

OSBCU president Laura Walton elevated to head Ontario Federation of Labour after sabotaging 2022 education workers' strike

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Laura Walton—the head of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE)-affiliated Ontario School Board Council of Unions—was elected president of the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) by acclamation at the union federation's biennial convention in Toronto last week. The OFL is the largest provincial labour federation in Canada, with 54 affiliated unions with a combined total of over 1 million members.

The OFL bureaucracy rolled out the red carpet for Walton. Reelected alongside her to the post of secretary-treasurer was Ahmad Gaied, a former local UFCW official who has held the OFL's second-most senior position since 2019. USW District 6 education coordinator Jackie Taylor will take over from Janice Folk-Dawson as OFL executive vice president.

The three had joined together to run as “Team Ignite,” just days after outgoing OFL President Patty Coates announced that she would not be standing for reelection. In their campaign literature, the three claimed Team Ignite would “challenge corporate greed” and “rebalance the scales in favour of workers instead of CEOs.”

Walton has been rewarded with her new position at the head of the OFL bureaucracy—and the six-figure salary and other perks that come with it—after proving her bonafides by shutting down last year's strike of Ontario education support workers. In so doing, she made an important contribution to the union bureaucracy's suppression of a building general strike movement that threatened to bring down the province's hard-right, Doug Ford-led Tory government.

Walton is among a new crop of top union executives who have been touted as representing a breath of fresh, more militant air, including J.P. Hornick at the Ontario Public Service Employees Union and Lana Payne at Unifor.

This is all so much hogwash. Walton, Hornick, Payne, et al. have been elevated to top posts in the union hierarchy because they are tried and trusted bureaucrats who have faithfully served a union apparatus that for decades has suppressed the class struggle, imposed rollbacks and stymied workers' strivings for improved living standards.

If the likes of Walton and Hornick are now rising to the top of major union bodies, it is precisely because important sections of the bureaucracy and their allies within the ruling elite calculate that their phony “left” and “militant” posturing will make them better able to contain and smother the growing working class struggle.

With worker struggles increasingly taking the form of a rebellion against the pro-capitalist union apparatuses, the bureaucracy feels the need for increased political cover in the form of ostensibly more “left-wing” leaders to prevent a complete breakdown of its authority.

The high point to date of the incipient rank-and-file rebellion was the strike by the 55,000 education support workers represented by the Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU) in November 2022. On the basis of a 96.5 percent strike authorization, workers pressed forward with a walkout despite the illegalization of their strike by Ford, Ontario's widely hated premier, and Education Minister Stephen Lecce.

Through the Keeping Students in Class Act (Bill 28), Ford's government pre-emptively criminalized the education workers' strike and sought to impose massive real-term wage cuts and other concessions. This flagrant attack on democratic rights was enforced by invoking the authoritarian “notwithstanding clause,” which allows governments to pass legislation that violates rights supposedly guaranteed in the Canadian constitution's Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

In the face of the threat of \$4,000-a-day fines, education workers walked out on Friday, November 4, 2022. However, Walton, seeking to ensure that the strike remained isolated, ordered them to set up pickets outside Tory MPPs' offices, rather than appealing for support from other education workers and workers more broadly by picketing schools.

Nevertheless, the education workers' defiant stand galvanized mass support, quickly revealing that the supposedly popular, recently reelected Ford government was weak and isolated. Thousands turned out to hastily organized protests across the province and millions of workers across the country rallied to their cause. Under these conditions, workers began to raise the demand for a general strike, to defeat Bill 28 and bring down the Ford government, on social media and at protests. Underscoring the immense potential that existed for a worker-led counteroffensive against austerity and real wage cuts, one poll showed that 48 percent of Ontarians backed sympathy strikes.

If such a movement did not develop, it was because the union bureaucracy, with the support of the union-sponsored NDP, strangled it. The teacher unions scandalously ordered their members to cross the education support workers' picket lines. Walton and union bureaucrats from virtually every major union in Canada, including the Canadian Labour Congress, the building trades and Unifor, came together over the weekend to throw Ford a lifeline. They promised to immediately call off the education workers' strike without achieving any of the workers' demands in return for a pledge from Ford to repeal Bill 28. Shortly after Ford held a press conference on the morning of Monday, Nov. 7, at which he announced that Bill 28 would be repealed, Walton, working in cahoots with CUPE President Mark Hancock, ordered the education workers to immediately take down their picket lines and return to work without any vote, let alone a tentative contract.

The Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee, formed in advance of the strike, issued a statement on November 7 calling for workers to defy Walton's return to work order and to stop the unions from

The 2022 Ontario education support workers' strike

“snatch(ing) defeat from the ‘jaws of victory’,” even as Ford had been forced onto his back foot and calls for a general strike were growing.

When the NDP and the pseudo-left backers of the trade unions claim that Walton forced Ford to back down from his attack on education workers, they turn reality on its head. It was Walton, Hancock and the other union officials who ensured that Ford lived to fight another day and prevented workers from waging a genuine struggle for inflation-busting pay increases and more money for the chronically underfunded public education system.

Walton’s pseudo-left boosters and attorneys

In the run-up to the strike, Walton had promised “open negotiations” and that the rank-and-file would have the ultimate say in the talks. She felt this pledge was necessary due to the widespread rank-and-file anger over the role that she and the CUPE/OSBCU bureaucracy had played in the previous round of negotiations in 2019. In October 2019, just hours before the low-paid education workers were to begin a strike, Walton and OSBCU announced a deal that enshrined Ford’s 1 percent per-year, three-year wage cap for over a million public sector workers, before the cap had even become law.

Predictably, all Walton’s talk about “open negotiations” proved to be a lie. As the strike deadline approached, just like in 2019, workers were kept entirely in the dark about the closed-door negotiations and the backroom “compromises” being made with the Ford government. Then Walton and OSBCU unilaterally ended the strike.

With this betrayal under their belt, and workers seeing no prospect for renewing their struggle under their leadership, the OSBCU/CUPE bureaucracy succeeded in ramming through a sellout contract in December with 73 percent support. Caretakers, education assistants, administrative staff, and early childhood educators—the lowest paid section of public school workers, making an average of \$39,000 per year—were forced to take a four-year deal with just 3.59 percent annual wage increases. This under conditions where the cost of living has continued to skyrocket.

Walton’s pseudo-left attorneys rushed to her defence following the sellout. Displaying their hostility to working class struggle and ignorance of the state of working class consciousness, the “Marxists” of Fightback penned articles assuring their readers that Walton could have done nothing more under the circumstances due to the unwillingness of workers to fight Ford. *Spring Magazine*, run by a right-wing split from the state capitalist International Socialists, produced glowing pieces about Walton and her supposed unique ability to “organize” union members in various grassroots initiatives and militant actions.

The smothering of the education workers’ struggle was followed by a series of union betrayals, including the launching of the OFL’s dead-end “Enough is Enough” campaign, which seeks to confine workers’ anger within toothless protests. In April 2023, a week-and-a-half-long strike by 100,000 federal workers was scuttled by the Public Service Alliance of Canada. In July, 7,400 dockworkers in British Columbia confronted a conspiracy of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union—which kept workers in Canada hermetically sealed off from their co-workers in the same union in the US while they were fighting for contracts at the same time—and the federal Trudeau government which effectively criminalized the strike and threatened back-to-work legislation after workers rejected a union tentative agreement. This was followed by the struggle of 18,000 autoworkers at the Detroit Three, which was systematically sold out by Unifor through anti-democratic measures and the promotion of nationalist divisions, pitting Canadian workers against

their American co-workers who were on strike.

After forcing their members to scab on the education support workers and dragging out talks for more than a year, the teacher unions in Ontario are now settling with the Ford government. Both the Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation and Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario have accepted the government’s proposal that wages and pensions be determined through binding arbitration. Meanwhile, in Quebec, the Common Front inter-union alliance is doing everything it can to block a head-on clash between 625,000 public sector workers and the right-wing CAQ government of François Legault.

It is within this context that Walton has been promoted to head one of the key institutions of the labour bureaucracy, the principal social prop of Canadian capitalism. At the national level, the OFL is a pillar of the union-backed Liberal/New Democratic Party (NDP) governmental alliance, which is pursuing austerity at home, while supporting Israel’s genocide in Gaza and fueling the US-NATO instigated war against Russia in Ukraine.

At the provincial level, the OFL waged a disastrous “anti-Ford” campaign in 2018-2022 overseen by previous presidents Chris Buckley and Patty Coates, which saw them block all independent working class action. Instead, OFL officials and their pseudo-left cheerleaders incessantly repeated the claim that Ford would be defeated at the ballot box by a “progressive” government, i.e., a regime led by the pro-austerity Liberals or NDP. By systematically demobilizing and demoralizing the workers, the OFL contributed mightily to Ford’s re-election amid a collapse in turnout, which was driven by workers’ hostility to the unions’ “progressive” allies in the Liberals and NDP.

Across Canada, whether they find themselves under the domination of a union apparatus or not, workers must heed the lessons of the struggles of the recent period to prepare for the great class battles to come. Workers must build rank-and-file committees, independent of the union bureaucracy, in every workplace and community to place power back on the shop floor. These rank-and-file committees will make it possible for workers to build connections across workplaces, provinces and internationally to link their struggles, which all arise out of capitalist exploitation. This fight must be guided by an internationalist-socialist program, with the aim of systematically mobilizing the working class as an independent political force and in the struggle for workers’ power. Above all, this means building the Socialist Equality Party (Canada) as a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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