

Ontario Premier threatens to ban strikes as education workers prepare to walk out to defend public education

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The Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee (OEWRFC) is holding a public meeting tonight, Tuesday, October 11, at 7pm Eastern to discuss the way forward for education workers in their contract struggle. Register here to attend this important event and spread the word to your co-workers.

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As 55,000 education support workers gear up for a strike against Ontario's hard-right Progressive Conservative government, Premier Doug Ford has issued his most direct threat yet that he will criminalize a walkout even before it begins. Ford made the provocative comments in the wake of an overwhelming 96.5 percent vote in favour of strike action by education assistants, caretakers, librarians, early childhood educators, and administrative staff.

"Please don't go on strike. Don't force my hand," Ford stated menacingly at a press conference last Thursday in response to a question about whether his government would impose a back-to-work law. Education Minister Stephen Lecce has repeatedly signaled that the government would ban a strike, a measure last taken against Ontario education workers by the union-backed Kathleen Wynne Liberal government in 2015.

A multi-millionaire and right-wing thug, Ford expressed in his remarks the bitter hostility of the financial and corporate elite towards education workers and the public education system. His government has presented an insulting offer of a 2 percent annual wage "increase" for support staff earning the poverty wage of less than \$40,000 and a miserly 1.25 percent for workers earning more. With the official inflation rate having surpassed 8 percent during the summer and price hikes for basic necessities much higher, Ford wants education support staff to accept a further, devastating real-terms pay cut on top of the round after round of cuts they have suffered during years of wage freezes and "wage restraint" programs.

To add insult to injury, Ford and Lecce routinely accuse education workers who are fighting for their livelihoods and to defend public education of "disrupting" student learning.

Coming from a government that plans to cut billions from education over the next decade and whose disastrous profits-

before-lives COVID-19 pandemic produced the greatest disruption of Ontario's education system in modern history, these claims are an outrageous provocation.

With the blessing of the federal Liberal government, Ford and Lecce insisted that all students and staff return to the classroom whenever hospitalizations dipped below breaking point, ensuring seven successive waves of mass COVID-19 infection and death. Their back-to-school campaign turned schools into vectors of mass infection that facilitated COVID's spread throughout the province.

Mass infections among education workers and an exodus from the education sector due to the terrible working conditions have led to staff shortages, leaving students in overcrowded classes. Millions in Ontario have contracted the potentially deadly disease, and at least 14,495 have died. Tens of thousands more, including education workers and students, now face "disruption" in their daily lives due to the debilitating effects of Long COVID.

The unions won't and can't counter Ford and Lecce's cynical attempt to invoke the pandemic's disruptive impact on education as the pretext for robbing workers of their democratic right to take collective job action, because they supported the government's homicidal back-to-work/back-to-school campaign and the elimination, at the start of the Fall 2022 semester, of any and all anti-COVID mitigation measures.

Ford feels able to act so aggressively because the education unions are doing everything in their power to divide workers and keep them trapped within the rigged, state-controlled collective bargaining system.

All five Ontario education unions are conspiring to leave the 55,000 support staff workers to confront the Ford government and an anti-strike law alone.

The Ontario School Board Council of Unions, an affiliate of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) that is bargaining for the support staff workers, has intentionally kept them isolated from their teacher colleagues. It did the same in 2019, then called off a strike at the eleventh hour and imposed a sellout contract that enforced the government's real wage-cutting, three-year 1-percent annual cap in pay "increases."

Although Ford and Lecce have thrown down the gauntlet to education workers, OSBCU lead negotiator Laura Walton has repeatedly insisted a strike is a last resort. One she claims can be avoided if only the government shows “good faith.” She and CUPE—which, with some 700,000 members, is the country’s largest union—have conspicuously refused to say anything concrete about how the union will respond to an anti-strike law. When challenged directly about this by a rank-and-file worker, she called it “the million dollar question.”

Workers in both the public and private sector—from Quebec construction workers, Port of Montreal dockers and CP Rail workers to Canada Post and Ontario college workers—have seen this film many times before. The unions stay silent about the impending threat of state intervention, then when a federal or provincial government introduces a back-to-work law or in many cases simply threatens to do so, torpedoes job action.

After two days of bargaining last Thursday and Friday, Walton’s negotiation team felt compelled to declare the talks at an impasse and asked the conciliator to issue a “no-board” report. Under the bureaucratic conciliation procedure, the union must first wait until a “no-board” report is issued before setting a strike date. The date must be a minimum of 17 days after the report’s release and confirmed by the union five days in advance. No such restrictions are placed on the criminalization of worker job action by Ford and his Thatcherite ministers.

If the union bureaucracy remains in control, there is every reason to believe that no strike will take place at all. Walton refused to use the word “strike” in her statement following the “no-board” report request. Instead, she declared that she requested the report to “up the pressure to reach a negotiated settlement.”

The four teacher unions are playing a despicable role. They have refused to release any serious bargaining demands or call for a strike vote, even though the contracts of their 200,000 members expired on the same day as the support workers. While dividing teachers—with each union insisting on pursuing its “own” bargaining strategy—they are united in declaring support for the government’s cynical barbed demand for “stability” in the classroom and in vowing not to take any job action until the winter.

Teachers should be on guard. If the teachers’ unions are left to their bureaucratic devices, they will ensure that the education support workers’ struggle is isolated, thereby allowing it to be sold out and defeated. Then, they will tell teachers that their hands are tied and nothing more can be achieved because support staff “accepted” a massive pay cut and/or bowed to a no-strike law. This was exactly how the teacher unions behaved in 2019-20. After quarantining teachers from support staff even as the government made them the test case for imposing the Bill 124 enforced 1 percent annual pay cap, the teacher unions called a series of toothless regional one-day walkouts. In late February 2020 they permitted one day of province-wide strike action, which provoked widespread enthusiasm among

workers. Then, they seized on the pandemic to impose the same pay cap on their members agreed to by the OSBCU bureaucracy.

If education support staff and teachers are to prevail, everything now depends on rank-and-file workers taking control of the contract struggle into their own hands. This requires the construction of a network of rank-and-file committees so education workers can advance their own demands based on what they need, not what the government and union bureaucracies claim is “fair” or “affordable.” These committees must unite all education workers, repudiating the unions’ systematic attempts to foster petty artificial divisions on the basis of professional designation or union affiliation.

Education workers ready to build a rank-and-file committee should start discussing the demands advanced by the Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee with their co-workers. These include an immediate 50 percent pay increase for education support staff and above-inflation raises for all other workers, the investment of tens of billions of additional dollars in public education, and a strategy to eliminate COVID-19. Workers should convene meetings at their school to establish committees, pass resolutions supporting the OEWRFC and its demands, and reach out to workers in other economic sectors to support the struggle. Autoworkers, miners, and other workers throughout the private sector have a direct interest in fighting for a strong public education system to guarantee their kids a fulfilling future. Moreover, they have no interest in allowing the Ford government to make an example of education workers so that similarly ruthless wage and benefit cuts can be imposed across the board.

Workers who wish to join this struggle should register now to attend the OEWRFC’s public meeting at 7pm on October 11 to discuss the way forward.



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