

Rank-and-file Ontario educators pledge to fight for “mass defiance of Ford’s strike ban” at well-attended meeting

Our reporter
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All education workers and their supporters wishing to join and help build the Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee can contact the committee at ontedrfc@gmail.com, join the OEWRFC Facebook group, or fill out the form at the end of this article.

Dozens of Ontario education workers and their supporters participated in a well-attended online public meeting last Thursday to discuss the way forward in the struggle against the Doug Ford-led provincial government’s draconian anti-strike law. The meeting, called by the Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee (OEWRFC), passed a resolution pledging to organize “mass defiance of Ford’s strike ban” and fight for “a contract with inflation-busting wage and benefit increases.” It also heard statements of solidarity from railroad workers and educators in the United States and Britain.

The OEWRFC was established by education workers—including school caretakers, education assistants and teachers—in August to provide workers with a democratic organization capable of seizing control of the contract struggle from the hands of the union apparatus and developing a broad-based movement in the working class to secure wage increases to make up for decades of pay cuts and defend public education against capitalist austerity.

Terry, a custodian and OEWRFC founding member, opened the meeting by explaining the significance of the hard-right Ford government’s savage attack on education workers. He noted that while caretakers, education assistants, early childhood educators and administrative staff are the initial targets of the strike ban, Ford and Education Minister Stephen Lecce have launched an attack on the entire working class.

He drew attention to the refusal of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) and the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), with which it is affiliated, to mobilize the entire working class in opposition to the illegitimate strike ban and stressed

that the union bureaucracy’s principal concern is futile appeals to Ford to get back to the “bargaining table.”

Terry spoke about the unions’ insistence on upholding the reactionary collective bargaining system, which keeps education support workers divided from teachers and their most powerful source of support: the working class. The speaker concluded by stressing the need to build rank-and-file committees in every school to place control over the struggle in the hands of rank-and-file workers and prevent the CUPE/Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU) bureaucrats from organizing a sellout like they did in 2019.

A lively discussion followed. Education support workers, teachers and workers from other sectors expressed their support for the strike set to begin the following day by over 60,000 education workers in defiance of the Ford government. The meeting passed a resolution presented by the OEWRFC, which declared:

“This meeting of rank-and-file Ontario education workers and their supporters declares:

“1. We will not accept the Ford government’s imposition via illegitimate and draconian legislation of contracts containing massive wage cuts and other concessions.

“2. We demand that the OSBCU and CUPE end all negotiations with Ford and Lecce. There is nothing left to negotiate with them after they trashed the collective bargaining system, only our terms of surrender.

“3. We pledge to build a unified mass movement of education support workers, teachers and supporters throughout the working class to organize mass defiance of Ford’s strike ban, fight for a contract with inflation-busting wage and benefit increases, and secure tens of billions in investments for public education. We will fight to build a network of rank-and-file committees in schools and workplaces to conduct this struggle.”

Speaking in support of the resolution, WSWs writer Roger Jordan explained the distinction between the strategy of

mobilizing the working class against the Ford government pursued by the OEWRFC and the call for a “political protest” made by CUPE.

Reviewing the experience of the 1997 teachers’ strike against the Harris government, which was the culmination of two years of strikes and protests against the Progressive Conservative government’s Thatcherite “Common Sense Revolution,” Jordan noted that the teacher unions described it as a “political protest” so as to make clear to the ruling elite that they were not challenging Harris’ “right to govern.” After Harris refused a compromise proposed by the unions, they swiftly called off the strike without achieving any of the teachers’ demands. This time around, the goal of the “political protest,” as far as the unions are concerned, is to get Ford and Lecce back to the bargaining table, even though they have long since trashed the collective bargaining system.

One participant questioned the demand raised by the OEWRFC’s resolution for an end to all negotiations with Ford, stating that education workers need a new contract. In his response, Socialist Equality Party-Canada National Secretary Keith Jones stressed that there could be no talk of negotiating with a government that is waging class war and has made clear its contempt for workers and democratic rights by invoking the authoritarian “notwithstanding clause” that allows governments to violate basic rights purportedly “guaranteed” under Canada’s constitution.

He emphasized that the outcome of the contract fight and the securing of education workers’ demands would be decided in the course of a political class struggle, which must involve the broadest sections of working people in a mass movement to bring down Ford. The conditions for such a movement to develop, Jones continued, are extremely favourable, since the issues over which the education support workers are striking—defence of the right to strike, for wage increases that will protect them from rampaging inflation, and opposition to cuts to public education—are of vital importance to all workers.

Bill, a rail worker speaking from the United States, told the meeting, “Railroad workers in the US and education workers in Canada are in the same situation. We’re stuck between the collusion between the government and capital, and the union bureaucracy. We’ve been without a contract for three years.

“Contract negotiations just started again this year. It went to mediation. That failed, and it went to what’s called a Presidential Emergency Board, which is formed by the President of the United States with the rail corporations and the rail unions.

“This Presidential Emergency Board agreed to a contract for railroad workers. It has substandard wage increases,

increases in our health insurance, and it addressed nothing with sick time. We have no sick days. If we get sick, we have to use a vacation day. We don’t get paid if we stay home sick, and all these companies have a points policy.”

Emma, a representative of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee in the US, commented, “The conditions facing school workers in Canada are shared by your fellow educators in the US and worldwide. By many measures, public education is in a state of collapse. There are deteriorating school buildings, ruthless austerity, losses in real wages and the ongoing threat to life of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Just as in Canada, American workers, including educators, are being driven into great struggles by the tremendous social and political crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, and now the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, which Biden recently admitted was on the verge of causing nuclear Armageddon.

“Against this extraordinary crisis, the US teachers, just like the Canadian teachers, are having to draw critical lessons about the role and nature of the trade unions that claim to represent them.”

Colleen, a retired education worker from Britain, said in her remarks, “The unions and government always seek to put a wedge between education support workers and teachers, when in fact we all work together, and we work with children. In that sense we all work collectively, although they always seek to create that divide, whether it exists or not.”

This sentiment for a unified struggle of all education workers found strong support among attendees. When a participant pointed out how Ontario’s teacher unions were making their members scab on the education support workers by ordering them to turn up to school Friday, a teacher remarked, “I have emailed the OSSTF (Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation) four times in two days about this very thing. I want us to walk out tomorrow with our CUPE sisters and brothers.”



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