

# Ontario unions stage protest as cover for facilitating Liberals' austerity agenda

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Over 15,000 workers attended a rally in Toronto Saturday called by the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) to protest the austerity measures and attacks on democratic rights implemented by the Ontario Liberal government. The rally was timed to coincide with the climax of the provincial Liberal leadership convention, which was being held at a downtown Toronto venue.

The biggest contingents at Saturday's rally and on the subsequent march to the Liberal convention were comprised of teachers. Earlier this month, the Liberals, who were reduced to a minority government in the 2011 election, imposed concessions contracts on more than 100,000 public elementary and high school teachers under a recently adopted anti-worker law, Bill 115.

Plagued by a series of scandals and facing mounting worker opposition to his government's two-year public-sector wage freeze and other austerity measures, Liberal Premier Dalton McGuinty prorogued (temporarily suspended) the legislature last October and announced that he would step down once his party chose a replacement.

From the platform of Saturday's rally, the leaders of various public- and private-sector unions fulminated against the Liberals, just as they did at a similar rally last April that served as political cover for the OFL-supported New Democratic Party (NDP) negotiating a deal to ensure passage of the Liberals' austerity budget.

On the part of the unions, this weekend's protest was a no less cynical maneuver. In recent weeks they have abjectly surrendered before the government's wage freeze. Moreover, they and the social-democratic NDP have made it clear that they are eager to strike a new deal to prop up the Liberal government at Queen's Park—a deal they will seek to justify by claiming that it is needed to prevent the coming to power of an even more rightwing Conservative government.

In his address at Saturday's rally, Sid Ryan, a perennially failed NDP candidate and the current OFL president, roundly denounced the Liberals for their imposition of a two-year wage freeze on more than a million teachers and other provincial public service workers. Not surprisingly he felt it

politic not to mention that when the NDP last formed Ontario's government in the early 1990s it unilaterally abrogated public-sector contracts not just to freeze but to cut workers' wages. Nor did he make any mention of how the NDP, at the OFL's urging, enabled the Liberals to pass a provincial budget that contains cuts that are almost four times larger than those implemented by the hated Conservative government of former Premier Mike Harris and whose centerpiece was the very wage freeze Ryan claims to oppose.

The bureaucrats addressing Saturday's rally clearly hoped the workers in attendance had been afflicted by some variety of collective amnesia.

Thus, Ken Lewenza, president of the Canadian Auto Workers union, railed against the Liberal government whilst omitting the fact that his union has backed Liberal candidates both provincially and federally for over a decade. Also going without mention was the regular praise the CAW has heaped on McGuinty for channeling billions to the auto bosses, funds that in the case of the bailout of GM and Chrysler the government expressly tied to the imposition of massive wage and benefit cuts.

For their part, leaders of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union and the Canadian Union of Public Employees who just a couple of weeks ago negotiated contracts implementing the wage freeze nodded their heads in agreement as their fellow bureaucrats decried Liberal policies.

Elementary teachers' union head Sam Hammond and secondary school teachers' union president Ken Coran continued their own prevarications. Both unions have been fervent supporters of the big-business McGuinty government since the premier was first elected nine years ago. From very early on in negotiations for new teachers' contracts last summer and fall, both Hammond and Coran agreed with the Liberal demands for a wage freeze and other concessions but insisted that their role as well-paid interlocutors between their members and the local school boards must not be overridden by government fiat.

They worked to contain the genuine anger of rank-and-file teachers by first proposing mild (and sometimes voluntary) work-to-rule campaigns. Then in late November they sent three contracts accepting Liberal concession demands to local memberships—two of which were soundly rejected. Localized and token one-day strikes by elementary school teachers just prior to the Christmas break were not extended as Hammond and Coran bowed to a January labour board ruling declaring that any further job action was illegal.

At Saturday's rally, both Hammond and Coran told reporters that they recognize the government's fiscal concerns and will accept the wage freeze, asking in return that they be more "respected" in future negotiations. They have pleaded for an early meeting with the new Liberal premier.

As the rally participants marched to the Toronto convention centre, Liberals were busy electing Kathleen Wynne as their new leader. Wynne has been a longtime cabinet minister and member of McGuinty's "core team," serving at one time as Minister of Education.

Unlike second-place finisher Sandra Pupatello, Wynne emphasized during the leadership race that her preference is to avoid an early election and to find "common ground" with the opposition parties. It is an open secret that the NDP looks favorably on Wynne.

Rumours of an NDP linkup with a Wynne-headed Liberal Party led reporters earlier this month to ask Ontario NDP leader Andrea Horwath if she would be prepared to join a Liberal-led coalition. Horwath at first refused to rule it out. When she did declare, several days later, that she has no interest in joining the government, Horwath made it clear that the NDP is intent on working with the Liberals in implementing their austerity agenda no matter who is their leader. To emphasize her and the union bureaucracy's eagerness to keep the Liberals in office, Horwath claimed that the last thing Ontarians want is another election and that her job is to "make parliament work."

A WSWS reporting team circulated hundreds of copies of the Socialist Equality Party (Canada) statement OFL and NDP complicit in Liberal attacks, Workers need a new perspective and new organizations to mount class political struggle and spoke with a number of rally attendees, some of whom had already read the statement online.

Several teachers told interviewers that they had previously supported the Liberals but were extremely disappointed by their current attacks. Nancy, a middle-aged elementary school teacher from Toronto said she had "knocked on doors" for the Liberals, including Kathleen Wynne for three elections in a row. "But that's the last time I'm doing that," she said. "Next time I'm voting NDP." Asked what she thought of the NDP's role in facilitating the adoption of the

Liberals' austerity budget, she said: "Well that's a good question. It just gets so frustrating. I guess sometimes you just have to hold your nose and vote. But you know, I worry about what it's all going to mean for my students. They're the ones who are really going to pay for all these cuts."

Eileen Schmidt, a young fast-food worker from Kitchener, said she came to the rally to show the government that "people can't just be pushed around." Eileen's father had worked at a series of auto parts jobs over the years but had been laid off on two separate occasions. "The union didn't do anything either time," she said. "He got a little bit of severance and the second time we had to sell our house. Now he works part-time at a car dealership. Where I work there isn't any union. We just get minimum wage. But from what I see happening, it doesn't matter if you're in a union or not. You still get screwed."

Cam Kilgour, a member of a rank-and-file teachers group in Toronto, voiced his frustration with union leadership. "The thrust of our movement if you will, within the standard union, is to push our leadership, whether it be the district level in Toronto or the provincial level to try different strategies. Among some teachers there is a tremendous sense of frustration and dissatisfaction with the strategies that have been used heretofore. The group represents a certain segment of classroom teachers. For example there was a petition that was distributed online to stop Bill 115 and it had some language that the union orthodoxy considered inflammatory so it was a challenge. And yet, there were 500 members who signed it, which is not an insignificant number of people who are willing to stand up in the sense of signing the petition."

As the protestors marched several blocks to the site of the Liberal leadership convention, an elderly woman from a nearby homeless shelter approached a WSWS reporter to ask what all the commotion was about. When it was explained that it was a labour protest at the Liberal convention, she responded simply, "They won't listen. Don't they know all those parties are just for the rich?"



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