

Ontario and Quebec Education workers condemn CUPE's push to ram through sellout contract

Our reporters

4 December 2022

Are you an education worker in Ontario? Take up the fight to oppose CUPE's betrayal of your struggle for real wage increases and improved working conditions. Contact the Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-file Committee by emailing ontedrfc@gmail.com or filling out the form at the end of this article.

55,000 school caretakers, education assistants, early childhood educators, and administrative staff across Ontario finished voting Sunday on a sellout contract negotiated by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and the province's hard-right Progressive Conservative government. The deal meets none of the workers' demands. It would impose a sweeping real wage cut through miserly 3.59 percent annual wage "increases" under conditions where the official inflation rate is 7 percent; includes no additional funds to hire more personnel to improve student/staff ratios; and leaves in place "job security" provisions that are chock full of holes and under which thousands of jobs have been eliminated.

There is mass rank-and-file opposition to the tentative agreement. In response, the union bureaucracy has mounted an unprecedented propaganda campaign of distortions, half-truths, and lies to browbeat the workers into ratifying it. This has involved not only the leaders of the Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU) bargaining unit, but the entire CUPE national leadership. Rank-and-file members were harangued at a series of online meetings by CUPE bureaucrats and lawyers with six-figure salaries about the impossibility of continuing the struggle, threatened with a worse offer if they reject the deal, and told in no uncertain terms that if they vote down the agreement they are on their own.

CUPE's determination to enforce yet another pay cut after two decades of wage reductions and attacks on working conditions flows from the fact that the agreement defends the collective bargaining system from which the bureaucracy draws its privileges. When Ontario Premier Doug Ford sought to impose a contract by government decree in early November with Bill 28, education support workers courageously defied his authoritarian anti-strike law in a two-day strike that won the support of workers throughout the province and across Canada. Sentiment was

building for a general strike, which would have posed the question of bringing down the Ford government, and opened up the possibility for education support workers and teachers to press home their advantage and secure inflation-busting pay increases and billions of dollars in investments for public education.

The CUPE bureaucracy wanted to avoid this outcome at all costs, because it feared that such a mass movement would escape its control, undermine its corporatist partnership with big business and the state and threaten the global "competitive" position of Canadian capitalism on which its own privileges rest. Leading CUPE bureaucrats connived with Ford and Canada's top union leaders—from the Canadian Labour Congress, the Ontario Federation of Labour, Unifor and the building trades—to sabotage the strike at the very point where it was having the biggest impact on the basis of a pledge by Ford to withdraw Bill 28 and return to the "bargaining table." The bitter fruit of the "bargaining" that followed is the sellout deal on which workers have just voted.

CUPE's betrayal of the education workers' struggle has provoked outrage among workers, many of whom have become involved with the Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee (OEWRFC). The OEWRFC was established by education support workers and teachers in August to organize a rebellion against the education unions' leadership and place control of the contract struggle in the hands of the rank-and-file. The committee has led the campaign over recent weeks for a "no" vote on the rotten contract through online discussions with workers and several well-attended meetings.

Whatever the outcome of the contract vote, the building of the OEWRFC is the most urgent task facing education workers. If the tentative contract is voted down, school support staff must demand the immediate calling of a province-wide strike and the mobilization of teachers and workers throughout the public and private sector, to defeat the Ford government's agenda of capitalist austerity, and secure wage and benefit raises that keep pace with inflation and make good the loss of purchasing power suffered by workers since the 1990s. If the union succeeds in ramming through the contract, the OEWRFC must be made the centre of opposition to the miserable working conditions enforced by the bureaucracy and the plans of the government and four teacher unions to impose the same rotten terms on Ontario's 200,000 teachers in the coming months.

These sentiments were shared in a series of comments received by the OEWRFc from education workers in Ontario and Quebec. A high school teacher from the GTA wrote, “How did education workers go from demanding a desperately needed 11 percent wage increase, having massive support across the province, and standing on the verge of a provincial general strike, to being demobilized, demoralized, and sent back to work with a tentative 3 percent deal?

“Only one word describes what has happened. Betrayal! Most infuriating is how the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF) applauds this sellout deal and telegraphs what they have in mind when their members fight for new contracts in the new year. I have no confidence my union will negotiate a fair deal for OSSTF members. It’s pretty clear to me that teachers are going to have to mobilize into rank-and-file committees to break the cycle of sellout contracts and never-ending cuts to education.”

An educational assistant in Quebec noted how the unions use the same tactics in his province to demobilize and demoralize worker opposition to wage and benefit cuts that they are using in Ontario, commenting, “What CUPE and OSBCU just did is a betrayal, pure and simple. The union leaders are forced to acknowledge that the agreement fails to meet the central demands of workers, namely cost-of-living wage increases and increased hiring to improve services and conditions.”

“These highly paid bureaucrats still claim that the rotten offer from Ford they accepted is the best the workers will get. After demobilizing workers by canceling the strike while they secretly negotiated with the right-wing, anti-worker Ford, union leaders are now giving workers a false choice: accept this impoverishing offer or get even less through arbitration or back-to-work legislation. The unions are still silent on a possible further government decree, but it is clear that they will make this threat to scare workers.”

“This is what the public sector unions in Quebec did during the 2015 and 2020 collective bargaining rounds. These same unions, including the SCFP (CUPE in Quebec), have done nothing to mobilize us in support of our Ontario colleagues.”

“The fight is not over my friends, and I encourage you to vote NO and rip up this contract. Never forget that money exists to satisfy the needs of all workers and have high quality education and public services, but governments take that money from us and give it to the rich at the top of society. Enough!”

“Join the OEWRFc to take control of the struggle from CUPE and expand the opposition movement to the rest of the working class. It’s not too late!”

A music teacher in the Kitchener-Waterloo region wrote, “I am outraged by CUPE’s acceptance of the sellout deal. For all of the bluster coming from the well-heeled union bureaucrats about ‘fighting for workers,’ they are not at all acting like a workers’ organization. Limiting wage increases to about 3.5 percent when inflation is running in excess of 7 percent is unconscionable. If CUPE has negotiated anything it is not so much a contract as terms of surrender. This is all the more criminal when one considers that they had Ford and Lecce on the ropes and there was a real possibility to broaden the struggle.”

“Far from being a mistake, the acceptance of sellout contracts is part of the modus operandi for the unions. There was mass popular

support for teachers and educational assistants during the last contract negotiations in 2019 and early 2020. I’m probably not the only one who remembers cars honking their horns in support of teachers and educational assistants when driving past picket lines at that time.”

“Yet CUPE—Laura Walton was the lead negotiator on the 2019 contract—was quite happy to agree to a sellout contract and demobilize support staff. Why was this the case? CUPE, like the four teacher unions (OSSTF, ETFO, AEFO, and OECTA), which represent 200,000 teachers in the province, have a vested material interest in maintaining the reactionary collective ‘bargaining’ system. As always, the ‘negotiations’ are conducted largely behind closed doors with the union brass mewling for table scraps from the provincial government. It’s worth noting that the Financial Accountability Office has noted that the provincial government currently has more than \$44 billion allocated to a contingency fund.”

“The government has more than enough money to cover wage increases, benefits, pensions, etc. Yet the union apparatus is so thoroughly integrated into the capitalist order that they are actually hostile to mobilizing workers to fight for a living wage. We can see this in the shrinking demands for wage increases down from 11.7 percent in the fall to 6 percent a few weeks ago, now down to 3.5 percent, well below the rate of inflation.”

“This treachery is not limited to wages. We saw a similar outcome during the pandemic. When there was mass popular fear and apprehension amongst parents, teachers, and students to sending students back into classrooms at the height of the pandemic in 2020, the unions heroically... grovelled before the anti-education ignoramus, Doug Ford, begging him to “do the right thing.” When asked by a CP24 reporter how they would respond to Ford’s provocations, Harvey Bischof, the former President of the OSSTF, declared that the union would not take any job action, because it would be illegal. One wonders what the point of a union is when it won’t even take the basic action of defending the lives and livelihoods of its members. The union simply turned to the pro-employer Ontario Labour Relations Board, which promptly refused to hear their grievance on the grounds of a technicality.”

“If a serious fight for the defence of public education and the lives and livelihoods of education workers, teachers, and workers as a whole is to be waged, workers need to draw the necessary lessons. We need to form new rank-and-file committees which are democratically controlled by rank-and-file workers.”

If you agree, contact the Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee to take up this fight. Email ontedrfc@gmail.com, follow the OEWRFc’s Twitter account, and join its Facebook group.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact