

Ontario education unions work to block teachers' struggle despite massive strike votes

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The members of two of the four Ontario teacher unions that represent some 200,000 educators in Canada's most populous province voted overwhelmingly to strike last month. As has been the case throughout the 14 months since teachers' contracts expired at the end of August 2022, the principal concern of the union bureaucracies following the votes has been to block a strike.

Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO) teachers voted 95 percent in favor of a strike while Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association (OECTA) members voted 97 percent for strike action. The clear strike votes are an expression of teachers' disgust at the status quo and their willingness to wage a genuine struggle to reverse the death by a thousand cuts to public education imposed by Progressive Conservative, Liberal, and New Democratic Party (NDP) governments over the last 30 years that have created chaotic conditions in Ontario schools.

Earlier in October, Ontario high school teachers represented by the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF) voted in favor of a proposal negotiated in secret over the summer with the hard-right Ford government to accept binding arbitration and give up their right to strike. The vote expressed a lack of confidence among teachers in the union bureaucracy to wage any serious struggle against the government to win significant improvements in wages and conditions.

Teachers will have no opportunity to debate and vote on what the arbitrator decides. Their decisions are final and will be shoved down the throats of high school teachers.

The Ford government is determined to gut what remains of the social programs extended to workers following the Second World War in the face of bitter class battles. The ruling elite sees public education as an unacceptable deduction from the profits of the financial oligarchy in Canada who want to privatize education and make it something that is exclusive only to the upper-middle class and wealthy, while the working class gets poor quality education.

Massive cuts to education budgets over the next decade have already been planned by the Ford government under conditions where school buildings are dilapidated and there is a massive staff shortage.

This class war strategy is shared by all levels of government.

The federal Trudeau Liberal government, which is backed by its trade union allies and propped up by the NDP, is the most vociferous advocate for public spending "restraint" to cover huge increases in military spending, the waging of wars in alliance with US imperialism, and the securing of Canadian capitalism's "competitiveness" on the world stage.

Ontario Education Minister Stephen Lecce, who is a hated figure among education workers for his homicidal policies during the COVID-19 pandemic and repeated attacks on workers' rights, was enthusiastic about the proposal agreed to by OSSTF. This is because he knows full well that arbitration invariably produces the outcome demanded by the government and other employers, which in this case is a further round of real wage cuts and attacks on conditions.

Following the overwhelming strike votes by ETFO and OECTA members, Lecce has continued to bully them into accepting the same arbitration sellout agreed to by the OSSTF.

The unions are doing everything to block a strike and sabotage the fight that teachers demanded with their strike vote. OECTA President René Jansen in de Wal made that clear in his statement after the strike vote was made public, writing, "Taking a strike vote and receiving a strong strike mandate does not necessarily mean that Catholic teachers will take job action. In fact, such a strong strike mandate may make job action less likely—but only if the Minister and Catholic school board representatives heed the message being sent."

The ETFO apparatus is also clearly preparing a sellout. On September 22, ETFO reached a tentative agreement for 3,500 education workers, including early childhood educators and education support staff, separately from its 80,000 teacher members. ETFO President Karen Brown claimed the TA is proof "legal bargaining process" works when "all parties" are genuinely engaged. This is union jargon for when negotiations are made exclusively between bureaucrats and the employer, excluding the rank-and-file. In late October, ETFO announced it had succeeded in ramming through the deal with 80 percent support, but it refused to make any of the details public.

One element of the agreement for education support workers since released, that makes clear its pro-government character, was the settlement reached on retroactive wage increases due to the overturning of the government's Bill 124 wage cap. After

the 1 percent per year wage cap for three years beginning in 2019 was declared unconstitutional, the Ford government has begun offering miserly “remedies” for some of the more than 1 million public sector workers affected by it.

In the case of the ETFO education support workers, an additional 0.75 percent per year in wages was agreed for the first two years, with an increase ranging from 1.5 to 3.25 percent for the third year to be determined by an arbitrator. Even assuming the maximum is awarded, which is highly unlikely, the end result would be little more than an additional 1.5 percent per year for the three years concerned, a period in which inflation for basic necessities skyrocketed.

The sellout by the union bureaucracy of the contract struggle by 200,000 teachers now in its advanced stage has been aimed at preventing the education workers’ struggle from becoming the catalyst for a broader working-class-led movement against government austerity and attacks on wages.

The potential for this was demonstrated in November 2022, when 55,000 education support workers represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) courageously defied a strikebreaking law adopted by the Ford government and walked off the job. Bill 28 sought to rob workers of their right to strike and was enforced with the invocation of the anti-democratic “notwithstanding clause,” which gives governments the power to adopt legislation that overrides rights supposedly guaranteed in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

The education support workers’ defiance of this draconian attack galvanized support throughout the working class. After the first day of the strike, demonstrations in solidarity with the strikers took place across the province as calls were made by workers for a general strike. This prospect terrified CUPE and the entire union bureaucracy, which worked overtime during a weekend in early November to dismantle the strike. Top officials from the Canadian Labour Congress and Unifor prevailed on Ford to withdraw his strike ban in exchange for the ending of the support workers’ strike before any of the workers’ demands had been reached. Within a month, CUPE acceded to a rotten sellout contract with below-inflation pay “increases.”

Throughout the education workers’ struggle, the teachers union bureaucracies played a key role in isolating the strike. They ordered their members to cross picket lines, even though teachers expressed a strong desire to join the struggle after having been forced to work for more than two months after their contracts expired.

In spite of the efforts to strangle the struggles of education workers, a powerful basis remains for teachers to take up a direct fight against the Ford government to achieve their demands.

In Quebec, teachers, alongside half a million public sector workers, voted overwhelmingly for unlimited strike action last month. The first walkout lasting half a day was called Monday by the “Common Front” alliance of unions, which is doing its

best to prevent any fight from developing into a direct political confrontation with the “Quebec first” Legault government.

In a separate vote concluded at the end of last month, the 65,000 members of the *Fédération autonome de l’enseignement* (FAE-Autonomous Education Federation) also voted overwhelmingly to walk out indefinitely. The FAE negotiates on behalf of 65,000 primary and high school teachers, including a majority of those in the Montreal and Quebec City regions.

Throughout the working class in Canada and internationally, anger is building over the imperialist powers’ backing for Israel’s genocide against the Palestinians in Gaza and squandering of billions of dollars on the US/NATO war with Russia in Ukraine. A determined stand taken by striking teachers could serve as a powerful catalyst for other workers across all economic sectors who face the same demands from public and private sector employers alike to accept real wage cuts, and give up benefits and pensions to pay for the enrichment of the wealthy and war abroad.

But such a development is only possible if ETFO and OECTA teachers take command of the struggle to ensure that their overwhelming strike mandates are realized. They must form rank-and-file committees in opposition to the union bureaucracy to put power where it belongs, in the hands of education workers who are in schools every day.

These committees will enable teachers to advance demands based on what they actually need, not what Ford and his cronies claim is “affordable.” Above all, the creation of rank-and-file committees will allow teachers to broaden their struggle to involve all education workers, healthcare workers, workers across the auto and manufacturing sectors, and others in a political mobilization against the ruling elite’s austerity drive to secure decent-paying jobs and well-funded public services.



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