

Union representing 55,000 Ontario education workers calls off strike, endorses sellout agreement

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The Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee is holding an emergency public meeting tomorrow, Tuesday, November 22, at 7pm eastern time to organize opposition to CUPE's sellout deal. Register here to attend and share details about the meeting with your co-workers and friends.

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In a display of utter disdain for the overwhelmingly low-wage workers they claim to represent, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) agreed to a concessions-filled contract Sunday for 55,000 Ontario school caretakers, education assistants, early childhood educators, and administrative staff.

The union leadership's most immediate concern in announcing the tentative agreement was to prevent school support staff from walking off the job today. They did so, because the union bureaucrats feared that the education workers' struggle could rapidly escape their control and become a direct political challenge to Ontario's Doug Ford-led Progressive Conservative government and its agenda of wage cutting and capitalist austerity.

The agreement unveiled by Ontario School Boards Council of Unions (OSBCU) lead negotiator Laura Walton and widely hated Education Minister Stephen Lecce Sunday afternoon is a contemptible sellout that meets none of the workers' demands. Having originally raised the demand for an 11.7 percent annual wage increase, Walton touted a \$1 per year rise, which amounts to approximately 3.59 percent, as a great "victory." With official inflation running at 7 percent, and price rises for groceries and other basic necessities over 10 percent, even the original demand would barely have kept pace with inflation.

According to City News journalist Richard Southern, the government and CUPE agreed as part of the deal to "form a task force to tackle absenteeism." In other words, CUPE has pledged to further increase the workloads on already overwhelmed staff, while cutting real wages and backing the government's refusal to make available additional funds to hire more workers.

Walton admitted that the four-year deal announced Sunday is no different from the offer made by hard-right Premier Doug Ford and Lecce on Wednesday of last week, which prompted

CUPE to issue a five-day strike notice. No additional funds were offered by Ford and Lecce to hire education assistants for every classroom, and more early childhood educators and librarians to reduce staff-student ratios.

Walton's admission begs the question as to what precisely CUPE negotiators and government officials were doing between Wednesday and Sunday. The only credible explanation has thus far been provided by the *World Socialist Web Site*, which noted in its initial analysis of CUPE's issuing of a strike notice that it was a cynical maneuver to mollify rank-and-file anger over the union leadership's demobilization of their courageous struggle. Walton already told membership meetings last Wednesday that her bargaining team had reached a "middle ground" with the government on wages, i.e., by totally abandoning workers' demands and seeking to impose a major real-terms pay cut. But she and the entire union leadership clearly feared that announcing such a massive betrayal without some militant posturing would have been too much for workers to stomach.

Workers increasingly recognize this fact. Typical comments from education workers to the *WSWS* following the announcement of yesterday's sellout included: "I think they wanted to demoralize and demobilize the membership. Why didn't they announce the deal on Wednesday if nothing changed?"; "I don't understand how they can call off the strike when the membership hasn't voted yet"; and "Laura is very good at emotional manipulation and gaslighting to fit a narrative."

Walton sought to square the circle of posturing as an opponent of the wage-cutting tentative agreement, while insisting that the bargaining committee she leads was "required" to urge school support workers to ratify it in votes set to begin Thursday. "What we have been told by this government is that they are not willing to budge any further," she pathetically declared. "For that, to parents and families, all I can say is that I am disappointed and so is the entire bargaining committee. As a mom, I don't like this deal. As a worker, I don't like this deal."

Walton's theatrical performance was less than convincing.

Not least because she played a central role in throwing Ford and Lecce a lifeline two weeks ago when education workers had them on the ropes. School support staff won overwhelming support from the entire working class when they courageously took strike action November 4 in defiance of Ford's authoritarian anti-strike law known as Bill 28. The law sought to impose massive real-wage cuts by government decree and threatened each worker who defied it with daily fines of \$4,000. The defiant strike galvanized support throughout the working class, with teachers rebelling against their union leaderships to demand to join the walkout, large majorities declaring in polls their support for solidarity strikes and higher wage increases, and many workers participating at impromptu rallies across the province.

With the movement building towards a general strike, Ford was not merely forced to "budge," but to carry out a full-scale retreat in the face of this impressive display of working class power. On the morning of November 7, he announced that Bill 28 would be repealed. Any genuine workers' leader would have at this point pledged to press home the advantage by refusing to call off the strike until the workers' demands were met **in full**. This would have placed immense pressure on Ford to make further concessions or risk provoking a general strike that could have threatened the continued existence of his government.

However, it was at this very moment that Walton, CUPE Ontario leader Fred Hahn, and the leaders of almost all of Canada's major unions rushed to Ford's aid and disarmed the workers. Calling off the strike with immediate effect without so much as consulting the rank-and-file, they asserted with one voice that workers had "won" because Ford was returning to the "bargaining table." The only victors that day were the union bureaucrats, who preserved their "collective bargaining" privileges and their "right" to negotiate a sellout. As the Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee, organized by education assistants, teachers, caretakers, and administrative staff with the aim of seizing control of the struggle from the hands of the union apparatus, prophetically warned in a statement published within hours of CUPE's monumental betrayal, the union bureaucrats were preparing to "snatch defeat from the jaws of victory."

While the CUPE leadership and the corporate-controlled media would like to convince themselves that the struggle is now over, that is far from the case. Anger among rank-and-file workers is seething over the union bureaucracy's capitulation, its refusal to bargain transparently, and its strangling of strikes.

Workers are justifiably demanding a decisive "No" vote to throw the tentative agreement into the trash where it belongs. Rejecting the agreement is necessary, but it can only be an initial step. If workers vote it down, the same bureaucrats who have sold them out twice in as many weeks will return to the "bargaining table" with their "partners" in the Ford government to cook up another rotten deal.

The way forward was spelt out in a resolution adopted by the OEWRFC at a meeting on November 13, which accurately anticipated the events of recent days:

"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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