

Massive vote in favour of strike against Ford government's austerity agenda by 55,000 Ontario education support workers

Roger Jordan
4 October 2022

Are you an education worker ready to take on the Ford government in a struggle for inflation-busting wage increases and a well-funded public education system? The Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee will be holding a public meeting on Tuesday, October 11, at 7:00 p.m. Eastern. Email ontedrfc@gmail.com to register to attend.

* * *

An overwhelming vote to strike for improvements to wages and working conditions by 55,000 Ontario education support workers was announced yesterday by the Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU). The workers, including custodians, librarians, early childhood educators and administrative staff, voted by 96.5 percent on a turnout of 82 percent for a strike in opposition to Premier Doug Ford and his Progressive Conservative government, which is planning to criminalize any job action.

The vote proves that rank-and-file workers are determined to strike to put an end to over a decade of declining real-term wages and miserable working conditions under both union-backed Liberal and Conservative governments. But the OSBCU, which is affiliated with the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), the country's largest union with over 700,000 members, has no intention of calling a work stoppage. Instead, the OSBCU leadership's main concern is to work out a sellout agreement with Ford at the "bargaining table" and prevent a mass mobilization of education workers that could escape its control.

The OSBCU bureaucrats delayed the strike vote as long as they possibly could without triggering an explosion of anger among the membership, which explains why the result was announced five weeks after their contract expired on August 31.

Moreover, the OSBCU has worked tirelessly with the four teacher unions to keep support staff divided from their educator colleagues, even though the contracts of high school and elementary teachers and education assistants expired on the very same day. All five unions are determined to keep the contract struggle straitjacketed within the "collective bargaining" system, which has facilitated one round of attacks

after another on public sector workers for the past three decades. The teacher unions have made clear that no strike votes, let alone a walkout, are planned until the winter.

OSBCU President and lead negotiator Laura Walton continued her stalling tactics at the press conference announcing the result, asserting that the union's next step would be to "return to the bargaining table" this Thursday and Friday and again on October 17 with a "strong mandate." She refused to announce a strike date or give any indication that preparations for a strike have even begun.

In fact, Walton and the OSBCU have already taken steps to ensure that the calling of a strike is next to impossible. In late August, she agreed to conciliation with the government. Under this bureaucratic and anti-democratic process, the union must first request the conciliator to issue a "no board" ruling to confirm that a negotiated settlement is not possible. Only when the report is released can the OSBCU issue a call for a strike, which cannot begin until 17 days have elapsed. Needless to say, no such restraints are placed on Ford and his cabal of hard-right ideologues to ram through back-to-work legislation to outlaw all job actions.

Walton and the OSBCU agreed to this procedure without even consulting the membership following Education Minister Stephen Lecce's highly provocative offer to OSBCU members. Lecce's offer included a 2 percent annual wage "increase" for workers earning less than \$40,000 and 1.25 percent for everyone else. With official inflation running at over 8 percent, and price rises for food and gas much higher, this would amount to a devastating pay cut for workers who have seen their wages fall by 19 percent in real terms over the past decade. Even the OSBCU's initial demand of an annual increase of 11.7 percent, which Walton and the bureaucracy know full well will never be achieved in bargaining, is inadequate. It would barely keep pace with inflation, while doing nothing to compensate education workers for decades of wage and benefit cuts.

Lecce responded to the strike vote result with a belligerent statement vowing to impose the government's attacks no matter what. He cynically accused workers of preparing a strike

that “hurts kids and disrupts families,” before declaring that his government would “continue to remain at the table to ensure kids remain in class without interruption right through to June.” This is rich coming from a government that has allowed the COVID-19 pandemic to run rampant over the past two and a half years, disrupting the lives and cavalierly endangering the health of education workers, students and their families to protect corporate profits.

The OSBCU’s response to the Ford government’s aggressive threats is to appeal pathetically for “real negotiations” with a regime that is pledged to shred education, health care and all other public services. In addition, the union’s messaging has sought to demobilize and demoralize rank-and-file workers, who have been itching for a battle with the Ford government ever since OSBCU’s last sellout in 2019, when it agreed to impose a 1 percent annual pay cap by sabotaging a strike at the last minute. The union’s sellout played a key role in helping the Ford government subsequently introduce Bill 124, which capped annual wage “increases” at 1 percent for over a million public sector workers for three years.

In a revealing email sent to all members of CUPE Local 4400, one of the union’s largest locals, entitled “Why vote yes,” the OSBCU bureaucrats lectured the workers on how a vote for strike action could actually help avoid a walkout. “A yes vote increases the power of our negotiating committees to win fair settlements at the negotiating tables,” they claimed. “By increasing the power of our negotiating committees, we increase the possibility of reaching negotiated settlements—without a strike.”

Evidently concerned that this appeal was unlikely to generate much enthusiasm given the repeated betrayals engineered by CUPE negotiating committees behind the scenes with governments across the country, Local 4400 concluded its email by urging rank-and-file education workers to fill out a survey for the chance to be entered into a prize draw for Home Show tickets and a “Count me in!” T-shirt.

CUPE’s national leadership responded to the strike vote by issuing a miserable statement committing the union to precisely nothing. In a four-paragraph statement in which not a single practical proposal was mentioned, CUPE national President Mark Hancock and Secretary-Treasurer Candace Rennick concluded with the hollow pledge, “CUPE National and our 700,000 members nationwide will stand with our OSBCU sisters and brothers. They will have the full support of our national union until a fair deal that respects workers and students is reached.”

In other words, while workers are robbed of their right to strike by anti-democratic back-to-work legislation, they will enjoy the (verbal) “full support” of CUPE. The mobilization of its 700,000 members in a solidarity strike with appeals to private sector workers to walk out in defiance of Ford, which is the only viable way to respond to a back-to-work law, is the furthest thing from the CUPE bureaucrats’ minds.

The massive strike vote by education workers is the latest indication of a growing rebellion among working people against never-ending capitalist austerity and the ruling elite’s disastrous pandemic policy, which has claimed the lives of over 45,000 Canadians.

If this initial healthy sentiment of militancy is not to be cruelly betrayed, workers must grasp the fact that they confront a political struggle on two fronts. First, they face a government determined to use all of the instruments in the capitalist state apparatus to ram through its agenda of wage and budget cuts for public education. Secondly, they confront a union bureaucracy that prioritizes its “partnership” with government and defence of its privileges through the anti-worker “collective bargaining” regime over the defence of the interests of the workers they claim to represent.

The only way forward is through the fight for the independent political mobilization of all education workers, including the 200,000 teachers and education assistants currently being artificially separated from their support staff colleagues by the unions. Education workers must make a special appeal to their class brothers and sisters working in manufacturing, auto, mining and other economic sectors, since a defeat for education workers would set a benchmark for further wage and benefit cuts by the corporate elite across the private sector.

This struggle requires the building of the Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee (OEWRFC), which was founded in August by teachers, education assistants, caretakers and others to break out of the collective bargaining straitjacket and organize a unified counter-offensive of education workers and the working class as a whole in defence of public education.

The committee demands an immediate 50 percent wage increase for all education support workers to make up for the decades of wage cuts and rampant inflation. It also demands the investment of billions of dollars to overcome the \$15 billion in outstanding maintenance for the province’s dilapidated school buildings. Money for these urgent social needs exists in abundance, but it is monopolized by the financial oligarchy on whose behalf Ford and his ministers govern. The struggle led by the OEWRFC must therefore consist of a frontal assault on the domination of all aspects of social and political life enjoyed by the super-rich in order to seize control of society’s vast resources and deploy them to meet the needs of the vast majority, not the profit margins of a wealthy few.

To contact the Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee, email ontedrhc@gmail.com.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact