

Union representing 55,000 Ontario education support workers announces strike for November 21

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Are you an education worker in Ontario? Take up the fight against the Ford government's attempt to impose wage-cutting contracts on school support staff with the assistance of its partners in the union bureaucracy. Email ontedrfc@gmail.com or fill out the form at the end of this article to contact the Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee.

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The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) has given the required five-day notice for 55,000 school caretakers, education assistants, early childhood educators, and administrative staff to strike across Ontario, beginning Monday, November 21. The announcement comes just over a week after CUPE, in alliance with the Canadian Labour Congress, Ontario Federation of Labour, Unifor and other major unions, scuttled a two-day strike by the workers, which won strong popular support and was rapidly building towards a general strike.

Speaking at a press conference Wednesday morning, Laura Walton, lead negotiator for the CUPE-affiliated Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU), stated that after several days of talks no agreement had been reached at the bargaining table. However, she admitted that the bargaining committee has come to terms with the government on a wage deal that would represent a huge real-terms pay cut for the overwhelmingly low-paid workers. Walton revealed that the hard-right Progressive Conservative government has offered a \$1 per hour increase for each year of the collective agreement, amounting to a 3.59 percent annual wage "increase." This does not even come close to meeting the current rate of inflation, which stands at 7 percent and over 10 percent for groceries.

"Let me be clear, that's a win for workers," Walton asserted of the wage offer. Rank-and-file support staff would beg to differ, given that it amounts to less than one-third of the original demand for a 11.7 percent annual wage increase, an extremely modest demand due to the double-digit wage cut experienced by education support staff over the past decade.

Walton declared that although the parties had reached a "middle ground" on wages, the government continues to refuse to invest money in services for students. Education workers have demanded increases in preparation time and budgets for school supplies, and the hiring of more personnel. "A wage increase isn't going to help if you lose your job," Walton commented, referring to moves by

school boards to lay workers off to cut costs and gut job security provisions.

The fact that the union leadership has been compelled to call for another strike reflects the depth of opposition among rank-and-file workers to the savage attacks on their wages and conditions being pushed by the hard-right Progressive Conservative government led by Premier Doug Ford. Earlier this month, Ford sought to impose massive wage cuts by government decree in Bill 28, which outlawed a strike by the education support workers and threatened to punish any violation with a \$4,000-per-day fine for each worker. Underscoring that Ford's move trampled on basic democratic rights, the Premier sought to enforce the law by invoking the authoritarian "notwithstanding clause," which allows governments to pass legislation that violates rights protected in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

The defiant response by the 55,000 education support workers, who were joined by 8,000 colleagues from the Ontario Public Service Employees Union when they walked out November 4, triggered a powerful reaction throughout the working class and growing calls for a general strike. Polls showed overwhelming support for a struggle against Ford's draconian law and for the workers' wage demands, including support from a strong majority of union members for solidarity strikes.

After the teacher unions' leaderships scandalously forced their members to scab on their colleagues and show up for work during the strike, a rank-and-file rebellion began to develop in support of teachers joining the walkout. In order to maintain control over this burgeoning movement, the Ontario Federation of Labour let it be known that it was organizing a province-wide one-day general strike. It was under these very favourable conditions, where a broadening of the strike would have enabled the school support staff to press for their full wage demands and more, that CUPE and the other major unions rushed to Ford's rescue and strangled the strike in exchange for Ford's repeal of Bill 28.

Many workers will no doubt be enthused that they will have another chance to take to the picket lines against Ford and his pro-corporate cronies. However, a serious warning must be made. All indications are that the CUPE leadership has no intention of allowing Monday's strike to go ahead. Instead, they are using the strike notice both as a bargaining chip with the government in negotiations and to placate the militancy of the rank-and-file,

which is still angered and frustrated by the bureaucracy's scuttling of their previous strike.

While CUPE national president Mark Hancock was wheeled out at yesterday's press conference to proclaim that all of CUPE's 700,000 members "stand with" the school support staff, both he and Walton stressed that there is still time for a "negotiated solution" before Monday. The fact that the bargaining committee has already abandoned the workers' wage demands further illustrates that the leadership's primary concern is to protect the collective bargaining process by imposing a sellout agreement on the workers. Over the past week, workers have been kept entirely in the dark about what CUPE is negotiating, with cryptically worded updates citing requests from the mediator for a blackout on the talks to justify their silence.

Anyone under any illusions about the intentions of Walton and Co. in the days leading up to Monday's strike should recall what happened in Oct. 2019, during the last bargaining round. At that time, a mass movement had been building across the province for months among public sector workers in opposition to the impending imposition of Bill 124, legislation proposed by Ford to cap annual wage increases for over 1 million public sector workers at 1 percent per year for three years. As the first major union to bargain with the Ford government, CUPE sought and obtained a near unanimous vote in favour of strike action, with wage increases the central demand. Late on the evening prior to the CUPE/OSBCU's strike deadline, Walton suddenly unveiled an 11th-hour deal with Ford and Lecce, which she enthused was a great "victory" for the workers, and promptly called off the impending strike.

What Walton in fact agreed to was the enforcement of Bill 124's wage cap during the three-year deal, even though the law was not yet in force at the time. CUPE/OSBCU's capitulation cleared the way for the same wage-cutting terms to be imposed on 200,000 teachers and the entire public service. Many workers continue to labour under concessionary contracts based on this law and unions continue to negotiate agreements in conformity with Bill 124's "wage restraint" terms. Just last week, the Amalgamated Transit Union called off a strike by 2,200 Go Bus workers after agreeing to a three-year deal with the Crown-owned company that includes Bill 124's wage cap.

If the strike is to go ahead Monday, now is the time for rank-and-file workers to take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands. Rank-and-file strike committees must be immediately established in every school to make preparations for Monday's walkout and ensure it takes place. These committees should appeal for all education workers, including the 200,000 teachers, to walk out in solidarity.

This is the strategy advocated by the Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-file Committee, which is fighting to seize control of the contract struggle from the union bureaucracy and place power in the hands of the rank-and-file. At its latest meeting Sunday, the OEWRFC passed the following resolution outlining the tasks before education workers:

"This meeting of rank-and-file education workers

unequivocally condemns the treacherous shutting down of the education support staff strike by the trade union leaderships. They carried out this move arbitrarily without ever consulting the rank-and-file and without achieving a single one of the workers' demands. Our brothers and sisters had Ford on the ropes, but Walton, CUPE, and Unifor threw him a lifeline. We further declare:

"1. No confidence in the CUPE/OSBCU/teacher union bargaining committees! Since the sabotage of the strike, OSBCU has resumed secretive talks with Ford and provides no information to the rank-and-file. The four teacher unions are also bargaining behind the backs of teachers and providing no details about the dirty deals they are making with Ford and Lecce. This is because Laura Walton, and the CUPE and teacher union leaderships don't want workers to find out about the massive sellout they're preparing.

"2. Establish rank-and-file control over all future negotiations! We demand the removal of the bargaining committees and an immediate end to all backroom talks with the Ford government, which made clear with Bill 28 its determination to enforce savage attacks on us. Education workers should establish rank-and-file committees in every school to seize control of all future talks from the union bureaucracy. Teachers should demand an immediate strike vote so that next time, we can walk out together.

"3. Build a mass working class movement to secure our demands! The two-day strike by support workers demonstrated the immense power of the working class when it is mobilized to fight. We call on caretakers, education assistants, early childhood educators, and teachers to make their contract struggle the spearhead of a rebellion by workers in the public and private sectors for inflation-busting pay increases and billions of dollars for investment in public education."



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