

CUPE rams through sellout contract for 55,000 Ontario education workers after massive propaganda campaign

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5 December 2022

Are you an Ontario education worker? We want to hear what you think about CUPE's sabotage of last month's strike and the ratification of the sellout contract. Contact ontedrjc@gmail.com or fill out the form at the end of this article.

The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) bureaucracy has succeeded in ramming through sweeping real-terms pay cuts and a further deterioration in working conditions in a four-year contract for 55,000 Ontario education support workers. CUPE announced Monday that the contract was ratified by 73 percent of those who voted on a turnout of 76 percent.

The contract for caretakers, education assistants, administrative staff, and early childhood educators includes an annual wage "increase" of just 3.59 percent, with official inflation running at 7 percent. On the same day that CUPE announced the ratification of the contract, a study projected that grocery prices alone will rise by between 5 and 7 percent over the next year. The CUPE bargaining team also agreed to a contract that includes no additional funding for hiring staff, facilitating the imposition of austerity by the hard-right provincial government led by Premier Doug Ford.

A significant section of rank-and-file school support workers, who are the lowest paid workers in the sector and earn an annual average wage of \$39,000, have made clear they do not support this sellout.

Despite two weeks of incessant browbeating by the leadership of CUPE, Canada's largest trade union with hundreds of millions of dollars in assets, 27 percent of workers still voted to reject the deal. And if the less than impressive 76 percent turnout is taken into account, fully 45 percent of the membership either voted "no" or boycotted the vote entirely. Many workers who voted "yes" did so under duress or because they knew that the union bureaucracy would do nothing to fight for a better offer.

As an education assistant told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "I think it passed out of fear and most of my colleagues agree. They were too afraid to strike and felt we should have stayed on the line on the 7th," a reference to CUPE's scuttling of the two-day education workers' strike on November 7, at the very point when popular support for the strike was building and workers had Ford on the ropes. "Most of my colleagues were not happy with this agreement but felt they were forced to vote yes...it was by far not

by choice. They felt like they were pressured to vote yes," she added.

Another EA was angered by the remark from Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU) president Laura Walton that the ratification of the contract was "like winning the Super Bowl." The worker said, "This comment confirms just how out of touch our president Laura Walton is concerning the membership in how they feel. No matter what spin she would like to take, it is and was a shitty deal."

Since unveiling the tentative agreement on November 20, Walton and the entire CUPE national leadership made crystal clear that they would not tolerate any other outcome than a "yes" vote. OSBCU members were treated to a series of membership meetings where well-paid bureaucrats and union lawyers lectured them about the "victory" they had achieved, how isolated they were, and how dangerous it would be to launch further strike action. CUPE national president Mark Hancock, who earlier in the bargaining process blustered that CUPE's 700,000 members would stand in "solidarity" with the education workers' struggle, did not even permit rank-and-file workers to consider the terms of the agreement before rushing to declare that this was the best they could expect in the circumstances. The message was unmistakable and intended by Hancock to be so: "If you vote this down and plan a strike, you're on your own."

The contempt shown by the union bureaucracy for the democratic rights of the workers during the ratification vote was the culmination of their massive betrayal of the education workers' struggle, which had the potential to spearhead a general strike in opposition to the Ford government's brutal public spending austerity. After rank-and-file workers delivered an overwhelming strike mandate in a vote supported by 96.5 percent, Walton and the OSBCU leadership reluctantly called a strike for November 4. In the lead-up to the walkout, she arbitrarily slashed the workers' initial 11.7 percent annual wage demand in half, offering the government 6 percent. Ford rejected this offer out of hand and instead sought to impose a contract with a mere 2.5 percent annual increase by government decree in the form of Bill 28.

The strike took place in defiance of this draconian anti-strike law, which threatened each worker on the picket line with a \$4,000 fine for every day of strike action. The courageous stand taken by

the education workers galvanized support throughout the working class and totally changed the political dynamic overnight. Thousands of teachers demanded to join the strike in a rebellion against the outrageous conduct of the teacher unions' leaders, who ordered their members to cross picket lines. Workers streamed to rallies across the province on November 5, and rumours of a general strike for November 14 were circulating. Ford, universally presented in the corporate media as a strong leader enjoying popular support, was revealed to be vulnerable and on the defensive in the face of working class power.

It was at this critical juncture, when the movement was at its strongest, that the leadership of CUPE and almost all of Canada's major unions intervened to strangle the strike. In a series of phone calls over the weekend, they pleaded with Ford to withdraw Bill 28, telling him that they would otherwise be unable to maintain control over the workers. On Monday, November 7, Walton then unilaterally declared an end to the strike on the basis that Ford had agreed to return to the "bargaining table" and rescind Bill 28. None of the workers' demands had been met, and not a single worker was consulted before this criminal decision was taken. The union bureaucrats proclaimed "victory" because they had secured their collective bargaining privileges, i.e., their "right" to negotiate a sellout.

In a statement published hours after CUPE's betrayal, the Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee (OEWRFC), which was set up in August by workers to seize control of the contract struggle from the union bureaucracy, warned that CUPE was preparing to "snatch defeat from the jaws of victory." This warning was confirmed in spades. Using their combined resources, the unions succeeded in demobilizing the popular support for the education workers' struggle.

Less than two weeks after strangling the strike, Walton appeared at a press conference on November 20 to state that her team had agreed to the 3.59 percent annual wage "increase," less than one-third of the original modest wage demand. Moreover, she admitted that the bargaining team agreed to present this miserable sellout to the workers even though Ford made no commitment to invest in the hiring of more custodians and education assistants, which was a major demand of the workers in order to improve student/staff ratios and reduce workloads.

The conduct of Walton and the entire union apparatus throughout this struggle underscores that the interests of the bureaucracy are irreconcilably opposed to those of rank-and-file workers. While workers wanted to fight for inflation-busting pay increases to overturn decades of real-terms pay cuts and keep pace with inflation, Walton and co. were only interested in a "fight" for their positions at the bargaining table. While striking workers were enthusiastic about broadening their struggle to teachers and other sections of workers to stop Ford's austerity policies, the leaders of CUPE, Unifor, and the Canadian Labour Congress conspired to sabotage the strike. And while workers, including those who voted "yes," continue to oppose pay cuts and unbearable workloads, the union bureaucrats applaud the entrenchment of precisely these conditions for another four years as a "victory."

The reason for these opposed interests is that the union bureaucracy is a privileged section of the middle class with a

vested interest in defending the status quo. The same union leaders who sabotaged the education workers' strike and rammed through the sellout contract are fervent supporters of the federal Trudeau Liberal government, which relies on an alliance with the New Democrats (NDP) for its parliamentary majority. The Liberal/NDP/trade union alliance is presiding over "post-pandemic" austerity for public spending, including by supporting the Bank of Canada's interest rate hikes to drive down workers' wages. The government is simultaneously shovelling tens of billions of dollars into waging imperialist war abroad and rearming Canada's military. Support for this ruthless ruling-class agenda is incompatible with fighting for real wage increases and improvements in conditions for working people.

The key lesson that education workers and their supporters must draw from the events of recent weeks is that they must establish rank-and-file committees in every school and workplace to advance their interests in opposition to the entire union apparatus. The widespread anger and hostility to the betrayals of the union bureaucrats must find organized expression so that workers are capable of resisting and countermanding the bureaucrats when they attempt to enforce a sellout. This task assumes renewed urgency in light of the latest betrayal, which the leaderships of the four teacher unions will seize on as a benchmark to impose similar concessions on 200,000 teachers in the coming weeks. More broadly, CUPE's betrayal has set the standard for massive real-terms pay cuts and attacks on workers' conditions across the private and public sector that must be opposed by unifying workers in a joint struggle against capitalist austerity, social inequality, and war.

The OEWRFC exists to spearhead this fight. We encourage all education support workers and teachers to join and help build it by contacting ontedrhc@gmail.com or completing the form below.



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