

Ontario Public Service Employees Union silent on why it cancelled Toronto anti-war meeting

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7 July 2023

Capitulating to a campaign of far-right threats orchestrated by the state-supported Ukrainian Canadian Congress (UCC), the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) cancelled an anti-war meeting that was to be held at its Toronto headquarters last month.

In the more than two weeks since, the OPSEU bureaucrats have said not a word about why the June 21 meeting was cancelled. They have provided no information about those whom it said it feared could do violence to meeting organizers and attendees and OPSEU property, let alone sought to mobilize opposition to them among its 180,000 members and the working class more generally.

This deafening silence underscores that OPSEU was and is complicit in the political censorship of anti-war voices, and does so in deference to far-right forces. It also exemplifies the hostility of the corporatist trade unions, close allies of the Trudeau Liberal government, to the development of opposition to the US-NATO war on Russia—a war in which Canada is playing a major role.

The June 21 event was organized by the self-avowed “ecosocialist” and former Green Party leadership candidate Dmitri Lascaris to report on his April trip to Russia. Lascaris’ trip was aimed at building support within the Russian elite, expatriate circles, and journalists for a “negotiated” settlement to the war based on a compromise between the imperialist powers and the reactionary nationalist oligarchical regime presided over by Russian President Vladimir Putin. Lascaris, like radical journalist Yves Engler, is a prominent supporter of the Canadian Foreign Policy Institute’s campaign for the Canadian government to call an official foreign policy review and elaborate thereby a “just foreign policy.”

Lascaris’ tour across Canada has come under systematic attack from the far-right UCC, which, with the support of the government and political establishment as a whole, is seeking to smear, disrupt and shut down all anti-war events. Notwithstanding well-documented and irreconcilable political differences with Lascaris, the Socialist Equality Party (Canada) issued a statement denouncing the censoring of his Toronto meeting and upholding his democratic right to disseminate his

views. The SEP statement stressed that censoring the June 21 meeting represented an attack on the democratic rights of the entire working class, one that was made all the more troubling by the complicity of OPSEU in enforcing it.

The statement declared:

At stake is not only the right of Lascaris or any other individual, but the fundamental democratic rights of all workers to criticize and oppose pro-war imperialist policies free from the threats of state-backed fascist thugs. The fundamental democratic rights of free speech and assembly can only be defended by mobilizing the same social force which can put an end to the imperialist war in Ukraine and the capitalist system that gave rise to it—the world working class, united around a revolutionary internationalist and socialist program.

The truth of these lines has been underscored by OPSEU’s cowardly and complicit silence. The public sector union not only bowed to the far-right and acted as a key cog in a regime of political censorship supported by the highest levels of the state. The union, including its much-touted “left” leader J.P. Hornick, has done nothing to alert workers to the grave threat that the cancellation of Lascaris’ meeting and the attempt to silence anti-war voices represent to their democratic rights. OPSEU did not call a press conference, issue a press release, or campaign at workplaces to alert workers to the violation of their, and the union’s, democratic right to organize or host a public meeting. A precedent has been set for state-backed far-right activists to determine what can and cannot be discussed publicly about the predatory US-NATO war on Russia in Ukraine.

OPSEU made clear to Lascaris when it told him it was cancelling his meeting that acts of violence had been threatened, declaring that “OPSEU leaders and staff” had “received dozens of emails expressing opposition to the holding of the event, and that, based on those emails, OPSEU

leadership became concerned for the safety of the participants and the property.”

Even if OPSEU felt that the security situation was out of control, a very doubtful presumption given the union’s vast resources, there can be no justification for its disgraceful capitulation to the censors without a fight. If it had no choice but to cancel the meeting to protect the safety of participants, OPSEU had a political obligation to publicly denounce the scandalous threats made by the UCC supporters. They could have mobilized their 180,000 members in defence of democratic rights and pledged to hold Lascaris’ meeting, backed by mass support from working people in defence of democratic rights, at a later date. Such a principled approach would have forced the far-right nationalists and their state allies onto the back foot, and strengthened the struggle in the working class in defence of democratic rights and against imperialist war.

In this regard, it is worth noting that the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, an organization with far fewer financial resources at its disposal than OPSEU, succeeded in beating back a similarly vicious campaign of political censorship and held a powerful anti-war meeting in Toronto June 4. After far-right forces sought to prevail on the Toronto Public Library to cancel the room booking, the IYSSE waged a vigorous campaign in the working class and among young people, including through a petition in defence of the meeting that secured over 1,000 supporters.

The reason OPSEU did not pursue a similar course is that it would have involved a direct conflict with its political allies in the pro-war Justin Trudeau Liberal government and its trade union and New Democratic Party backers. Canada’s union bureaucracy, led by the Canadian Labour Congress and Unifor, the country’s largest private-sector union, has collaborated intimately with the Liberals since they came to power in 2015, including by providing support for massive military spending increases and the consolidation of “North America First” economic policies to prepare for war against China and Russia. One month after US imperialism and its allies succeeded in goading the reactionary nationalist Putin regime into invading Ukraine, Canada’s top union bureaucrats engineered a “confidence-and-supply” agreement between the Liberals and NDP that stopped just short of a government coalition. The NDP pledged to secure a parliamentary majority for the minority Liberal government through June 2025, allowing it to focus on waging war abroad and imposing “post-pandemic” austerity at home.

OPSEU’s endorsement of this anti-worker agenda was underlined during the recent Toronto mayoral election campaign, when it acted as one of the most prominent cheerleaders for former NDP MP Olivia Chow, the widow of ex-NDP leader Jack Layton. Under Layton, the NDP junked even the most tenuous association with socialism, backed wars in Afghanistan and Libya, and agreed to the 2008 coalition deal

with the Liberals. While the OPSEU bureaucracy never found the time to utter a peep about its decision to ban Lascaris’ meeting, it issued repeated appeals for its members in Toronto to vote for Chow, “the fighter for Toronto we need,” as its website proclaimed. The OPSEU website included information on how to volunteer to contact union members to vote for Chow, leaflets backing the Chow campaign for workers to distribute in their workplace, and a link to make a donation to the Chow campaign.

OPSEU’s complicity in political censorship and its refusal to utter a single word of warning about the far-right spearheaded, state-backed campaign to intimidate and silence opponents of imperialist war have been met by Lascaris and his supporters with tacit acquiescence. Lascaris’ immediate reaction to the decision to cancel the event, about which he was not even consulted in advance, was to describe the decision as “not political.” His method of organizing meetings for his tour across the country also helped ensure that no broader popular support was built in his defence. Venues were kept secret until participants paid for a \$15 ticket, a cost which many workers and youth would have to think twice about before paying. Presented as a clever tactic to prevent far-right activists from learning where the meetings were to take place, the end result was that venues in Montreal and Winnipeg also cancelled Lascaris’ events.

Lascaris responded with pathetic appeals to his censors to engage in discussion with him. In a statement released after OPSEU’s decision to cancel the Toronto event, he declared, “If supporters of Canadian government policy toward this devastating war truly believe that their position can be defended on the basis of evidence, reason and humanitarian principles, then they should engage in open and constructive debate with their opponents.”

Lascaris’ actions reflect his orientation to the union bureaucracy and other layers of the middle class to apply pressure to the Canadian government in order to convince it to pursue an end to the war through peace talks with Russia.

The US-NATO war on Russia, which aims to subordinate the resource-rich country to a semi-colonial status and bring about “regime change” in Moscow, will not be halted by pleading with imperialist war-mongers and far-right Ukrainian nationalists to engage in reasonable debate. What is above all required is the building of an international anti-war movement led by the working class and young people to oppose imperialist war and the capitalist profit system from which it emerges.



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