Over 250,000 Ontario education workers vote overwhelmingly for strike action to fight Tory government's attacks

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Over 250,000 teachers, education support staff, and clerical and maintenance workers, whose contracts expired at the end of August, called overwhelmingly for strike action in votes organized by five Ontario education trade unions earlier this month.

Members of the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario, Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF), Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU), Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association (OECTA) and L'association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens (AEFO) registered between 94 percent and 98 percent support for job action to secure real wage increases, an end to understaffing and dilapidated school buildings, and job security.

The massive strike vote is an indication of the pent-up anger among education workers over decades of public spending austerity, and the undermining of wages and workplace benefits. Ontario's Progressive Conservative government has systematically slashed education funding per head of student since coming to power in 2018, following on from over 15 years of Liberal-imposed spending cuts. Deepening social inequality and poverty among wide layers of the population, combined with school buildings in dire need of renovation, and overworked and low-paid staff are the result of these policies, which cater to the interests of big business and the ruling class, and have been enforced with the complicity of the trade union bureaucracies.

The trade union leaderships held the strike votes as a bargaining chip, not to organize a serious fight. Their goal was to pressure Premier Doug Ford's government to return to the "bargaining table" while ensuring that no strike actually takes place.

Typical was a posting on the strike vote on the website of the Elementary Teachers of Toronto, the Toronto section of the ETFO. "It's a vote on whether you're prepared to take job action if bargaining breaks down, " declared the union apparatus. "**It is not a vote to strike**. It doesn't automatically start work-to-rule and it doesn't set a strike date. It gives your bargaining team the leverage at the table: it is proof that 84,000 of you are behind them."(emphasis in the original)

Separate bargaining rounds for the unions involved are planned for later this month and December, following several months in which talks on new agreements were stalled over a jurisdictional dispute between the government and unions. The unions have asserted that they are defending "local bargaining" rights, which are bound up with the relative autonomy of school boards to decide on terms and conditions for many operational areas, while the Ford government has demanded greater centralization in bargaining so as to more easily enforce sweeping budget cuts.

A ruling by the pro-employer Ontario Labour Relations Board earlier this month largely came down on the side of the union leaderships, stating that local bargaining tables should continue to determine many day-to-day operational issues. Nonetheless, this ruling in no way strengthens the position of rank-and-file workers. Devastating budget cuts have been carried through at all levels of the education system over recent years, and the Ford government has undertaken several administrative and legislative changes since 2025 to weaken whatever democratic control school boards possessed in the past over local education spending.

One of these measures is Bill 101, which weakened the powers of school board trustees by appointing CEOs with expanded powers to each board. The Tories have already placed eight out of the province's 72 school boards under provincial government trusteeship, citing bogus claims of "mismanagement" and "bloated deficits" to justify direct control over spending from Queens Park. Among the affected school boards several of the province's largest, including the Toronto District School board, the Toronto Catholic District School Board, and the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board.

The unions' defence of "local" bargaining has much less to do with any concern about the democratic origins of elected school boards and far more with the fact that the continued reliance on local bargaining to impose budget cuts offers more opportunities for mid-level union bureaucrats to influence and administer them. The bureaucracy is a privileged caste of highly paid functionaries whose interests are opposed to those of the workers they claim to represent. When the bureaucrats posture about defending local bargaining, they are defending their own territory and prerogatives, not the wages and conditions of education workers.

This is underscored by the unions' reliance on an OLRB ruling to uphold "local" bargaining rights. The Ford government deliberately delayed any bargaining for months, citing the dispute with the unions over what should be bargained centrally and locally. But the unions did nothing to prepare workers for a genuine struggle against the government, even as their contracts expired and the extent of the attacks demanded by the government

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became ever clearer.

The OLRB is a tried and tested institution of the government and bosses. In 2020, the OLRB refused even to hear a case on unsafe school reopenings during the eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic. Facing rank-and-file pressure to call job action to close schools so as to prevent the further spread of the potentially deadly virus, the unions appealed to the OLRB to intervene and when it predictably sided with the government opposed any and all worker attempts' to assert their legal right not to work under unsafe conditions.

The unions had at that time turned to the OLRB to block rank-and-file action to call job action

Ford's cost-cutting Education Minister Paul Calandra emphasized that he was "not stressed" by this month's massive strike votes. Smugly taking the measure of the union bureaucracies, he declared, "I'm not Nostradamus, I can't say what will happen, but I think for the next number of months, there is going to be peace in our school. There are no strikes on the horizon."

The fact that Calandra and the union leaderships both so categorically rule out strikes should demonstrate to rank-and-file workers who they are up against. While they posture as bitter enemies, the corporatist "partners" at the bargaining table are on the same side. They want above all to prevent education workers from intervening independently with their own demands in the contract struggle.

The last bargaining round in 2022 and 2023 demonstrated this to the hilt. When 55,000 school support workers, members of OSBCU, courageously defied the Ford government's preemptive strike ban in Bill 28 and walked off the job in early November 2022, they unleashed a burgeoning movement among education workers and other sections of the working class for a general strike. The union bureaucracies in Ontario and at the national level intervened decisively to short-circuit the movement and regain control. They persuaded Ford to withdraw his strike ban in exchange for an end to the walkout without any of the workers' demands being met. The support staff strike began on a Friday, and union leaders then spent the ensuing weekend in behind-the-scenes informal talks with Ford and his then education minister, before unilaterally announcing an end to the strike on the Monday morning without consulting the rank and file.

Within a month of this sellout, the OSBCU succeeded in ramming through a concessions-filled contract by threatening that if workers rejected it, they would be left to strike on their own. The sell-out agreement included a pathetic 3.6 percent annual wage increase under conditions of rampant inflation and enshrined most of the government's cuts. The teacher unions, which acted as scab agencies during the strike by ordering their members to cross the support workers' picket lines in the face of widespread rank-and-file sympathy with the strikers, negotiated their own concessionary agreements with Ford in 2023.

If conditions in 2022 were favourable to broaden the support staff strike into a rebellion against the Ford government and corporate Canada as a whole, they are even more so today. The massive strike vote by education workers occurs as former central banker Mark Carney's Liberal government is ploughing ahead with plans to spend 5 percent of the GDP on war and related infrastructure, offer tens of billions in handouts to big business and the financial oligarchs, and slash public spending. The trade war between the US and Canada launched by Trump's "America first" program is being fuelled by Carney and his trade union allies' promotion of counter-tariffs and "Team Canada" nationalism. Thousands of workers have been laid off or face the threat of job losses as a result, but the unions and their New Democratic party allies insist these are the "sacrifices" workers must make to defend Canadian "sovereignty."

Militant workers' struggles across Canada show that an appeal by education workers to defend public education and social services in general against the rapacious profiteering of big business and the redirection of society's resources toward war would meet with powerful support. Over 1,200 National Steel Car workers have been on strike in Hamilton, Ontario for more than three months to end the barbaric piecework system in their plant, which has claimed the lives of three workers on the job since late 2020. At the Teck Resources mine near Kamloops, British Columbia, around 1,300 workers have been on strike against the highly profitable operator since October 24, demanding, among other things, improved health benefits to help them treat the medical problems resulting from their dangerous work. Protests by students in Ontario and Quebec against the elimination of student grants and cuts to post-secondary education funding show that young people are also being radicalized by the deepening social crisis.

Mobilizing the working class behind their struggle is the only way for Ontario education workers to achieve their demands and beat back the corporatist partnership between the Ford government and trade union bureaucracies. To do so, they must build independent rank-and-file committees in every school and workplace so they can seize control of the contract struggle from the union apparatus and advance non-negotiable demands endorsed by the rank and file.

What is posed is not a "collective bargaining" struggle that can be won at the negotiating table. It is a political struggle against the entire capitalist ruling class. The issues confronting public education cannot be resolved without the expropriation of the financial oligarchy who monopolize resources to pay for militarism, business and investment tax cuts, and billions in corporate bailouts. This can be accomplished only through the development of a mass industrial and political counteroffensive by the working class for workers' power and socialism.

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