

Over 10,000 Ontario community college workers strike over precarious employment and low pay

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More than 10,000 full-time support workers at 24 community colleges across Ontario launched strike action on Thursday, September 11, in pursuit of improved wages and benefits, and most crucially amid a brutal cost-cutting drive, job security provisions.

The workers, members of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU), provide a full gamut of services in the provincial college network, acting as library technologists, student advisers and co-op placement coordinators, administrative staff, job counsellors, IT specialists, tradespeople, custodians and food service workers.

The strike is the latest indication of mounting working class opposition across Canada to the ruling class' imposition of savage austerity and the gutting of workers' rights to pay for war and further swell the financial oligarchy's vast wealth. Contradicting the bogus claims of the mainstream media, establishment parties, and the trade union bureaucracy of a "Team Canada" united across all social classes in the ongoing trade war with the United States, the college workers' strike underscores yet again that Canada, like every country, is riven by irreconcilable class conflict under conditions of a deepening global capitalist crisis.

The strike by the over 10,000 support staff comes less than a month after 10,500 Air Canada flight attendants defied a back-to-work order from Mark Carney's federal Liberal government before having their courageous struggle for better wages and an end to unpaid labour sabotaged by the Canadian Union of Public Employees' (CUPE) bureaucracy. It coincides with ongoing rotating walkouts by over 30,000 government workers in British Columbia, who are fighting for a new contract against a New Democratic Party (NDP) government that is just as determined to impose savage cost-cutting as Doug Ford's Tories in Ontario.

Classes and most labs for the more than 500,000 full- and part-time students enrolled in the provincial community college system are currently proceeding without significant interruption. This is thanks above all to the recent sellout of the contract fight of the 17,000 Ontario college faculty, who are also members of OPSEU. The union sat on an overwhelming strike mandate delivered by college lecturers last year before sending their contract to binding arbitration in January, thereby blocking the possibility of a joint struggle involving all college workers. A contract that failed to address many of the membership's grievances around looming layoffs, precarious gig economy working conditions and low pay was eventually imposed, the union having surrendered the workers' right to strike or even vote on their terms of employment.

OPSEU's betrayal has created the conditions for college

management to threaten full- and part-time professors, instructors, librarians and other part-time education workers with disciplinary action if they refuse to cross picket lines and continue classes during the support workers' strike.

The support workers' confrontation with the College Employer Council (CEC)—the bargaining agent for the managements of Ontario's 24 publicly funded colleges—directly raises the issue of the massive under-funding of the college system in Ontario by successive Liberal and Conservative provincial governments. The Ford government's cost-cutting agenda is already well on its way to eliminating 10,000 of the 50,000 faculty, support and administrator jobs and canceling curriculum programs by the hundreds.

These developments underline that the striking support workers are not simply in a contract struggle, but a political fight that pits them against the class war agenda spearheaded by the Ontario Tory government and Carney's Liberals and backed up by all of corporate Canada to offload the burden of paying for rearmament, war, and handouts to enrich the wealthy few on the backs of the working class. The immediate task facing the strikers is to appeal for support from broader sections of workers, all of whom confront the same threats of precarious employment, layoffs, wage cuts, and worsening public services, to join a worker-led industrial and political counteroffensive to secure decent-paying, secure jobs and well-funded public services for all.

The full extent of the jobs massacre in the colleges was only made public this past July as the result of the release of the arbitrated contract between the OPSEU faculty bargaining unit and the CEC. The right-wing Conservative government of Premier Doug Ford had withheld plans for the layoffs, leaving the details to be revealed to the press and the general public only when the arbitrated agreement for the teaching faculty was finalized.

The arbitrator's report noted that the federal Liberal government's 2024 cap on international students had led to a dramatic decline in enrolment and tuition revenue, and the cancellation of more than 650 college programs. That cap represented a 35 percent reduction of international student visas from the previous year, with an additional 10 percent reduction for 2025. Colleges have reported a 48 percent decrease in first-semester enrolment of foreign students for 2024. Tuitions for these students, at twice the domestic student rate, had become an ever-more important cash cow for the colleges since the provincial government froze domestic tuitions in 2019, while continuing to reduce the real-terms dollar value of provincial grants.

The budgetary crisis in Ontario's college system, like those facing

all levels of education across the country, has been deliberately created through decades of underfunding by successive governments. In order to fund the colleges to the standards of other provinces, it is estimated that the disbursements from the provincial Conservative government would have to be more than doubled. The Ford government, however, has refused to meet this country-wide standard and has insisted, without any credibility, that it has no hand in the CEC's negotiations with OPSEU, even as it calls for "more cost-cutting efficiencies."

College management's assertion that massive job cuts are needed to address budget shortfalls stands in stark contrast to the massive salaries and compensation increases delivered to college executives. Conestoga College president John Tibbits, for example, received \$409,900 in 2022. In 2023, his salary was bumped by 20.7 per cent to \$494,716. His 2024 salary has been listed as \$636,107, a year-over-year increase of 28.6 percent. Such payments are not unusual amongst college executives. Meanwhile, the CEC brags about the magnanimity of its miserable wage offer to the support workers of a 2 percent increase per year over the life of any new deal.

Management's negotiators have called the union's position a "poison pill" and have refused to negotiate on employment levels. "A complete ban on campus closures, college mergers and staff reductions could force colleges into bankruptcy," asserted CEC's CEO Graham Lloyd. "CEC has repeatedly advised OPSEU that these types of demands simply can never be agreed to. They are more about broader political campaigns than the benefits we have proposed at the table for their members."

OPSEU President JP Hornick responded quickly to Lloyd's statement, signalling that bans on campus closures and staff reductions are not unmovable demands. "Forget 'poison pills,'" said Hornick. "There are countless proposals on the table that have not yet been addressed, from language around contracting out, to protecting bargaining unit work from management and erosion by new technologies. We made clear we wanted to trade proposals..."

For community college workers to defeat the brutal slashing of jobs and the gutting of student curriculum, a militant political struggle must be waged against the provincial government. But despite popular support for the community college system in Ontario, the union apparatus is determined to keep workers isolated on their picket lines even as their own members in the college faculties are instructed to bow to management demands to keep the classrooms open and the union bureaucrats give up job security and protection against campus closures at the "bargaining table."

Workers must fight to mobilize the full 180,000 OPSEU membership, as well as the millions of workers whose families directly depend on a publicly funded education system, in this struggle. The union bureaucracy, however, is not interested in such a fight. Hornick and the OPSEU officialdom as a whole fear nothing more than the prospect of a broad movement in the working class against austerity, and the onslaught on jobs and working conditions, which inevitably must turn not just against Ford, but also against the bureaucracy's "partners" in Carney's Liberal government, and the rump of the NDP that sees its role as a "left" prop for the big business Liberals.

As the union's Chief Steward prior to ascendancy to OPSEU's presidency, Hornick—who has been touted as a leading figure in a new generation of "left" and more "militant" union leaders—played the leading role in demobilizing a previous contract dispute involving college faculty in 2021-22. Hornick, chairing the College Faculty

Bargaining Team, held back strike demands in favour of a meek 13-week work-to-rule campaign that ended with capitulation to management's key wage restraint demands.

Hornick's role during the strike by 55,000 education support staff in November 2022 must also be recalled by all workers. After the members of CUPE's Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU) courageously defied a preemptive strike ban issued by Ford, triggering calls by workers throughout the province for a general strike, Hornick was among a phalanx of leading union bureaucrats from Ontario and across the country who prevailed on Ford to withdraw his strike ban in exchange for the strangling of the strike by the unions. The sabotage of the struggle, which Hornick loudly proclaimed as a "victory" at a well-attended press conference, was the prelude to the enforcement of a concessions-filled contract by OSBCU that escalated the crisis of the elementary- and secondary-level education systems.

The bureaucracy's hostility to organizing workers in an unrelenting, mass mobilization against big business and their representatives in government flows from their corporatist ties with the state and big business that are the source of the union officials' privileges. For them, all the jumps and traps and hurdles put up by the labyrinth-like "collective bargaining" system must be defended, because it is this system that secures union bureaucrats their well-paid salaries and defangs the working class of its true power.

The key lesson that striking college support staff and all workers must draw is that they must establish rank-and-file committees in every school and workplace to advance their interests in opposition to the entire stultifying union apparatus and the rapacious demands of the ruling class. The widespread anger and hostility to the betrayals of the union bureaucrats in dispute after dispute must find organized expression so that workers are capable of independently resisting and countering the bureaucrats when they attempt to enforce a sellout. This can only take place through the fight for a socialist program that places the interests of the workers above the demands of the corporate elite for higher profits, austerity and imperialist war.



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