

Strike looms for 3,000 York University academic workers: What way forward in the struggle for wage increases and job security?

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A strike is imminent at York University in Toronto, Ontario, by 3,000 contract instructors, teaching assistants (TA) and researchers. Members of Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 3903, the workers are ready to fight for better working conditions, end precarious contract work and secure real wage increases at Canada's third largest university.

In December, the low-paid and precariously employed workers voted 84 percent in favor of a strike. The union has been negotiating with York University management since June 2023.

In addition to demanding wage increases to keep pace with the spiking cost of living, the workers are seeking recompense for the losses caused by Bill 124, which was recently struck down and deemed unconstitutional by an Ontario judge. Enacted by the provincial government of Tory Premier Doug Ford, Bill 124 capped wage "increases" for over a million public sector workers at a miserly 1 percent per year for three years.

CUPE Local 3903 filed a request for a "no board" report February 8 with the pro-employer Ontario Labour Relations Board, which will put workers in a "legal" strike position seventeen days following the issuing of the report. CUPE has dragged out the bargaining process for over six months, hoping to pour water over the boiling militancy of its members.

York University management has arrogantly dismissed the demands of workers, knowing full well it has the CUPE bureaucracy acting as their labour police to suppress the opposition by faculty and students and impose a pro-management contract. At the same time, management has seized on the hard-right Progressive Conservative government's decision to slash funding for post-secondary education to justify its demand for a below-inflation wage settlement.

Premier Ford demagogically claimed to be acting in favour of students when his government cut tuition fees by 10

percent in 2019 and froze them at the lower rate. However, cuts in funding to post-secondary institutions of around half a billion dollars have seen programs closed and the quality of education deteriorate. The Ford government's onslaught on universities is part of a general assault on all public services through austerity budgets and major privatization plans for healthcare and social services.

If the union is unable to impose a sellout on CUPE 3903 workers, York management can count on the government to criminalize a strike with back-to-work legislation as they did six years ago. The last strike in 2018 lasted 142 days and was the longest at an English-language university in Canadian history.

Before the 2018 election, the trade union-backed Liberal government tried to quickly pass legislation to end the strike before the dissolution of parliament. They failed because the New Democratic Party cynically postured as an opponent of strikebreaking legislation, which the party has deployed regularly when in power, to gain votes in the election. After the Conservatives gained a majority due to popular disgust with the Liberals after 15 years of Liberal-imposed austerity, Ford rammed through the back-to-work law.

This experience demonstrates that the struggle facing TAs, researchers, and contract instructors is political. They are up against a management that is not only bitterly hostile to making any concessions to their demands, but which has vilified students as supporters of "terrorism" for their opposition to the imperialist-backed genocide by Israel in Gaza. And on both counts, management enjoys the full backing of the provincial Tory and federal union-backed Trudeau Liberal government.

In their struggle, the CUPE bureaucracy is a bitter enemy of York University workers. Stephanie Latella, Chairperson of CUPE 3903, made clear in a news release that if they can get away with it, CUPE wants to trample on the democratic mandate given it for strike action. She declared contemptuously, "Obviously we don't want to go on strike.

We want to continue working and creating an environment for excellent learning and research at York.”

York University workers must take this as a serious warning that the union is determined to block a strike and reach a sellout deal that meets none of the workers’ demands before the seventeen-day “no board” report period ends.

CUPE has a long and rotten record of selling out powerful workers’ struggles, especially in the education sector. In the fall of 2022, 55,000 education support workers at Ontario public schools represented by CUPE launched a courageous strike in defiance of a strike ban imposed by the Ford government. Ford’s Bill 28 invoked the draconian “notwithstanding clause” in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which allows governments to violate democratic rights, to force through a pro-government contract.

The workers’ powerful stand triggered strong support among broad sections of workers, with calls raised for a general strike. Working together with the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), Unifor, and other major unions, CUPE went into overdrive to sabotage the movement by urging Ford to withdraw his strike ban in exchange for a suspension of the strike without any of the workers’ demands being met. Once this betrayal was successfully concluded, CUPE returned to backroom talks with the Ford government and succeeded in imposing a sellout deal on the workers with real wage cuts less than a month later.

Underscoring that the ability to sell out workers’ struggles is beneficial for one’s career in the union bureaucracy, Laura Walton, who led the negotiations for the education support workers, was promoted by the bureaucracy to lead the Ontario Federation of Labour one year later.

The global objective situation has changed dramatically since the last strike by York University academic workers in 2018. The Coronavirus pandemic exploded in early 2020 and continues to spread unchecked to this day. The virus is infecting tens of millions of people globally on a daily basis, killing thousands and causing acute and chronic illness with unknown long-term damage to the bodies of infected people. Public schools are breeding grounds for COVID infections and university campuses are no different.

The eruption of the US-provoked war against nuclear-armed Russia in Ukraine in February 2022 contributed to an explosion of the cost of living globally. Inflation soared in Canada to 8 percent that year. The predatory war against Russia has nothing to do with defending “freedom” and “democracy” in Ukraine, where the corrupt oligarchy relies entirely on billions in military and financial aid from the imperialist powers.

The genocide against the Palestinians backed by Washington and its allies, including Canada, and carried out

by Israel has driven millions of people onto the streets around the world. Ruling elites in every country have responded to this mass outrage with an escalating campaign of censorship and intimidation. Anyone who expresses even mild opposition to war and genocide is witch hunted or smeared, as student organizations on the York campus quickly found out in October when York management tried to deregister them for the “crime” of solidarizing themselves with the Palestinians.

The struggles to defend democratic rights, end precarious work and stop the development of world war are intimately linked. York University workers will find powerful allies in their struggle for wage increases, job security, and improved conditions by appealing to all workers on campus and beyond, who confront similar challenges as the ruling class attacks all social gains to pay for war and the enrichment of the wealthy elite.

As workers at York prepare to walk off the job, some 8,000 academic and support workers at the University of Toronto are getting ready for their own strike after a no-board report was filed earlier this month, underlining the urgent need to unify these struggles into a common fight.

This orientation necessitates breaking out of the limited “collective bargaining” framework imposed by the union bureaucracy through the establishment of rank-and-file strike committees by York University workers. These committees will fight to broaden the struggle and develop it as a political and industrial counter-offensive by the working class against capitalist austerity, war, and attacks on democratic rights, and for decent-paying, secure jobs for all.



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