

From the Archives: The betrayal of the 1997 Ontario teachers' strike

1 November 2022

Twenty-five years ago this month, over 120,000 Ontario teachers waged a courageous two-week strike against the right-wing, Mike Harris-led Progressive Conservative government. The strike was the culmination of a mass movement that had been developing in the working class since late 1995 against the Tories' "Common Sense Revolution"—a Thatcher-style program of sweeping public spending cuts, privatization, deregulation and anti-worker laws.

The strike became a direct political confrontation between the Harris government and the teachers, who rapidly won the sympathy and active support of large sections of workers in Canada's most-populous province. Popular support for the strike was so strong that a judge denied the government's request for a court injunction banning the strike, fearing that the injunction would be ignored and the authority of the courts as bulwarks of capitalist property and order undermined.

An insurgent working-class movement, the largest in North America during the 1990s, was gathering pace, calling into question the future of the Tory government and the domination of the capitalist elite over social and economic life. Precisely at this juncture, the union bureaucracy intervened to strangle the strike. They did so because the impending broadening of the teachers' struggle to wider sections of working people threatened the interests of the union bureaucracy, with its close ties to the capitalist state and big business.

Throughout, the teacher unions described the strike as a "political protest." They did so as part of their effort to contain and suppress it: in order to make clear to Harris and his ministers that they had nothing to fear from the unions, that they would not challenge his government's "right to govern" or lead a working class political offensive against its class war agenda. After the courts balked at trying to stamp out the struggle, the union bureaucrats took on the job themselves, calling off the strike and capitulating to the government's demands.

The 55,000 education support workers currently in a direct confrontation with the hard-right government of Doug Ford must draw critical political lessons from the historic 1997 teachers' strike. Caretakers, education assistants, early childhood educators, and administrative staff are in a direct political struggle with the government after it tabled draconian strikebreaking legislation Monday that robs workers of their constitutional right to strike and seeks to impose brutal real-terms pay cuts. Reprising the line taken by the teacher unions in 1997, the Ontario School Board Council of Unions and Canadian Union of Public Employees are trying to limit worker opposition to a "political protest"—i.e., a short-lived walkout aimed at urging Ford to return to the "bargaining table."

To prevent the defeat of their struggle and organize a successful campaign of mass defiance of the Ford government's draconian anti-strike law, education support workers, teachers and their supporters throughout the working class must seize control of the struggle from the union

bureaucracy by building rank-and-file committees in every school and workplace. The experience of the 1997 strike demonstrated that what education workers lacked above all was their own rank-and-file organizations to coordinate their fight, and their own party to provide political leadership. To assist in the clarification of these crucial questions of working class perspective, we are republishing a statement by the editorial board of the International Workers Bulletin, a predecessor to the World Socialist Web Site, published in November 1997 following the sellout of the Ontario teachers' strike.

The betrayal of the 1997 Ontario teachers' strike—The lessons for all workers

17 November 1997

The two-week strike by Ontario's 126,000 public school teachers and its betrayal by the teachers unions and the Ontario Federation of Labour contain vital lessons not only for the Canadian working class, but for workers all over the world.

The teachers struck against a right-wing provincial government that has launched a frontal assault on social programs, as well as trade union and democratic rights. The teachers stood firm in the face of Ontario Premier Mike Harris's threats of massive fines and other legal sanctions. Their stand galvanized the active support of parents, students and workers all across the province, who turned out in the tens of thousands at a series of rallies to demonstrate their class solidarity with the strikers.

The strike was the largest-ever work stoppage in Ontario, Canada's most populous province, and the biggest teachers' strike in North American history. From the outset it took on the character of a broad social movement of working people, transcending the more narrow, sectional standpoint of most trade union struggles.

It was a direct challenge to the Tory (Conservative Party) provincial government, aimed at forcing Harris to rescind his so-called Education Quality Improvement Act (Bill 160). The teachers walked out not only to protect their jobs and working conditions, but to defend the public school system against the government's attack. Thus the strike centered on a question that goes to the heart of the social position and democratic rights of the entire working class.

Moreover, it was the culmination of two years of working class protests against the Harris government. Hundred of thousands of workers, students and unemployed people have demonstrated against the Tories' cuts in social spending, which include a 21 percent reduction in welfare benefits and the imposition of a "workfare" program.

The teachers' walkout became the focal point of the mass opposition to the Tories. Even the capitalist press had to concede that the strike had the support of a large and growing majority of the public.

Precisely because the strike had become a broader social struggle which

raised fundamental political and class issues, objectively challenging the corporate offensive against working people which is the basis of capitalist “prosperity,” the trade union apparatus moved to terminate the walkout. Its interests were directly threatened by the strike because the trade union bureaucracy, in Canada as in every other country, defends the profit system and answers to the needs of big business, not the working class.

Union leaders call off the strike

At the height of the walkout, with the Harris Tory government isolated and in crisis, having failed to obtain a court injunction against the teachers, the union leaders, backed by the New Democratic Party (NDP) politicians, dropped their opposition to Bill 160 and offered major concessions to the government’s demands for job cuts, reductions in teachers’ preparation time and increases in class size. When Harris refused their capitulatory offer, the unions called off the strike.

The courts had denied Harris’s request for a back-to-work order because there was real concern within the ruling class that workers would refuse to comply. Recognizing the potential for a mass movement that could spin out of the control of the unions, the judge, in effect, instructed the union leadership to do the dirty work of smashing the strike.

Thus the teachers were defeated not by the might of the state, nor by any weakening within their ranks. Rather their struggle was sabotaged by their own leadership.

The Ontario teachers’ strike has provided a devastating exposure of the reactionary role of the existing trade union organizations, which, all over the world, are collaborating with big business and capitalist governments in the destruction of the past social conquests of the working class, including the right to decent public schools.

It has brought into sharp relief the crisis of leadership and political perspective confronting the international working class. The Ontario workers faced a dilemma common to workers in every country—the absence of any mass political alternative of the working class to the parties of big business.

The more directly the teachers were locked in struggle with the Harris Tory government, and confronted with the task of bringing it down, the more clearly they came up against the most essential question: the need to build a new party based on a perspective of struggle against the whole of the profit system and all of its political parties.

Despite the attempt of the union leaders to cast the struggle in the most narrow possible terms—as a contractual dispute with an aberrant politician and his demonic party—Ontario workers were well aware that Harris was simply carrying to their logical end the policies embraced by all of the establishment parties in Canada, including the union-backed NDP. Over the past seven years workers in the province have endured successive Liberal Party, NDP and Conservative (Tory) regimes. All have launched attacks on the jobs, social services and democratic rights of the working class.

In fact, Harris was able to sweep to power in 1995 only after masses of working people turned with disgust from the NDP government of Bob Rae, which carried out unprecedented attacks on public service workers and enacted brutal social spending cuts.

And on a national level, the Liberal Party government of Jean Chretien takes its cue in social policy from the Harris regime in Ontario.

Thus the Ontario strikers were starkly posed with the following problem: Harris had to go, but what would replace him?

This is the very question that confronted the French workers in their mass strike movement of 1995, when they took to the streets against the right-wing government of Juppe, having previously experienced years of austerity and job-cutting under Socialist Party governments that ruled with the backing of the French Communist Party.

The same can be said of Britain, where the Labour Party has embraced a Thatcherite social program even to the right of the Tories, and of Australia, where the Labor Party did the bidding of big business during its

13 years of national rule.

In the US, the political disenfranchisement of the working class is maintained by the AFL-CIO’s support for the big business Democratic Party.

At the heart of the trade union bureaucracy’s betrayal of the working class is its support for the political parties that defend the capitalist system, including so-called “Labor,” “Socialist” and “Communist” parties, and its opposition to the construction of genuine parties of the working class—parties based on the struggle to abolish class privilege and social inequality and unite workers internationally against the profit system.

In Ontario, the more the strike assumed the character of a political struggle against the government, the more overt and desperate became the bureaucrats’ attempts to channel the anti-Tory movement behind the other capitalist parties. That is why they brought NDP and Liberal Party politicians onto the platform at the support rallies called by the teachers unions and the Ontario Federation of Labour.

Teachers, parents and students throughout Ontario, and workers in the rest of Canada, were stunned and outraged by the labor bureaucracy’s betrayal of the strike. Rank-and-file teachers in Toronto and elsewhere sought to organize a movement to defy the union leadership’s surrender.

However this opposition lacked a coherent alternative perspective to the pro-capitalist politics of the trade union bureaucracy. Such a perspective can, in fact, only be developed in the working class through the construction of a genuine socialist party, based on an assimilation of the historical experiences of the international workers’ movement and a scientific understanding of capitalist society.

The central lesson of the betrayal of the teachers’ strike is that there is no alternative to the struggle to build a mass socialist party of the working class, committed to an internationalist program.

The Socialist Equality Party of Canada intervened in the strike to fight for this orientation. It warned teachers of the treachery of the unions and urged them to make their struggle the catalyst for the all-out mobilization of working people against the Harris government, and to build the SEP as the new party of working class.

It explained that even the most basic demands of working people, such as high quality public education, are incompatible with the insatiable profit demands of the capitalist market. Society’s resources can be mobilized to end poverty and unemployment and raise the material and cultural level of the people only if the economy is radically reorganized, with the most important levers of economic life placed under public ownership and utilized in a planned and rational way, under the democratic control of the working class.

The SEP distributed statements in the thousands at mass rallies in Toronto on November 6 and 8. Its November 8 statement, entitled: “The way forward after the betrayal of the teachers’ strike: workers need their own party,” declared:

“All the struggles against the Tory cuts, their ‘reforms’ of social programs and the downsizing of the public sector must be brought together in a political struggle aimed at bringing down the Harris regime and building a movement to replace it with a government democratically controlled by and serving the interests of the working people.”



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