

Over 250,000 Ontario education workers on collision course with right-wing Ford government

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Contracts for 275,000 Ontario education workers, including some 200,000 teachers and around 57,000 support workers, expired August 31, with bargaining between the right-wing Progressive Conservative government and the five education trade unions largely stalled. Facing a vicious hard-right government committed to the dismantling of public education, and trade union bureaucracies that have repeatedly enforced concessions and smothered workers' opposition, education workers confront a political struggle.

The Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU), which represents education support staff, and the four teacher unions—the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO), the Ontario Secondary School Federation of Teachers (OSSF), the Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association (OECTA), and l'Association des enseignantes et des enseignants Franco-Ontariens (AEFO)—issued a notice to bargain to the government this past June. In so doing, they officially launched the legal bargaining process under the pro-employer “School Board Collective Bargaining Act of 1995.”

During his eight years in power, Premier Doug Ford has overseen a vicious attack on public education that he and his Tory government are determined to escalate during the current bargaining. Over the past year, the government has sought to significantly curtail democratic control over local school boards by limiting the powers of school board trustees, and placed several boards, deemed by the government to be financially dysfunctional, under government trusteeship so as to force through major cuts.

Since June 2025, the Ford government has imposed provincial oversight on eight school boards out of a province-wide total of 72 under the false pretext of “poor fiscal mismanagement” and “bloated deficits.” As a result, provincial administrators rather than locally elected trustees determine the day-to-day operations of boards covering schools attended by some 750,000 students.

Bill 101, the Putting Student Achievement First Act, became law in May and significantly reduces the powers of school board trustees. Rather than the trustees directing the work of the director of education, each board will now have a CEO with expanded powers, and the province can also intervene in board decisions via the Ministry of Education.

These administrative changes flow from the Ford government's agenda of deepening the ruthless cost-cutting drive it has enforced on public education. Since 2018, the government has made funding cuts worth \$1,500 per student, amounting to over \$6.4 billion in eight years. This has produced catastrophic learning and working conditions for students, teachers and support staff. Ontario schools were already stretched to the breaking point after over a decade and a half of Liberal-imposed attacks on education workers and school funding prior to 2018.

Ford's austerity program has been imposed hand in hand with the

federal Liberal government, under both Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his successor Mark Carney. The Progressive Conservative premier has become one of the loudest voices promoting the reactionary nationalist “Team Canada” mantra in the trade war with the United States, demanding that workers make “sacrifices” to safeguard the profits of the corporations and financial oligarchy, while Ford takes an axe to the public services on which millions depend.

The Ford government is also a firm supporter of the Liberals' rearmament program to make Canadian imperialism ready for world war. The province's defence industrial strategy, released in May, just three months after the federal Liberal government's own document, aims to transform much of Ontario's manufacturing sector into a base for war production and co-opt the secondary and post-secondary education systems to funnel young people into military-related industries or prepare them as army recruits.

Trade unions, NDP smother worker opposition to austerity and war

Millions of workers across Ontario oppose this class war agenda and Ford personally, whom they rightly view as one of the most vicious representatives of Canadian capital and the corporate elite. But the fact of the matter remains, despite their widespread unpopularity, Ford and his Progressive Conservatives have been able to gut public services for over eight years and have played a major role in shifting politics across Canada far to the right. The inability of the working class to defeat the Tory government is due entirely to the trade unions, their political mouthpieces in the NDP, and their satellites in the pseudo-left organizations, who have systematically sabotaged workers' mobilization and diverted opposition to Ford into fruitless protest actions.

The most revealing example of this process was the November 2022 school support staff strike. Some 55,000 OSBCU (Ontario School Board Council of Unions) members walked off the job in defiance of Bill 28, which invoked the constitution's “notwithstanding clause” to preemptively legalize their strike and impose new concessionary contracts by government decree. The defiance of the government by the education support workers, among the lowest-paid public sector workers, had a galvanizing effect—this despite the express orders of the teachers' unions that their 200,000 members should cross picket lines during the strike.

The strike began on a Friday and triggered spontaneous mobilizations by workers across the province over the following weekend, with calls raised from the rank and file for a general strike against Ford.

The union bureaucracy swooped in to make sure this never took place.

Over the weekend, leaders of OSBCU, and its parent organization, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), the Canadian Labour Congress, Unifor, as well as the Ontario Public Services Employees Union (OPSEU) held secret back-channel talks with Ford and his then Education Minister Stephen Lecce. Behind the backs of the education workers and the working class, they communicated to the government that if it withdrew Bill 28, they would suppress the strike and burgeoning movement for a province-wide general strike.

Thus no sooner did Ford announce on the morning of Monday, November 7, that the government would rescind Bill 28, than OSBCU President Laura Walton, unilaterally called off the strike. Workers were ordered to return to work without a single one of their contract demands having been met and without any say or vote. Less than a month later, CUPE/OSBCU succeeded in pushing through a rotten four-year contract with poverty-level wage “increases” of just 3.6 percent per year amid rampant inflation and no significant improvements in working conditions and staffing levels.

With working-class opposition demobilized, Ford went on the offensive. His government continued to cut education funding in real terms, privatize healthcare and savage funding for social programs. The four teacher union bureaucracies, who functioned as scabbing agencies during the November 2022 strike by ordering their members to cross the support staff’s picket lines, rammed through their own below-inflation pay settlements with the Ford government in contracts that continued the downward spiral of public education provision in Canada’s most populous province.

To demonstrate their appreciation for services rendered in stabilizing “labour relations,” the trade union bureaucracy promoted Walton to the position of Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) president following her sellout of the 2022 strike.

As all of this was unfolding, the Liberals pressed ahead at the federal level with their massive rearmament program, the waging of the war on Russia in Ukraine alongside Ottawa’s NATO “partners” and the virtual banning of the right to strike. They could be sure of a parliamentary majority thanks to the March 2022 “confidence and supply” agreement with the NDP, which the same trade unions that sabotaged the Ontario education support workers’ strike boasted about having helped engineer. The unions lauded it as a great step forward for workers and “progressive” policies.

Pseudo-left attorneys for the union bureaucracy work to keep education workers demobilized

Four years on, the same organizations want to posture as the principal opponents of Ford’s frontal assault on public education, which would have been unthinkable without the defeat of the 2022 strike. In perpetrating this fraud, the education union leaderships receive assistance from an array of pseudo-left organizations, who work tirelessly to convince workers that they merely confront a “collective bargaining” struggle against Ford that can be “won” through loud one-day protests and a dose of union militancy. In keeping with this complacent, pro-capitalist perspective, they depict Ford as a veritable political bogeyman, not the frontman of a ruling class all of whose political representatives are wedded to austerity, corporate competitiveness, rearmament and war.

Spring magazine, a right-wing split from the state-capitalist International Socialists, has emerged as the most prominent cheerleader for ongoing monthly protests organized with strong backing from forces within the education unions under the slogan “Fight Ford.” At the latest August 29 mobilizations, *Spring* reported breathlessly that the gatherings led by “community organizers” and union “activists” had expanded their

focus with the tagline, “Fight Ford and fight for education.”

“As education workers’ unions are bargaining for more jobs and increased funding, they are also bargaining to push back against the gutting of public education,” *Spring* wrote in its latest article. “Education workers in Ontario are uniquely positioned to take on the fight against Ford in a way that many other community supporters are not: They can force concessions through negotiations, or they can withdraw their labour (i.e., go on strike) and shut down schools altogether...”

“The Fight Ford protests,” *Spring* continues, “are the culmination of a growing frustration with Doug Ford’s provincial mismanagement. The Fight Ford protests have been a space where people organizing in different movements (from the Greenbelt to bike lanes to housing to healthcare) and people without roots in any particular movement who are just sick and tired of Ford can come together to make their displeasure known. By meeting under the banner of public education during education worker bargaining, the most recent protests took another step forwards: instead of merely expressing malaise, people were able to build on a key campaign that has the power to advance our common struggles against the Ford government.”

All of this blather is designed to cover the union bureaucracy’s tracks and subordinate workers fighting for better jobs and improved conditions to the corporatist union apparatuses. With its claim that education workers’ unions are “bargaining for more jobs and increased funding,” *Spring* implies that they are advancing workers’ interests and can be pressured into serving as instruments of workers’ struggle.

In fact, everything shows the opposite. The unions act to suppress the class struggle, demobilizing workers and derailing their struggles, and for decades have politically subordinated workers to the union-Liberal-NDP alliance, the “progressive” face of austerity, rearmament and war.

Far from representing workers, the union bureaucracy is a privileged caste of highly paid functionaries, with interests different and opposed to those of education workers and the working class as a whole. Via the much-vaunted “collective bargaining” process, they have helped to impose the opposite of what *Spring* claims—lower wages, less jobs and deteriorating public services—for years.

Who can take the claim seriously that workers can “force concessions through negotiations” after the experience of 2022 and countless other contract struggles throughout the public sector and industry over the past four decades? On the contrary, the only “concessions” forced through “negotiations” take place when the union bureaucracy teams up with governments and the employers to ram concession-filled contracts down workers’ throats. As for striking to “shut down schools altogether,” this is of course a powerful weapon, but 2022 demonstrated that workers can only exercise it in struggle against the union bureaucracies, who shut down strikes at the first opportunity to defend their “collective bargaining” privileges and the stability of bourgeois rule.

To top it all off, *Spring* asserts that the “culmination” of working-class opposition to Ford is a monthly gathering of a wide variety of middle-class local protest groups with disparate goals and the sole task of removing Ford as premier—“a space where people organizing in different movements (from the Greenbelt to bike lanes to housing to healthcare) and people without roots in any particular movement who are just sick and tired of Ford can come together to make their displeasure known.”

Far from a “culmination,” this is the pathetic spectacle of the flotsam and jetsam left over from the union bureaucracy’s repeated strangling of mass opposition to Ford: from the 2019 mass protests against Ford’s austerity to the aborted 2022 general strike to back education support workers. Revealing in this regard is that at the July 25 edition of the “Fight Ford” protest at Queen’s Park, one of the main speakers was OPSEU President J.P. Hornick, the same Hornick who flanked Walton at her infamous November 2022 press conference as she ordered striking education support workers to “collapse” their picket lines without so

much as a vote.

**Mobilize the working class behind Ontario education workers!
Defend public education and workers' rights!**

The expiration of contracts for 275,000 Ontario education workers certainly provides a major opportunity to develop a worker-led mobilization in defence of public education and against austerity, war and attacks on workers' rights. But such a movement will only develop through a decisive break from the "collective bargaining" framework and bankrupt protest politics promoted by the unions and groups like *Spring*. It must be based on a rank-and-file rebellion against the education union bureaucracies to seize control of the contract fight and expand it into an industrial and political counteroffensive of the working class against the Ford government, his Liberal allies at the federal level and the ruling financial oligarchy.

This fight demands the building of rank-and-file committees in every school and educational institution to put power into the hands of education workers and unite with their class brothers and sisters across Canada, the US and internationally through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

Millions of workers across Canada and the US are engaging in insurgent struggles against the fascist US President Trump and the dictatorship of the oligarchy he represents. Workers in Canada are also being radicalized by the rising cost of living, a spate of workplace deaths, sweeping state attacks on the right to strike, and the attempt by big business and its political representatives to offload the costs of the trade war onto workers, behind a wave of nationalist propaganda about "Team Canada." This radicalization finds expression in the ongoing strike by over 1,200 National Steel Car workers in Hamilton, Ontario, against the exploitative piecework system at their plant.

Workers across the North American continent are the allies to whom Ontario education workers must turn in their fight to defend public education. They must do so with the understanding that they must wage a working-class political struggle. They must fight for the seizure of the vast resources currently squandered on the financial oligarchy, rearmament and war, so that they can be deployed to secure fully-funded free education through the post-secondary level and provide quality public services for all. This can be achieved only through the establishment of a workers' government committed to the socialist reorganization of socio-economic life, so as to make social needs, not private profit, its animating principle.



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