

CUPE announces sellout agreement for 3,000 striking York University academic workers

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The bargaining team for Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 3903 announced Monday that a tentative agreement had been reached with York University in Toronto for over 3,000 academic workers who have been on strike for more than seven weeks.

The details of the sellout makes clear the strikers must respond with a decisive “No” vote, and make this the starting point for a broadening of their struggle to academic workers on other campuses fighting over the same issues, and the working class as a whole, as it confronts the consequences of capitalist austerity.

The striking workers at Canada’s third-largest public university, including contract instructors, teaching assistants and graduate assistants, walked off the job on February 26 to fight for significant wage increases, stronger job security and better working conditions. While they are responsible for more than half of the courses taught at the university, their positions are highly tenuous. Many strikers, who are themselves graduate students, struggle to afford housing, food and childcare on their salaries.

According to the bargaining update announcing the tentative agreement, the university administration issued its “final offer” on Sunday afternoon. The bargaining team then signed off on the agreement that evening, agreeing to a memorandum of settlement and sending the deal to the membership for a vote.

The deal, which the union leadership is hoping to rush through in a three-hour online only vote on Friday, is an abject capitulation to management—which had earlier threatened to deploy scabs to break the strike.

CUPE Local 3903 was compelled to admit in its statement that the contract offer “didn’t achieve everything we wanted” and that it provides for wage increases “well below both what we were seeking and what our members deserve.” At the same time, they declared this “the best we could get under the circumstances.”

This statement is a flat-out lie that workers should unequivocally reject. The “circumstances,” for anyone who cares to examine them, are propitious for making the striking

workers’ struggle the catalyst for a broad-based movement in the working class for good-paying, secure jobs, issues that resonate for millions of workers far beyond the York campus. Neither York management, which is determined to uphold the corporate domination over universities by retaining a low-paid, precarious workforce, and its backers in the Ford government, which won reelection with less than 18 percent of the electorate’s support in 2022, have popular support for their policies.

If mass opposition has yet to develop, it is above all because the trade union bureaucracy has worked tirelessly to smother it and sabotage the strikes that went ahead. CUPE has played a particularly prominent role in this suppression of worker opposition, going back to its role in conjunction with all of Canada’s major unions in strangling the strike by 55,000 education support workers in late 2022. The unions short-circuited the strike because it threatened to develop into a general strike that would have challenged the government’s austerity agenda.

According to the “highlights” offered by the bargaining team, the wage raises, which are retroactive to 2020 and extend until 2026, average to just 2.46 percent per year, or 2.96 percent with Tory Premier Doug Ford’s Bill 124 factored in. Bill 124 capped the wages of all public employees at 1 percent per year for three years. With a current inflation rate of 2.9 percent and months which saw inflation surge to more than 8 percent in 2022, these derisory “increases” will leave academic workers well behind the rising cost of living.

Furthermore, the offer provides for a guarantee of only 90 percent of remediation pay for completing Winter 2024 term work missed due to the strike, with the remaining 10 percent being paid out depending on specific conditions.

Toronto is among the most expensive cities in Canada, where the average rent for a one-bedroom apartment is over \$2,300 per month. During the strike, academic workers reported that they have to work multiple jobs and rely on food banks just to make ends meet.

“It’s tight,” Brody Stevenson, a course instructor in

York's dance department, told CBC News in March. "We're not getting paid enough to do the job we've been hired to do and live at the same time. Everyone I've talked to who's on strike would prefer to be at work but they'd also prefer to be at work with a decent wage and a little bit more job security."

York academic workers last went on strike in 2018 over the exact same issues, walking the picket lines for 143 days before being legislated back to work by the Tory Ford government. The Ontario Liberal government of Kathleen Wynne first proposed the strikebreaking law, but it was withdrawn after the New Democrats made a show of opposing it for reasons of electoral grandstanding. The legislation was one of the Ford government's first legislative actions after winning the 2018 provincial election.

The CUPE bureaucracy offered no resistance to the government's authoritarian action breaking the strike. Its acceptance of the back-to-work order left unresolved the issues on pay and job security, which have only grown worse over the succeeding six years.

CUPE 3903 announced the tentative agreement with York University just as 2,000 graduate teaching assistants (GTA) at Western University in London, Ontario, members of Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) Local 610 were walking off the job. The GTAs at Western, who began their strike on April 11, can currently earn just over \$23,000 per year if they get the maximum of 10 course hours per week, a prospect which is not guaranteed for most. This is just about half of the recommended stipend for a PhD student at Western of \$41,848. The average cost of a one-bedroom apartment is currently over \$1,700 a month, eating up almost 100 percent of a GTA's wage at the maximum hours.

Meanwhile in Quebec, teaching assistants at McGill University in Montreal began an eight-week strike on March 25. The 1,600 members of the Association of Graduate Students Employed at McGill (AGSEM) confront the same problems as their associates at York and Western, fighting for higher wages and more guaranteed work hours amid the surging cost of living. On April 11, McGill obtained an injunction which stops students from picketing on campus property and limits picket lines on public property to just 10 people in most locations.

Under conditions in which thousands of academic workers across Canada are coming into struggle against the same issues at the same time, the unions have worked to divide these workers union by union, and campus by campus. There has been no effort to inform workers about these strikes, let alone unify them into a joint counteroffensive. Instead, CUPE left them isolated on the picket lines.

A "No" vote by York University academic workers

rejecting the tentative agreement will only be the first step in the development of a new strategy for the struggle. The York strikers will find no way forward with more "militant" trade union struggles. What is required is a political strategy to mobilize the working class as a whole in opposition to capitalist austerity and war. This must involve the building a rank-and-file strike committee to seize control of the contract battle from the CUPE bureaucrats and make a direct appeal to all workers to join in a political struggle against the union apparatus and Ford government, which stands behind the university administration and is prepared to step in against workers as it did in 2018.

Mass opposition is developing in the Canadian working class to capitalist austerity and war, as shown by a series of strikes, from last year's strike by 7,400 dockworkers in British Columbia, and over 600,000 public sector workers in Quebec, as well as the ongoing mass protests against the NDP-union-backed Liberal government's support for Israel's genocide in Gaza. However, in every case, the unions have worked to demobilize worker opposition and subordinate workers to the Trudeau government nationally and the Ford government in Ontario.

Workers must organize to break free from the straitjacket imposed on them by the nationalist, pro-capitalist union bureaucracies and unleash their immense social power as a class. All those interested in taking forward this fight, which necessarily entails the adoption of a socialist program to stop the subordination of key public services like post-secondary education to corporate profits, should contact us today by filling out the form below.



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