans in light of evolving public health guidance. However, the role was not extended for the following year; instead, a hybrid learning model was implemented to facilitate in-person and at-home students.

The Ford government touted the hybrid model as a way for students to flexibly access an education in the event of in-person disruptions, but completely downplayed the added burdens to teachers' workloads and the negative outcomes associated with student achievement and engagement. The model was unsustainable, poorly implemented and drew the ire of parents, teachers, students and medical professionals. We all breathed a collective sigh of relief when the board decided to terminate the model for 2022–23, but it did not negate the hardships of what workers have to endure.

While our public schools have been poorly funded for decades, not even the spectre of mass infection and disability were enough of a catalyst to adequately invest in our schools to render them safe for staff and students. Education unions such as ETFO (Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario), OECTA (Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association), OSSTF (Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation) and AEFO (Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens), voiced their concerns in the press and through joint letters submitted to Premier Ford, and to

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Minister Christine Elliott's and Minister Stephen Lecce's offices in December of 2021. The unions acknowledged that school-based and community measures, such as increasing access to and heavily promoting booster shots, improving ventilation and air filtration in classrooms, providing staff with high-quality N95 masks and Rapid Antigen Tests (RATs), and a mandatory paid sick leave for workers, would require "considerable political will to implement," but were necessary to ensure a safe return to school after the winter break.

It was no surprise that cases and hospitalization rates soared during this period due to the Omicron variant's high transmissibility. Following a return to school, reports on social media spoke of an unequal distribution of resources, with some schools, such as my own, receiving a limited supply of improved masks and rationed RATs. We were (and still are) operating with dirty air, poor masking compliance and unvaccinated staff and students permitted to attend without consequence. Given the established science of SARS-CoV-2 aerosol transmission, the virus' classification as a level 3 biohazard according to the Public Health Agency of Canada and the unions' very own Health and Safety committees acknowledging the airborne and asymptomatic nature of the virus, it stands to reason that the unions should have called a strike due to these dangerous factors. But they simply refused to do so. As a result, tens of thousands of education workers and students were needlessly infected, many died and countless more continue to suffer in silence from Long COVID or other post-infection conditions.

After the unions failed to mount a strike campaign, the Ford government felt entitled to begin dismantling necessary protections in 2022—the lifting of mandatory vaccination among staff, the abandonment of contact tracing and reporting of close contacts in schools, and of course, the gradual "unmasking" of the population. The union's messaging had also made an obvious shift at this point; communication from the local barely mentioned COVID-19 mitigations in schools and simply reiterated government messaging about optional masking in the workplace. Local meetings once held via Zoom were now being held in-person again (with dining provided), as venues were now "mask optional." Despite forwarding my complaints to the local about this logistical change, indoor meetings continued as scheduled.

At this point, it became very clear to me that my union was no longer interested in being a strong voice for common sense measures and the leadership was more than happy to parrot the new propaganda moving forward. That fact would become even more crystal clear to me as ETFO's Annual General Meeting (AGM) resumed in-person this year for the first time since 2019. Unmasked executive members and delegates in attendance began to gleefully share footage of the event online, while touting the importance of fighting for health and safety in schools.

As I turned to independent news outlets for pandemic information, the WSWS' coverage and analysis deeply resonated with me. There were education workers and people in other industries who were dealing with pervasive gaslighting and misinformation from their employers, union leaders and elected officials. Knowing that there were already rank-and-file committees established across communities in Canada, the US and Europe, I felt that there was a place for workers like me who have felt abandoned and disheartened by their unions.

As Ontario education workers enter another year of bargaining for a new Collective Agreement, there is much more at stake than ever before. Pay, benefits, working conditions are all part of the struggle, but where does the pandemic fall? Not even at the bottom of the list. Updated and improved vaccines will emerge, but that will take time and outcomes are to be determined. One thing is for sure—for as long as newer variants emerge without any meaningful steps taken to stop transmission, more lives will be in danger. Education workers in Ontario, and across Canada, must mobilize together to fight for necessary protections to make our schools safe and help end the pandemic once and for all.

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