

How Canada's Liberal-trade union-NDP alliance suppressed the Ontario education workers' strike

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15 February 2023

The alliance between the federal Liberal government, the trade union bureaucracy, and the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP) played a pivotal role in sabotaging last November's Ontario education workers' strike and suppressing the broader working class rebellion it threatened to unleash.

Since it took shape some two decades ago, the purported "progressive" alliance between the labour bureaucrats and the Liberals, long the Canadian ruling elite's preferred party of national government, has served as a key mechanism for suppressing working class opposition to austerity, imperialist war, and attacks on wages and conditions. Last March, in the immediate aftermath of the outbreak of the NATO-instigated Ukraine war and under conditions of mounting working class anger over rising prices and the ruling elite's ruinous profits-before-lives pandemic policy, this political partnership was transformed into a formal governmental alliance. With the unions' encouragement and blessing, the NDP signed a "confidence and supply agreement" under which it is pledged to keep the Justin Trudeau-led Liberal government in power through June 2025.

Workers entering into struggle must recognize that this alliance is a major obstacle in their fight to defend jobs and public services and oppose war.

The 55,000 education support workers received enthusiastic support from millions of workers across the province and beyond when they courageously defied a draconian antistrike law authored by the erstwhile Trump enthusiast, Ontario Premier Doug Ford. Their two-day strike galvanized support throughout the working class and rapidly triggered a movement for a general strike. This would have represented a powerful challenge to four decades of never-ending attacks on public spending and workers' wages, and the ruling elite's squandering of tens of billions of dollars on waging imperialist war against Russia and preparing for war with China. This prospect terrified the Trudeau government, Canada's union leaderships, and the NDP. They responded by taking coordinated steps to strangle the movement and impose a sellout.

The development of the strike

In early November, Ford rushed Bill 28 through the provincial parliament to pre-emptively ban the impending education workers' strike and impose on them, by government fiat, a massive real-wage cut. Moreover, he invoked the "notwithstanding clause"—a reactionary provision in Canada's constitution, long viewed as too egregious to be used—that allows governments to adopt laws that trample on basic democratic rights while blocking all legal challenges.

Ford's Bill 28 triggered outrage among working people, as it was rightly viewed as a frontal assault on workers' most basic rights to collectively struggle and negotiate the terms of their employment. Indeed, it marked a major step in the evisceration of democratic rights and imposition of authoritarian forms of rule in Canada and took place in the

midst of a wave of similar actions by capitalist ruling elites internationally to criminalize working class struggle. These include legislation in Britain that will effectively ban strikes in health care, transport, and other key sectors and the outlawing of an impending US rail workers' strike by the Biden Administration and the Democratic Party-controlled Congress.

The deployment of the full force of the state against low-paid workers demanding decent wages and conditions served as a stark contrast to Ford's kid-glove treatment just nine months earlier of the fascistic Freedom Convoy, which menacingly occupied downtown Ottawa and whose leaders made violent threats to overthrow the federal government and institute a dictatorship.

But Ford and his backers in the ruling elite failed to reckon with the response of the working class, which transformed the political situation overnight. In the run-up to the strike, the corporate-controlled media sought to intimidate the workers with claims that Ford enjoyed widespread support and that COVID-fatigued parents were opposed to any disruption in the school calendar.

However, when education workers took the offensive and defied the government's strike-ban and threats of \$4,000 per day fines, it was Ford who was shown to be isolated and vulnerable. A rank-and-file rebellion developed among Ontario's 200,000 teachers after the leaderships of their four unions scandalously ordered them to cross picket lines. Polls showed overwhelming support among union members for solidarity strikes with the school support staff. Tens of thousands, including many parents of school age children, flocked to strike-support demonstrations.

It was precisely at this point, when the strike was threatening to become a working class political challenge to Ford and his hated Ontario Tory government, that the union leaders initiated backroom talks with the premier and Education Minister Stephen Lecce to strangle it.

They did so for two reasons. Firstly, the only thing the bureaucrats who head the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and its Ontario Council of School Board Unions affiliate were ever interested in was getting Ford back to the "bargaining table" so as to secure the bureaucrats' "right" to negotiate a sellout. More fundamentally, the union leaderships recognized that the emerging mass movement could rapidly escape their control, and call into question the big business social and political setup they depend upon for their privileged positions.

The Liberal/trade union/NDP alliance intervenes

The strike's shutdown was directed politically by the leadership of Canada's most powerful unions, Trudeau and NDP leader Jagmeet Singh. In the days immediately preceding the "illegal" strike, both Trudeau and Singh criticized Ford's use of the "notwithstanding clause," but refrained from taking issue with his push for real-wage cuts. This reflected the fact that Trudeau and Singh were concerned not so much with Ford's drive to slash workers' real wages—the Trudeau government is offering federal

workers wage “increases” of just 2 percent per year—but that his government’s actions threatened to destabilize and discredit the “collective bargaining” system they and their union partners view as critical for containing and suppressing the class struggle on behalf of Canadian capitalism.

Singh, whose NDP has propped up the Trudeau Liberal government in parliament at the behest of the unions since 2019, appealed for Trudeau to intervene to defuse the impending class confrontation. Trudeau duly obliged. He met with the leaders of the education unions on the morning of November 4 as the strike began; while continuing to repeat his appeals to Ontario’s hard-right premier, with whom he has frequently worked closely to attract investments, to reconsider.

Top union bureaucrats from the Canadian Labour Congress, Unifor, the Ontario Federation of Labour and CUPE then spent the entire weekend on the phone with Ford and his senior aides. They pleaded with him to withdraw his strike ban so that the union apparatus could enforce it in practice. As soon as Ford announced the withdrawal of Bill 28 on the morning of November 7, union leaders ordered education workers without any democratic consultation to “collapse” their pickets and return to work.

The unions’ ability to torpedo the strike was ensured by a coterie of pseudo-left groups who rushed to justify the betrayal as a “victory” for the rank and file. Groups like Fightback and the Spring Magazine, a split-off from the state-capitalist International Socialists, asserted against all the evidence that workers “were not ready” for a general strike. Ignoring the fact that rank-and-file workers never had a say on whether the strike should end, they passed off the views of the top union bureaucrats as those of working people. Moreover, they all insisted that the union apparatus remains the only legitimate mechanism through which workers can conduct their struggles.

In reality, the education workers’ struggle proved that if workers do not have their own rank-and-file organizations to seize control of the struggle from the bureaucracy, the union apparatus has a free hand to sell out their demands. The establishment of rank-and-file committees entirely independent of the bureaucracy and its union apparatuses is a prerequisite for the political mobilization of working people to overturn decades of attacks on wages, jobs, and public services.

As they strangled the strike, the union leaders loudly proclaimed “victory,” even though none of the workers’ demands had been met. Yet from the standpoint of the privileged section of the middle class represented by the union leadership, they had “won,” because their collective bargaining privileges had been restored. The defence of this state-designed, pro-employer system has been critical to the suppression of the class struggle for over three decades and has served as a cornerstone of the Liberal/union/NDP alliance since the 1990s.

These basic truths were confirmed in the weeks that followed. CUPE’s national apparatus intervened to an unprecedented degree to bargain a rotten sellout agreement with Ford and then ram it down the throats of the education workers. After the Ontario School Board Council of Unions’ bargaining committee unveiled a pathetic 3.5 percent annual wage increase over a four-year deal, the union apparatus went into overdrive to browbeat workers into voting for it.

An alliance for imperialist war and suppressing the class struggle

The Liberal/union/NDP alliance has its roots in the suppression of the last major upsurge of the class struggle in Ontario: the mass movement against Mike Harris’ Thatcherite “Common Sense Revolution” between 1995 and 1997. The culmination of this movement was a two-week strike by over 120,000 teachers in the fall of 1997. The strike represented a direct challenge to Harris’ austerity agenda, as it targeted his government’s slashing of education funding and legislative changes that dramatically increased class sizes. While the unions, like CUPE last November, felt compelled to call a strike for fear of otherwise losing control over the rank and file, they made clear from the get-go that they

opposed any challenge to Harris’ “right to govern”—i.e., a political general strike. To emphasize this point, they called the strike a “political protest.” When Harris refused to accept a compromise offer, the unions promptly shut the strike down and gave Harris a free hand to impose his sweeping attacks.

Terrified by the intensification of class struggle, the unions—spearheaded by Unifor’s predecessor (the Canadian Auto Workers) and the teachers’ unions—responded by forging close ties with the Ontario Liberals. For 15 years beginning in 2003, they helped keep in power a right-wing Liberal government that began by keeping Harris’ key attacks on public service spending and workers’ rights intact, then went on to impose fresh waves of austerity and tax cuts for big business and the rich. The NDP was fully implicated in this, including when it propped up the minority Liberal government between 2011 and 2014 as it froze teachers’ wages, and gutted spending for health care and education.

The alliance’s record of ramming through austerity budgets and attacks on working conditions in Ontario served as a platform for intensifying collaboration between the Liberals, unions, and NDP at the federal level. This anti-worker agenda was covered over with the claim that it was necessary to unite “progressives” against the threat posed by arch right-wingers like the former Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper. The end result was a sharp shift of official politics to the right and the strengthening of the very reactionary forces the union bureaucrats and NDP claimed to be combatting.

Since Trudeau and his Liberals came to power in 2015, the unions have established unprecedentedly close ties with the federal government. Leading bureaucrats from Unifor and the Canadian Labour Congress served as de facto government advisers during the renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement. Known as the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement, the new deal was essential in consolidating a protectionist trade bloc in North America so that American and Canadian imperialism can confront their global rivals economically and militarily. During the pandemic, the unions and NDP endorsed the Liberals’ homicidal policy of mass infection and spearheaded the deadly back-to-work campaign.

The union bureaucracy strongly encouraged and enthusiastically celebrated the conclusion of a three-year parliamentary “confidence-and-supply” agreement between the Liberals and NDP in March 2022. The NDP and unions are strong supporters of the Trudeau government’s frontline role in the war against Russia and the massive rearmament of Canada’s military. In announcing the NDP-Liberal governmental alliance—which falls just short of a full-fledged coalition government—Singh said the deal was necessary to ensure “political stability.” By this, he meant “stability” for the ruling elite to intensify the exploitation of workers for profits and the pursuit of Canada’s imperialist ambitions abroad. The fact that the Ontario education workers’ strike threatened to compromise both of these goals explains why Trudeau, Singh, and Canada’s top union bureaucrats joined hands to crush it.

The Ontario education workers’ strike and the enthusiastic support it generated among working people demonstrate that the objective conditions to bring an end to the decades-long smothering of the class struggle by the union bureaucracy and “progressive” parties like the Liberals and NDP exist. Workers are more than ready to take up a struggle against austerity, war, and social inequality, and for decent wages and substantial public spending increases. But to do so they must establish their political independence from the Liberal/NDP/union alliance and its pseudo-left apologists. A critical step in this struggle involves the creation of rank-and-file committees in every workplace to take control of contract struggles and the fight for improved wages and conditions out of the hands of the union bureaucrats. However, these committees can only be sustained and expanded to the extent that workers are armed with a socialist and internationalist program to guide their struggles. This

necessitates the building of the Socialist Equality Party to unify Canadian workers with their class brothers and sisters in the United States, Mexico, and internationally.



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