

Rank-and-file Ontario education worker denounces union bureaucracy's bogus "Why vote yes!" campaign

An OSBCU member from Toronto
7 October 2022

The Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee is holding a meeting on Tuesday, October 11 at 7 p.m. Eastern to discuss the way forward in the education workers' struggle. We encourage all education workers in Ontario to register to attend.

The *World Socialist Web Site* received the following letter from an education support worker who voted in favour of strike action during the recently concluded balloting of 55,000 education support workers by the Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU). The OSBCU, which is part of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), waged a cynical "Why vote yes!" campaign that urged workers to vote in favour of a strike to prevent one from ever taking place. The strike vote resulted in an overwhelming majority of 96.5 percent in favour of a walkout, underscoring the determination of workers to fight to overturn decades of concessions.

The campaign, like the OSBCU's entire bargaining strategy, is aimed at demoralizing and demobilizing workers in the face of a massive onslaught on their wages and working conditions by the Ford government. Leading CUPE bureaucrats like lead negotiator Laura Walton, who presided over the imposition of a 1 percent wage cap for three years in 2019, asserted that a "yes" vote would increase the likelihood of a "fair deal" at the "bargaining table."

In fact, Premier Doug Ford and his hated Education Minister Stephen Lecce have made clear that they will only bargain a deal that includes massive real-terms pay cuts for the support workers, some of whom earn as little as \$39,000 per year and must take second jobs to make ends meet. Just this week, Ford made his most direct threat yet to criminalize any job action by enforcing anti-democratic back-to-work legislation.

The worker who wrote the letter is a member of the Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee (OEWRFC), which was established in August by caretakers, teachers, and education assistants to seize control of the struggle from the union apparatus and place power in the hands of the rank-and-file. To contact and help build the OEWRFC, email ontedrhc@gmail.com.

Dear fellow education workers,

I am a caretaker from Toronto and a member of CUPE Local 4400, and I strongly denounce the outrageous letter the union bureaucracy sent us about their "why vote yes" campaign during our recent strike vote between September 23 and October 2.

Our massive "yes" vote, with over 96 percent of members in favour, sent the message that rank-and-file education workers are eager for a fight. However, the union bureaucracy is only interested in using our strike vote as a bargaining chip to sell out workers. The OSBCU's "Why vote yes" campaign must be taken as a warning by workers that the union apparatus is hostile to waging a genuine political struggle against the government.

The entire state apparatus is being mobilized against education workers and the working class as a whole. Ford and Lecce have more or less publicly stated that if we launch a strike, they will ban it. If we are going to win this struggle, we have to develop a strategy to defy back-to-work legislation by developing a unified fight of all education workers and working people more broadly. This is the key question that should be on every worker's mind at this stage.

The union's campaign lacked any strategy for us to win this struggle, and didn't even mention the government's threats.

The union bureaucracy said members should vote "YES" for four reasons. First, to give the negotiating committee more power to call a strike "if necessary." Second, to increase the power of the negotiating committee to win a "fair settlement." The email insisted that voting "yes" will mean the negotiators will be able to reach a "fair settlement *without a strike*." Third, a "yes" vote sends a "clear message" that *we* are willing to take action *together* to defeat the employers demands. Finally, the bureaucracy told us to vote "yes" because it means "hope for a better future."

All they offer us is "hope for a better future," but what good is hope when we are suffering massive wage cuts due to inflation and the prospect of this being entrenched for another three years by the government and the institutions under its

control?

The union leadership says we should give the negotiating committee more power to possibly call a strike, but they are doing everything in their power to avoid one. They have not shared a practical plan on how to conduct the strike, let alone a political perspective to guide it to victory.

Was the negotiating committee ever elected? My colleagues and I don't know who is on the negotiating committee. They have never approached rank-and-file members and asked us what our demands are.

How is giving the negotiating committee more power going to help win a "fair settlement" for workers? In 2019, the negotiating committee used its "power" to betray education workers by agreeing to a tentative agreement in the dead of night just hours before we were due to walk out on strike. The deal included the PC government's demand for a 1 percent annual pay cap for three years. As we saw in 2019, giving the negotiating committee "more power" produces betrayals.

What is included in a "fair settlement?" Beyond the OSBCU leadership's grossly inadequate demand for an 11 percent wage increase per year for education workers, which would barely keep pace with inflation and do nothing to reverse the drastic wage cuts we have experienced over the past two decades, we don't know what the demands we are fighting for are. The COVID pandemic is entering the most dangerous stage yet, and the negotiating committee has not mentioned it, nor raised any demands in contract talks on how to protect the lives of students and staff from this lethal virus.

Thanks to viral evolution made possible by the ruling elite's criminal decision to let the virus infect everyone, COVID is mutating into more contagious and lethal variants at an unprecedented pace. The Ford government has undemocratically stripped all COVID protections, and American President Joe Biden declared the pandemic is over without any shred of scientific evidence to back up his disinformation. COVID is evolving so fast that there is already evidence of new variants emerging that are completely immune evasive, which will cause catastrophic damage to those infected. The union bureaucracy's refusal to take any action to stop the transmission of COVID exposes their criminal negligence in the mass infection and death of kids, education staff, and the general public.

The leadership of Ontario's five education unions are conspiring with the government to enforce the demands of the capitalist state. They are using the rigged "collective bargaining" system as a shield for their planned sellout. Even though we voted overwhelmingly for a strike, Walton and her fellow OSBCU bureaucrats did not even to file the paperwork for a strike until Friday night. Under the law we will not be able to launch a strike for almost a month because of anti-democratic procedures agreed to by the union designed to smother working-class opposition. In effect, the unions are begging the government to legislate workers back to work or

ban a strike before it even starts. Workers should have no faith in the collective bargaining process.

Workers want to fight for wage increases above inflation, and to reverse decades of wage and budget cuts to public education. Union members are well aware the union bureaucrats are not at all interested in waging a struggle to beat back the austerity agenda advocated by Ford and his supporters in the ruling elite.

Instead of providing a strategy to win a strike, all the OSBCU bureaucracy has left to offer us is "hope for a better future." But the question is for who? Certainly not working people, who have been betrayed time after time by the union bureaucracy and have lost wages and benefits for decades. The better future they really mean is for the capitalist parasites who seek to make massive profits from an expanding education market thanks to the gutting of public education by the capitalist state, supported by their labour police in CUPE and the four teacher unions in Ontario.

The days of vicious assaults on public education and education workers' living standards are quickly coming to an end. Education workers have had enough and are beginning to organize independently of the bureaucracy to place power in the hands of the rank-and-file. We are the ones who make the education system function, and we know best what the public education system needs to thrive.

The OEWRFC is mobilizing all education workers, breaking down the artificial barriers the unions erected long ago to divide us along professional and regional lines. We are uniting and the union bureaucrats won't be able to stop us. I appeal to all my fellow education workers, including teachers, caretakers, early childhood educators, education assistants, librarians, and administrative staff to join and help build our committee.

To contact and help build the OEWRFC, email ontedrfc@gmail.com.



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