

Ontario Liberals to outlaw college teachers' strike

By Dylan Lubao
18 November 2017

In a blatantly anti-democratic step, the trade union-backed Liberal government of Premier Kathleen Wynne has tabled back-to-work legislation to end the strike of 12,000 Ontario community college faculty that began on October 16. Under the proposed legislation, all outstanding issues would be referred to binding arbitration, ensuring the workers' demands will be jettisoned.

The formal introduction of the Liberals' strikebreaking bill to the provincial parliament was temporarily blocked Thursday when the New Democratic Party refused unanimous consent. But the Liberals successfully introduced their bill Friday afternoon and the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) has pledged to order its striking members to obey it once it becomes law.

The government's strikebreaking measure came in response to Thursday's announcement that the striking workers had overwhelmingly rejected the "final offer" of the management of Ontario's 24 provincially-administered colleges, represented by the College Employer Council (CEC). With a turnout rate of 95 percent, the strikers rejected the proposed contract by a margin of 86 percent, testifying both to the great militancy of the rank-and-file and the regressive character of the CEC's "final offer."

Strikers were forced to vote on the offer after the CEC bypassed OPSEU by utilizing a reactionary provision of the Ontario Labour Code. Both parties had earlier been called back to the bargaining table by the Ministry of Labour, and allegedly came close to reaching an agreement before talks broke down last weekend.

Those on strike include counsellors, librarians, and full-time and partial-load professors. The rank-and-file's key demand is an end to the precarious working conditions that see 81 percent of professors employed through partial-load or temporary four-month contracts. Workers also want greater faculty representation and agency in academic decision-making, which is currently dominated by college management.

Partial-load professors have no job security and receive only a fraction of the pay and benefits that full-time

professors receive, despite doing the same work. Although the majority of their work is done outside of classroom hours in course preparation and evaluation, they are only paid for time spent teaching. As a result, the average salary for partial-load professors comes in under \$30,000.

According to the OPSEU bargaining team, which recommended rejection of the CEC's final, it would only have reinforced the latter's stranglehold over academic decision-making. The offer also contained measures that would compel full-time faculty to work unlimited overtime hours.

Despite the union bureaucracy's militant posturing, its promotion of the issue of academic freedom in recent days was an attempt to conceal the fact that it had already sold out the strike.

What the union bureaucracy glosses over is that it had effectively dropped even its inadequate demand for 50 percent of faculty to be given permanent employment. Calling it a "significant gain," the OPSEU bargaining team agreed with the CEC to the establishment of a provincial task force that will examine and make non-binding recommendations on the question of precarious work.

For over a decade, OPSEU and the union bureaucracy as whole have trumpeted bogus claims that the Ontario Liberals are "progressive" and "friends of workers," just as they are lauding Justin Trudeau's federal Liberal government, who, not incidentally, are Wynne's closest political allies.

The unions and their Working Families Ontario coalition have invested millions of dollars in urging workers to support and vote for this big business party, which has privatized public utilities, slashed social spending, including in the education sector, and maintained a low-tax regime for the wealthy corporate elite. Successive Liberal governments led by Dalton McGuinty and Wynne have deployed strikebreaking legislation to outlaw strikes, without the unions lifting a finger to defend their members.

During the current strike, the OPSEU leadership has focused all its rhetorical fire on the well-heeled

administrators who sit on the CEC, while ignoring the fact that Wynne's Liberals very much hold the purse strings.

The union bureaucracy's response to the Liberals' strikebreaking announcement was similarly duplicitous and craven. On Thursday, OPSEU President Warren Thomas first declared that "the entire labour movement would come down on the government" for introducing strikebreaking legislation. Within hours, however, he had conceded that, "We're not, as a labour movement, pleased that workers are being legislated back to work but... we are happy that the students will be back in class as early as Monday."

Even the New Democratic Party's token opposition to the Liberals' bill was too much for Thomas. "If political parties want to turn this into a political football I think that's unfortunate," he declared.

The NDP, no less than the OPSEU leadership, is adamant that once the Liberals' anti-democratic bill is adopted, workers must obey it. As for its initial blocking of the introduction of the bill, it was no more than a parliamentary charade. NDP provincial leader Andrea Horwath has indicated that her party will allow the Liberals to debate the bill over the weekend and bring it to a vote on Sunday. The NDP's "opposition" thus boils down to the question of whether the strikebreaking bill should be passed on Thursday or Sunday.

The NDP's sham opposition is, moreover, confirmed by its entire political history. Having helped sustain the Liberals in power for years under Wynne and her predecessor McGuinty, the NDP is just as responsible as the Liberals and the Conservatives for the underfunding of public education and the attacks on the jobs and working conditions of college faculty.

Whereas in 1965 the community college system derived 80 percent of its operating revenues from the government, today that figure has fallen to 44 percent—the lowest ratio of any province in Canada. Brutal social spending cuts by successive federal and Ontario governments, including under the NDP administration of Bob Rae, have steadily blighted the educational landscape and turned the majority of college professors into low-wage "gig" workers.

There is a strong spirit of resistance among workers in the education sector and across all industries to the protracted assault on education and vital services—an assault on the social position and the democratic rights of the working class as a whole.

However, whenever rank-and-file workers challenge the austerity measures of the big business governments, their struggles are made illegal, and the unions use this as a pretext to shut them down. In 2012, the McGuinty Liberals enacted Bill 115 to outlaw all job action by the province's public school teachers and impose wage-cutting contracts on

them by government decree.

What rank-and-file college faculty face is more than just an economic struggle for wages and working conditions, but a political fight against all the depredations of the capitalist system. A fight against the CEC is a fight against the Liberals and the other big-business parties, as this strikebreaking legislation demonstrates.

Ontario College teachers should defy the strikebreaking legislation and appeal to broader sections of the working class and to their students for support. In opposition to the right-wing campaign of the college student unions to pit students against their instructors, students should join with teachers to form strike committees at every college to take control of the strike out of the hands of the OPSEU bureaucracy. The first task of such committees should be to fight to broaden the strike—to make it the catalyst for a working-class counter offensive against the state-big business assault on secure and decent-paying jobs, education and other vital public services, and workers' right to strike.

Such a mobilization would from the get-go need to be animated by a working-class political strategy: the fight for a workers' government to break the power of big business and reorganize social-economic life so society's abundant resources can be mobilized to meet social needs, not further enrich the few.

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