

“A general strike is absolutely required”: Strike by 55,000 Ontario education workers in defiance of Ford government to continue Monday

Our reporters
6 November 2022

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.

A courageous strike by 55,000 Ontario education assistants, early childhood educators, caretakers, and administrative staff against a draconian anti-strike law imposed by the province's hard-right government enters its second day Monday. The education support workers are defying Premier Doug Ford and Education Minister Stephen Lecce's Keeping Students in Class Act, which robs them of their right to strike and imposes by government fiat four-year contracts that will dramatically cut their real wages, slash their sick pay, and gut job protection.

The education support workers, who are members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and its Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU) affiliate, are taking a stand on behalf of the entire working class. For years, federal and provincial governments of all stripes have used anti-strike laws or the threat of them to impose concession contracts and austerity.

On Friday, the school support staff were joined in their job action by 8,000 members of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) who perform like functions at some Ontario schools and are currently in contract negotiations with the Ford government. In public statements, the OPSEU leadership conceded it was forced by rank-and-file support for the CUPE workers' struggle to sanction their participation in Friday's walkout.

Solidarity with the strike from other sections of the working class has continued to grow over the weekend. Rallies called reluctantly by the Ontario Federation of Labour in response to a groundswell of support for the strike were held across the province Saturday. Thousands of education workers and their supporters took to the streets to oppose the Ford government's strike ban, illegitimate decreed contracts and invocation of the “notwithstanding clause.” This reactionary clause of the Canadian constitution allows governments to pass laws that trample on basic democratic rights supposedly guaranteed in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and shields them from any legal challenge in the courts.

A petition circulated by members of the Elementary Teachers of Toronto (ETT), Ontario Secondary School Federation of Teachers (OSSTF), and Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO) denounced the Ford government's onslaught on workers' rights and the refusal of the province's four teacher unions to allow teachers to walk out with their brother-and-sister school support workers. The teacher unions ordered their members to show up at school on Friday as it was their “contractual obligation” to do so. The petitioners demanded that the

teacher union leaderships respond by November 9 with a proposal for teachers to support the strike, including by refusing to teach online at schools closed down due to the strike.

In a poll conducted by Abacus Data, 48 percent of respondents said they would support unions calling sympathy strikes alongside the CUPE/OSBCU workers. Calls for a general strike on Twitter and at protests have been widespread.

The Ford government remains committed to its vicious class-war attack, which represents a further step towards authoritarian rule. No sooner was its strike-ban law adopted last Thursday than the government petitioned the Ontario Labour Relations Board (OLRB) to declare the impending strike “unlawful.” This would empower it to start fining individual workers up to \$4,000 for each day of job action.

At a three-day OLRB hearing that stretched into Sunday afternoon, government lawyers advanced arguments with chilling implications for workers' rights. They claimed that a “collective agreement” does not necessarily require negotiations or the agreement of both sides to be valid, insisting it is legitimate and legally binding if it is imposed by the state. Attorneys for the government contemptuously brushed aside the argument put forward by CUPE attorney Steven Barrett, who correctly observed that describing a contract arrived at through government-imposed legislation as a “collective agreement” is “Orwellian.”

As the weekend progressed, an increasing air of crisis hung over the participants, with government representatives pushing for a ruling before classes resume Monday and unions fearing that the anger among the rank-and-file could escape their control. At the conclusion of the OLRB hearing, OLRB Chair Brian O'Byrne said, “I honestly cannot tell you when I will get you a bottom line. I'm going to try and do it by today. Hopefully I'll succeed.”

On Sunday evening, the CUPE leadership announced that whatever the OLRB ruled the strike would proceed Monday. “As much as we wish that we were talking about how we could actually find a different path we have no options but to talk about our next steps,” said Ontario CUPE President Fred Hahn.

CUPE continues to present the ongoing strike as a “political protest” in order to make clear that it has no interest in leading a mass movement to defy and defeat Ford's draconian strike ban and bring down his government, which is the only way workers can secure victory. Instead, CUPE's main concern is to get Ford and Lecce back to the “bargaining table,” even though they have trashed the collective bargaining system.

Windsor custodian: “For me it is one meal a day, I get a lunch and that’s it”

In contrast to the union bureaucracy’s strategy of isolating the education support staff and seeking a “negotiated solution” through the rotten collective bargaining system, workers on strike Friday broadly recognized that the issues at stake in their fight require the mobilization of a mass movement of working people. Reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* and members of the Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee visited protests and spoke to workers at the provincial legislature at Queen’s Park in Toronto, as well as the cities of Windsor, Guelph, and Richmond Hill, where workers protested outside the offices of Tory members of the provincial parliament.

An early childhood educator (ECE) with thirteen years of experience spoke about the core economic issues that prompted a 96.5 percent strike mandate among OSBCU members. The average annual salary for education support staff is \$39,000, but many earn far less than that.

“Since 2012, we’ve had wage freezes and zero increases,” she said. “All these years, workers got 1 percent or 0.5 percent increases. Why do I have to work for the past 13 years with the Toronto District School Board as a permanent full-time employee, and not be able to afford my rent?”

“The government can pay themselves though. Lecce got a \$16,000 raise. It blows our minds when we talk about numbers like that. It covers half our annual salary. We get less than \$30,000 in hand after tax.”

Her colleague, a fellow ECE, spoke bitterly of the government propaganda about creating new jobs in public education and providing adequate funding.

“They said they created 7,000 new jobs,” he remarked. “I’m one of the 120 laid-off ECEs. I just got my job back, which took a month and a half. They keep laying us off to save money.

“The school and government are saying we cannot get more support, so I’m the one who’s always there with the kids. I get disgusted every time the government says they’re doing everything they can do to support families and children. That’s exactly the opposite of what they’re doing.”

Another colleague, a recently retired teacher of over 30 years, spoke about the conditions in their classrooms.

“It infuriates me that these workers are being considered glorified babysitters,” they commented. “We worked together last year, and we had three high-needs kids in our class. We were hit, pinched, kicked, spat on, everything. Literally. Every day. We showed up every day, and I got \$50,000 more than they did. We were basically doing the same job.”

An EA expressed her appreciation for the job done by caretakers, remarking, “We have situations where there are accidents, problems come up all of the time and they are there to keep the schools going. As far as I am concerned they are superheroes. We could not do our jobs without their help.”

WSWS reporters spoke to a young worker in Toronto who has been forced through short staffing caused by the COVID-19 pandemic to take on a variety of responsibilities she was not initially hired for.

“My official title is swim instructor and lifeguard,” she said. “However, due to the COVID closures, we were assigned different roles within the schools. So I do lunchroom supervision. I help out in the office. I help out in the classrooms with the students, from kindergarten to grade 8. I help out in the gym classes. Basically, wherever they need support, I go.”

She also commented on the common refrain by the government and corporate press that there is no money for public education: “The richest of the rich have never been richer, and the poor have never been poorer. There’s never been this big of a gap, and it’s funny how they complain about ‘struggling corporations’ not making 100 percent increases each quarter. That’s not considered ‘struggling’ in my eyes.”

Custodians in Windsor explained that they have a two-tier system where

new hires come in part-time making \$18.11 an hour, close to 30 percent less than full-time workers at \$25.00 an hour. Even workers earning \$25 an hour are struggling to afford basic necessities.

A young custodian who is working part-time said he has to work a second job to make ends meet: “We can’t live on this wage. And with inflation the way it is we have to take a stand.”

Mike, a full-time caretaker, added, “For me, my wife is disabled. My take home pay pays the rent, but there is little left to pay the rest. My new step will be food stamps. I can’t afford gas and I’ve used up all of my savings.

“For me it is one meal a day, I get a lunch and that’s it. I have a daughter and granddaughter at home because they have no place else to go.”

Foremost in many workers’ minds were the broader political implications of the government’s strikebreaking Bill 28.

Julie, a school office worker in Windsor, said, “This is just another of Ford’s tactics to control the working class. It’s not just about us any more. We have to fight this because we are done if we don’t. We need to take on Ford and change the government to someone who has a heart.”

Glenn, a caretaker in Toronto, echoed the same sentiments, commenting, “The big issue is the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. It’s huge. If they do it to us, they’re gonna do it to everybody.

“It’s not rocket science. They’re trying to take away your rights! They take away mine, then yours, his, everybody! And if you accept it, they move the goalpost again. Then you accept that, and they move it again.”

Faustine, who attended the Windsor protest, said, “The government doesn’t want to help us, we need a raise because it has been a long time. Over five years we have not had a wage increase.

“They don’t care, that’s why we are here. We have needs for our families. We work hard to get what we have.”

Toronto striker: “If we back down now, it’s going to be detrimental not just for us, but for everybody who comes after us”

Maggie, Lorraine, and a friend are three retirees who were out in support of education workers. They spoke of the strikebreaking legislation being an attack on public education as a whole.

“They just wanna turn everything over to the private sector,” Maggie said. “So they break the unions first, or try to, then they turn it over to the private sector. It’s awful. Healthcare, daycare, and so on.”

Lorraine added that this was a continuation of a decades-long process, stating, “Look what they’ve done to long-term care homes. It was the Conservative Mike Harris government that started privatizing long-term care facilities. And they’re crap now.”

Demonstrators were strongly in favour of broadening the struggle to defeat Ford.

“If we back down now, it’s going to be detrimental not just for us, but for everybody who comes after us,” said the young swimming instructor. “The teachers’ contract is up ... Everyone should be concerned because this affects all of us.

“My personal opinion is one for all and all for one, so if we are in this together, then teachers should be here with us.”

“A general strike is absolutely required,” said one ECE. “It would be nice to see more support from other unions, and from people across the country to stand together with us and say, ‘No, this is Canada. This is 2022. We cannot allow education workers, who are at the front line, who support the children of this country, to be stripped of their rights’.”

“There’s a lot of teachers that show support, and they have come to work wearing purple,” she continued. “Individual teachers believe in us.

It's in the upper levels of the union that things need to change.”

Both Maggie and a graphic designer who attended the protest to express his support replied with “General strike!” when asked for a solution to Ford’s attack on democratic rights.

An operating engineer named Steve, who dryly remarked that he was among the half of all Canadians who live paycheck to paycheck, made an urgent appeal to the entire working class to mobilize for a fight: “Come out! Where are you, if you’re not here? I think this is gonna be a lot bigger than what it looks like now, which is already huge.”



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wswws.org/contact