

Ontario government seizes control of 4 school boards

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28 July 2025

Ontario's right-wing Progressive Conservative government has taken over the running of four school boards in the Greater Toronto Area and Ottawa, setting aside the elected school councillors, in order to ram through massive budget cuts and sweeping attacks on workers' rights.

Premier Doug Ford's government has appointed supervisors to oversee the operations of the four boards following an "investigation" into school board finances.

The school boards now under government trusteeship include the province's two largest, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) and the Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB), as well as the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (OCDSB) and the Dufferin-Peel Catholic School Board (DPCSB). The latter supervises publicly-funded Catholic schools in the Peel region, which includes much of Toronto's western and northwestern suburbs, and Dufferin County, in central Ontario.

The government has made no secret of its intention to use the takeover of the boards to ramp up its drive to gut public spending. In a statement, it declared that it is concerned with "growing deficits, depleting reserves and mismanagement," while conceding that there is no question of any financial malfeasance on the part of the boards or the elected school board councillors.

Education Minister Paul Calandra accused the four boards of running "unsustainable deficits," and warned the government is prepared to seize control of other boards to slash spending. "All school boards across the province should be put on notice," he declared.

The Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives noted in a report that the Ford government has cut public education by \$6.3 billion since coming to power in 2018. The TDSB alone has faced cuts just shy of \$900 million since 2018, according to the same report. Billions more in cuts are planned by the end of this decade.

The official opposition Ontario New Democratic Party (ONDP) evaded the basic issues at stake in its response to the takeover of the school boards, merely portraying it as a power grab and a political game on the part of the

government. Nothing more can be expected from the social-democratic ONDP, which played a key role in keeping the McGuinty-Wynne Liberals in power as they savaged spending on public education and other public services prior to Ford. Teachers, students, their families, and all workers who want to defend public services for all will find no support for such a fight from this pro-capitalist party, which at the federal level has propped up the Liberal government as it rearms for war and slashes in real-terms the transfers to the provinces on which the funding of public services depend.

The President of the Toronto branch of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF), which represents high school teachers, Michelle Texeira, has called the takeovers "an affront to local democracy and community voice." "The investigations into these school boards," she continued, "were nothing more than a ruse designed to distract from the fact that" the Ford government is "willfully underfunding education in this province."

Far from being a "distraction," the takeovers are a mechanism by which such attacks on education funding can be intensified.

However, the more fundamental issue raised by the OSSTF bureaucrat's remarks is how is it that a rabid right-winger like Ford has been able to get away with taking the hatchet to public education and other budgets for public services in the face of widespread working-class opposition?

The answer is to be found in the actions and political perspective of the education unions. They have systematically suppressed opposition to the cuts, opposing the mobilization of the rank-and-file and through them the working class as a whole in a movement to defend public education and well-funded public services for all.

When opposition has developed, in the form of strikes and mass protests, they have done everything in their power to sabotage it and prevent the emergence of a direct political confrontation with the Ford government and its program of capitalist austerity. They have done so in conjunction with union bureaucracies at the national level, like the Canadian

Labour Congress and Unifor, all of whom want first and foremost to preserve their corporatist privileges drawn from their close partnership with governments and big business.

The clearest examples of this is provided by the 2022 education support workers' strike. The 55,000 low-paid workers walked out in defiance of a draconian Ford government anti-strike law, designed to enforce sweeping attacks on pay and working conditions. As calls rapidly grew in the working class for a general strike, the Ontario education unions, together with CLC and Unifor officials, had secret back-channel talks with Ford and the then education minister, Stephen Lecce, to persuade them to withdraw the strike ban in exchange for the job action being called off without any of the workers' demands being achieved. The teacher unions played an especially foul role, ordering teachers to scab on their colleagues by crossing picket lines. The union bureaucracy's strangling of the strike led within a month to the imposition of a concessions-filled agreement on the workers, including below-inflation pay increases and a continuation of precarious employment.

Laura Walton, who headed the Ontario School Board Council of Unions, the organization that bargained on behalf of the striking support staff, has since been promoted to the position of Ontario Federation of Labour president. The union bureaucrats who selected her were no doubt impressed by her ability to derail the burgeoning working-class opposition to Ford and her loyalty to the pro-employer "collective bargaining" system from which the bureaucracy derives its privileges.

Building a movement to resist the Ford government's onslaught on education and public services requires a rebellion by rank-and-file workers against the union bureaucracy, whose material interests are tied to the capitalist state and the profitability of Canadian capitalism and are therefore hostile to the workers they claim to represent. New forms of organization to conduct the class struggle—rank-and-file committees—must be established in every school and educational institution so that education workers can fight for their demands. This must involve a decisive rejection of the bogus arguments advanced by the ruling class about accepting what is "affordable"—arguments which are premised on slashing social spending to pay for handouts to the billionaire oligarchs and tens of billions more for Canada's war machine.

The destruction of public education is happening across Canada. The chauvinist, "Quebec first" CAQ government of François Legault has taken greater control over public schools by eliminating elected school boards and replacing them with regional "school service centers". The CAQ regime has also demanded hundreds of millions in cuts for the 2025-2026 school year, which will devastate students

and staff.

The attacks on education and other public services at the provincial level are a key component of the ruling-class onslaught on social spending to pay for imperialist war. At the beginning of June, the federal Liberal government announced a massive 17% increase in military spending, so as to reach NATO's minimum 2 percent of GDP military-spending target in the current fiscal year. Since that announcement was made, NATO's heads of government, including Liberal Prime Minister Mark Carney, have agreed to raise the target to 5 percent. This would mean, Canada spending \$150 billion each year on the military. These vast sums must be squeezed out of the working class through stepped-up exploitation and the destruction of public services on which workers depend.

In the United States, fascist-minded President Donald Trump is rapidly dismantling the federal Department of Education, which provides up to \$100 billion of funding for public schools annually. This is on top of the sweeping cuts Democratic Party politicians are implementing at the state and city level. All capitalist parties across North America support austerity.

The conditions exist for a united North America-wide struggle, breaking down the provincial and national barriers long used by the bourgeoisie in Canada and the US to divide workers and prevent them from mobilizing their enormous economic and political power.

Education workers can help initiate a counter-offensive of the working class against capitalist austerity by creating independent rank-and-file committees. To broaden their struggle beyond the artificial provincial borders upheld by the union bureaucracy and the bosses' "collective bargaining" framework, these committees should affiliate with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), which is leading the fight to mobilize the industrial and political power of the working class internationally against attacks on jobs and living standards, austerity, and imperialist war.



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