

Stop Canada's unions from scuttling the general strike movement in Ontario!

Keith Jones
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The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) yesterday ordered 55,000 Ontario education support workers—whose courageous defiance of an anti-strike law has galvanized mass working class support—to end their “protest sites” and report to work today, November 8.

Canada's largest union did so because the strike that began Friday had pushed Doug Ford's hard-right Progressive Conservative government on to the back foot and threatened to trigger a province-wide general strike.

In defying Ford's authoritarian Keeping Students in Class Act (Bill 28), the education support workers struck a powerful blow on behalf of the entire working class.

Millions of workers have rallied to their support because they rightly recognize that the Ford government's class war assault on the education workers, the majority of whom earn less than \$39,000 per year, targets the entire working class in Ontario and across Canada.

Bill 28 preemptively outlawed a strike and imposed by government decree contracts that cut workers' real wages, slash sick pay and gut job security. In an admission that it trampled on basic democratic rights, Ford invoked the “notwithstanding clause”—an authoritarian clause of Canada's constitution that allows governments to adopt laws that violate rights guaranteed by Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

The education support workers' defiant stand shifted the political dynamic overnight, revealing, if only in as yet limited way, the immense social power of the working class.

When Education Minister Stephen Lecce tabled his anti-strike law in the Ontario legislature on October 31, the corporate media rushed to proclaim that the majority of Ontarians supported the government's actions. Yet this narrative quickly collapsed.

Union bureaucrats who for decades have enforced anti-strike and “wage restraint” laws admitted they were under tremendous rank-and-file pressure to sanction mass defiance.

In advance of Friday's strike, CUPE had to announce that it would pay the potential fines of \$4,000 per day per worker. When the education assistants, early childhood educators, school custodians and administrative staff walked out, they were joined by 8,000 workers in the Ontario Public Service Employees Union, who perform similar tasks at some Ontario schools.

After the four Ontario teacher unions scandalously ordered their members to report for work Friday, teachers took to social media in droves to denounce their ostensible representatives. An online

petition campaign demanding they organize job actions in support of the striking school support staff quickly won widespread support.

An Abacus Data opinion poll found 48 percent of Ontarians favoured sympathy strikes to back the education workers. In an appeal to Ford on how “we are going to get back from the brink,” one local Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation official nervously pointed to those clamouring for a general strike: “It's not the union leaders. I can't begin to tell you how many messages are in my inbox, in my phone. This is the people.”

In their attempt to retain control over, head off and suppress the growing movement for a general strike, the union bureaucrats were continually forced to revise their plans. After workers across the province flocked to hastily organized protests Saturday, CUPE announced that representatives of Canada's largest unions would join CUPE President Mark Hancock and Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU) head Laura Walton at a 10 a.m. Monday press conference. It was soon leaked to the press that they would there announce a mass demonstration outside the Ontario legislature for Saturday, November 12 and a one-day, province-wide public- and private-sector “protest strike” for Monday, November 14.

This announcement was never delivered. Just one hour before the gathering of the union top brass was to begin, Ford and Education Minister Stephen Lecce held their own hastily organized press conference to announce a tactical retreat. They said they would repeal Bill 28 in exchange for CUPE ordering an end to the strike.

After several hours of backroom maneuvering, in which the government reportedly agreed to stipulate that its anti-strike law never had legal force, Hancock and Walton took centre stage. Flanked by top leaders of virtually every major union organization in Canada, they unilaterally ordered the support workers to end their strike.

What the multimillionaire businessman and erstwhile Trump wannabe Ford called an “olive branch” is in fact a poisoned chalice. The unions have eagerly clutched at it with both hands and are now trying to force the strikers and their supporters to swallow, because they recognize it to be a mechanism for demobilizing the working class and shoring up capitalist rule.

The support for the strike demonstrated that Ford and his Tories, who won a parliamentary majority last June with the support of just 18 percent of the electorate, have no popular mandate for their

class war agenda of austerity, privatization, real wage-cuts and attacks on democratic rights.

Rather than pressing the advantage and mobilizing the working class to bring down Ford and his government, the unions are throwing him a desperately needed lifeline.

In so far as they succeed, not only will Ford live to fight another day, but the ruling class as a whole will be strengthened, the better to retake the initiative.

By ordering the support staff workers back on the job, CUPE has itself enforced the first aim of Bill 28. Moreover, the promised negotiations are a fraud—a conspiracy of the government and the union bureaucracy against the workers. In the days leading up to Friday's strike, CUPE made concession after concession behind workers' backs, including agreeing to a halving of their wage demand.

The union bureaucracy is as frightened and hostile to the incipient general strike movement as the government and its big business backers. Throughout they have insisted that their fundamental goal is to uphold the state-designed collective bargaining system, the source of their privileges, including myriad lucrative corporatist union-government-big business partnerships.

The same union bureaucrats who demagogically denounce Ford are enthusiastic supporters of the union-sponsored New Democratic Party's (NDP) governmental alliance with Trudeau and his federal Liberal government. With the full support of the CLC, OFL, CUPE, Unifor, et al, the NDP has pledged to sustain the minority Liberals in office through June 2025 as they wage war on Russia, massively increase military spending, impose "post-pandemic" austerity, and support the Bank of Canada in hiking interest rates to drive up unemployment and sap a growing strike wave against inflation-driven pay cuts.

The events in Ontario over the past several days are a microcosm of the role played by contending social forces in a resurgence of the class struggle that is global in character. The deepest capitalist crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s is driving the ruling elites in all the major powers towards the pursuit of imperialist war abroad and the imposition of savage attacks on workers at home, policies that are incompatible with democratic forms of rule. But the same objective crisis is propelling millions of working people around the world into struggle.

The ruling elites have two key mechanisms for suppressing the resurgent working class: outright state repression and the trade union apparatuses. In the United States, the Democratic Biden administration has connived with the rail unions to prevent a strike by over 120,000 rail workers, who have been in a legal strike position for almost two months. Biden and other leading Democrats have chosen to hold the powers of state repression in reserve, but have made clear that they will not hesitate to ruthlessly crush a strike through an intervention by Congress should the union bureaucracy fail to strangle it.

In Britain, the union bureaucracy has been the decisive roadblock to the development of a general strike by millions of workers against the hated Tory government during the UK's "summer (and now fall) of discontent." Fearing that the waning authority of the unions, who like their Canadian counterparts have presided over decades of concessions, may no longer be capable of

containing the imminent eruption of social anger due to skyrocketing energy and food prices, the Tory government is adopting a battery of authoritarian measures to criminalize strikes and curtail workers' rights.

To the extent that the ruling elite has thus far succeeded with its twin-pronged attack in containing the upsurge of the class struggle, it is above all due to the fact that the seething opposition among working people to the ruling elite and its accomplices in the union bureaucracy has not yet found conscious expression through the emergence of independent, democratic and militant organizations of rank-and-file workers.

As the International Committee of the Fourth International explained in its April 2021 statement announcing the formation of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, "The working class is ready to fight. But it is shackled by reactionary bureaucratic organizations that suppress every expression of resistance...new pathways for mass struggle must be created."

This is the perspective upon which the Socialist Equality Party (Canada) and the SEP-supported Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee (OEWRFC) have based their intervention in the Ontario education workers' struggle. OEWRFC members have fought at public meetings and in discussions with workers for the understanding that victory for the education support workers in their contract fight depends upon seizing control of the struggle from the union bureaucrats and building a network of rank-and-file committees in every school and workplace to unify the entire working class behind the education workers.

As the SEP explained in its statement "Mobilize Ontario workers to defy and defeat Ford's anti-strike law!", there is nothing left to negotiate with Ford and Lecce. Education workers and their supporters must spearhead a working class political struggle, preparing a general strike to bring down the Ford government as part of the development of an independent political movement of the working class.

"The current struggle," the statement declared, "raises the fundamental question: in whose interests should society be governed?... 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."



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