

Ontario Liberals attempt to legislate end to York University strike

By Roger Jordan
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In a flagrantly anti-democratic move underscoring its contempt for the working class, Ontario's Liberal government attempted to ram legislation through the provincial legislature Monday that would have outlawed a strike by 3,000 workers at Toronto's York University.

The move was facilitated by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), which has done all it can to isolate the strike and prepare a rotten sell-out, and which, like the rest of the union bureaucracy, has had cozy relations with the big business Liberals over the past 15 years, even as they have pursued a right-wing austerity agenda.

The contract faculty and student teaching and research assistants have been on strike against poverty wages and precarious employment for more than two months.

The Liberals' attempt to illegalize the strike ultimately failed after the New Democrats (NDP), with an eye to the upcoming provincial election, refused to allow the bill, known as the "York University Labour Disputes Resolution Act, 2018," to be rushed through the legislature ahead of yesterday's dissolution of parliament. Under a fixed-date election law, Ontarians will vote in a provincial election Thursday, June 7.

The legislation would have compelled the 3,000 members of CUPE local 3903 and York management to submit to an arbitrator's award, which would have inevitably enforced the employer's principal demands. York management was so sure of a positive outcome from binding arbitration that for much of the strike it has been pleading for government intervention.

Introduced by Labour Minister Kevin Flynn and Post-Secondary Education Minister Mitzie Hunter, the legislation came in response to the pre-determined conclusions of a government-appointed "industrial

commissioner" into the status of bargaining between CUPE and the university. Even though the university has persistently refused to bargain with the union for months and held fast to its provocative demands, William Kaplan denounced the union for adopting bargaining methods that are "not normative" and essentially blamed it for the bargaining impasse.

In a remarkable display of hypocrisy, the Liberal government, which has attacked the pay and working conditions of teachers and educators, and slashed education funding to the bone, sought to assure everyone that it was acting in the best interests of the students. This was eagerly amplified by the corporate media, with the pro-Liberal *Toronto Star* proclaiming that the government was "mindful" of the growing concern among students that they will not be able to complete their academic year.

In reality, the Liberals were concerned, notwithstanding the best efforts of CUPE to betray the strike, that it could become the catalyst for broader working class struggles. Under conditions in which strikes among industrial workers and other sections of the working class have spread over recent months, including in a number of instances where workers have openly defied attempts by the unions to shut their struggles down, the Liberals decided they had to act.

The NDP's cynicism in attempting to pose as defenders of the striking workers in opposing the back-to-work legislation is hard to stomach. This is a party which has repeatedly connived in the adoption of anti-strike laws at both the federal and provincial levels, including with regard to Canada Post in 2011, Ontario school teachers in 2012, and last year's college lecturers' strike.

More fundamentally, whenever this right-wing, pro-capitalist party has held power, as it currently does

in Alberta and British Columbia, it has come into direct conflict with the working class, with its support for austerity budgets, attacks on workers' wages and working conditions, and, in the case of Alberta, support for the interests of Big Oil.

In Ontario, under the leadership of current party leader Andrea Horwath, the NDP propped up a Liberal minority government for two years between 2012 and 2014. During that time, Wynne's government was able to pass two austerity budgets, including cuts to education and health care.

The NDP has all but ignored the striking workers since early March, with the only exception being a fleeting visit by federal party leader Jagmeet Singh to the picket line after he was invited by CUPE bureaucrats.

In spite of the Liberals' failure to end the strike, workers at York face imminent defeat if they fail to settle accounts with CUPE, which has worked from the beginning to prepare a rotten sell-out.

Although it was clear from the very outset that contract faculty and student assistants faced a political struggle against the Liberal government, which controls the university's purse strings and has previously outlawed strikes at York, the CUPE bureaucracy has confined the struggle within the reactionary framework of collective bargaining.

CUPE 3903 president Devin Lefebvre and his fellow bureaucrats have made the demand to get York to return to the bargaining table the sole issue in the strike. To this end, the CUPE leadership even issued pathetic appeals to the Liberals to intervene and compel the parties to negotiate. This paved the way for the government's attempt to shut down the strike.

No attempt has been made to appeal to students for a joint struggle against austerity and to win recognition of free education for university students as a social right.

Nor has CUPE made any appeal for support from other striking education workers, including 800 support staff at Carleton University in Ottawa who were on strike during the first month of the York job action, or from workers across Canada, who confront job insecurity and low wages on a daily basis.

CUPE has no intention of allowing the strike to become a rallying point for a struggle against the right-wing Liberal government because this rotten

organization, together with the majority of the union bureaucracy, has promoted the Liberals as a "progressive" alternative to the Conservatives for the better part of two decades. Even now, with the party well down in the polls ahead of the June 7 provincial election, much of the union bureaucracy is waging a get-out-the-vote campaign for the Liberals on the absurd basis that this will allow workers to stop the anti-worker, far-right policies represented by Progressive Conservative leader Doug Ford.

In reality, as workers at York and elsewhere know all too well, the role of the Liberals over the past 15 years has been to clamp down viciously on working class opposition, including through the repeated outlawing of strikes, and to privatize public utilities, impose ruthless austerity and slash taxes for big business and the rich—imposing policies that have gone far beyond those of the hard-right Mike Harris-led Progressive Conservative government of 1995-2003.

Strikers at York must take the attempt to impose back-to-work legislation as a serious warning. If the strike continues under its present leadership, CUPE will organize a miserable betrayal of the workers' entirely justified demands sooner rather than later.

To prevent this outcome, contract faculty and student assistants must break decisively with the CUPE bureaucracy, form their own rank-and-file committee to lead the strike, and appeal to students and workers across Canada and internationally for support. Above all, the winning of good-paying, secure jobs requires a political struggle against the Liberals, NDP, and their defenders in the trade union bureaucracy, and the development of an independent political movement of the working class.

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