

Ontario teacher unions conspire to divide 200,000 educators after forcing them to work for a year without a contract

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Are you a teacher in Ontario? Contact the Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee at ontedrhc@gmail.com or by filling out the form at the end of this article to let us know your opinion on the unions' efforts to sabotage your contract struggle.

Over a year after contracts expired for Ontario's 200,000 teachers, the province's four teacher unions are conspiring to block a united struggle against the hard-right Ford government.

On August 25, the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF) issued a press release following a "special meeting" of bargaining representatives to announce an agreement with the hard-right Progressive Conservative government to send all outstanding issues to binding arbitration. If teachers back the OSSTF bureaucracy's proposal, which is being voted on throughout September, issues remaining in dispute as of October 27 would be settled by an "independent" arbitrator, i.e., an official over which the government has a veto. Binding arbitration invariably produces the results desired by the government or private-sector employer.

One of the most significant aspects of the OSSTF bureaucracy's proposal is that it would prevent any strike action by secondary school teachers. As the press release bluntly declared, "If accepted, the proposal provides there will be no strikes or lockouts during this round of bargaining...as any items that cannot be agreed to at the central and local bargaining tables will be sent to arbitration."

Education Minister Stephen Lecce—a hated figure among education workers due to his savage attacks on wages and conditions, and pursuit of a mass infection policy during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic—jumped on the OSSTF's announcement to pressure the other teacher unions to agree to a similar procedure.

In a joint statement, the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO), Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association (OECTA), and Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens (AEFO), which represents teachers in French-language school boards, rejected the proposal for the time being.

Leaving the door wide open to agreeing to binding arbitration at a later date, the three unions stated that arbitration "is not something that AEFO, ETFO, and OECTA can consider at our respective bargaining tables at this time...Entering into binding arbitration at this juncture would not support the students we serve

in elementary and secondary schools – as binding arbitration would all but guarantee that the key issues we have brought forward at our respective bargaining tables, which are critical to learning and working conditions in our schools, would not be addressed."

These three teacher unions are no less determined to sabotage the struggle against the Ford government for improved wages and conditions than the OSSTF. The ETFO, which has 83,000 members, announced last month that it will hold a strike vote starting at the end of September. The intentionally drawn-out process will not conclude until mid-October, meaning that when the two-week strike notice is taken into account, ETFO members will not be able to legally strike prior to November.

ETFO president Karen Brown made clear that from her standpoint, the strike vote is aimed at avoiding rather than preparing for a strike. "ETFO's goal is to reach fair and reasonable agreements without having to take job action," she said. "We need the government's full attention on bargaining so we can address pressing concerns in public education."

The OECTA, representing 45,000 teachers, announced in a media release on August 21 that it intends to hold a strike vote on October 18 and 19, which also rules out strike action for the coming months.

The weaselly behaviour of the teacher union bureaucrats flows directly from their disgraceful role in helping betray last year's strike by 55,000 education support workers against the Ford government.

In November 2022, Ontario education support workers courageously defied the Ford government's draconian Bill 28, which used the undemocratic "notwithstanding clause" in Canada's constitution to criminalize a looming strike. Education assistants, caretakers, early childhood educators, and other workers in the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) rejected Ford's intimidation and walked out on strike. Their stand galvanized support throughout the working class, including among teachers, who recognized the struggle as an opportunity to overturn decades of concessions and stop the gutting of education budgets.

But the teacher unions forced their members to scab on their colleagues, informing them with consummate arrogance that it would be a violation of the "collective bargaining" process to join

the strike. The OSSTF and ETFO even insisted that teachers virtually cross the picket lines by offering online classes for students at schools that could not open due to the absence of support staff during the strike. This scandalous betrayal was not the product of mistakes on the part of individual union bureaucrats. Rather, it results from the fact that the bureaucracy's principle concern is to defend the "labour relations" system upon which its cozy and corrupt relations with the government and big business rests.

Despite the teacher unions' best efforts to sabotage the struggle, growing support for the education workers developed across the province during the first weekend of November 2022. Calls for a general strike grew as workers flocked to hastily organized protests in support of the school support staff.

The entire union bureaucracy intervened decisively to crush this incipient movement. The Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL), Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), and Unifor were in close contact with Ford over the weekend to urge him to make a tactical retreat by rescinding his anti-strike law. If he did so, the union bureaucrats pledged to immediately call off the education workers' strike and connive with the hard-right government to ram through a sellout deal at the first possible opportunity.

This plan was put into practice on the following Monday, with support staff ordered to "collapse" their picket lines without achieving a single demand. Within a month, CUPE succeeded in ramming through a sellout deal with below-inflation pay "increases" for the lowest-paid workers in the education sector. The agreement also retained the Ford government's education budget cuts.

The leaderships of all four teacher unions are continuing their treacherous role with their refusal to organize a joint strike vote, never mind a common strategy for all 200,000 teachers to fight the Ford government for their just demands. Based on the experience of last fall, the union bureaucracy is deeply afraid of a unified struggle because it would quickly gain momentum and escape its control.

The fact that the union apparatus uses similar language as the government with buzz words like "fair and reasonable," "negotiating in good faith," and the need to maintain "stability" for students is another red flag for a sellout. These are phrases cooked up behind closed doors to disarm teachers and sell a rotten contract to a hostile membership. How is it possible to talk of "stability" for students and their families in a school system facing billions of dollars of cuts over the next decade under conditions in which buildings are already falling apart, COVID-19 continues to spread among students and staff, materials are lacking, class sizes are unmanageable, and all education workers have experienced real-terms pay cuts for years?

A warning must be made to all teachers in Ontario. The teacher union leaderships will impose yet another defeat if you do not take your contract struggle against the Ford government out of the hands of the bureaucracies by forming independent rank-and-file committees in every school. These committees will be democratically controlled by rank-and-file teachers and other education workers, and create the framework to wage a genuine struggle against the capitalist elite, their government and labour

police in the unions. The Ontario Education Workers Rank-and-File Committee (OEWRFC) was established during the school support workers' struggle last fall to spearhead this struggle.

Teachers must understand that they are not merely involved in a contract fight, but a political struggle against the entire capitalist ruling class in Ontario and Canada, which is fully behind the Ford government.

These forces are determined to impose savage and sweeping cuts to public education and to the living standards of all education workers for two main reasons: 1) in order to give away more money to the oligarchy in the form of tax cuts and subsidies, which are falsely justified with lies like "job creation"; and 2) The ruling class is demanding an increase in military spending to 2 percent of GDP to meet the demands of the US-led NATO alliance, which is at war with Russia in Ukraine and has plans for waging aggressive war around the world to secure the domination of American imperialism and its junior partners like Canada.

The teacher union bureaucracies, horrified by the CUPE struggle they helped betray last fall, will never lead a joint struggle against the despised Ford government because they know it can spark a wider rebellion. Such a movement would also inevitably develop in opposition to the Liberal/union/New Democratic Party alliance that is the key mechanism through which the ruling elite is imposing its policies of austerity and war at the federal level. This is why the unions isolate the teachers from the wider class struggle, which is growing in intensity every month in Canada and across the globe.

Teachers in New Brunswick were recently sold out as the New Brunswick Teachers Association reached a rotten tentative agreement at the end of July with the hard-right Blaine Higgs Conservative Government. Teachers are voting on the tentative agreement this month.

Teachers in Quebec are among the 600,000 public sector workers whose contracts expired at the end of March and are currently negotiating with the right-wing chauvinist government of multi-millionaire businessman Francois Legault. By building independent rank-and-file committees to unify these struggles, teachers can make their fight for improved wages and conditions the spearhead of a mass worker-led counter-offensive against capitalist austerity and war across Canada and internationally.



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