

Ontario education workers speak out ahead of strike by 55,000 workers Monday: “We were kept in the dark on negotiations for almost 10 days”

Our reporter
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Are you an education worker in Ontario? Take up the fight for inflation-busting pay increases and oppose the trade unions’ effort to isolate education support workers. Join the Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee by emailing ontedrfc@gmail.com or filling out the form at the end of this article.

Over 55,000 caretakers, education assistants, early childhood educators and administrative staff are preparing to walk off the job on Monday for the second time this month in a strike for wage increases and improvements to working conditions. The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), which is bargaining on their behalf, was forced Wednesday to issue the required five-day strike notice after failing to reach an agreement with the hard-right Progressive Conservative government led by Premier Doug Ford.

Earlier this month, Ford tried to impose massive wage cuts on the low-paid workers by government decree. His Bill 28, which banned a strike by the workers under threat of exorbitant fines, triggered mass opposition as the education workers defied it in a powerful strike. With sentiments among teachers and broader sections of the working class building towards a general strike to challenge the government, CUPE and other leading unions came to Ford’s rescue by calling off the strike in exchange for Ford’s repeal of Bill 28.

The sabotage of the strike materially weakened the workers, a fact that was underscored by the massive real-terms wage cut CUPE has reportedly agreed with the government. Laura Walton, lead negotiator for the Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU) bargaining unit, announced Wednesday that an annual “increase” of 3.59 percent has been agreed, with parties supposedly meeting “mid-way.” This is a lie, since rank-and-file workers went into bargaining with a demand for an 11.7 percent annual rise. Given that they have suffered a huge real-terms pay cut over the past decade, this demand was already extremely modest and would barely keep pace with inflation. Walton’s attempt to sell an offer worth less than one-third of this initial demand as a “victory” is a slap in the face to all education support workers, who earn on average the poverty wage of \$39,000 per

year.

While government and union negotiators came to terms on a further attack on real wages, Walton explained that a deal could not be reached due to Ford’s refusal to invest additional sums in student services, including to enable the hiring of more personnel and more prep time. However, her issuing of the strike notice has much more to do with the seething anger among rank-and-file workers, who are determined to wage a powerful struggle to overturn decades of wage and benefit concessions that CUPE and the other education unions have been complicit in enforcing. Moreover, it does not remove the possibility that CUPE will strike an 11th-hour sellout with the government and try to rush workers into voting for it.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained in its analysis of CUPE’s strike announcement, “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.”

The WSWWS spoke to education workers to find out their views on CUPE’s latest strike announcement and the way forward in their struggle.

A caretaker from Toronto who attended an online OSBCU membership meeting Wednesday said, “Laura Walton and company tried to frame a \$1 per hour raise as a ‘win.’ None of the attendees bought this, \$1 does not come anywhere near what is necessary to even match inflation, let alone reverse decades of lost wages from union-enabled concession contracts that included wage freezes and pay caps of 1 percent.

“Laura and [CUPE Ontario President] Fred Hahn repeated the bankrupt strategy of the union bureaucrats, encouraging members to apply pressure to MPPs to force the government to come to a ‘fair deal’ for workers. This will not succeed.”

He explained how the union leadership has repeatedly conceded

ground to Ford, stating, “On several occasions, Laura discussed how the bargaining team will recommend a deal, bring forward a tentative agreement (TA) and that it will be up to workers to vote for or against it. When a TA is reached will workers even be allowed time to read through it carefully and discuss it before voting on it?”

“It’s difficult to believe the union bureaucrats, who back in the summer came up with a demand of 11.7 percent as a wage increase, promoting the slogan ‘a toonie, a loonie and a quarter.’ Since then, they conceded their demands, cutting it down from 11.7 percent to 6 percent in a desperate attempt to reach a deal before our first strike. Now they’ve cut the wage demand further to only a 3.5 percent ‘pay increase.’ Laura and company framed it as ‘a win’ but not enough. In the economic context of at least 7 percent inflation, the fact the union leadership frames a 3.5 percent real-terms pay cut as a ‘win’ exposes their bankruptcy.”

The worker also addressed what happened after the strangling of the previous strike, commenting, “Education workers have been kept entirely in the dark since the union bureaucrats from the public and private sector came together almost two weeks ago to throw the right-wing Ford Conservative government a lifeline by smothering a growing strike movement instead of building a general strike movement.

“We were kept in the dark on negotiations for almost 10 days, workers’ only source of information on negotiations was from social media and rumours.”

All of the education unions are bargaining behind the backs of their members with the aim of cooking up another round of concession-filled contracts with Ford. In addition to CUPE, four teacher unions are currently bargaining for 200,000 teachers who have been without a contract since August 31.

An elementary school teacher told the WWSW that like her CUPE colleagues, she and her co-workers have heard virtually nothing from the leadership of the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO). “My ETFO local has not sent any communication to members since November 3,” she said late Wednesday. “At the provincial level, ETFO last communicated with members on November 9, the subject line proclaiming, ‘Ed workers solidarity win!’ Aside from the self-congratulatory and self-indulgent tone, the message included a link to ETFO’s health and safety resources with outdated and minimizing information on COVID-19. In terms of the bargaining process, the last update was sent from the central bargaining committee on November 1... Specific details have been withheld from members, leading to an information vacuum and widespread speculation on social media.”

The teacher contacted us again Friday to note that ETFO sent another update Friday morning on the planned CUPE strike. The notice instructed teachers not to join picket lines, adopting the same scandalous position taken by the teacher union bureaucrats earlier this month during the first strike. ETFO bureaucrats cynically ordered teachers to “comply under protest” by teaching online classes in cases where schools are forced to close due to the CUPE strike. The bulletin sternly declared, “all ETFO members ... are legally obligated to attend to their regular work duties...”

“The messaging is mixed, contradictory and puts members in a very awkward position,” the teacher commented. “To ‘comply

under protest’ totally negates the idea of worker solidarity. I will not be sending a protest email to my Director of Education, as my email, as well as others I have sent in the past, will go unread and unacknowledged. Synchronous virtual teaching was an emergency solution during the start of the pandemic but it cannot be continuously used as a tool of convenience for politicians. Not to mention how many students are without access to computers at home and will not be able to access virtual learning. There are extenuating issues of equity and inclusion that have gone unaddressed by the school boards and the unions.”

A high school teacher and member of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF) added, “OSSTF has the same message. Get your classes ready for online teaching Monday.”

The Toronto caretaker explained the way forward for all education workers in the current contract struggle: “What is needed is to build a general strike movement and that requires appealing to all workers in the public and private sector. The union bureaucrats refuse to build a general strike and they continue to use ‘legality’ as a shield for their inaction and cowardice. Laura repeated these claims at the Zoom meeting. CUPE refuses to appeal to other public sector workers because they are not in a ‘legal strike position.’ The labour laws are not on the side of the worker in Canada. They are designed to straitjacket workers in the anti-worker collective bargaining system. Workers must break free from this archaic system and throw it in the trash to build a strong, independent and successful working-class movement.

“The information provided by the union leadership during the Zoom meeting confirms why education workers cannot trust the union bureaucracy and must take command of the struggle by forming rank-and-file committees in all schools. They must be connected to the Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee in order to better coordinate the struggle against the government.

“The establishment of rank-and-file committees will allow education workers to advance their interests and eventually overrule the decisions of the unions and school boards. As the committees grow in numbers, the union bureaucracy will be isolated and deemed irrelevant, placing all power in the hands of the workers.”



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