

Ontario teacher unions seek to soften up members for major concessions as opposition grows among rank and file

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Are you a teacher or education support worker in Ontario? Let us know your opinion of CUPE's sellout of the school support workers' struggle and the efforts by the teacher unions to suppress a mass movement against the Ford government. Contact the Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee at: ontedrfc@gmail.com or by filling out the form at the end of this article.

Ontario's 200,000 teachers are in the midst of a contract battle with Ontario Premier Doug Ford's hard-right Progressive Conservative government. Contracts for public and separate (Roman Catholic) school teachers—represented by the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF), the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO), the Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens (AEFO), and the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA)—expired on September 1 of last year.

All of the unions have been tight-lipped about their "demands" and the content of their negotiations with Ford and his hatchetman, Education Minister Stephen Lecce. The latter are pledged to slash hundreds of millions of dollars from the education budget in the years to come. The last major public statement from any of the teacher unions was on the ruling that the Ontario Superior Court made last November striking down Bill 124 as unconstitutional. This deeply unpopular legislation capped wage increases for 1 million Ontario public sector workers at 1 percent per annum for three years starting in 2019. Working to cover up their own role in enforcing Bill 124 by agreeing to concessions-filled contracts covering all their members, the teacher unions hailed the judicial ruling as a great "victory" for workers, even though it did nothing to reverse the massive real-terms pay cuts they suffered as a result of the illegal bill. The Ford government is currently in the process of appealing the court ruling.

The AEFO, which represents 12,000 French-language teachers in Ontario, has made a call for more prep time. The ETFO, which represents 83,000 elementary school teachers, has made a vague demand for stronger class-size caps. However, the ETFO acceded to an increase in class sizes in the last contract, which was imposed by the Ford government in partnership with the unions at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The OECTA, which represents 45,000 separate school teachers, has not made public any information concerning its negotiations. The OSSTF, which represents nearly 60,000 secondary school teachers, has similarly not made any details public, although it has presented an opening offer to the government,

according to a report in the *Globe and Mail*.

A town hall meeting held by the OSSTF prior to the holiday season school break revealed growing tensions between the union top brass and rank-and-file teachers. One teacher, who was present at the meeting, agreed to speak to the *World Socialist Web Site* on condition of anonymity.

At the meeting, OSSTF President Karen Littlewood mendaciously claimed that teachers face a government with a strong popular mandate. According to the teacher, Littlewood went so far as to say that "this government has a strong majority, and it will be difficult for us to fight them."

In fact, Ford "won" re-election last June with the support of just 17.5 percent of the electorate.

Of even greater significance for understanding the depth of popular opposition to Ford and the treacherous role of the union apparatuses is the experience of last fall's support staff strike. Fifty-five thousand education assistants, caretakers, early childhood educators and administrative staff defied the government's pre-emptive criminalization of their strike under Bill 28 and use of the anti-democratic "notwithstanding clause" to do so. Their action galvanized mass popular hostility to the government's program of capitalist austerity, forcing Ford and Lecce onto the ropes.

With sentiment building towards a general strike, the leadership of Canada's major trade unions, including Unifor, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and all Ontario's education unions, intervened with the backing of the Trudeau federal government to strangle the strike and throw Ford a lifeline. In exchange for Ford's promise to rescind Bill 28, they arbitrarily ended the strike, without any reference to the rank and file or any of the workers' demands being met.

This criminal betrayal, which had been preceded by the union halving its wage demand in the run-up to the strike, paved the way for the CUPE-affiliated Ontario School Board Council of Unions to ram through a rotten sellout contract. It imposed a massive real-terms pay cut on the school support workers, who are the lowest paid workers in the education sector, and entirely abandoned their demands for increased investment in education.

Littlewood's OSSTF and the other teacher unions played an especially foul role during the support workers' strike. The four teacher unions ordered their members to cross picket lines and transmitted the threats of the Ford government of disciplinary action against anyone who failed to show up for work. If one accepts Littlewood's claim that Ford is in a strong position, this is primarily

because the unions sabotaged a mass movement that could have fought for inflation-busting pay increases for all education workers and more funding for public education and initiated working class action to bring down the hated big business Ontario Tory government.

The union bureaucrats acted in this way because they were only interested in defending their collective bargaining privileges, i.e., their “right” to sit around a table with Ford and Lecce and work out the concessions to be imposed on workers. Littlewood underscored this fact, telling CBC in an interview that a friendly working relationship exists between her bargaining team and the representatives of a government that wanted to rob education workers of their right to strike less than three months ago, subjected them to three years of “wage restraint” and forced them to return to unsafe schools at the height of the pandemic. Littlewood said, “[T]he tone of the table is really positive. It’s collegial. We’ve managed to sign off on some small items.”

While the CUPE/OSBCU sellout materially weakened the education workers in their struggle, conditions remain highly favourable for the development of a mass working class movement against capitalist austerity and an end to real-terms wage cuts. Teachers, as with all workers, are suffering heavy blows to their livelihoods due to inflation. According to Statistics Canada, the Consumer Price Index (CPI) rose 6.3 percent year over year in December, down slightly from 6.8 percent the month before. However, this figure is misleading. A considerable portion of any worker’s paycheck goes towards food and fuel. Grocery prices have hovered around an average 11 percent increase year over year for the past five months, with fresh fruit and cereals seeing the largest increase. Gasoline prices were up by 28.5 percent on an annual average basis.

Under these conditions, Ford’s pledge to impose an even lower annual percentage increase on the teachers than the miserable 3.6 percent annual “increase” forced on the school support workers amounts to a kick in the teeth.

Ford, the political heir of Mike Harris’ Thatcherite “Common Sense Revolution,” presides over a government that is deeply isolated. The attempt to criminalize the basic democratic right to strike during last fall’s education workers’ struggle is correctly seen by workers as a blatantly authoritarian means to carry out a deeply unpopular agenda that has no support in the working class. This includes defunding and privatizing public education, health care and a host of other public services, while providing lucrative contracts and opportunities for his big business cronies—the recent controversy over the hiving off parts of the Toronto region Greenbelt for development being just the most conspicuous example.

To block the emergence of a unified struggle for wage hikes and funding increases, the teacher unions are intensifying their promotion of identity politics. The OSSTF teacher who spoke to the WSWS related the fact that virtually nothing is being done to mobilize high school teachers, let alone unite them with their elementary, French and separate school colleagues. Instead, he explained that the OSSTF plans to limit its opposition to Ford’s attacks to emphasizing “equity” concerns.

The ETFO will likely follow suit. Echoing the rhetoric of “anti-racists” like Ibram X Kendi, the ETFO published a document last week stressing the need to “dismantle the white supremacist structures that are embedded in: curriculum and instruction; assessment; discipline policies; and hiring, promotion and retention.” The union bureaucracy is deliberately invoking identity politics to muddy the

waters and prevent teachers from raising demands that stem from their class position. Moreover, the emphasis on hiring and retention speaks to the careerist elements in the upper echelons of the union bureaucracy, who use identity politics as a means to jockey for privilege and power, and take advantage of lucrative career opportunities.

Questions that arose during the OSSTF town hall meeting reflected the division between the privileged bureaucrats and the rank-and-file teachers. One teacher questioned the secretive nature of the bargaining process, to which Littlewood could only respond by saying that they did not want to publicize their strategy because “now is not the time for transparency.”

When questioned about striking, Littlewood retorted, “Striking is a strategic process. We have to go to conciliation, no board, and then 17 days later a legal strike position. The strike must go down at the right moment.”

The invocation of such bureaucratic barriers to justify the bureaucracy’s prostration before the Ford government’s attacks will convince no one, especially if it is kept in mind that the teachers’ contracts expired *almost five months ago*, which is more than enough time to jump through the “collective bargaining” hoops set up to smother mass opposition in the working class. More importantly, Littlewood apparently took her listeners for fools, since there could have been no more favourable “moment” to have organized a strike than in coordination with the low paid school support workers and by appealing for the broadest possible support from all workers for the defence of public education.

As it is, the mass outpouring of support that found initial expression during the November strike by school support staff remains strong. For teachers to take advantage of the overwhelming support for public education in the working class, they must join and build the Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee. The OEWRFC is the only organization fighting to unify all education workers and working people more broadly in a common struggle against the Ford government to secure above-inflation pay increases, overturn the decades of concessions imposed by the unions and secure billions in new funding for schools.



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