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60,000 Ontario education workers defy Ford government's draconian anti-strike law with province-wide walkout

More than 60,000 caretakers, education assistants, early childhood educators, librarians, custodians and administrative staff walked off the job Friday across Ontario, Canada's most populous province. The strike is a show of mass defiance by working people against a draconian anti-strike law imposed by Ontario's hard-right Progressive Conservative government Thursday with the aim of enforcing massive wage cuts and other concessions on the overwhelmingly low-paid workforce.



A section of the CUPE demonstration at Queen's Park in Toronto [Photo: WSWS]

The 55,000 education support workers, who are members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), have been without a contract since August 31. They are demanding wage increases to make up for over a decade of wage cuts and rampant inflation, which is

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officially running at 7 percent but is in reality much higher for basic necessities. Around 8,000 school support workers, members of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU), compelled their union leadership to support them joining the strike in solidarity with their brothers and sisters.

Ontario Premier Doug Ford wants to impose an insulting pay “increase” of 2.5 percent per year over a four-year contract for workers earning less than \$43,000, and 1.5 percent per year for everyone else. Ford’s illegitimate anti-strike law includes fines of up to \$4,000 per day for every worker who defies it, which CUPE has pledged to pay, and a penalty of \$500,000 per day for unions. The legislation could therefore cost CUPE \$220 million for each day that the 55,000 workers defy the government’s sweeping wage cut, wiping out its general assets in one and a half days.

Strikers gathered to protest outside the provincial legislature at Queen’s Park and at local offices of the governing Progressive Conservatives across the province.

“We’ve proved that we aren’t going to listen to Ford, and we’re showing that we mean business,” said Jeremy, a striking custodian in Windsor. “We need as many people as possible to join us on strike until the government listens to us.”

Another custodian at the Windsor picket said, “If they can do this to us, they will do the same to the teachers. Where does it end? They are trying to take away our right to negotiate for a wage so that we can take care of our families. We have a lot of support. And everything trickles down. What they do to us will also affect the private sector. Where does it stop?”

June, an educational assistant, added, “We have a right to voice our opinion and the right to strike.”

Workers also spoke out about the terrible working conditions they face, which have been worsened by an exodus of staff during the pandemic and the dangerous working conditions in schools created by the ruling elite’s “profits before lives” policy that let the deadly coronavirus run rampant for more than two years.

“They can’t even get us new guys to do this work. I’m breaking my back doing this, because there’s just not enough staff,” commented Brian, a Toronto caretaker, who described getting up at 3:00 a.m. to go to work cleaning his school. Another worker at the Queen’s Park protest added, “I was hired as a swim instructor but now have to do lunch duty and manage children in classrooms. And the pay doesn’t cut it.”



Custodians Jeremy, Dalton and Spencer [Photo: WSWS]

“My bills have gone up but my wage hasn’t,” said Steve, an operating engineer in Toronto. “Any increase I have gotten, 1 percent (per year) over the years, has been eclipsed by the rise in bills and the cost of living. So I want more wages for what I do.”

Due to round after round of concessions-filled contracts imposed by Liberal and Progressive Conservative governments with the assistance of the education union bureaucracies, support staff have seen a real-terms decline in their wages by over 10 percent since 2012. If the Ford government succeeds in ramming through its “collective agreement,” pay for education support workers could drop by close to 20 percent over the coming four years, based on the conservative assumption that official inflation does not rise above its current 7 percent level.

The Ontario education workers’ struggle is part of a resurgence of working class strikes and protests across Canada, the United States and worldwide. Rail and postal workers in Britain, French oil refinery workers and Ontario construction workers have all struck in recent months against grueling working conditions and the disastrous impact of cost-of-living increases while wages stagnate. The ruling elites in every country have responded with savage state repression, making clear that they are determined that working people must pay for the capitalist crisis and the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine. In the United States, where over 120,000 rail workers were set to walk off the job September 16 to challenge inhuman work scheduling and dangerous conditions, the Biden administration and the rail unions have collaborated to enforce an effective injunction against the strike that remains in place to this day.

The Ford government's anti-strike law initially targets education support workers, but it is an attack on the entire working class. Premier Ford is aiming to establish a benchmark for the imposition of huge wage reductions across the public and private sectors and set a precedent for robbing workers of their democratic rights to strike and bargain collectively. Ford's turn to authoritarian forms of rule was underscored by his invocation of the "notwithstanding clause" to pass the strike ban. This reactionary provision in the Canadian constitution allows governments to pass laws trampling on basic democratic rights that are supposedly guaranteed in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, while shielding them from any legal challenge in the courts.

Immediately following the passage of the anti-strike law, known as Bill 28, in the provincial legislature Thursday, Education Minister Stephen Lecce announced that the government has filed a complaint with the Ontario Labour Relations Board (OLRB) to have the education workers' strike declared "illegal." This is the first step the government must take to impose draconian fines on workers. The complaint calls for the OLRB to order CUPE to "cease and desist from calling, authorizing, or threatening to call or authorize unlawful strikes." It also targets CUPE Ontario President Fred Hahn and Laura Walton, head of the Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU) bargaining unit, urging that they "cease and desist from counselling, procuring, supporting, authorizing, threatening, or encouraging unlawful strikes."

The bankrupt strategy advanced by the trade union leaderships has encouraged the Ford government's provocative behaviour. Even though Ford and Lecce have dispensed with any pretence that they are bargaining in "good faith" by ramming through their strike ban, CUPE and the OSBCU have continued to insist that their goal is to get back to the "bargaining table." Walton even resumed talks with the government and a mediator this week following the tabling of Ford's draconian law and reportedly offered major concessions on the union's original modest demand for an 11.7 percent annual wage increase. But Lecce refused to entertain any deal unless CUPE called off Friday's strike, a step the union bureaucracy recognized was impossible to carry out without provoking a social explosion.

CUPE and OSBCU refused to call yesterday's walkout a strike, referring to it instead as a "political protest." No picket lines were set up at schools, with strikers instead encouraged to congregate at Queen's Park or outside Tory Party offices. This bankrupt strategy, coupled with appeals for workers to write emails to Ford and his ministers to plead with them to restart talks, has the effect of isolating custodians, early childhood educators,

education assistants and administrative staff from their most powerful ally: the working class.

As for Ontario's four teacher unions, their executives have effectively organized a massive scabbing operation by refusing to allow their 200,000 members to walk out with their support staff colleagues, even though their contracts expired on the same day more than two months ago. The teacher unions are next in line for contract talks with the Ford government, which has already made clear that it will use the contract it is trying to impose by government fiat on support staff as a template for teachers.

Opposition is growing to the unions' division of education workers along professional lines and their efforts to keep education support staff isolated from their allies throughout the working class. Although CUPE and OSBCU originally intended to limit Friday's strike to a one-day "protest," the overwhelming support for the walkout among union members and the public more generally has compelled CUPE to declare that they will continue the strike until Ford withdraws Bill 28, a claim which workers should treat with extreme skepticism. Some school boards have sent memos to parents informing them that classes will be online Monday and possibly Tuesday.

At a well-attended meeting of the Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee (OEWFC) held Thursday evening, several teachers expressed anger over the four teacher unions' refusal to let them walk out with their colleagues. The OEWFC, which was established in August by education workers to take the conduct of their contract struggle out of the hands of the union bureaucrats and enable rank-and-file workers to democratically decide how to take forward their fight against Ford, adopted the following resolution at its meeting:

This meeting of rank-and-file Ontario education workers and their supporters declares:

1. We will not accept the Ford government's imposition via illegitimate and draconian legislation of contracts containing massive wage cuts and other concessions.
2. We demand that the OSBCU and CUPE end all negotiations with Ford and Lecce. There is nothing left to negotiate with them after they trashed the collective bargaining system, only our terms of surrender.
3. We pledge to build a unified mass movement of education support workers, teachers, and supporters throughout the working class to organize mass defiance of Ford's strike ban, fight for a contract with inflation-busting wage and benefit increases, and secure tens of billions in investments for public education. We will fight to build a network of rank-and-file committees in schools and workplaces to conduct this struggle.

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