

Ontario education support workers: Vote YES to strike! Build rank-and-file committees to defend public education and stop COVID!

Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee
23 September 2022

The following statement was discussed and approved by members of the Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee (OEWRFC), which was established in August to fight for the mass political mobilization of education workers in defence of public education and to stop COVID. To get involved with the OEWRFC, email ontedrjc@gmail.com or fill out the form at the end of the statement.

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The Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee strongly urges the 55,000 education support workers who are members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) to vote YES in the strike authorization ballot that began on September 23. A decisive vote for strike action must be made the starting point of a political mobilization of all Ontario education workers and the working class as a whole to defend public education, defeat the hard-right Ford government's wage-cutting and austerity policies, and secure inflation-busting wage and benefit increases.

CUPE's Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU) and the province's four teacher unions are bitterly opposed to mounting such a struggle.

OSBCU has delayed a strike vote as long as it could without provoking a rank-and-file explosion. OSBCU's largest local, Local 4400, brazenly stated in a communication to workers that the aim of the strike vote is to "strengthen the bargaining committee" to reach a "negotiated settlement without a strike." This under conditions where the government has thrown down the gauntlet by making derisory wage offers of 2 percent per year for those making less than \$40,000 and 1.25 percent for those earning more, and by all but publicly vowing to legalize any strike before it even begins.

The four teacher unions—the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario, Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation, Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association and Association of Franco-Ontarian Teachers—which collectively have over 200,000 members, have indicated they won't even schedule strike votes until the late fall or winter, even though their members' contracts expired almost a month ago—on August 31, the same day as the CUPE workers'.

Teachers enrolled in these four unions should collectively demand immediate strike votes and make preparations to walk out

alongside their brother and sister support-staff workers in OSBCU. This will require the construction of rank-and-file committees in every school and workplace across the province to seize control of the struggle from the union bureaucracy, and break out of the collective bargaining framework used by the government and unions to paralyze and smother working-class opposition.

Above all, teachers, caretakers, education assistants, early childhood educators, school bus drivers, and administrative workers must recognize that to defend public education and win their just demands, they will need to wage a working-class political struggle.

Premier Doug Ford and Education Minister Stephen Lecce are threatening to legalize a walkout from the outset, because they know that a strike by education support workers could quickly expand to include teachers and the rest of Ontario's 1 million public sector workers. The goal of this hard-right government of Thatcher and Poilievre admirers is to ram through massive real-term pay cuts for education workers and austerity budgets for public education, as part of their systematic drive to dismantle public services and open up the public sector to corporate profiteering. By imposing wage "increases" well short of rampant inflation—currently at levels unseen in four decades—Ford and his henchmen also intend to set a benchmark for the enforcement of similar wage-cuts on millions of workers throughout the private sector.

The education unions are not opponents of this anti-worker agenda, which is supported by the entire ruling elite. Rather they offer their services as government partners in imposing austerity and concessions on working people. All five unions have played a key role in suppressing the class struggle during decades of a sustained assault on public education, leaving schools dilapidated and staff overworked. In 2019-20, they sabotaged worker opposition to Ford's Bill 124 and the 1 percent per year cap on wage "increases" that it has imposed. During the pandemic, which has officially killed over 14,000 people in Ontario and more than 45,000 in Canada, the unions smothered all efforts by education workers to resist the Ford government's "profits before life" policy that turned schools into vectors for mass community infection.

Just as they enforced Bill 124 by imposing rotten sellout contracts in the 2019-20 bargaining round, the bureaucracy is

keeping education workers arbitrarily divided by profession and school system. And it opposes any and all efforts to warn and mobilize workers against the government's plans to undemocratically strip us of our right to strike and impose wage-cutting contracts by government fiat.

When a rank-and-file caretaker asked OSBCU president and lead negotiator Laura Walton how the union plans to respond to a strike-breaking law, she proclaimed it "the million dollar question." But she had nothing concrete to say about what CUPE, Canada's largest union with over 700,000 members, intends to do. This is because the unions are preparing to immediately surrender before strikebreaking legislation and then pin the blame on the rank-and-file. In the same exchange, Walton blamed rank-and-file workers for the 2019 sellout over which she presided, declaring that there was "not the organizing or worker power built to fight back."

These lies cover up the unions' decades-long complicity in government strikebreaking and the suppression of the class struggle. The principal political mechanism through which the unions have done this is their partnership with the pro-austerity, pro-war Liberals and New Democratic Party. In 2012 and 2015, when a union-backed Liberal government outlawed strikes by hundreds of thousands of education workers, the unions stood their members down and meekly accepted the government decrees. Today, the unions back the minority Trudeau Liberal government to the hilt. They are the biggest supporters of the "confidence-and-supply" agreement the NDP struck with Trudeau last March to keep his minority government in power as it spends tens of billions of dollars to wage war with Russia and imposes "post-pandemic" austerity and inflation-driven real wage cuts at home.

The Liberal/NDP/union alliance's support for using society's resources to wage war on behalf of Canadian imperialism and enriching the financial oligarchy provides the key to understanding why Ontario's education unions are working tirelessly to keep their members divided and weak. They have all insisted on bargaining separately and pursuing their "own" strategy, with the four teacher unions planning to let support staff workers fight the Ford government alone. As they did in 2020, the teacher unions hope to use an OSBCU-engineered sellout of the low-paid support staff workers as a pattern for the concessions-laden contracts they will then seek to push onto their own members.

None of the unions have raised a single demand related to protecting education workers from the COVID-19 pandemic, the greatest health crisis to hit Canada in over a century. To date, at least 62 children under the age of 20 have died of COVID-19 in Canada. Millions of children and hundreds of thousands of education workers have caught the disease in schools, with untold numbers suffering from the debilitating health effects of Long Covid.

This state of affairs is intolerable and must become the starting point for a political counter-offensive by education workers in Ontario, across Canada and beyond.

The Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee (OEWRFC) proposes the following course of action to all Ontario education workers, irrespective of your union membership, pay grade, professional designation, or any other arbitrary distinction:

1. Vote "Yes" in the strike ballot if you are an OSBCU member

and demand that the overwhelming vote for strike action, that everyone knows workers will deliver, be acted upon forthwith. If you belong to another education union, demand an immediate strike vote so you can walk out together with OSBCU members.

2. Demand an immediate halt to all secretive bargaining between top union bureaucrats and the Ford government. All bargaining must take place in the presence of representatives of the rank-and-file and should be livestreamed for all education workers to follow.

3. Discuss the OEWRFC's program with your work colleagues. Convene meetings at your school or other work location to establish rank-and-file committees outside of the stifling control of the unions. These committees should make preparations to defy back-to-work legislation by making the education workers' struggle the spearhead of a mass mobilization of working people to secure pay and benefit increases, and the investment of billions of dollars in public education. To this end, delegates from the committees should contact parents of students and other workers to explain why their struggle must be supported.

4. Join and build the OEWRFC as the political and organizational leadership education workers need to secure victory. The OEWRFC insists that workers can only defend public education and put an end to the deadly pandemic by waging a frontal assault on the vast wealth monopolized by the financial oligarchy, which holds sway over all aspects of social and political life. The OEWRFC is affiliated with the Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees because we firmly believe that this struggle can be waged only through the unification of education and all workers across Canada, the United States, and internationally. The prospects for such a struggle have never been so promising, as shown by the struggle of rail workers in the United States, and the campaign of Mack Trucks worker Will Lehman for the presidency of the United Auto Workers (UAW) on a program of abolishing the bureaucracy and placing control back in the hands of the rank-and-file.

What education workers confront in the Ford government is the rule of Bay Street, which is bleeding the working class dry to pay the full costs of the pandemic, the US-NATO war against Russia and rampant corporate profiteering. Workers must respond with a political counteroffensive, uniting education workers with the broader working class, on the basis of a socialist program that will place public education on new social foundations. Rather than subordinated to the capitalist drive for profit, public education and all social decisions must be oriented to serving the needs of the vast majority.



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