

York University threatens to hire scabs to break six-week strike by 3,700 academic workers

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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.

Some 3,700 York University teaching assistants (TAs), contract faculty, librarians and archivists, members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 3903, have been on strike for over six weeks at Toronto's York University. The strikers are fighting for job security and real wage increases, but university management is determined to impose sweeping concessions.

In a highly provocative move reported on Reddit this past week by a student who attended a recent town hall meeting, the School of Nursing is threatening to hire scabs to break the strike by TAs. They wrote, "The nursing faculty and students recently convened for a townhall meeting with the Course Directors to address the matter concerning the suspended course, NURS4527. It is one of the most outrageous meetings we've ever had and I'm sure 99.9% of all the nursing students who attended this townhall meeting would back me up..."

"Despite almost being near the end of the course program, we are being recalled to continue our suspended course and finish our remaining hours regardless whether the strike continues or not. We have been informed that the School of Nursing are hiring TAs (or CCDs as we call them) to allow the suspended course to continue. This not only defeats the purpose of the strike, but also undermines the instructors who went on strike. Basically they are going around the union to allow the suspended course to continue and hire people from outside the union to allow the course to continue. We are expected to have 'new instructors' once they give us the green light to return sometime before April 14."

The student stated that school officials gave them a deadline for the implementation of this strikebreaking plan of April 14.

Management's provocative actions flow from its understanding that no threat to its position is posed by the CUPE bureaucrats, whose aim is to starve the overwhelmingly low-paid and precariously employed strikers out on the picket line until they can

convince them to accept a rotten sellout.

Bargaining between CUPE and York management stalled in late March after the mediator left the bargaining table claiming the "two parties are still too far apart for bargaining to be fruitful at this time." CUPE Local 3903's response was to plead with management to return to the bargaining table, while offering no advice to workers other than to attend a barbecue and a rally aimed at persuading the university to bargain "fairly."

An April 5 tweet from CUPE Local 3903 summed up the union bureaucracy's strategy: "York University come back to the table and negotiate a fair contract, so we can get back to the classroom!" A celebratory tweet Wednesday then declared, "At the bargaining table this week! Hoping that York University will share our commitment to negotiating a fair contract by matching our movement at the table, so we can get back to the classroom!"

This is all absurd. York management has made clear throughout that it wants massive concessions on wages and the ability to continue ruthlessly exploiting precariously employed students and contract faculty, while raking in cash from exorbitant tuition fees and citing the devastating cuts to higher education budgets by the provincial Tory government to justify their attacks. "Fair" bargaining is not in their lexicon.

A recent bargaining update made clear that the "fair contract" jargon CUPE Local 3903 talks about publicly in fact means a deal with massive concessions. The bargaining team claimed to have made "significant moves." In plain English, all this talk about "movement at the table" and "significant moves" means CUPE has made concessions to the employer and remains open to accepting further givebacks to the detriment of members.

The update also claimed, "Members on the picket lines are organizing and standing up for what we deserve: decent wages, job stability, and a more equitable university for all." How can this be true when only about a dozen workers are at the picket line at any given time, when the local has well over 3,000 members? The union has refused to appeal to students and other workers on campus, never mind workers across Toronto and Canada, to broaden the struggle into a political movement against wage cuts, precarious employment, and sky-high tuition fees, issues which concern wide sections of workers and students.

The union update also went on to assert, "We are building connections with other unions, holding rallies, and gaining power

through education and solidarity.” This is a bare-faced lie!

Any “solidarity” organized through the union has been of an entirely platonic character. On the first day of the strike, Local 3903 organized a rally where a representative from Local 3902 at the University of Toronto (UofT) spoke about the imminent prospect of a strike the following week by 8,000 academic and service staff at that institution and formally stated their “solidarity” with York strikers. In the event, CUPE Local 3902 sabotaged the strike at UofT by presenting an 11th-hour sellout tentative agreement. This decision isolated York workers, placing them in a weaker position in the face of management’s attacks, and prevented a unified struggle of university workers in Toronto.

The strike at York takes place under conditions of major struggles by other sections of workers across Canada and internationally, creating the ideal opportunity to broaden the fight. At McGill University in Montreal, 1,600 TAs have been on strike since March 25 after voting for an eight-week strike. The main demand of workers is higher wages to compensate for the spike in inflation over recent years caused by the US/NATO war against Russia, in which Canadian imperialism is playing a major role, and address the cost of living crisis.

Despite working at one of the most prestigious universities in Canada, McGill workers live below the poverty line and experience terrible working conditions. University management is demanding that full-time professors and other staff scab on the strikers, as detailed in an April 5 open letter to the university administration.

Three McGill professors wrote, “The administration’s communications to faculty have been heavy-handed and, in some cases, inappropriate. McGill has directed professors and other course instructors that they have no choice but to perform the labour of striking student-employees or be placed on unpaid administrative leave. McGill has justified its position by arguing that instructors are managers (despite the fact that we don’t hire, fire, or set the hours of TAs), as if this is settled case law, and not in fact the subject of an ongoing legal dispute before the Tribunal administratif du travail.”

Another opportunity to broaden the York strike is presented by the ongoing strike at the Art Gallery of Ontario, where around 400 workers belonging to the Ontario Public Sector Employees Union (OPSEU) have been on strike since March 27. They are fighting for above-inflation wage increases and more consistent work patterns, since 60 percent of staff are part-time workers making poverty wages of just \$30,000 per year. This leaves them having to work two or three other part-time jobs to tread water and meet their basic needs. York University workers can relate to deplorable working conditions and poverty wages. CUPE or OPSEU have not made any statements expressing interest in unifying these struggles.

The CUPE bureaucracy is incapable of unifying the York strikers with striking TAs in Montreal, art gallery workers, Canada Post workers who are currently up in arms over their union’s sellout strategy, and other workers. This is because the union apparatus is wedded to the “collective bargaining” system, which secures for the bureaucracy its corporatist relationship with the employer and the state against the workers they claim to represent.

Round after round of concessions have been imposed on academic workers with CUPE’s connivance, including in 2018 when it refused to defy a back-to-work law by the provincial Ford Tory government that helped management enforce its dictates.

The only path to victory is to form rank-and-file strike committees independent of and in opposition to the union apparatus. The tasks of these committees will be to advance a series of non-negotiable demands for TAs and contract faculty, and defy all strikebreaking efforts by management and the provincial government, including a back-to-work law. This necessitates a fight to broaden the struggle to all sections of the working class in a political struggle against wage-cutting and capitalist austerity.

A critical precondition for the waging of a successful political fight is the recognition that there is no way forward within the rigged “collective bargaining” system defended by CUPE, York management, the provincial Tory and federal Liberal governments, and the entire trade union bureaucracy.

The fact that York charges outrageous tuition fees while relying on low-paid TAs and contract faculty to perform the majority of teaching is bound up with decades of austerity policies for education and all public services enforced by all political parties of the establishment. Further cuts and concessions are now demanded from all sides of the political establishment to pay for Canada’s massive military build-up to wage imperialist war abroad and subsidies to pad the bank accounts of the billionaires.

Capitalism offers humanity no future except nuclear world war, the climate collapse, poverty and pandemics. The fight by York strikers for decent-paying, secure jobs must therefore necessarily involve a fight to politically mobilize the working class against the capitalist profit system and for the socialist transformation of society.



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