With contracts for over 250,000 Ontario education workers set to expire in August: Unions prepare another betrayal of teachers and support staff

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Contracts for over 250,000 teachers and education support staff in Ontario expire on August 31 amid a concerted drive by Canada's ruling class to offload the cost of rearmament and the enrichment of the financial oligarchy onto the backs of workers through the gutting of education and public service budgets, and attacks on worker rights. Tory Premier Doug Ford, who demonstrated his backing for the federal Liberal government's agenda of austerity and war by expressing his hope prior to last month's three federal by-elections that Prime Minister Mark Carney would secure a majority, has made clear that his government intends to impose another round of attacks on teachers, education assistants, custodians and other support staff.

The government in Ontario has seized direct control of eight major school boards in the province as a prelude to intensified budget cuts and sweeping attacks on wages, staffing and public education itself. This past January, the government took over the Peel District School Board (PDSB) in the western suburbs of Toronto. The government also placed the York Catholic District School Board (YCDSB) in the northern suburbs of Toronto under government supervision. Education Minister Paul Calandra justified these actions by claiming "significant governing issues" with the YCDSB.

The government appointed Heather Watt to supervise the PDSB. She was a management consultant and the former chief of staff to Ontario Health Minister Christine Elliott from 2018 to 2022. Watt is also the daughter of long time bourgeois political consultant and insider Jamie Watt, who founded the PR firm Navigator, which has been consulting for the Conservative Party for decades. Carrie Kormos, a consultant and gaming executive who previously worked for former Progressive Conservative leader Tim Hudak, was appointed supervisor of the York Catholic board.

The takeover of public school boards are not technical fixes; the Ford government is demonstrating its eagerness to override local democracy to force through fiscal austerity. By appointing supervisors to run eight of the 72 school boards in Ontario, the government has made explicit its plan to accelerate cuts, close schools, end regular maintenance of decrepit school buildings, cut staff and supports for students like special education. These measures are falsely presented as "necessary efficiencies," but are in reality part of a broader program to funnel public funds to corporate priorities and military spending.

According to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, per-student funding in Ontario has declined in real dollars by about $1,500 since the 2018-19 school year, a percentage decline of 11.4 percent. Funding for special needs education has been hit especially hard. The Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF) has estimated a current shortfall of $398 million for special education spending. Overall, it suggests that if 2018-19 budget levels had been maintained, an additional $3.1 billion would be available across the education budget.

The five education unions—the OSSTF, Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario, Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association, the Associations des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens and the CUPE-affiliated Ontario School Board Council of Unions—have issued verbal criticisms of the Ford government. They have combined this with stunts mounted to allow education workers—who are furious after years of real wage cuts, underfunding, crumbling school buildings and a growth of violence in schools bound up with the social crisis—to let off steam, not mobilize for struggle.

A case in point was the unions' April 29 province-wide "day of action." More than 255,000 education workers were instructed by the union leaderships to wear red or purple according to the slogans "Red for Ed" and "Power of purple." All actions were taken during breaks or after school hours, and none of the unions involved even went as far as to call it a protest.

The unions are deeply complicit in the disastrous state of public education in Ontario. They have collaborated in the enforcement of one round of concession-filled contracts after another, while systematically demobilizing worker opposition to the combined onslaught on education waged over recent decades by all political parties in the Ontario legislature. This policy of close cooperation with government and the smothering of the class struggle is in line with the trade unions' actions at the federal level, where they have worked hand in hand with successive Liberal governments since 2015. Under Prime Ministers Trudeau and Carney, successive Liberal governments have reduced real-terms funding to the provinces in order to divert society's resources towards the military, waging war against Russia in Ukraine and backing Israel's genocide of the Palestinians, and enriching Canada's fabulously wealthy billionaire oligarchs.

Since the beginning of the year, the unions have been appealing to the government to begin early bargaining, a demand the Tories have rejected. The unions' motivations in doing this are to give the bureaucrats more time to work out the attacks they plan to impose on education workers behind the scenes, separate rank-and-file workers from the bargaining process and control the narrative.

What happened during the last contract struggle in 2022?

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The corporatist bureaucracies that call themselves unions have material interests that are tied to the preservation of their close partnership with government through the reactionary collective-bargaining framework, which is the main source of the bureaucracy's privileges. The events of 2022–23 demonstrate this clearly.

In November 2022, 55,000 education support staff courageously defied Ford's Bill 28, which preemptively banned them from striking and imposed concessionary contracts by government fiat. The "illegal" strike by custodians, early child educators and other support staff in the OSBCU on November 4 set off a major political crisis for Ford and triggered broad popular support. Over the weekend that followed strike's first day, Friday, November 4, spontaneous demonstrations were held across the province to back the strikers and there were growing demands for a general strike.

The unions, including leading members of the national CUPE, Unifor, and CLC bureaucracies, worked overtime during the same weekend to persuade Ford to make a tactical retreat by withdrawing Bill 28 to enable the OSBCU leadership to short-circuit the strike. This then transpired on Monday, November 7, when OSBCU leader Laura Walton announced an end to the strike with none of the workers' demands having been met and without so much as a membership vote.

The federal Liberal government and New Democratic Party played key parts in the systematic sabotage of the strike. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau met with the unions on the first day of the strike, while NDP leader Jagmeet Singh refused to support mass worker action to overturn the Ford government's strikebreaking legislation and achieve real wage gains and reverse impending budget cuts. Instead, he urged the Trudeau Liberals, i.e. a pro-austerity, pro-war government, to use their power of "disallowance" to void Bill 28.

Walton and her fellow union bureaucrats still had to come up with a plan to ram through a concessions-filled contract in the face of widespread rank-and-file determination to continue the struggle. They accomplished this by issuing a phony strike notice to resume the walkout on Monday, November 21. But they never had any intention of allowing this strike to go ahead. Instead, they used the prospect of a strike to divert the attention of workers away from the sordid conspiracy unfolding at the bargaining table. Walton unsurprisingly announced a tentative agreement on Sunday, November 20, just hours before the strike was due to start, and then dispatched union lawyers to membership meetings over the next two weeks to bully workers into accepting real wage cuts and continued precarious employment with the threat that this was the best they could get and that they would be on "their own" if they challenged the government.

The result was the imposition of a concessions-filled agreement—an outcome that protected the unions' institutional standing while delivering a real-terms pay cut to members. The already low-paid support staff got a miserly 3.5 percent annual wage "increase," which meant even deeper poverty given the higher increases in food, energy and rent prices over recent years. The fall in real wages, and casualization of positions have pushed many workers into multiple jobs just to survive.

The four teacher unions, who played a miserable role throughout the strike, including by ordering their members to cross picket lines during the support staff strike, concluded their own sellout agreements with Ford during 2023.

Lessons for the working class from the 2022 union sabotage of their struggle

One lesson workers must draw from these events is that the bureaucracy's first duty is to preserve its close relationship with the state and employers; independent, militant action undermines that relationship and the bureaucrats' power. The repeated pattern—the bureaucracy's posturing about a commitment to "open bargaining," then negotiating back-room deals when the movement gains force—is not a sequence of mistakes but a structural function of the union apparatus.

The second decisive lesson flowing from the first is that the only viable path to defend the right to public education for all, and win real-wage increases and better conditions for workers is for workers to organize independently and against the union apparatus. Democratically-run rank-and-file committees must be built in every school and educational facility to place decision-making power in the hands of the rank and file, who must use it to broaden their contract struggle to all sections of workers in a mass political mobilization against capitalist austerity and war. Every worker has a direct interest in well-funded public education, whether they work directly in the sector, or benefit from it because their kids or other relatives attend school.

The Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee (OEWRFC) was created during the last contract struggle in 2022 to mobilize workers independently to counteract the sabotage of the strike by the unions and unify workers internationally through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA?RFC). The OEWRFC analyzed in real time the systematic sabotage of the education support workers' struggle by CUPE and the entire union bureaucracy, while at the same time advancing a political program of struggle to unite the working class in a fight for decent-paying, secure jobs and well-funded public services. The record of the OEWRFC should be studied by all workers preparing to enter this year's contract struggle.

The betrayal of 2022–23 shows unions cannot be reformed from within: their institutional life depends on compromise and collaboration with the capitalist state at all levels, which necessitates unflinching support for austerity and war. The unions saved the government in 2022 from a direct political confrontation with the working class and are determined to do so again under conditions of a much deeper social and economic crisis, and greater popular hostility to the ruling class' agenda of austerity and war.

The struggle for public education, democratic rights and the social needs of working-class families is inseparable from a struggle against the capitalist profit system. Rank-and-file committees based upon a socialist program are the only mechanism through which education workers can mobilize the full social power needed to secure working conditions, wages, staff levels and a world-class public education system.

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