

3,000 academic workers at Toronto's York University set to begin strike action Monday

Sterling Oliver
25 February 2024

Some 3,000 teaching assistants (TAs), graduate assistants (GAs), researchers and contract faculty are set to walk off the job Monday at Toronto's York University. They are demanding wage increases to keep pace with inflation and make up for years of concessions, and job security to put an end to precarious employment.

At a general members' meeting last Friday, the workers voted by a large majority to reject management's "final offer," which came after more than six months of "bargaining" between York University and Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 3903. The reality is that the chief purpose of this "bargaining" was to delay a strike as long as possible while the university administrators and CUPE bureaucrats work out how to impose a sellout on the workers. CUPE declared its readiness to continue negotiating over the weekend in an attempt to avert the strike at the last minute, but its communication officer admitted Sunday morning that the university was taking no "serious steps" to prevent the walkout.

The strike takes place under conditions of a series of militant struggles by workers across Canada and could be developed into the spearhead of a broad working-class-led movement against austerity and attacks on workers' rights. In the same city, at the University of Toronto (UofT), around 8,000 academic and support staff are poised to go on strike over the same issues being fought out at York as of March 4. On the transit system, hundreds of TTC workers have voted to launch their first strike in over a decade. Major strikes in recent months have been waged by more than a half-million Quebec public sector workers and Toronto-area supermarket workers.

However, the CUPE leadership is bitterly hostile to any strategy based on mobilizing the broader working class, along with students, who must contend with rising tuition fees and student debt, in support of a strike at York. Their aim is to conduct the struggle on the lowest possible "collective bargaining" level, by hermetically sealing off the strikers from their strongest allies on campus and beyond—i.e., to restrict it entirely to the chosen terrain of the

university-administration employer and the Ontario Tory government, which stands four-square behind it.

University management, meanwhile, is waging a ruthless struggle with the support of all levels of government to attack workers' rights. It has seized upon the hard-right Doug Ford-led Ontario government's gutting of public funding for universities to legitimize its demands for real-terms pay cuts and a continuation of the highly exploitative working arrangements that see poorly paid graduate students and contract faculty performing the bulk of teaching of the university's programs.

York's administration has also worked in tandem with the Ford government to intimidate and target opposition among students to Israel's genocide in Gaza, including by threatening to de-register student groups who endorsed a pro-Palestine statement in October. This anti-democratic action is in line with the trade union and NDP-backed Trudeau Liberal government's unconditional backing for the far-right Netanyahu regime. Its aim is to muzzle freedom of speech on campus and bully students and university workers into conforming to management's demands.

When the membership had its first opportunity to express its will in a democratic vote in December, almost six months after "bargaining" began, they voted by an overwhelming 84 percent for strike action. But CUPE Local 3903, whose leadership likes to posture as providing an "open" and "democratic" environment that sets it apart from other unions, continued to drag its feet and delayed job action for more than two months.

In the days leading up to the vote to reject the final offer, the CUPE local leadership published a grade-school style "Strike Q&A," which reveals the extent to which the union is refusing to expand the struggle and trying to keep it within the narrow field of pro-employer "collective bargaining." To the question, "What does it mean to be on strike?" CUPE 3903 claimed, "Being on strike means withdrawing your labour to pressure the employer to move at the bargaining table."

This is pabulum. Insofar as striking workers have ever made

real gains, it is because they recognized that they were waging a class struggle and wrenched them from the employer through the broadest possible mobilization of the social power of the working class. Over the past 40 years, however, the invariable experience of workers has been the exact opposite. Strikes called on the perspective outlined by CUPE 3903 are designed to wear down the resistance to concessions among the rank and file, with the union leadership working to ram through agreements that fall well short of workers' demands after workers have been softened up on the picket lines on starvation strike pay for a few days or weeks.

CUPE wants to follow this playbook at York. Its Q&A presents the strike as an isolated event, with not a single reference to anything beyond the limits of the York campus. There is no mention of the fact that when York academic workers last took strike action in 2018, it was criminalized by a back-to-work law imposed by the Ford government to enforce management's dictates. Not a word is spared on the question of how the strikers should respond if a similar step is taken this time around, even though preparations for strikebreaking legislation are undoubtedly already being made behind the scenes. Nor is anything said about the struggles of other sections of workers currently underway over virtually identical issues, including the impending strike by UofT workers, many of whom perform the same jobs in the very same city and are members of the same union as their York colleagues!

Adhering scrupulously to the anti-worker "collective bargaining" process, CUPE has made no appeal to the 1,500 members of the York University Faculty Association (YUFA), which bargains for tenured faculty, librarians, archivists and visiting post-doctoral scholars, to support the strike. A joint rally has been called for 11 a.m. Monday in front of the York subway station to which faculty have been invited, but this showpiece will be aimed above all at creating a photo-op for the union top brass rather than coordinating any serious joint struggle.

YUFA has taken the cowardly position of declaring that it cannot call for the suspension of classes during the strike, since this power rests solely with the management-dominated university Senate and Senate executive. In a miserable Q&A addressed to its own members, YUFA refused to urge faculty not to cross picket lines, declaring, "YUFA is not on strike, and the Association cannot advise members to withdraw their labour."

To weaken strikers' resolve, CUPE is proposing a pathetic \$300 per week in strike pay, assuming five four-hour shifts of picketing per week. This in a city where the average one-bedroom apartment costs over \$2,000 per month. With over 740,000 members across the country, CUPE, which

incessantly boasts about being "Canada's largest union," has plenty of money to pay workers their full salary during a strike but refuses to in order to grind them into submission.

But this outcome is not inevitable. The strike provides TAs, GAs, contract faculty and researchers with a golden opportunity to seize control of their struggle, and make it the spearhead of a worker-led counteroffensive against precarious employment, low wages and capitalist austerity. This prospect is possible only to the extent that the strikers consciously reject the bankrupt "collective bargaining" framework enforced by the CUPE leadership. They must recognize that they are engaged in a political fight, not just against York management, but the entire political establishment and financial elite. They all endorse the commodification of post-secondary education and the ruthless exploitation of academic and support workers alike as part of their strategy to subordinate all of society's resources to waging war abroad and enriching the financial oligarchy at home.

A precondition for succeeding in this struggle is the broadening of the strike to all academic and support workers at York and throughout Toronto, including the 8,000 UofT workers who will soon hit the picket lines. Connections must be developed with other sections of workers, including the public transit employees, who face similar attacks and made their own bitter experience with government intervention in 2011 to rob them of their right to strike. To carry out this strategy, and provide a mechanism for strikers to advance their own demands, CUPE 3903 members should build rank-and-file strike committees to take control of the strike out of the hands of the CUPE apparatus.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained in its initial article on the impending York strike, "These committees will fight to broaden the struggle and develop it as a political and industrial counteroffensive by the working class against capitalist austerity, war and attacks on democratic rights, and for decent-paying, secure jobs for all."



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact