

“The issues we are facing are not just related to university teachers, but affect the entire working class”

An interview with a striking York University contract faculty member

By our reporter
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Approximately 3,000 contract faculty and support staff at Toronto’s York University are on the fourth day of strike action over poverty wages and job security. Contract faculty members, teaching assistants, graduate assistants and research assistants voted overwhelmingly last Friday to reject a contract offer from university management containing below-inflation pay increases and no solution to precarious working conditions.

Late Tuesday, university management rejected as out of hand a union compromise proposal for a modest 3.5 percent annual pay increase and a handful of additional full-time posts.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with a contract faculty member about the issues involved in the strike. We are withholding their identity to prevent retribution from management.

Asked about job security, the worker said, “Absolutely it’s a major issue. There’s the vulnerability of not knowing what will happen next year, will I have a course to teach or not? For example, I finished a contract at Wilfrid Laurier University last year that ran from September to December with no benefits.”

He pointed to the vast gulf between contract faculty, who teach the majority of courses at York and many other Canadian institutions, and tenured staff. “They say a full-time faculty member makes between \$80,000 and \$150,000. A contract faculty member teaching the same number of courses makes somewhere between \$25,000 and \$32,000.

“Then there’s the issue of your career. As contract

faculty, you get no access to funding for major projects that can produce publications. So that limits your career. It’s extremely difficult to publish your own work, because the work you’re doing is much more teaching based.”

Just four months ago, Ontario premier Kathleen Wynne’s big business Liberal government forced striking college tutors back to work and imposed a rotten deal that met none of their demands for job security and better pay. Like striking faculty at York, college tutors were protesting a system that saw some of them labor on 14-week contracts for poverty wages.

The striking faculty member warned that the Liberals will seek to play a similar role this time around. “Many more people were on strike then than now, and the Liberal government did not hesitate to impose strikebreaking legislation. The Liberals set a precedent with the college teachers.”

He was critical of the role of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), which like the entire union bureaucracy has boosted the Liberals as a “progressive” alternative to the Tories. Referring to the union during the last strike at York in 2015, he remarked, “Last time around, the union was in a battle with rank-and-file members, who rejected numerous proposals made by the union.”

While CUPE officials have spent the first days of the strike apologizing to the media for having called it and promising to restart talks with management at “short notice,” the striker called for a broadening of the struggle. “The issues we are facing are not just related to university teachers but affect the entire working

class. I saw a study that said less than 50 percent of Canadian workers worked a full year in 2016, so most Canadians are precariously employed. The issues of low wages and job security are common to all workers, not only across Canada, but the United States and globally. People are striking on a daily basis to fight for better living conditions.”

He expressed strong solidarity for the strike of West Virginia teachers, who had defied the efforts of union bureaucrats to shut down their struggle and won broad support from workers across the state and nationally before being sold out this week by the unions. “We’re definitely in solidarity with the strike in West Virginia. In many ways it’s inspirational and there are many similarities. The bottom line is that people are at their wit’s end in terms of their ability to live. These are not people who want to get rich but make a decent life for themselves. That is increasingly impossible due to low wages and precarious work.”

He added, “What would be amazing is if we could build a movement that would include not only workers here, but workers in other parts of the world in a common fight. A generalized strike to shut down the entire country and see the impact that would have.”

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