

Faced with CUPE propaganda campaign endorsing sellout, Ontario education support workers determined to defeat concessions-filled contract

Our reporters

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The Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee (OEWRFC) is comprised of teachers, caretakers and education assistants who are fighting to mobilize all education workers in the province in a political struggle independently of the trade union bureaucracies in defence of public education and for an end to the COVID-19 pandemic. Read the OEWRFC's founding statement and contact the committee at ontedrfc@gmail.com.

Education support workers in Ontario have until Sunday, December 4 to vote on a sellout tentative agreement endorsed by the leadership of their union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). The 55,000 workers, including educational assistants, custodians, early childhood educators, and administrative staff, have waged a bitter struggle for wage increases to keep pace with inflation and overturn decades of pay cuts, the hiring of more staff, and better working conditions against the hard-right Progressive Conservative government of Doug Ford.

CUPE National and its Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU) bargaining division are pulling out all the stops to ram through the agreement, even though it meets none of the workers' demands. Members have been harangued at union meetings by well-paid CUPE bureaucrats and lawyers on the dangers of voting against the agreement, how they are isolated in their struggle, how the government could impose a worse agreement through arbitration, and how this is the best deal they have ever obtained.

In reality, the miserable deal, cooked up behind the backs of rank-and-file workers, includes a \$1 per hour pay increase across the board, representing a 3.59 percent annual average increase. This "increase" does not even come close to the official inflation rate of 7 percent, let alone the higher price rises for groceries and other basic necessities.

The campaign for a massive "no" vote is being led by the Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee

(OEWRFC), which school support workers and teachers set up in August to organize a rebellion against the union bureaucracies and place power in the hands of the rank-and-file. At a recent meeting, the OEWRFC adopted a resolution charting the way forward for the contract struggle, which included an appeal to broaden the fight against the Ford government's concessions to include all teachers and other sections of working people in the public and private sectors confronting similar attacks on pay and conditions. To conduct this fight, the OEWRFC urged the construction of rank-and-file committees in every school across the province so education workers can coordinate their opposition to the OSBCU's betrayal.

The OEWRFC has gathered responses from members and supporters to the shameless promotion of the sellout deal by the CUPE leadership. We encourage all workers wishing to express their views on the agreement and the way forward for the contract fight to email ontedrfc@gmail.com with your comments or fill out the form at the end of this article.

A veteran educational assistant commented, "As a long time member of CUPE and employee of the education sector, like most I found myself completely exhausted with inconsistent messaging throughout the process from our central bargaining team.

"It's been challenging for many years and I'm disappointed that this round of bargaining is no different than those before it. The only difference was we used our strike card on a piece of legislation that was 'against' our rights and compromised our ability to strike for our collective agreement. Unfortunately, the last five-day strike notice accomplished nothing and was perhaps used as a bluff. The government called the bluff and won. So now it's back to the membership to ratify this agreement.

"We were told to vote and let our voices be heard, but conditionally. If you vote no, a list of things could occur

along with a long cold winter. This bargaining round, I watched how members engaged and became emotionally invested with highs and lows. It's so emotionally exhausting that members just can't cope.

"Combine that with the bits of emotional blackmail to gain sympathy for the job the bargaining team has to do. Imagine if I went to my boss and complained about how tired I was or that I was away from my family too much. I don't see the purpose of those types of comments other than to prevent the leadership from being questioned or receiving criticism by the membership.

"We are now at the end of this mess and being asked to vote on a tentative agreement where our own bargaining team knows it falls short in delivering what it promised at the beginning. Members are now asked to vote on a tentative agreement with the recommendation of the OSBCU to accept it, and if we don't there will most likely be consequences. I guess there is a choice but not really."

A CUPE member from Toronto spoke about how CUPE scuttled the education support workers' strike in early November, when the strong popular support they secured forced the Ford government to make a retreat. The burgeoning movement in support of a general strike compelled Ford to withdraw his draconian anti-strike law, Bill 28. Rather than pressing home the advantage and expanding the strike to win the workers' demands in full, including an above-inflation pay increase, OSBCU president Laura Walton conspired with Canada's leading union bureaucrats to call off the strike without consulting the rank-and-file.

The Toronto-based worker commented, "As a worker, I am extremely disappointed that leadership has let so many supporters down when they backed down from a general strike that had enormous potential.

"As a CUPE member, I am concerned about the lack of democracy when the leadership made the unilateral decision to call off the general strike without any input from the membership.

"I am alarmed by the interference and lack of solidarity from CUPE National when they decided to push a tentative agreement down these locals' throats when the membership hasn't even decided, for itself, if the tentative agreement is acceptable to them.

"As a parent, I am disheartened that union leaderships have, time and time again, settled for less than what workers and students deserve, only to see the school buildings crumble, supports being stripped away from children, and class sizes increasing to unmanageable levels.

"As a community member, I am disillusioned with the extent in which organized and institutionalized labour has let down the broader community, once more."

The systematic demobilization by CUPE and the entire union bureaucracy of the strong wave of popular support enjoyed by the education support workers has led to demoralization among some workers. This is, in fact, the unions' desired outcome, since it facilitates the ramming through of another round of concessions.

As a skilled trades worker from Toronto explained, "I'm a master electrician, gas fitter and a refrigeration technician. I'm not convinced that we'd have enough support from the public and other unions to get much more. I will still be voting no but I doubt our voices will be heard. Too many of the younger, less paid members are frightened of being off on strike for a long period of time and I can't blame them for that."

An elementary school teacher from Toronto expressed her backing for the support staff's struggle, and emphasized that more could be achieved if rank-and-file workers take the fight into their own hands. She said, "The tentative agreement is a disappointment to CUPE and frankly all education workers. The union leadership killed the momentum for a general strike when there had been a huge outpouring of support for CUPE members and other unions from across the public and private sector.

"I was there at the picket lines supporting my co-workers for those two strike days in early November and the anger, resentment, and at times full-blown outrage was on display. Unions missed another opportunity to galvanize that anger and demand a better collective agreement with fair and equitable wages and stronger workplace protections.

"As teacher unions engage in bargaining right now, the expectations are set very low for a positive outcome. The Ford government successfully negotiated the creation of a task force to combat employee absenteeism — who's to say teachers won't be subjected to even more unreasonable scrutiny when many of the reasons for absenteeism come down to unsafe work conditions during an ongoing pandemic, rising levels of violence and crushing workloads?

"I have no trust or confidence in my union leadership. Supporting the establishment of rank-and-file committees can put the bargaining power back in the hands of members where it truly belongs."

Education workers who agree and wish to join and build the OEWRFC should email ontedrfc@gmail.com, follow the committee's Twitter account, and join its Facebook group.



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