

# Ontario Federation of Labour's "Enough is enough" campaign: a trap for the working class

Sterling Oliver, Roger Jordan  
27 February 2023

A wave of working class struggles across Canada since the latter half of 2021 has been characterized by an ever-more open rebellion by rank-and-file workers against the entrenched union bureaucracies that have suppressed the class struggle for the past four decades.

The highpoint to date of this wave was last November's strike by 55,000 Ontario education support workers in defiance of hard-right Premier Doug Ford and his draconian anti-strike law. The courageous stand taken by the workers changed the political situation overnight and forced Ford onto the ropes. He was saved by the intervention of the union bureaucracy, which succeeded in shutting down the strike at the very point where it threatened to politically challenge the government and its austerity agenda.

Drawing on their experience of smothering the militant education workers' struggle, the well-paid bureaucrats who staff the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) and Canada's major unions are seeking ways to prevent the growing working class upsurge from assuming a more conscious political form. They intend to trap leftward-moving workers within the unions' twin bankrupt strategies of establishment electoral politics and the state-regulated, pro-employer "collective bargaining" system. While the former subordinates all workers' struggles to the election of "progressive," i.e., pro-war, pro-austerity Liberal or New Democratic Party (NDP) governments, "collective bargaining" is a mechanism that anchors the anti-worker corporatist partnership between union bureaucrats, government ministers and corporate executives. This partnership has served to smother working class opposition to austerity and wage-cutting since the 1980s.

It is in this context that one must evaluate the purpose of the OFL's much publicized "Enough is Enough" campaign. This initiative is a fraud that aims to ensnare workers in a toothless protest campaign confined to Ontario's provincial borders, and led by the very same unions that are propping up the Trudeau Liberal government at the federal level as it spends billions on war and takes the axe to public spending.

At the campaign's launch in late January, the only practical initiative unveiled by the assembled bureaucrats was a "Day of Action" planned for a Saturday more than four months hence in early June. Even this pathetic stunt is timed to coincide with the electoral calendar, since it is scheduled for the first anniversary of Ford's re-election. In the meantime, workers facing the consequences of cuts to wages and public services to pay for Canadian imperialism's major role in the US-NATO war on Russia are told to grit their teeth and conduct canvassing among friends and family members to recruit new union members to pad the bureaucracy's bottom line.

## The "Enough is Enough" campaign demands

The series of demands advanced by the "Enough is Enough" campaign amount to nothing more than cynical demagoguery. First, because it is the union bureaucracy's systematic sabotage of workers' struggles and support for phony pro-big business politicians that have created the social and economic conditions that make them necessary. Second, because the OFL and its affiliates have no intention of mounting any struggle to mobilize the working class to fight for them.

The demands include: real-terms pay increases, an end to poverty wages, a stop to the privatization of public health care, and affordable housing and groceries.

Workers could be forgiven for rubbing their eyes in disbelief at the claim that the very same union bureaucracies that have imposed real-terms pay cuts for decades now intend to spearhead the fight for inflation-busting increases. A partial list of workers who have had real-terms pay cuts rammed down their throats in union-backed contracts over the past year alone includes 3,000 CP Rail engineers and conductors, 900 Metro grocery store workers, over 40,000 Ontario construction workers, 55,000 education workers, over 2,000 GO Transit bus drivers, and over 2,000 Via Rail workers.

"Enough is Enough" also calls for the repealing of Ford's wage-cutting Bill 124. But it was the public sector unions that sabotaged all serious opposition to Ford's imposition, starting in 2019, of Bill 124, which capped wage "increases" for over a million public sector workers at 1 percent per year for three years. This amounted to a massive real-terms pay cut even before the explosion of inflation in 2022 after the eruption of the US/NATO provoked war against Russia in Ukraine.

All public sector unions in the OFL browbeat their members into accepting collective agreements under Bill 124, while directing workers' opposition behind an electoral campaign to support "progressive" parties in the 2022 provincial election. Although calls were mounting in 2019 for a general strike to stop Bill 124 and Ford's cuts to education, health care and other vital social services, the unions opposed all militant action against the Ontario Tory government and any working class political challenge to Ford. Instead, they told workers that the only way to fight the Tory government was by voting Ford out in the 2022 election. Their perspective was summed up by the countdown clock that sat atop the opening page of the OFL's website for more than three years informing workers in days, hours, minutes and even seconds how long they had to wait for the privilege of electing a "progressive government." The end result of this miserable get-out the vote campaign for the pro-austerity NDP and Liberals was an historic collapse in voter turnout, with only 43 percent of the electorate casting a ballot. Ford was re-elected with an

increased majority.

The “Enough is Enough” campaign’s appeal to “keep health care and education public” rings just as hollow as its pledge to secure real-terms pay increases. For decades the unions have facilitated the vicious ruling class assault on education and health care. The last major struggle against government austerity in Ontario was in the 1990s, when a two-week strike by teachers challenging cuts to class-sizes and other regressive legislative changes had the real potential to become the spearhead of a political general strike aimed at bringing down the hated government of Mike Harris. Coming after two years of mass protests against Harris, the strike won mass popular support. Fearing it could trigger a working-class-led movement that would escape their control, the unions swooped in to shut it down. To underscore that they had no intention of challenging Harris’ “right to govern,” the unions declared the teachers’ strike a “political protest,” then called it off after Harris refused their “compromise” proposal. This betrayal saved Mike Harris’ government, allowing him to go on to make further massive cuts to education and health care.

The OFL unions—led by the teachers’ unions and the Canadian Auto Workers union—followed up this betrayal by forging an alliance with the Ontario Liberals. During their 15 years in power between 2003 and 2018, the Dalton McGuinty-Kathleen Wynne Liberal governments kept the key tenets of Harris’ Common Sense Revolution in place, further reduced taxes for big business and the rich, implemented wave after wave of cuts to health care and education, and promoted privatization. At the federal level, the unions became the closest ally of the federal Trudeau government and have championed the NDP’s parliamentary support for it since 2019. Trudeau’s views on private health care were summed up concisely when he recently described Ford’s plan to expand private health care as an “innovation.”

Much the same could be said about the OFL’s demands for “affordable gas, groceries and basic goods.” They call among other things for rent controls, affordable housing, and to make the banks and corporations “pay.” The fact that these demands are nothing more than window dressing for the bureaucracy’s cynical posturing is once again underscored by the unions’ support for the Trudeau Liberal minority government, which bailed out the banks and big business at the outset of the pandemic to the tune of \$650 billion. Moreover, Trudeau fully endorses the Bank of Canada’s interest rate hikes, which aim to push the economy into recession so as to slash workers’ wages and boost profits for corporate Canada.

Doing their best to put lipstick on the pig, Canada’s pseudo-left groups have rushed to applaud “Enough is Enough” as a tremendous “opportunity” for workers to fight. Spring Magazine, the Stalinist Communist Party’s *People’s Voice* and Fightback all enthused over the fact that the words “general strike” were uttered by several bureaucrats at the launch meeting.

Workers must take the measure of such ritualistic phrase-mongering. It is comparatively easy and costs the union bureaucrats not a thing to mention in passing the possibility of a “general strike” at some distant and unspecified future date so as to provide some militant gloss for their latest fraudulent manoeuvre. Last November, the OFL and its member unions showed their true colours as the bitterest opponents of class struggle, above all when workers begin to break out of the straitjacket of the official collective bargaining system. As the education support workers’ courageous defiance of the government’s savage anti-strike law galvanized mass support with teachers and other sections of workers flocking to solidarity rallies and mounting calls for a general strike, the unions feverishly worked behind the scenes with Ford to diffuse the conflict. They begged in a series of weekend telephone calls for him to withdraw his strike ban in exchange for the suspension of the strike. Immediately after Ford withdrew the law, a gathering of Canada’s top union leaders agreed to scuttle the strike without so much as consulting

the rank-and-file and with none of the workers’ demands being met. Within a month, the Canadian Union of Public Employees succeeded in enforcing a miserable sellout on the low-paid school support staff.

### **Workers must oppose the unions’ provincial and pro-war agenda**

Beyond the OFL’s hypocritical posturing as opponents of the very conditions they have done so much to bring about, the demands of their “Enough is Enough” campaign are very provincial. One of the most glaring examples of this narrow parochialism is that no mention is made of the fact that over 500,000 public sector workers in neighbouring Quebec, whose contracts expire at the end of March, are in a battle with a hard-right government in the shape of Francois Legault’s Coalition Avenir Quebec that is equally as ruthless as Ford in offloading the crisis onto the backs of working people. The very idea that workers in Ontario could unite in a common struggle with their colleagues in Quebec is considered beyond the pale for the OFL bureaucracy.

Workers increasingly recognize that the issues they face—wage cuts, job losses, inflation, the gutting of pensions and public services and declining living standards—are global in character. These issues cannot be resolved in Ontario, or for that matter Canada, alone.

The onslaught on the working class is driven by a global capitalist crisis, which is producing an international working class response. The ruling elite is using the NATO-provoked war against Russia as the excuse to justify public spending cuts and attacks on workers, which are presented as unavoidable necessities to pay for billions of dollars of weaponry and handouts to the corporate elite. Working people must respond with a unified struggle by the international working class against the global dictatorship of finance capital.

The OFL and the unions refuse to make the connection between attacks on the working class by governments at all levels and the eruption of imperialist war because the union leaders are pro-war and appendages of the imperialists conducting the war. The union- and NDP-backed Trudeau government is relying on the unions to enforce labour peace in order to conduct the war. The union bureaucracy is hostile to a struggle against the capitalist system that gives rise to war because it threatens their privileged positions as enforcers of “labour peace.” Their “Enough is Enough” campaign is virtually a carbon copy of the initiative launched under the same name by the union bureaucracy in Britain, which aims to maintain the subordination of the millions of workers who have taken part in strike action over the past year to the pro-war, pro-austerity Labour Party.

Workers should reject bogus union-led campaigns like “Enough is Enough.” Instead, workers should organize themselves into rank-and-file committees, organizationally and politically independent of the pro-capitalist union apparatuses. These committees must systematically unite workers’ struggles across provincial and national borders and connect the fight for massive wage increases and investments in public services, safe and secure jobs, workers’ control over workplace health and safety, and the abolition of all two-tier wages with the struggle against war. They must strive for the independent political mobilization of the working class across Canada and internationally in opposition to the institutions of capitalist rule, including the union bureaucracy. Such a struggle will be possible only if class-conscious workers fight for a political break from the Liberal/union/NDP alliance and its pseudo-left hangers-on, and the adoption of a socialist and internationalist program.



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**