

The criminalization of the Ontario education workers strike and the global onslaught on workers' rights

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The Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee is holding a public meeting at 7 p.m. Eastern time Thursday, November 3, to discuss the strategy outlined below. Click here to register to attend.

Ontario's hard-right Progressive Conservative government is rushing legislation through the provincial parliament to criminalize a planned strike by 55,000 school custodians, education assistants, early childhood educators and administrative staff.

The strike is scheduled to begin Friday following a massive 96.5 percent vote in favour of strike action. The lowest-paid workers in the education sector, school support staff, are determined to reverse years of real wage cuts and secure increased funding for an education system that has been bled white by decades of austerity.

Ontario Premier Doug Ford and Education Minister Stephen Lecce are using their draconian strike ban to arbitrarily decree further massive real-terms pay cuts. The four-year contracts to be imposed under the Orwellian-named Keeping Students in School Act would provide a maximum annual pay increase of just 2.5 percent, under conditions in which inflation for basic necessities is well over 10 percent. The imposed contracts would also slash sick pay and gut job security provisions. Any worker who defies the strike ban faces a potential \$4,000 fine for each day of job action, while trade unions can be fined \$500,000 per day.

Ford and Lecce have publicly declared that their illegitimate "collective agreement" will serve as the benchmark for new contracts for 200,000 Ontario teachers. However, their onslaught on the wages and democratic rights of education workers is an attack on the entire working class. It is aimed at breaking resistance to sweeping cuts to education and other public services and bolstering big business in imposing massive inflation-driven wage cuts on private sector workers across Canada.

To enforce his strike ban and concessionary contracts, Ford is invoking the Canadian constitution's anti-democratic, and until very recently rarely used, "notwithstanding clause." This clause allows Canada's federal and provincial governments to adopt laws that violate fundamental democratic rights supposedly guaranteed in Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms and thereby shield them from being overturned by the courts. Ford's invocation of the notwithstanding clause is a tacit admission his government is trampling on core democratic rights and is meant to normalize such authoritarian actions.

Canada's federal Liberal government criticized Ford's invocation of the notwithstanding clause, but has avoided opposing the strikebreaking law. This two-faced posturing comes as no surprise. The government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has routinely ridden roughshod over workers' rights, threatening or breaking strikes with back-to-work laws. This includes illegalizing rotating walkouts by postal workers in 2018 and a strike at the Port of Montreal in 2021. Trudeau speaks for a faction of the Canadian ruling elite which, like Biden in the United States, prefers to use the trade union bureaucracy to enforce attacks on working people rather than risking a direct confrontation between workers and the state.

The gutting of workers' rights by the capitalist elite is a global phenomenon. In the United States, the Biden administration connived with the union bureaucracy and rail companies to temporarily block a strike by over 120,000 rail workers in September. If the rail unions fail to ram through another round of massive concessions, the Democratic-led US Congress has pledged to intervene and ban any strike.

In France, the hated President Emmanuel Macron recently requisitioned striking oil refinery workers to end a two-week job action that curtailed fuel supplies to much of the country. And in Britain, the right-wing Tory government is on the brink of adopting legislation that will effectively legalize strikes in key sectors including air, road and rail transportation.

The abrogation of workers' rights by deeply unpopular governments in North America and Europe makes a mockery of the incessant claims by these very same regimes to be engaged in a crusade for "democracy" and "human rights" against "Russian aggression" in Ukraine. These attacks underscore that workers in the imperialist centres essentially have no democratic rights at all, at least not when they threaten to get in the way of the ruling elite's class war austerity agenda at home and military operations abroad.

The systematic destruction of workers' rights is part of a conscious turn to authoritarian forms of rule by the bourgeoisie in all major countries. This process found its clearest expression in Trump's attempted fascist coup on January 6, 2021, to overturn the 2020 US presidential election result.

The drive to dictatorship is rooted in the deepening capitalist crisis which is fuelling the danger of a third world war fought with

nuclear weapons and driving social inequality to unprecedented levels. Workers' wages and public services and social supports on which hundreds of millions of people depend are being sacrificed to swell the bank balances of the super-rich and fund the imperialist war machine.

While Ford claims there is "no money" to provide the low-paid education support workers—many of whom must work a second job to make ends meet—with anything more than a 2.5 percent annual wage "increase," Canada's federal Liberal government has spent over \$600 million on the US-NATO war against Russia since February.

The federal Liberal government also handed over a massive \$650 billion bailout to the banks and major corporations at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, then oversaw a drive to reopen businesses and schools, resulting in seven waves of mass infection and death. Meanwhile, a recent national survey revealed that one in five Canadians are skipping meals because they can't afford to buy food. Such glaring contradictions between wealth and squalor cannot be maintained democratically.

The only way for education support workers to respond to Ford's anti-strike law is to fight for the mobilization of teachers and all workers in a campaign of mass defiance. Such a campaign could and would galvanize mass support: All workers in Ontario, across Canada and internationally have a direct interest in defending the right to strike, fighting for a well-funded public education system and securing inflation-busting pay and benefit increases.

This is precisely the strategy that the corporatist trade unions, led in Canada as internationally by a bureaucratic apparatus of highly paid functionaries, bitterly oppose. The Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) and Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) have issued meaningless statements of "solidarity" with education support workers that commit these organizations with millions of members to do precisely nothing. Ontario's four teacher unions are playing a foul role, ordering their members to show up for work Friday as it is their "contractual obligation" and warning them not to join pickets or protests during "working hours."

Recognizing the mass anger among education support workers, the Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU) and its parent body, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), have been forced to call a walkout they are dubbing a "political protest" beginning Friday.

But CUPE, Canada's largest union with over 700,000 members, continues to insist in the face of the anti-strike law that a deal can be reached with Ford and Lecce through "negotiations" at the "bargaining table." To entice the government to resume talks, CUPE slashed its annual pay increase demand from 11.7 percent to 6 percent Wednesday.

CUPE and the OSBCU have refused to appeal for a united struggle with the 200,000 teachers whose contracts expired on the same day as those of the education support workers, never mind working people more broadly. While Ford has made clear with his use of the notwithstanding clause that he is ready to use every repressive weapon at his disposal to defeat the education support workers, CUPE is doing everything it can to isolate and sabotage their struggle.

CUPE has announced that during Friday's walkout there will be no pickets at schools. Workers are instead instructed to rally outside the Ontario legislature, "protest" at local Progressive Conservative politicians' offices and write emails to Ford begging him to "negotiate." In reality, there is nothing to "negotiate" with a government that has trashed the collective bargaining system by rewriting the rules to impose its own demands.

The unions justify their call for a "political protest" by presenting it as a clever tactic. By "protesting" rather than striking, or so claim the bureaucrats, workers will not be violating the strike ban. In fact, what they are declaring is that they will limit the strike to a futile pressure campaign aimed at persuading Ford and Lecce to sugar-coat their poison pill. Their principal concern is to defend the reactionary collective bargaining system at all costs, since it is this state-run, anti-worker monstrosity that secures them their privileged relations with government ministers and corporate executives.

These corporatist ties are exemplified in the alliance between the governing Liberals, the social democratic New Democrats and the trade unions at the federal level. This alliance, which is pledged to secure the minority Trudeau government a majority in parliament through June 2025, is aimed at suppressing the class struggle at home and waging war on behalf of Canadian imperialism abroad.

To defeat the Ford government's strike ban, education support workers must seize control of the struggle from the union bureaucracy by building a network of rank-and-file committees to lead a campaign of mass defiance. They must break out of the confines of the collective bargaining framework by unifying their fight with teachers and mobilizing support from the entire working class to bring down the Ford government. The struggle to secure decent-paying jobs, a well-funded public education system and the protection of workers' rights is incompatible with the domination of social and political life by the financial oligarchy. What is required is the redistribution of society's vast resources to meet social needs rather than private profit, which depends above all on the fight for a workers' government committed to socialist policies.

Since the onslaught on workers' rights is rooted in a systemic crisis of global capitalism, workers must adopt a unified international response. The most powerful allies of education workers in Ontario are workers around the world—be it rail workers and educators in the United States, French oil refinery workers or British health and transport workers—not the union bureaucrats seeking a "negotiated" solution with their government "partners." This is why the development of a genuine struggle against capitalist austerity and state repression depends upon the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



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