With Nova Scotia government support, Halifax education authority uses strikebreakers against support workers

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Nova Scotia's Progressive Conservative Party government is supporting the Halifax regional education authority's attempt to hire scabs to break a two-week strike by 1,800 education support workers.

While the strikers confront a hostile government and employer, their struggle for wage increases and improved working conditions has resonated powerfully throughout the working class. Hundreds of Halifax-area students walked out of classes and were joined by parents at education workers' picket lines across the city last week in the second major community show of support for the striking public school support workers. The workers, who walked off the job on May 10, include educational assistants and assistive technology support workers who tend to students with special needs, as well as early childhood educators and library specialists.

Parents attending picket lines and rallies held signs or made statements describing how essential the support workers were to their children's educational and social growth. Angered by the attempt of the government and employer to paint the strikers as "selfish," many parents went out of their way to laud the self-sacrifice of these workers who care attentively to children in dire need of professional attention.

Now entering their third week of strike action against the Halifax Regional Centre for Education (HRCE) and the Conservative provincial government, which backstops the school authorities, the 1,800 education workers are fighting against the government's poverty wage offer presented to them in a recent contract proposal.

Last month, Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) negotiators reached tentative agreements with the province's eight regional school authorities or school boards. Nan McFadgen, president of CUPE Nova Scotia, told reporters that she and her union officials were "pleased" with the contract offer. Education Minister Becky Druhan concurred, telling reporters that the union unanimously recommended acceptance of the final offer.

The tentative agreements, however, would need to be endorsed by eight CUPE locals comprising some 5,400 workers in the various education regions across Nova Scotia and in the province's French-language school board. The contract was eventually ratified at the French schools and in the seven smaller regions outside the provincial capital. But in Halifax, which is the largest union local, workers overwhelmingly rejected the deal, setting the stage for a citywide strike that began May 10.

Although all pre-primary school programs were cancelled, the HRCE quickly declared that schools would remain open. Of the 58,000 students in the Halifax school system, about 2,800 children access the special needs services of these support workers.

Only days later, on May 13, while refusing to re-start contract talks, officials of the HRCE began advertising for replacement workers to scab on the striking employees. That same week, 20 casual employees were mobilized to cross picket lines and cover for some striking workers. School authorities and government officials have also encouraged parents and guardians of students, who rely heavily on educational support staff due to physical and intellectual challenges, to attend schools in an effort to voluntarily perform basic support duties. However, parents of students with conditions and challenges deemed too serious by school

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authorities were told to keep their children at home.

School and government authorities have attempted to erode public support for the strikers by claiming that the demand for wage parity for support workers across all provincial bargaining units is now being undermined by Halifax workers with their “excessive” wage demands. The strikers have pointed out that not only are living costs in the capital city significantly higher than in the hinterlands, but also the “wage parity” recommended by the union officials is based on a miserable poverty wage to begin with.

The tentative contract offered a paltry 6.5 percent raise over three years. On average, workers earn a gross wage of about $28,000 per year, reduced after taxes to anywhere between $20,000 to $23,000 annually. Since the annual pay is for the 10 months of the school year but divided into 12 months, workers actually take home from $365 to $415 per week.

Top pay for workers with decades of seniority reaches only about $38,000 per year. For all workers, skyrocketing insurance premiums have steadily reduced take-home pay. The increases are due to increased violence in the schools and disability claims from workers either injured in attacks or from the onerous duties associated with some assignments. One striker, showing her pay slips to reporters, demonstrated a 19 percent hike in long-term disability deductions just over the past year.

From the outset of the process to attain a new contract, the bureaucrats in CUPE Nova Scotia have worked happily with the right-wing provincial Conservative government to maintain the poverty wages of the education workers and foist on them yet another miserable contract. Their shameless collaboration with the school and governmental authorities to push through the tentative contracts across the province has met resistance on the part of the Halifax workers.

Last November, leaders from CUPE and other major Canadian unions shut down a powerful strike by 55,000 Ontario education support workers in defiance of a draconian antistrike law that was galvanizing mass working-class support and threatening to precipitate a general strike against the province’s hated Doug Ford-led Progressive Conservative government. The strike was ended behind the backs of the support staff and without their winning a single one of their demands.

To advance their struggle for decent living standards, school support workers must wrest the leadership of their struggle from the hands of the labour bureaucrats who are “happy” to recommend and push through poverty contracts. This requires that workers establish rank-and-file strike committees in every workplace, organizationally and politically independent of the union apparatus. Through these committees, workers should advance a series of non-negotiable demands, including wage increases to outstrip inflation, and appeal to other sections of workers to unify their struggles for decent-paying, secure jobs for all in opposition to the ruling elite’s agenda of capitalist austerity.

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