

Ontario education workers discuss way forward in contract struggle against the hard-right Ford government

Our reporters
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For the first time in this year's bitter contract fight against the hated Doug Ford-led Progressive Conservative (PC) government, Ontario education workers were able to speak freely about their struggle at a meeting of the Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee (OEWRFC) held October 11. The meeting marked the first time that education workers, irrespective of their profession or union affiliation—including teachers, early childhood educators, caretakers, secretaries and education assistants—were brought together at a meeting to discuss a united mobilization for victory in opposition to the trade unions' efforts to divide them and suppress their struggle.

The meeting was moderated by Jake, a teacher from Toronto and a founding member of the OEWRFC. Meeting attendees spoke powerfully about their frustrations and concerns, including poverty-level pay, the rampant spread of COVID-19 in schools, the threat of an anti-strike law, and their dissatisfaction with the education unions' anti-worker strategy.

After a lively discussion lasting over 90 minutes, attendees voted for a resolution expressing the determination of rank-and-file education workers to oppose the conspiracy of the Ford government and union bureaucracy to impose another raft of sellout contracts on over a quarter of a million education workers.

The resolution reads:

This democratic assembly of rank-and-file teachers, education assistants, caretakers, child care workers and other school support staff denounces the Ford government's vicious assault on education workers. With the backing of the entire ruling elite, Ford and [Education Minister] Lecce want to impose massive real-terms wage cuts on us and gut funding for public education so they can continue subsidizing corporate profits and imperialist wars abroad.

We declare no confidence in the Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU-CSCSO) and the four teacher unions. They are working to systematically divide us and preparing to submit to and police an anti-democratic no-strike law.

To mobilize our collective strength and galvanize working people's opposition to the dismantling of public education and workers' rights, we resolve to seize control of our contract struggle from the union apparatuses. This requires the building of a network of rank-and-file committees that unites all education workers irrespective of profession or union affiliation, but excludes the union bureaucrats. We appeal to Ontario education workers to take the following actions:

1. Discuss and popularize the Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee's demands with your colleagues, including an immediate 50 percent wage increase for all support staff and above-

inflation increases for all education workers, tens of billions of additional dollars in education funding, and a strategy to eliminate COVID-19 from our schools.

2. Call meetings at your school to establish rank-and-file committees and make them the organizing centres for a genuine struggle against the Ford government's attacks, its plans to criminalize job action, and any attempt by the union apparatuses to force through contracts that fail to meet our needs.

3. Broaden the struggle by appealing for support from workers across Ontario, Canada and internationally for a counter-offensive against austerity, wage-cutting and strike-breaking. This is the only way to prepare for mass defiance of any government anti-strike law and prevent the unions from isolating us.

Education workers discuss the role of rank-and-file committees

Speaking in support of the resolution, Sterling, a school custodian and founding member of the OEWRFC, explained that forming a network of school-based rank-and-file committees was necessary because "the union bureaucracy is the biggest block to our progress and achieving our demands." He stressed that the network would enable workers to coordinate their activities and develop a response independently of the union apparatuses, which are focused above all on maintaining their cozy corporatist partnership with big business and the federal Liberal and Ontario Tory governments.

Pointing to the OSBCU leadership's declarations that they want to avoid a strike at all costs, despite rank-and-file workers voting by a massive 96.5 percent for strike action, Sterling asked, "Why are they waiting for the government and not going on the offensive?"

Sterling also noted that the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), the parent union of OSBCU, has steadfastly refused to "mobilize the entire 700,000 CUPE membership across the country to support education workers" and defeat the PC government's plans to outlaw worker job action even before it begins. Instead, CUPE National President Mark Hancock issued a meaningless statement pledging his "support" for education support workers, which commits Canada's largest trade union to precisely nothing.

Laurent Lafrance, an education assistant from Quebec and the National Convenor of the Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, to which the OEWRFC is affiliated, also endorsed the resolution. Lafrance spoke about the broader issues involved in the contract fight.

"In your struggle," Lafrance began, "you are not only confronting a particularly draconian employer. You are confronting the government, which has in its hands the whole apparatus of state repression." He also stressed that the government enjoyed the backing of the entire ruling elite, including the Liberals and New Democrats, who behaved no differently in ramming through attacks on workers when they formed Ontario's government. In this regard, he pointed to the outlawing of a strike of college lecturers by the trade union-backed Liberal government of Kathleen Wynne in 2017.

Lafrance derided CUPE's proclamations of support for its members as akin to how "a rope supports a hanging man." To combat the union-government sellout conspiracy, Lafrance insisted workers have to "break free from the union apparatuses that tie them to the capitalist system and to one or another of the bourgeois political parties."

More broadly, Lafrance concluded, education workers must "turn to the rest of the working class to expand the strike and make it the spearhead of a broad movement of the working class in opposition to austerity and war."

The pandemic, wage cuts and austerity budgets

A Toronto-based elementary school teacher and member of the OEWRFC shared her experience of working during the pandemic. While she had earlier been granted an opportunity to teach remotely, she was forced to return to in-person instruction as the Ford government dropped all public health measures this past spring.

Describing the daily hazards at work, she drew attention to how it is no longer possible at her school to mark an absence as COVID-related. "There is without a doubt, every single time, at least a student who's absent due to 'cold' or 'allergies' or 'gastro' problems," she said. "It's hard. It's pushing a huge boulder up a very steep hill every day. I love my job very much, and I love where I work. I just want everyone to be safe."

As for how the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario has handled the pandemic, she said, "There's a lot of dissatisfaction with our union bureaucracy. Their messaging since last March has basically completely ignored COVID as an issue. And we feel very let down."

A school secretary spoke about her fear that Ford and Education Minister Stephen Lecce would make good on their repeated threats to illegalize a strike by the 55,000 OSBCU members. She remarked that defying such a law "absolutely terrifies me." She recounted how during previous strikes, the unions' policy of dividing teachers from support staff led to tensions between different groups of workers who should be fighting together.

"I'm one of the rank-and-file in CUPE that makes \$39,000 or less," she continued, speaking of the financial difficulties that drive workers into struggle but also make them reluctant to take strike action when the union bureaucracy offers no viable way to secure victory. "My T4 [income tax statement] was \$39,080 for 2021. I don't have enough hours to do my job. I could not support myself by finding myself a home, let alone finding a home for my son and me."

An early childhood educator with over three decades of experience spoke about her struggle to make ends meet on her low wage. She began by bitterly noting, "I started out in the field making \$11,000 so let me tell you, I haven't come that far since then."

She described the shock of finding out how low her pension would be after a full career of teaching, and how she was forced to spend her own money for classroom essentials. Remarking on job postings within the union apparatus, she said, "The amount of money they're offering to these people is obscene, and yet when I ask for an increase for my wages

it's a little pat on the back, and 'we'll try to do our best.'"

Drawing the political lessons from successive union betrayals

Some participants expressed doubts about the ability of workers to resist in face of the full gamut of repressive state powers at Ford's disposal. Several claimed there was "apathy" among the rank and file towards waging a struggle, with one attendee remarking on how hard it was to involve workers in union activities.

Roger Jordan, a writer for the *World Socialist Web Site* who has covered education workers' struggles extensively, stressed that it would be incorrect to draw pessimistic conclusions about the readiness of education workers to fight. Far from expressing "apathy," the lack of enthusiasm for volunteering as a picket captain or otherwise getting involved in the unions reveals the lack of confidence broad layers of rank-and-file workers have in the union officialdom and their apparatus. He emphasized the need to consider the impact on workers' consciousness of the more than three decades of betrayals perpetrated by the union bureaucracy, during which round after round of public spending cuts and concessionary contracts was imposed.

Jordan explained how a mass movement developed in the late 1990s against the Mike Harris Conservative government's "Common Sense Revolution." However, the union bureaucracy sabotaged it. First they limited it to regional "Days of Action," protests aimed at dissipating workers' power. Then when the anti-Harris movement began to escape their control, with teachers mounting an "illegal" strike that won widespread public support and posed the necessity of a general strike to bring down the government, the unions isolated the teachers, suppressed their strike and quickly shut down the anti-Harris movement altogether.

Jordan went on to review how the unions, led by Unifor and the teachers' unions, subsequently developed close ties with the Liberals, who under McGuinty and Wynne continued Harris' austerity measures.

He also explained that the OEWRFC's call to defy back-to-work legislation should not be understood as an appeal for individual acts of protest. Instead, it is a policy that can only succeed through the broadening of the struggle to all workers with an interest in defending public education so that the working class can resist the government's assault on their rights collectively through the methods of political class struggle.

Ken, an Ontario teacher and OEWRFC member, spoke strongly in favour of the OEWRFC's demand for an immediate 50 percent wage increase for support staff. He said that there was no "realistic" proposal the Ford government would accept.

"This isn't an appeal to Doug Ford to do the right thing," Ken continued. "We're not asking the government. We're telling them what we need. We're telling them how things are gonna go down."

Jake concluded by emphasizing the critical role that the OEWRFC and the committees it is fighting to build will play in the coming struggle. "There is a huge mandate for a strike," Jake said. "There is massive support for the fight for public education ... The critical question here is leadership and organization. This is something that can be built."

Education workers who oppose the Ford government's austerity measures and its "let it rip" pandemic policy, and who distrust the union leadership and its strategy of dividing and isolating education workers, should read the founding statement of the Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee and join us. The OEWRFC can be contacted at ontedrfc@gmail.com.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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