

Report reveals how Canada's unions intervened to strangle Ontario education support workers' strike and rescue Ford government

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Canada's major trade unions launched a concerted intervention over the weekend to suppress a developing general strike movement in Ontario triggered by a strike of 55,000 education support workers. Details of this conspiracy, which included secretive communications between national union leaders and Ontario Premier Doug Ford, were revealed in a *Toronto Star* article published Tuesday. The unions' intervention resulted in the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) calling off the strike on Monday with immediate effect without achieving any of the workers' demands, provoking widespread outrage among rank-and-file members.

The school custodians, education assistants, early childhood educators, librarians and administrative staff walked off the job last Friday in defiance of Ford's draconian anti-strike law, known as Bill 28. The legislation imposed on the workers by government fiat "collective agreements" contained savage real-terms pay cuts and threatened them with massive fines of \$4,000 per worker for every day of defiance. In an admission that the law trampled on basic democratic rights, Ford invoked the "notwithstanding clause," a reactionary provision in Canada's constitution that allows governments to pass legislation violating rights contained in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and shields them from any legal challenges. At a press conference yesterday, Ford made the revealing remark that the strike was "much more dangerous" than any violation of Canadians' rights contained in Bill 28.

The education support workers' strike galvanized widespread opposition to the ruling elite's program of capitalist austerity and wage cuts. Thousands of workers participated in solidarity protests across the province Saturday and polls showed that almost half of respondents supported the launching of solidarity strikes. A rank-and-file rebellion developed among teachers demanding to join the struggle after the four teacher unions forced them to scab on the support workers' strike.

The intervention by the working class transformed the political dynamic. Ford, previously presented as an unassailable leader enjoying popular support for his brutal onslaught on some of the lowest-paid workers in the education sector, was forced into a humiliating retreat Monday morning, when he told a hastily

convened press conference that Bill 28 would be repealed if CUPE called off the strike. Without consulting its members, CUPE duly obliged. The scuttling of the strike perfectly exemplifies how the union apparatus fights tooth and nail for the "right" of well-paid bureaucrats to negotiate sellouts with government ministers, but is bitterly hostile to workers waging a struggle for pay increases that keep pace with inflation.

It is now clear that Monday's events were part of a carefully choreographed deal cobbled together between Ford, the national leaderships of Unifor, the building trades' unions, and CUPE, as well as the bureaucrats who head CUPE Ontario and its Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU) affiliate. The *Star* wrote Tuesday, "Sources say leaders of private sector unions phoned Ford over the weekend to condemn the use of the notwithstanding clause and urged him to reconsider. Some of those same union leaders called Ford again Monday to congratulate him on reversing his stance."

At a press conference Tuesday explaining that talks with CUPE would resume, Ford went out of his way to praise the union leaders for their assistance in smothering the strike, commenting, "I want to say a special thank you to CUPE Canada, Unifor and our private sector union partners who helped get us back to the table."

It is not difficult to imagine what Unifor President Lana Payne, CUPE National President Mark Hancock, and the other union bureaucrats told Ford in these weekend calls. Your attempt to impose real-terms pay cuts with the bludgeon of state repression is provoking a working-class rebellion that neither you nor we can control, they would have complained. Withdraw your anti-strike law, let us enforce Bill 28's strike ban for you in practice, and we can all get back round the bargaining table to decide how best to impose a sellout contract on these workers.

That this was the mindset within the leadership of Canada's unions was revealed in a tweet Monday morning by a leading Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation official, who appealed to Ford to consider "how we are going to get back from the brink" of a general strike. She wrote, "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."

Negotiations have now restarted on the basis of the massive concessions offered last week by CUPE, when lead negotiator Laura Walton reduced the original demand for an 11.7 percent annual wage increase by more than half. Ford has reportedly slightly increased his offer for workers earning less than \$43,000 from 2.5 percent to 3.5 percent, but continues to insist that all others must accept an “increase” of less than 2 percent. With inflation running well over 7 percent, this amounts to a huge pay cut.

The concerted intervention by Canada’s most powerful unions over the weekend followed a meeting Friday morning between Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and the leadership of Ontario’s education unions. After the meeting, the Prime Minister stated that his government was considering “all options” to end the dispute. Trudeau, whose government has enjoyed intimate ties with the union bureaucracy since it came to power in 2015, was publicly critical of Ford’s use of the “notwithstanding clause” in the days leading up to the strike. However, Trudeau did not complain about Ford’s attempt to impose massive pay cuts on the workers. This is because Trudeau and his Liberals do not oppose vicious wage cutting and capitalist austerity. Their only objection to Ford’s policy was that he was not utilizing the union bureaucracy to enforce these attacks and contain opposition from below.

New Democratic Party (NDP) leader Jagmeet Singh responded to Ford’s draconian anti-strike law by pleading to Trudeau to take action, including by potentially using the federal government’s “disallowance” power, which was last invoked 80 years ago. Predictably, Canada’s social democrats made no call for working class mobilization. Ultimately, Singh and the NDP got their wish. With Trudeau’s encouragement, the union bureaucracies intervened, but in so doing proved that their main concern was rescuing the Ford government, not supporting the workers courageously resisting its draconian attacks.

The role of Canada’s unions, the federal Liberal government, and their New Democratic Party supporters in strangling the burgeoning general strike movement in Ontario provides a devastating exposure of the Liberal/union/NDP alliance that has been systematically cultivated over the past quarter century to suppress the class struggle. Trudeau’s minority Liberal government currently depends for its parliamentary majority on support from the NDP, which entered a “confidence-and-supply” agreement with the Liberals in March. The deal has given Trudeau a free hand to enforce “post-pandemic” austerity; support the Bank of Canada’s interest rate hikes, which are aimed at driving up unemployment so as to sap a growing strike wave; hike military spending and wage war in the interests of Canadian imperialism abroad. The Trudeau government is a major participant in the US-NATO war against Russia and is poised to release an Indo-Pacific strategy, formulated in close collaboration with Washington, that will line Canada up squarely behind American imperialism’s all-sided diplomatic, economic and military-security offensive against China.

The unions’ sabotage of the Ontario education workers’ strike and the movement for a general strike has significantly weakened the school support staff in their contract struggle and the working

class as a whole. But the struggle is not over. Workers are angered by CUPE’s betrayal and are looking for a way to take their fight forward.

As one worker wrote in a widely shared tweet, “Shouldn’t membership consent to making such an important decision? Would they have voted to end the protest before the bill was even rescinded and with no guarantees or conditions set? Are the interests of union leadership aligned with those of its members?”

The widespread anger provoked by CUPE’s betrayal must be translated into a conscious strategy to seize control of the struggle from the union bureaucrats and place it in the hands of the rank-and-file. The Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which is spearheading this fight, won strong support for a statement it issued Monday afternoon condemning CUPE’s decision to call off the strike.

The statement explained, “Don’t let the CLC, OFL, four teacher-union and CUPE/OSBCU bureaucrats snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. Any negotiations with Ford and (Education Minister) Lecce will be about negotiating our terms of surrender and result in contracts that fail to reverse years of real wage cuts, defend public education, or otherwise satisfy our just demands. We can only achieve inflation-busting wage increases and the securing of billions of dollars in investments for public education by building a mass movement to mobilize the working class against capitalist austerity.

“Teachers and all workers should join the education support workers in preparing a general strike. All workers have an interest in defending public education and preventing the government from establishing a precedent, as it did with the unrepealed Bill 124, for real-wage cutting contracts.

“To secure victory, we must seize the leadership of our struggle from the corporatist trade union apparatuses through the building of rank-and-file committees, uniting education workers across sectional lines in schools, and workers at every workplace, public and private sector alike.”



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