

Build rank-and-file committees to:

Mobilize Ontario workers to defy and defeat Ford's anti-strike law!

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The 55,000 education support workers in Ontario are courageously defying the hard-right Ford government's savage anti-strike law. Today, Friday, November 4, they launched a province-wide strike despite facing the threat of punitive fines of up to \$4,000 per day of job action.

Workers across Canada—starting with Ontario's 200,000 teachers, who are next in line to be robbed of their democratic rights to strike and bargain collectively—must ensure the education support workers are not left to fight alone. Solidarity strikes must be organized with the aim of rallying the working class for a general strike to bring down the Ford government.

By government decree, Ford and Education Minister Lecce are imposing “collective agreements” that will massively cut the education workers' real-terms wages, gut job security and slash sick pay. After suffering a more than 10 percent decline in their real wages since 2012 and with annual inflation currently running at over 7 percent, the education workers are to receive maximum annual pay “increases” of just 2.5 percent.

To shield his government's class war legislation from constitutional challenge, Ford has invoked the Canadian constitution's “notwithstanding clause,” which allows governments to violate rights supposedly guaranteed in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. This is both a tacit admission that the government is trampling on basic democratic rights and a chilling step toward authoritarian rule.

The Ford government's 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 further sweeping cuts to education and other public services and at bolstering big business in imposing massive inflation-driven wage cuts on private sector workers across Canada. This, moreover, is the agenda of the entire ruling class. The federal, Justin Trudeau-led Liberal government has proclaimed a pivot to “post-pandemic” austerity and stands staunchly behind the Bank of Canada in raising interest rates to drive up unemployment, so as to undercut workers' attempts to win inflation-busting wage increases through a growing wave of strike action.

Every worker has an interest in the victory of the education support workers. The defeat of the Ford government's draconian strike ban would deliver a powerful blow against the ruling elite's concerted drive to abolish the right to strike, at least whenever workers are in a position of strength. It could and must serve as the catalyst for a working class counter-offensive against decades of government austerity and contract concessions enforced by governments of all political stripes in cooperation with their partners in the trade union

bureaucracy.

For all these reasons, were the striking education workers to issue a strong appeal to teachers and workers in every economic sector to come to their defence, it would meet with enthusiastic support. Due to overwhelming support for the strikers among the 8,000 school support staff for whom the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) is the bargaining agent, OPSEU has been forced to sanction their joining today's walkout.

Build rank-and-file committees to mobilize working-class power

But if the immense social power of the working class in Ontario and across Canada is to be mobilized in support of the education support workers—and it must be—workers must take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands by establishing rank-and-file committees in every school and workplace.

This is because the fight to rally teachers and the working class as a whole behind the education workers is bitterly opposed and actively resisted by the corporatist trade unions and the highly-paid bureaucrats who staff them. The Ontario Federation of Labour and Canadian Labour Congress, which together represent many millions of workers, have issued empty “solidarity” statements, but propose no practical action to strengthen the education support workers' struggle. Even though Lecce has explicitly said that the settlement imposed on support staff will serve as the template in the ongoing negotiations for new teachers contracts, Ontario's four teacher unions have ordered their members to show up to work today, as it is their “contractual obligation,” and warned them not to join any picket or protest during “working hours.” The teacher unions want to lead every group of workers to the slaughterhouse separately to avoid at all costs a unified struggle by all education workers against the government's savage attacks.

As for the Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU) and its parent union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), they want to keep the education workers isolated and geared toward a futile attempt to pressure the Tory government to see reason.

Despite the fact that the authoritarian legislation tabled Monday by the Ford government makes a mockery of the entire collective bargaining system, OSBCU and CUPE have continued “negotiating” with the government. Underscoring that the union is in the process of

abandoning the workers' minimum demands and negotiating its terms of surrender, OSBCU president Laura Walton told the *Toronto Star* in an interview last Tuesday evening, "We are working away, trying to find somewhere that we can meet halfway." According to leaks to the media, CUPE has already slashed workers' wage demand in half.

OSBCU and CUPE's intransigent opposition to organizing a working class mobilization against the Ford government is further illustrated by their choice of protest sites for today's strike. There are no pickets at schools anywhere in the province, which would have created conditions for education support workers to establish links with teachers, working-class parents, students and other workers in the local area, and explain what is at stake in their struggle. Instead, the union bureaucrats have instructed strikers to gather at Queens Park and local Progressive Conservative offices to appeal to the good conscience of Ford, Lecce, and their hard-right followers.

The lessons of the 1997 teachers' strike

CUPE and the OSBCU describe today's action as a "political protest," not a strike. This characterization has a history. In 1997, Ontario's teacher unions strangled a two-week strike by over 120,000 teachers that was threatening to develop into a political challenge to the right-wing government led by Mike Harris. The teachers' strike won mass support, coming after two years of widespread strikes and protests against Harris' "Common Sense Revolution." Although the strike implicitly raised the question of political power, the unions described the strike as a "political protest" to make clear that they opposed any challenge to the "legitimacy" of the Harris government—that is its "right" to ruthlessly impose the diktats of big business. After a court refused to grant an injunction against the strike to the Harris government for fear that it would provoke mass defiance of the courts, the unions called off the strike without winning any of the teachers' demands.

The union bureaucrats' determination to isolate education support workers and defend the collective bargaining system at all costs, even under conditions where Ford and Lecce have trashed it, is not the product of mistakes or bad decisions. It reflects the privileged interests of the union bureaucracy, which enjoys close corporatist ties with governments at all levels, and big business. These interests are hostile to those of rank-and-file workers, who have nothing to gain by cozying up to Ford or Trudeau.

The sharp distinction between the interests of the rank-and-file and the union bureaucracy has been on full display during the COVID-19 pandemic. Union leaders, including from OSBCU and Ontario's four teacher unions, rejected any collective action by education workers to protect themselves and their students from the deadly virus running rampant through schools, on the grounds that it was illegal under Ontario labour law. They argued that all workers could do was file worthless "work refusals" to Ford's Ministry of Labour, which rejected every one of them, and they thereby played a key role in enforcing the ruling elite's homicidal "profits before life" pandemic policy.

The hostility of the union bureaucracy towards rank-and-file workers and their needs finds its clearest expression in the alliance between Justin Trudeau's federal Liberal government, the New Democrats, and the trade unions. The unions enthusiastically endorsed

the "confidence-and-supply" agreement reached between Trudeau and NDP leader Jagmeet Singh in March. The deal gives the Trudeau minority government a free hand to wage war abroad, massively increase military spending, and impose ruthless austerity at home until June 2025.

The union bureaucracy is implacably opposed to a political challenge to Ford's class war agenda, but that is precisely what is required. Striking education support workers confront a political struggle that raises the interrelated questions: who controls society's resources and for what purpose should they be used?

To take forward their struggle, education support workers must fight for the following program:

End all negotiations! There is nothing to negotiate with Ford and Lecce, whose ruthless attacks can only be defeated through the methods of class struggle.

Build rank-and-file committees to seize control of your struggle! The Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee has begun the fight to establish a network of rank-and-file committees through which workers can democratically decide on the way forward and coordinate a mass campaign to defy Ford's anti-strike law.

Expand your struggle to defeat Ford! Call upon all teachers, parents, and workers from every economic sector to launch solidarity strikes to defend workers' rights and oppose wage cutting. Build a general strike to bring down the Ford government.

Build an independent political movement of the working class! The current struggle raises the fundamental question: in whose interests should society be governed? Whereas Ford and Lecce, Trudeau and Singh, and their union partners insist that society's wealth must be funnelled into the pockets of the super-rich and used to wage war around the world, the working class must fight for the redistribution of these resources to meet urgent social needs. These include well-funded public services like education and health care, and decent wages and working conditions for all. Moreover, the attacks on education workers in Ontario are being replicated in every country, whether it be on rail workers in the United States, oil refinery workers in France, or postal workers in Britain. To resist the ruling elite's drive to make workers pay for the capitalist crisis exacerbated by their criminal pandemic policies and wars for plunder, workers must adopt an internationalist and socialist program to guide their struggle for working class political power. We urge all workers who agree with this program and want to fight for it to join and build the Socialist Equality Party.



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