

“We must fight and defy this legislation tooth and nail”

# Opposition builds among education workers to Ontario government’s draconian anti-strike law

**Our reporters**

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Since Ontario’s hard-right Progressive Conservative government unveiled legislation Monday that robs school caretakers, education assistants, early childhood educators and administrative staff of their right to strike and arbitrarily imposes concessionary contracts on them, the *World Socialist Web Site* has received numerous angry comments from workers.

Members and supporters of the Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee (OEWRFC) attacked the Ford government for its contempt towards workers’ rights, and criticized the education union bureaucracy’s refusal to call for and organize mass defiance by school support staff, teachers and all workers of the anti-democratic Keeping Students in Class Act.

A meeting of OEWRFC members Tuesday evening agreed to call an emergency online public meeting open to all rank-and-file education workers and their supporters this Thursday, November 3, at 7 p.m. Eastern time. The purpose of the meeting will be to discuss and advance a strategy for defying the Ford government’s back-to-work legislation, and securing inflation-busting wage and benefit increases for all workers in their next contract. At the center of this strategy must be the building of a network of rank-and-file committees to mobilize the full power of the working class in defence of the education support workers. To attend Thursday evening’s meeting, email [ontedrfc@gmail.com](mailto:ontedrfc@gmail.com) or fill out the form at the end of this article.

The Tory strikebreaking law aims to impose four-year contracts on education support workers, including a miserly 2.5 percent per year wage increase for those earning less than \$43,000 and 1.5 percent for everyone else. On Monday, Education Minister Stephen Lecce said that there would be no further talks with Ontario School Boards Council of Unions (OSBCU) negotiators as the government was focused on ramming its anti-strike law through parliament. However, press reports Tuesday suggested that the Ford government might participate in previously scheduled mediator-led bargaining sessions. A government source told the *Toronto Star* that the government would participate if the union withdraws its strike notice for Friday and makes a “reasonable offer,” i.e., dramatically scales back its already modest demand for an 11.7 percent annual pay increase.

The leadership of the OSBCU and Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), which with 700,000 members is the country’s largest union, has no strategy to defeat the government’s evisceration

of workers’ rights. All they want is to persuade the government to get back to the “bargaining table.” But workers have nothing more to negotiate with Ford and Lecce, who trashed the collective bargaining system by rewriting the rules as they saw fit and, moreover, invoked the anti-democratic “notwithstanding clause” to do so—an admission that they are trampling on basic democratic rights.

**London, Ontario, caretaker: “We must continue to work outside of the union apparatuses to defend our struggle”**

A caretaker from London, Ontario, explained their dissatisfaction with the OSBCU’s proposal for a “political protest” Friday rather than a strike against the government’s anti-strike law. The same formula was used in 1997 by the teacher unions to contain and ultimately sabotage a two-week strike by teachers against Mike Harris’ Progressive Conservative government. By declaring the mobilization a “political protest,” the union bureaucracy sent an unmistakable signal to the political establishment that it had no intention of leading a working-class political challenge to the Harris government and its class war agenda. This time around, OSBCU and CUPE are instructing their members to hold protests outside the offices of Tory MPPs, with the claim that the government can be prodded into returning to “negotiations.”

“I am under the impression that the workers have the militancy to stand up against the government’s extremely heavy handed overreach,” the caretaker said. “With the OSBCU stating that they wish to conduct a ‘political protest’ come Friday, the members should pressure the bureaucrats within the OSBCU and CUPE to stand behind us in continuous strike action. My local has started to mobilize workers to continuously defy the imposed contract and fight to have our charter protected rights to bargain restored, but without mobilizing workers outside of the union’s channel, I don’t believe we can carry out action. Workers must band together throughout the OSBCU to build strength and strategies to defy these breaches of law laid before us by the Ford government and not allow other sectors to fall into their slimy trap of removing our rights. CUPE and the OSBCU must be pushed to make other sectors understand and feel the pressure because

they are next in line.”

The caretaker continued, “The hangmen in the Ford government are gearing up to sell every union contract down the river and it starts with us. We must fight and defy this legislation tooth and nail.”

Asked what they thought rank-and-file workers should do if the union agrees to a sellout at the bargaining table with the Ford government, the caretaker answered, “I believe that if the union leadership once again accepts another sellout, the rank-and-file must swiftly build true rank-and-file committees within every local, while fighting to rapidly change the internal make up of the locals and OSBCU with more militant and political members to make sure that after this horrific contract runs out, we will have real representation at the bargaining table. Real understanding of political struggles outside of a liberal framework, and if internalized struggles fail we must continue to work outside of the union apparatuses to defend our struggle instead of letting class traitors govern our struggle.”

The caretaker also commented on how a unified fight involving all education workers is necessary. “Leading the struggle, I would have set up outreaches to organizations to supply workers with the necessary political outlook on what this struggle means,” they commented. “Outreach to organizations to help feed and pay expenses for workers who can’t afford to be mobilized with the little pay that CUPE offers as a strike fund. Organization and mobilizing of the supporting public and other workers who empathize with our struggle would commence. I would have us strike in key sectors of cities, shutting down the flow of traffic and industry. There should be a mass mobilization onto Queens Park and holding ground until Ford and his cronies are forced to see the backing of public support. We would shut down every school board and withhold all services until our demands are met, openly defying the government’s unjust laws.”

### **Toronto custodian: “This attack by the state was possible because of the bankruptcy of the union bureaucrats”**

A custodian from Toronto told the WWS, “The Ford regime’s draconian decision to impose a massive wage cut on education workers and to criminalize our democratic right to strike via legislation is an attack on the entire working class. This attack by the state was possible because of the bankruptcy of the union bureaucrats, who have no strategy for victory and encouraged members to appeal to their MPPs to ‘come to the table’ to ‘make a deal.’ This was a dead end strategy that led to failure. Rank-and-file education workers must appeal to working class parents and the millions of workers in the public and private sector in the province to build a worker-led movement against the union bureaucrats and the capitalist state led by the PC government.”

### **York teacher: “The only way workers ever have gotten ahead historically was by fighting for their rights”**

Ken, a teacher from York region, commented, “All education workers should be very concerned with the government of Ontario’s draconian threats against our right to strike. Education workers really

need to question whose side our unions are on and if they are really fighting for us. Times are tough. Everything is getting more and more expensive. It feels like every day we are falling behind. We are struggling for wages that keep up with inflation. Just in the past few months higher mortgage rates and fuel costs have put a serious dent in my family’s cash flow. This situation is getting worse it seems with every passing week. I’m worried about the future.

“I’m a history teacher. I know that the only way workers ever have gotten ahead historically was by fighting for their rights, fighting for better working conditions, and fighting for higher wages. The government is taking away these rights, and our unions are doing nothing to stop it. They are not fighting for us. Nothing was ever given to workers willingly by the state or by corporations.

“The history of the workers movement has been written in blood, violence, and oppression. Every victory came with sacrifice. The only thing workers have in this fight is control over our labor. That means I decide if I will work under certain conditions. This is a basic human right, the right to withhold my labor. When enough workers come together and decide that we will not work for wages that amount to devastating wage cuts, we transform individual acts of rebellion into a powerful collective struggle for what we deserve as workers. This WAS what unions used to do. They used to be workers organizations that fought for workers. Sadly, I don’t think that is the case anymore. I feel like the people in charge really don’t care about the rank and file.

“We are left to face some ugly truths in these contract negotiations. The Government is criminalizing our right to strike. That’s what the fascists did in Italy under Mussolini and in Germany under Hitler. What kind of society bans the right of a worker to withhold his labor? The answer is easy—not a democratic one! In addition, the unions are abetting the government by not unifying ALL education workers in a mass political struggle against a hard-right government that has very little public support. Less than 18 percent of all eligible voters voted for Doug Ford’s party in the last election. Why are the unions not mobilizing to bring down this government? Why are the unions telling me that they will support me if I decide to personally not go back to work but will not call on every education worker in the province to defy back to work legislation collectively?”

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The key task facing rank-and-file education support workers is to broaden their struggle to teachers and every section of the working class. Such a campaign would galvanize mass support, as all workers have 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 have routinely used to impose austerity and contract concessions. We appeal to all workers wishing to support this struggle to attend the OEWRFC’s public meeting on Thursday at 7pm by emailing [ontedrfc@gmail.com](mailto:ontedrfc@gmail.com) or filling out the form below.



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