

Canadian Union of Public Employees rally shows union leadership has no strategy for education workers to defeat Ford

Our reporters
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Fifty-five thousand education support workers are on a collision course with Ontario's hard-right Progressive Conservative government. Premier Doug Ford and Education Minister Stephen Lecce have for all intents and purposes pledged to preemptively illegalize a strike that could begin as early as Thursday, November 3. Caretakers, librarians, early childhood educators and administrative staff, who are members of the Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU), have voted overwhelmingly for strike action to overturn more than a decade of real wage cuts, secure inflation-busting pay increases and reverse years of education cutbacks.

The rally organized by OSBCU in conjunction with its parent union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), Saturday, October 22, underscored that faced with a direct political struggle to achieve their demands, rank-and-file education support workers will find no way forward if the union bureaucracy retains control of their fight. The event, overseen by OSBCU lead negotiator Laura Walton and CUPE Ontario President Fred Hahn, was pitched entirely as a grovelling appeal to the hard-right Thatcherite Tories assembled in the Toronto Convention Center. The smattering of rank-and-file workers and strong contingent of union bureaucrats who participated were treated to little more than a dance party.

The general indifference felt by the vast majority of support workers to this union stunt was illustrated by the fact that the OSBCU and CUPE bureaucrats succeeded in mobilizing a pathetic 150 to 200 people, many of them union officials. This was in spite of the fact that the demonstration took place in Toronto, where CUPE Local 4400, OSBCU's largest local, has 12,000 members alone. CUPE is Canada's largest national union with a membership of over 700,000.

The comments made by workers in discussions with *World Socialist Web Site* reporters demonstrated that the abysmal attendance had nothing to do with a lack of readiness of workers to fight. On the contrary, workers are outraged over

the devastating impact of decades of austerity, which has ravaged the public education system, and the humiliating struggle to make ends meet despite helping provide a critical public service. However, most are deeply skeptical, despite the OSBCU leadership's rhetorical bluster, that it has any intention of waging a struggle against Ford and organizing mass defiance of back-to-work legislation. Remembering well Walton's 11th-hour sellout of an overwhelming strike vote in 2019, when she agreed to the enforcement of Ford's hated 1 percent annual pay cap just hours before workers were set to walk out, support workers see little point in participating in empty gestures designed to let off steam and pave the way for a massive real-terms pay cut for the lowest paid workers in the education sector.

One veteran educational assistant from Toronto detailed the financial struggles endured by education support workers for decades. The majority of OSBCU members earn less than \$39,000 per year, and over half of them work multiple jobs just to make ends meet.

"My pay basically hasn't changed in 10 years," she said. "With inflation, everything's going up. My pension doesn't go up with the cost of living. Something has got to give at some point."

A custodian from the Halton region echoed these sentiments, saying that he had been employed at his school board for "13 years, and never got a decent raise. Just 1 percent. When you look at inflation, it's at 7 percent right now. I see management getting their raises every year, and us front-liners, it's like basically, 'Who cares? Just show up and do your job.' It's not right."

Three early childhood educators from Toronto spoke of the emotional and psychological toll the job had taken on them and their colleagues.

One of them began, "We have a lot of members who can't go home well at night because they're so tired and so stressed out because they work so hard. They don't get recognized, and they don't get properly paid for it."

Discussion also turned to the Ford government's cynical claims of concern for kids as the justification for its threats to criminalize job action. Widely hated Education Minister Lecce has repeatedly asserted that kids have a "right to learn ... from September to June."

"One thing I have to struggle with," said one of the early childhood educators, "is I'm against using children with special needs as a bargaining chip. But right now we're not giving them the support they need in the form of adequate staff. We can't support a child with the best that they require. There's no support. It's frustrating."

A child and youth worker who attended the demonstration with her spouse and school-aged son spoke powerfully about the devastating impact that decades of budget cuts and almost three years of COVID-19 pandemic have had on safety and children's educational outcomes.

She pointed out that her son, who is considered a special needs student, lacked the necessary support of an educational assistant, despite the family filing numerous appeals for him to be provided one.

"We don't have safety at school any more, because we don't have staff," she said. "We don't have staff to keep kids safe or to keep ourselves safe."

"We have at least 100 more kids at our school than last year, many of whom have social or emotional needs. We manage toileting. We manage feeding them. So I'm left managing a child who has medical needs, and managing kids with behavioural needs, all at the same time."

An office administrator echoed these sentiments, saying, "I'm in student services, and I have to help cover for the main office, for attendance and everything else. So when I'm trying to cover for somebody else's job for half a day, it really takes away what I can give to students at my job for the other half of the day. I just can't do a job and a half or two jobs. It's not possible."

The reality expressed in these interviews would be instantly recognized by the 200,000 Ontario teachers currently working without a contract, and millions of workers labouring in both the public and private sectors under dangerous conditions and for wages that fail to keep pace with inflation. But Walton, Hahn and Co. are determined above all to ensure that the education support staff workers remain isolated from this potential groundswell of popular support. What they want to avoid at all costs is the emergence of a mass movement in defence of public education and workers' right-to-strike that would defy Ford's threats and secure substantial pay increases for support workers, and billions of dollars in investments for the starved public education budget. This is because such a movement would clash with the union bureaucrats' lucrative partnerships with government and the state apparatus

through the so-called labour relations system, and their fulsome support for the Liberal-New Democratic Party governmental alliance at the federal level, which is based on waging war abroad and imposing austerity on workers at home.

Speaking at the rally, Walton's main message was an appeal to Ford for a "fair deal" at the bargaining table. Hahn struck a similar note, commenting that workers are "applying pressure ... to convince the government that what they gotta do is change their offer."

These appeals will fall on deaf ears. The urgent task now facing education support workers is to establish a network of rank-and-file committees for the purpose of carrying forward their struggle on a diametrically opposed basis. Instead of issuing hopeless appeals to Ford and Lecce to be "fair" within the anti-worker collective bargaining system, workers should fight to popularize their struggle at schools, in neighbourhoods and other workplaces. Demonstrations, information pickets and meetings should be organized to explain to teachers, parents of students and workers in all economic sectors why the fight by education support workers for an end to poverty-level wages and austerity budgets for public education is a fight that deserves the support of the entire working class. In this way, support workers can play a powerful role in mobilizing a mass movement of working people capable of defying the Ford government's threats and reorganizing society's vast resources to meet social needs, like public education and health care, rather than private profit.

This struggle is being led by the Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee (OEWRFC), which brings together teachers, education support staff and other workers across the province. The OEWRFC is affiliated with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees in recognition of the fact that the success of a struggle against austerity and wage cutting in Ontario depends upon education workers organizing a common fight with their co-workers across Canada and internationally. **We urge all education workers who want to take forward this struggle to contact the OEWRFC at ontedrfc@gmail.com or fill out the form below.**



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