

The case for building rank-and-file strike committees at Toronto's York University: A reply to a reader

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3 March 2024

Are you a striking teaching assistant, graduate assistant, or contract faculty member at York University? We'd like to hear more about your working conditions and your thoughts on CUPE's role in the contract talks. Email yorkuniversityrfc@gmail.com or fill out the form at the end of this article to discuss the necessity of building independent rank-and-file strike committees to break out of the pro-employer collective bargaining framework and prevent the CUPE bureaucracy from selling out your fight.

Thirty-seven hundred teaching assistants (TAs), graduate assistants (GAs), and contract faculty at Toronto's York University are now entering their second week of strike action. They are fighting for above-inflation pay increases and an end to the precarious work that pervades post-secondary education, where low-paid students and graduates teach the majority of classes.

The bargaining agent for the strikers is the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 3903. The local sought to delay the strike as long as possible and is working with the Ontario and national CUPE leadership to isolate the strikers at York from their most powerful allies throughout the working class in Toronto and across Canada. Despite the fact that over 8,000 University of Toronto (UofT) workers, who perform similar duties and are also represented by CUPE, are slated to walk off the job this Monday (March 4), all that the union bureaucrats could muster at a February 27 rally on the York campus was a platonic declaration of "solidarity" from a union representative from UofT.

In our initial article in the lead-up to the strike, we warned workers of CUPE's treacherous role during the Ontario education support workers' strike of 2022, when the union collaborated with Canada's other main unions to strangle a burgeoning general strike movement that threatened to develop into a direct political confrontation with the province's hard-right Progressive Conservative government. After sabotaging the powerful opposition to Premier Doug Ford's draconian Bill 28, CUPE imposed a sellout on the low-paid workers that included a real-terms pay cut. We placed this betrayal within the context of the past four decades, in which pro-capitalist trade unions in Canada as around the world have integrated themselves ever more fully with big business and the state. In close collaboration with the capitalist parties, they have imposed round after round of concessions and suppressed workers challenges to austerity and privatization. In Canada, this has taken the form of an alliance between the unions, and the union-sponsored New Democrats and the Liberals, long the Canadian ruling elite's preferred party of national government.

A "Worker" disagrees

One reader took exception to our association of CUPE Local 3903 with the rest of the union. In a comment written under the pseudonym "Worker," they stated, "CUPE 3903 member here, love the pro-worker sentiment of the article but CUPE 3903 is a radically democratic and proudly rank-and-file union. Even all the exec committee and bargaining team members are elected rank-and-file members. This article really mischaracterizes the local and how the bargaining process has gone—CUPE 3903 is one of the few locals that practice open bargaining, where every member is encouraged to participate in every bargaining meeting, and all bargaining demands and strategies are chosen by the membership. It's actually pretty cool. No doubt that York has been terrible though! You should reach out to the local next time for an interview."

One is tempted to respond: Haven't we heard this all before? Under conditions in which major struggles by workers increasingly take the form of a rebellion against the union apparatus, which works tirelessly to suppress the class struggle, defenders of the union bureaucracy invariably come forward to insist that this time, everything will be different. Whether it be more alleged "democracy" in the selection of local officials, "open" bargaining, or "grassroots" involvement, the attempt is always to distinguish the particular union or union local engaged in a strike from the organizations responsible for one defeat after another for workers from the 1980s onwards.

How CUPE strangled the Ontario education workers' struggle with the support of the pseudo-left

The stoking of such illusions is the task above all of the professional defenders of the union bureaucracy in the pseudo-left. When Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU) President Laura Walton announced in the summer of 2022 that she would conduct an "open" round of bargaining for 55,000 education support staff, she was lauded by pseudo-left publications like *Spring Magazine*, a split-off from the state-capitalist International Socialists. Despite her six-figure salary and close connections with the upper echelons of the bureaucracy, as demonstrated by her subsequent meteoric rise to head the Ontario Federation of Labour, Walton was permitted by *Spring* to describe rank-and-file members of the union—who on average were earning the poverty wage of \$40,000 annually—as her "co-workers." In a lengthy interview with *Spring* in September 2022, Walton had the opportunity to speak at length on her strategy of "transparent open bargaining" and "member to member engagement."

How did this work out in practice? As we explained in our initial article, the test of Walton's "openness" and "transparency" came when 55,000 OSBCU members defied the Ford government's Bill 28, which invoked the "notwithstanding" clause to pre-emptively ban their strike. The courageous stand taken by the education workers against the government galvanized support throughout the working class, with hastily organized rallies across the province producing calls for a general strike. Walton rapidly threw her "open" bargaining out the window and spent a weekend in backroom talks with Ford and the leaderships of Unifor and the Canadian Labour Congress to shut the movement down. After getting Ford's agreement to withdraw Bill 28, Walton—working in close consultation with CUPE National President Mark Hancock—unilaterally called off the strike without a rank-and-file vote or a single one of the workers demands' being met. Within two weeks, the OSBCU presented a tentative agreement cooked up behind the scenes with hated Education Minister Stephen Lecce that included real wage cuts and funding cuts for education budgets. Members were bullied into voting "yes" by well-paid lawyers from CUPE's national apparatus, who threatened the workers that they would be on their own if they relaunched their strike.

To cover up the betrayal, Walton's pseudo-left defenders rushed forward to proclaim the "historic" character of the new collective agreement. *Spring* declared that Walton had led a "successful strike that defeated Doug Ford's Bill 28," and invited her to headline its misnamed "Red October" conference in 2023.

As for Fightback (now pompously renamed the Revolutionary Communist Party), it endorsed the unilateral shutting down of the strike by Walton and Hancock without any recourse to the rank-and-file, declaring that conditions were not ripe for a general strike. All that Fightback dared say after Walton pushed through the sell-out contract was that she had made a "big mistake," as if anything else could be expected from a well-paid union bureaucrat and supporter of the union-NDP-Liberal alliance.

The fact of the matter is that Walton did not lead a "successful strike" with her pledges of "open bargaining" and "grassroots democracy." Nor did she make a "big mistake" in accepting a sellout agreement—at least not from the standpoint of well-paid union officials. She merely pursued the same policy that countless union bureaucrats have enforced over the past four decades, including those who shout loudest about their "transparent," "democratic," and "rank-and-file" credentials. Her principal concerns were to suppress the class struggle and deepen her union's ties with the state and employers, which explains why she sold out the interests of her members by imposing a concessions-filled agreement.

Build rank-and-file committees in opposition to the corporatist union apparatuses

Walton's trajectory is a carbon copy of all the "dissident" factions of the union bureaucracy in North America that have claimed to stand for union "reform" or "democratization." The Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD), and education and health care unions like the FAE and FIQ in Quebec, which have claimed to be more "militant" and bargain separately from the main public sector union alliances, have all wound up imposing the same concessions on their members as the most right-wing union bureaucrats.

Shawn Fain, who won the presidency of the UAW with the backing of the UAWD, presided over a massive sellout of 150,000 US autoworkers last fall. His "stand-up strike," aptly dubbed a "bend over strike" by many autoworkers, kept the bulk of the Detroit Three's workforce on the job for over a month churning out profits for Ford, GM, and Stellantis, while a

few thousand colleagues were hung out to dry on the picket lines on starvation strike pay. Fain then imposed a sellout agreement that set the stage for a jobs bloodbath, as has been underscored by the thousands of layoffs announced in the months since. In January, Fain was among the UAW dignitaries who met behind a wall of riot cops with "genocide Joe" Biden, and pledged to the US President that his union was ready to "go to war" for him.

The never-ending series of union betrayals is not the product of bad leaders or a policy misjudgment that can be corrected. Rather, it arises out of the very nature of the unions, which over the past four decades have been transformed into tools of the bosses and capitalist governments to smother the class struggle. Rooted in the outmoded nation-state and pro-capitalist to the core, the union apparatuses are among the most ardent supporters of their "own" ruling class as it fights to secure profits through imperialist war abroad and austerity at home to ensure global "competitiveness." The bureaucracy uses "collective bargaining" and other pro-employer "legal" mechanisms to isolate all struggles and impose the bosses' demands.

Canada provides a prime example of this process, known as corporatism. The major union bureaucracies have emerged as key pillars of support for the pro-war, pro-austerity Liberal government, which relies in parliament for its majority on the votes of the trade union-sponsored NDP. The Liberal/union/NDP alliance is viewed by the dominant faction of Canada's ruling class as a key mechanism to block the development of a political struggle by workers against its class war agenda, including the gutting of funding for education from kindergarten to university and other public services. The union bureaucracy's intimate alliance with the Trudeau Liberal government involves its support for a regime that backs Israel's genocide against the Palestinians and the US-NATO war on Russia, and smears opponents of war and genocide as "anti-Semites" or stooges of Putin.

There is no evidence to suggest that CUPE Local 3903 offers an alternative to this. In its miserable Q&A sent to its members ahead of the strike, CUPE Local 3903 avoided mentioning a single event beyond the York campus and confined its plans for the strike to the most banal "collective bargaining" pressure campaign. The local had nothing to say about the threat of back-to-work legislation, even though the last strike in 2018 was quashed precisely by such an anti-democratic law.

This is why the *World Socialist Web Site* and International Youth and Students for Social Equality call on striking York University workers to form rank-and-file strike committees in opposition to the CUPE bureaucracy. These committees will allow workers to counter the maneuvers of the bureaucracy to short-circuit the strike and break out of the suffocating, pro-employer "collective bargaining" framework, by mobilizing support from students, all workers on campus and the broader working class across Ontario and Canada who face like attacks on their living standards, public services and right-to-strike. Through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), strikers can unify their struggle with those of workers in the United States and around the world in a political counter-offensive against capitalist austerity and war, and for a socialist transformation of society to protect public education. This fight has already produced the emergence of rank-and-file committees among autoworkers in the US and Germany, postal workers in Britain and Australia, and public sector workers in Quebec. York University strikers should lose no time in taking their place in this developing global rebellion.



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