

CUPE leadership unites to ram through sellout for Ontario education workers as rank-and-file calls for “no” vote, relaunch of strike

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All education workers and their supporters wishing to join and help build the Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee (OEWRFC) can contact the committee at ontedrfc@gmail.com, join the OEWRFC Facebook group, or fill out the form at the end of this article.

In the wake of the agreement by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) to a rotten sellout deal for 55,000 education support workers in Ontario Sunday, the fact that workers face a battle on two fronts has become ever clearer. Caretakers, education assistants, early childhood educators and administrative staff, who earn on average the poverty wage of \$39,000 per year, confront on the one hand the ruthless attack of the hard-right Ford government on their wages and working conditions, and on the other the complicity of the entire trade union bureaucracy in enforcing another round of massive concessions.

The miserable agreement presented by Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU) bargaining unit leader Laura Walton includes a miserly annual \$1 hourly wage “increase” per year, which equates to 3.59 percent rise each year for four years. With official inflation running at 7 percent and price increases for basic necessities much higher, this slap in the face amounts to a huge pay cut. It is less than one-third of the original 11.7-percent demand raised by OSBCU.

As if the imposition of yet another real wage cut after a decade of declining pay is not bad enough, union officials agreed with Tory Premier Doug Ford to establish a joint “task force” to tackle “absenteeism.” They also agreed that the Ford government would not invest any more money in hiring additional staff. In short, the CUPE bureaucrats support robbing workers of their purchasing power, policing their sick leave, and enforcing even more punishing workloads on the already overwhelmed and low-paid staff. They do so because the agreement secures and in fact deepens the bureaucracy’s privileged position in the “labour relations” system, and because they were terrified by the upsurge of working-class struggle triggered by the education workers’ strike earlier this month.

If it is true to say that the OSBCU leadership stabbed workers

in the back by agreeing to this sellout and recommending its ratification, then it must be added that the statement put out by the CUPE national leadership Tuesday was the equivalent of twisting the knife in the wound. With undisguised cynicism, CUPE national president Mark Hancock (2018 salary \$170,000) and national secretary-treasurer Candice Rennick (2018 salary \$164,000) announced that the leadership of Canada’s largest union “congratulates Ontario education workers on reaching a tentative agreement” that includes “all that could be secured.”

The two bureaucrats, who earn more than four times what the average education support worker does in a year, continued, “The OSBCU bargaining committee was able to achieve a breakthrough wage settlement, after more than a decade of legislated wage restraint. The agreed wage increase of \$1 per hour in each year of a four-year collective agreement will result in wage increases of 3.59% on average across your bargaining unit, or roughly 15.2% compounded over four years. For the lowest paid workers in the education sector, the flat rate of \$1 per hour, per year amounts to more: 4.2% each year or 16.8% compounded over four years.

“The bargaining of a flat rate increase itself is an achievement, one that helps lift the wages of the lowest paid workers in a way that bargaining straight percentage increases does not.”

This statement only goes to show how far these bureaucrats with their six-figure salaries and corporatist “partnerships” with government ministers are removed from the everyday realities confronting working people. Firstly, it should be pointed out to them that “Ontario education workers” have “reached a tentative agreement” on nothing. The rotten sellout deal was cooked up behind the scenes by Ford, Education Minister Stephen Lecce, and Walton, who, in spite of her incessant talk of “open bargaining,” kept workers in the dark about the concessions she was making.

Secondly, an education assistant or caretaker earning \$39,000 per year will still have to maintain their second job and struggle to afford enough food for their family with a 4.2 percent “wage increase,” which in reality is another real-term pay cut. CUPE

has itself acknowledged that by the end of 2022, average wages for education support workers will have fallen by 19 percent since 2012. In other words, even based on the “achievement” of a 16.8 percent increase over four years, workers’ wages in 2026 will remain more than 2 percent below what they were in 2012 before any inflation is taken into account.

Hancock’s order to the membership to vote for the deal and get back to work is all the more significant because his rhetorical pledges of “solidarity” and “support from CUPE’s 700,000 members” were touted by apologists for the union bureaucracy as examples of how CUPE was organizing a “fight” for workers. The truth is that the only fight they conducted was for the privileged interests of their own bureaucrats.

Hancock and Rennick may as well have written to the school support staff: “If you vote this contract down, you’re on your own. We promised you solidarity until a ‘fair deal’ was reached. We’ve got our fair deal now, because our bureaucrats’ bargaining rights are secured, and we even created a few new well-paid committee positions so we can work with the government to squeeze a few more sick days out of you. Get back to work.”

The CUPE leadership has been joined in its praise for the sellout agreement by the leaderships of the teacher unions, who will now endeavour to enforce similar concessions on their 200,000 members, and the Ontario Public Service Employees Union, the bargaining agent for 8,000 education support workers. If the \$1 per year “increase” is adopted by the teacher unions, it will mean an even greater wage cut for teachers due to their higher salaries.

If the bureaucrats think they can get away with this, they are in for a rude awakening. There is widespread sentiment among rank-and-file workers for the defeat of the agreement, which secured none of their demands. Typical responses sent to the WSWs from CUPE members and education workers to the CUPE national statement included, “I’m disgusted” and “They can go shove their congratulations. They are behaving as if ratification of the agreement is a *fait accompli*.”

The union bureaucracy has worked to impose a sellout from the outset. CUPE and other major unions came together to sabotage a burgeoning general strike movement by strangling the strike by 55,000 education support workers in early November, which was launched in defiance of Ford’s draconian anti-strike ban and won strong support throughout the working class.

The *Toronto Star* reported that last Thursday, after CUPE was forced to issue a five-day strike notice to placate rank-and-file demands for a genuine struggle, the leaderships of eight private sector unions made clear they would not support another strike by showing up at a training center announcement alongside two Ford government ministers. Some public sector unions, the *Star* continued, urged CUPE to “accept” the government’s offer.

At the latest meeting of the Ontario Education Workers Rank-

and-file Committee (OEWRFC) Tuesday, education support staff and teachers discussed and approved the following resolution outlining the way forward for all education workers:

The Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee emphatically condemns the rotten sellout agreement brought back by the CUPE bargaining committee and urges school support workers to massively vote it down. A ‘no’ vote must be made the starting point for a rank-and-file rebellion to seize control of the struggle from the CUPE bureaucrats, who rescued the Ford government by scuttling the education workers’ strike on November 7, and have demonstrated by recommending this miserable contract that they support Ford’s agenda of real wage cuts and austerity for public education. The OEWRFC urges all education workers:

1. Build rank-and-file committees in every school to unify school support workers with teachers and prepare for a unified strike.

2. Demand that a rejection of the rotten deal be followed by an immediate strike, since support staff are in a legal strike position. Teachers should demand strike votes now so all education workers can walk out together.

3. Call for no more negotiations with Ford, the removal of the CUPE bargaining committee, and the election of rank-and-file representatives pledged to fight for inflation-busting wage and funding increases.

4. Broaden your struggle to workers throughout the private and public sectors, who confront the same gang up of union bureaucrats and government ministers imposing attacks on them. Establish ties with striking university workers and rail workers across the US through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



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