

Unite all Ontario education workers to defy Ford's impending no-strike law!

For a working class counter-offensive in defence of public education and workers' wages and rights

Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee
28 October 2022

55,000 education support workers, including caretakers, early childhood educators, administrative staff, and librarians, face a direct confrontation with Ontario's hard-right Progressive Conservative government. Not only have Premier Doug Ford and Education Minister Stephen Lecce made provocative, real-wage cutting contract "offers." They have made it abundantly clear they intend to break a strike that could start as soon as next Thursday, November 3, by immediately adopting an anti-strike law.

The support-staff workers must not be left to fight alone against the Ontario Tory government's class war agenda of wage cuts, austerity, and the destruction of workers' rights.

Contracts for all 255,000 Ontario education workers, including 200,000 teachers, expired on August 31. Yet the five Ontario education unions have conspired to divide us. They are adamantly opposed to answering an anti-democratic law criminalizing the support workers' strike with mass job action on the part of all education workers.

If the education support workers' struggle remains isolated, their courageous stand for inflation-busting wage increases and an end to austerity budgets for public education will be defeated and the Ford government and the Bay Street financial oligarchy that stands behind it strengthened.

This is why we formed the Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee. It aims to unify all education workers in a common fight to defend public education, organize mass defiance of strikebreaking legislation, and to make this the spearhead of a mass mobilization of working people against austerity and in defence of workers' rights.

The Ford government's pitiful, maximum 2 percent annual wage "increase" and its plans to cut billions more from education budgets in the coming years have no popular mandate. Ford and his Tories won the support of less than 18 percent of the electorate in last June's provincial election.

The only reason this illegitimate government can threaten us so aggressively is because the bureaucrats who lead the education unions are doing everything in their power to sabotage our struggle. Even though our contracts all expired on the same day, the Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU), which represents support staff, and the four teacher unions have insisted on bargaining separately. The teachers' union apparatuses have ruled out strike action until the winter and haven't even begun the process of organizing strike votes.

So great was the anger among school support staff after more than two decades of wage cuts that have reduced many to poverty pay, the OSBCU leadership was forced to hold a ballot on strike action. It returned an overwhelming 96.5 percent in favour of a strike. But OSBCU and its parent union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), are doing

everything to ensure workers go into struggle with both hands tied behind their backs.

Union representatives have admitted in membership meetings that the government is preparing to use draconian powers—including the anti-democratic "notwithstanding clause" to repress a strike. Yet they have made it clear they will not call on teachers, the more than 650,000 other CUPE members, or other workers to walk off the job or take any other meaningful action to defend the support staff workers.

How the union bureaucrats plan to sell us out

In recent days, OSBCU President Laura Walton and other top OSBCU officials have appeared alongside Ontario CUPE President Fred Hahn at rallies and public events to proclaim CUPE's "support" for an education support staff strike. This "support" was reportedly decided at a meeting of CUPE's national executive in late September. Yet for weeks, CUPE remained silent about what this "support" would concretely mean—making clear in the process that it would have nothing to do with mobilizing working-class support for striking education workers. Now the CUPE/OSBCU top brass have announced that this "support" amounts to a union pledge to pay the fines levied on individual workers who choose to defy a strikebreaking law.

This is the kind of support that a rope gives to a hanging man. The OSBCU leadership has refused to advance any strategy for the mobilization of the collective strength of the working class to defeat Ford. Walton has said the union will hold regional mass meetings to "consult" the membership on what to do in the event of a strike ban. But she has failed to commit the leadership to any practical measures to strengthen the movement.

A genuine workers' leader would explain to the 55,000 support staff that they are in the frontline of a struggle that has implications for the entire working class. They would say that if Ford so brazenly violates our democratic rights, they would immediately call for CUPE's 700,000 members nationally and the 200,000 members of the four teacher unions in Ontario to join support workers in defying the government until it is forced to back down. Additionally, they would stress that the hundreds of millions of dollars in CUPE assets hoarded by the bureaucracy would be deployed to guarantee full pay for all workers participating in the strike.

A genuine workers' leader would insist that conditions could hardly be more favourable for mobilizing popular backing for their struggle. Every

worker has an interest in defending education and other vital public services, defeating the government-employer drive to impose inflation-induced wage cuts, and smashing the battery of anti-strike laws governments of all stripes have used to impose austerity and contract concessions.

For all the militant-sounding bluster of Walton and Hahn, what they are in effect telling support staff is that they must decide as individuals whether to defy a back-to-work law that the government will seek to enforce with all the coercive methods of state repression at its disposal.

Under these conditions, it is understandable, albeit mistaken, if some workers conclude they cannot resist Ford's attacks. This is in fact the outcome the union apparatus hopes to achieve. As the OSBCU bureaucracy did in 2019, it intends to blame any defeat, whether imposed through a back-to-work law or a rotten sellout agreed to at the 11th hour, on the "lack of organizational support" to take on Ford.

The union apparatus is tied by a thousand threads to the anti-worker "collective bargaining" regime and the capitalist state, which together guarantee the bureaucrats' fat salaries and close partnership with provincial and federal governments and big business. These material interests explain why it is hostile to mobilizing the social power of the working class, and has for decades policed government anti-strike laws.

A struggle against Ford's push for wage cuts, the gutting of public education budgets, and the effective abolition of the right to strike must therefore come from below. It must come from rank-and-file workers seizing control of the struggle through the construction of a network of rank-and-file committees. These organizations, led by the most militant and self-sacrificing workers and democratically controlled by the rank-and-file, would give education workers the organizational power and political leadership to defy Ford's attacks, and any and all attempts by Walton and the CUPE leadership to sabotage their struggle.

Why the union apparatus opposes our struggle

The policy pursued by the OSBCU bureaucracy is not the result of mistakes or bad leaders. The bureaucrats are part of a privileged middle class layer that is hostile to our interests. Their main concern is not to secure better wages and conditions for us, but to preserve the authority of the "collective bargaining" system that they have used to suppress working-class struggles for the past four decades. Over the past three years alone, education support workers have suffered massive real-terms pay cuts due to OSBCU's agreement to enforce Ford's Bill 124, which imposed a 1 percent annual pay cap on over 1 million Ontario public sector workers. Citing the sanctity of collective agreements, OSBCU and the teacher unions also blocked all attempts by us to organize collective action to resist the ruling elite's policy of mass infection during the pandemic.

As Canada's largest union, CUPE has played a crucial role in the trade unions' support for the pro-austerity, pro-war federal Liberal government since 2015. When the New Democrats concluded a formal governmental alliance with Justin Trudeau's Liberals in March, the Canadian Labour Congress cheered on the deal. The agreement ensures that the government has a parliamentary majority to spend tens of billions of dollars on war and cut billions in domestic spending in a new "age of austerity" recently outlined by Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland. Support for spending billions on weaponry so Canadian imperialism can wage war around the world and billions more in handouts to the corporations and super-rich through tax cuts and COVID "emergency bailouts" is incompatible with support for improved wages and conditions for workers. To ensure that Trudeau and NDP leader Jagmeet Singh succeed in serving the interests of

Canadian big business, the unions must ensure that social spending and the cost of public sector wages decline continuously.

What must education workers do now?

The immediate task posed to caretakers, administrative staff, early childhood educators, and librarians is to take control of their contract struggle out of the hands of the union apparatus and transfer decision-making powers to the rank-and-file. Only in this way can support staff make a direct appeal to teachers for a common struggle. They must conduct a determined fight to make their resistance to strikebreaking legislation the catalyst for a mass mobilization of the working class in defence of public education. This is the precondition for successfully defying anti-strike legislation, not an isolated struggle that will expose workers to victimization and reprisals.

The necessity of rank-and-file committees is one of the key lessons from the bitter experiences of four decades of the suppression of the class struggle by the trade union bureaucracy. Twenty-five years ago this month, to cite but one example, Ontario teachers began a courageous two-week strike against the Tory government of Mike Harris and its cuts to education and attacks on workers' rights. The strike rapidly galvanized mass support from working people outraged by Harris' "Common Sense Revolution," which slashed social spending across the board. Conditions were emerging for a general strike to bring down the hated Harris government. But that was precisely what the teachers unions and Ontario Federation of Labour would not countenance. Having affirmed they did not want to challenge Harris' "right to govern," they called off the strike after the government failed to secure a court injunction against the striking teachers. Anger was widespread among teachers to the unions' outrageous betrayal of their struggle. But the lack of an organized political alternative to lead this opposition enabled the bureaucracy to prevail. Exploiting the ensuing confusion and demoralization, Harris secured re-election little more than a year later.

Education workers must draw the lessons of the 1997 strike and mount a struggle for rank-and-file committees. To this end, we urge education workers across Ontario to take the following immediate steps:

1. All education workers working without a contract, including the 200,000 teachers, should demand an immediate strike vote. This demand should be made the starting point for mobilizing all education workers in a unified struggle against Ford.

2. Education workers should convene meetings at schools, excluding union bureaucrats, to establish rank-and-file committees. These committees should adopt resolutions outlining the demands workers want to fight for, declare their affiliation with the OEWRFC, and demand the right of the rank-and-file to observe and, through their elected representatives, participate in all future bargaining sessions.

3. The rank-and-file committees should begin a systematic campaign to build support for education workers among parents, students, and other sections of workers in manufacturing, transportation, health care, and logistics. Visits should be organized to auto plants, factories, offices, and work sites to explain how all workers have an interest in a well-funded public education system and resisting the ruling elite's drive to outlaw strikes and slash workers' incomes.

4. The rank-and-file committees should organize information pickets and other initiatives to explain to all education workers and their supporters throughout the working class that they are involved in a political fight. Achieving the just demands of education support workers for inflation-busting pay increases and a well-funded public education system is unthinkable without a frontal assault against the financial

oligarchy that stands behind the Ford government. Education workers can emerge victorious by unifying their struggle with their co-workers across Canada and around the world through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

We strongly appeal to all education workers ready to take up this fight to contact us at ontedrfc@gmail.com or join our private Facebook discussion group



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact