

Letter from Toronto school caretaker answers the lies CUPE told Ontario education workers to ram through its sellout contract

Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee
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The Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee (OEWRFC) received the following letter from a caretaker in Toronto, who was a founding member of the OEWRFC last August. The OEWRFC was established to enable rank-and-file education assistants, school caretakers, teachers, early childhood educators, and administrative staff to organize a rebellion against the trade union bureaucracies that have imposed one round of concessions after another over the past three decades. Its next public meeting will be held at 7 p.m. EST on Thursday, December 15. Register here to attend.

The OEWRFC is leading the struggle by education support workers against the sellout enforced by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). Canada's largest union rammed through a four-year contract with massive real-terms pay cuts earlier this month after scuttling a powerful strike by education workers in early November that had galvanized working class opposition to the hard-right, Doug Ford-led Ontario government and threatened to trigger a province-wide general strike.

The committee is also working to mobilize teachers against the impending betrayal of their contract struggle by the teacher unions, which will seize on CUPE's sellout as a template to browbeat educators into accepting similar concessions.

Officially, 73 percent of those who voted backed the deal, although many undoubtedly did so through gritted teeth. Thousands of workers who voted "yes" felt they had no other option and rightly had no confidence that the bureaucracy would fight for anything better. When the workers who boycotted the vote are taken into account, fully 45 percent of the 55,000 members either voted "no" or abstained, which amounts to over 20,000 workers.

With its relentless campaign of lies, the CUPE bureaucracy succeeded in ramming through its sellout. The caretaker's letter exposes the bullying tactics used by CUPE during the supposed "democratic" vote by workers on the latest contract and points the way forward in the struggles to

come.

The outcome of the dispute shows that anger at the bureaucracy for its betrayals is not enough. Workers need their own rank-and-file committees acting independently of the union bureaucracy so that they can take control of their struggles, countermand the union bureaucracy's efforts to impose sellouts, and build a powerful movement of all workers against austerity and wage cuts. This is the strategy we will be discussing at our upcoming public meeting on Thursday, December 15, and we encourage all education workers in Ontario and across Canada, and their supporters throughout the working class, to make plans to attend.

All education workers wishing to share their experiences and participate in the building of the OEWRFC should email us at ontedrhc@gmail.com.

CUPE was desperate to coerce education workers into voting "yes" for this rotten tentative agreement—one the bureaucracy only a few weeks ago claimed to oppose. Laura Walton claimed she didn't like the tentative agreement, but then flipped and encouraged members to vote for this deal filled with massive giveaways. CUPE manipulated members with lies, scare tactics and mistruths which I will debunk in the following paragraphs.

1. Education support workers are isolated.

The Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU) bargaining unit, a division of CUPE, falsely claimed education support workers are isolated. This is not the case. There is overwhelming support for education workers across the entire working class. The strike, or "political protest," at the beginning of November was sabotaged by the union bureaucracy just as support for it was swelling from other sections of the working class in the public and private sectors. Calls were building for a general strike, which terrified the CUPE bureaucrats. The leaderships of the majority of Canada's unions saved the government by sabotaging a developing mass movement of workers in

opposition to the policies of austerity and war of the capitalist state. CUPE National President Mark Hancock ensured we felt isolated during the contract vote by hailing it as a great “victory” before we had even seen any details and telling us in no uncertain terms that we would receive no support from CUPE’s 700,000 members if we voted it down.

2. The wage “increases” secured in the agreement are unprecedented and “fair.”

OSBCU falsely claimed the wage “increases” in the tentative agreement are “unprecedented” and “fair.” Inflation is at least 7 percent and the 3.6 percent annual “wage increase” of a loonie per hour is half of the rate of inflation. It is a huge pay cut. A wage increase of a toonie (\$2) per hour would nearly allow workers to keep up with the cost of living. But Laura Walton and company never put up a serious fight for wage increases and agreed to a huge pay cut. Nor did they fight for additional government funding to hire more staff so that the punishing workloads faced by education workers could be reduced.

3. The strike could go on a long time with uncertain results.

In the OSBCU TA (tentative agreement) info zoom meetings the union bureaucracy brought forward their legal counsel, Alex Hunsberger, to fear monger the membership by falsely claiming a “No” vote would result in an indefinite strike. They took advantage of the economic insecurity workers face to force them to accept a bad deal. There’s no evidence a strike would have to last “indefinitely” for workers to achieve their demands. It took just two days for a strike by 55,000 education workers to force the hard-right PC government to capitulate on its anti-democratic Bill 28. Imagine what a strike by all 260,000 education workers could achieve, or a strike by all 1 million public sector workers in Ontario. Strikes achieve results, whereas the bargaining table results in pay cuts and massive concessions.

4. The government could impose a worse offer or send the dispute to arbitration.

The union claimed the government could enforce a worse offer or send the dispute to arbitration. The truth is that arbitration has to be accepted by both sides. Or to put it another way, if the government enforced concessions through arbitration, this could only take place if the union agreed to it or failed to mobilize the working class to defeat another Conservative government anti-worker law—a Bill 28 Take Two.

The chances that the government would come with a worse offer if we struck are dubious, to say the least, because that would have played into the hands of workers who would be even more determined to strike and win widespread support.

5. We won’t get a better deal because the government “won’t budge.”

The OSBCU bureaucracy falsely claimed that the government “wouldn’t budge” at the bargaining table. This is obviously a lie. It took less than two days of striking for the government not merely to “budge,” but carry out a full-scale retreat in the face of the developing mobilization of the working class. The unions then threw the government a lifeline by calling off the strike, allowing them to press their demands for wage cutting and austerity at the “bargaining table.”

Ford and Education Minister Lecce don’t have to capitulate to workers’ demands at the bargaining table, because they know that their union “partners” will help enforce their attacks. But they will capitulate to the demands of workers in the face of a well-organized strike that threatens to break out of the bureaucracy’s stranglehold and develop into a direct political challenge to the government. The unions don’t want this because gains through strikes undermine the privileged positions of the bureaucracy and they lose their right to negotiate a sellout contract.

6. Workers called for the sellout contract to be put to a vote.

Another lie they told to manipulate the rank-and-file to vote for this rotten tentative agreement is that workers wanted to vote on this TA based upon comments on social media. This is false. Comments on social media were overwhelmingly in favor of striking and waging a struggle against the state instead of negotiating at the bargaining table. Despite boasting throughout the summer about how she was engaging in “open bargaining,” Laura Walton and company refused to share a draft of the TA. They didn’t want to share details because they knew the details would provoke overwhelming opposition, which is exactly what happened when details were shared with members through carefully crafted zoom meetings. They also deleted any critical comments from their social media pages to create a synthetic “opinion” among members in favour of the sellout.



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