

Canada: The unions' suppression of the 1995-97 anti-Harris movement: Political lessons for today

Part 3: The 1997 Ontario teachers' strike

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10 October 2018

This is the third part of a four-part series. The first part can be accessed [here](#) and the second [here](#). The fourth and final part will be published Friday, October 12.

In the wake of the massive working class mobilization in Toronto on Oct. 25-26 1996, polling showed that a majority of Ontarians supported the anti-austerity movement against the Harris-led Conservative government. Sentiment for a province-wide strike, of at least one day, was widespread and growing.

This only heightened the fears of the union bureaucracy that the movement was taking a radical direction and threatening, as in the case of the unanticipated shutdown of the Toronto Transit system on Oct. 25, to escape its control. Within weeks of the Toronto events, the heads of 13 unions, including the Steelworkers (USW) and Power Workers, that represented more than a third of the OFL membership, demanded the OFL scale down the city-wide Days of Action (protest rallies and one-day walkouts), and shift its resources to returning the NDP to power at the next election, slated for 1999 or 2000.

As a result, in November 1996 the OFL announced that the next two protests against the deprivations of the Conservative government would take place in the smaller northern Ontario cities of Sudbury and Thunder Bay. Not only were both cities far from Toronto and the province's other major population centers. They were dominated by the United Steelworkers, which had opposed the Days of Action mobilizations from the very start and was adamantly against its members taking job action in support of the anti-Harris movement.

Whatever their tactical disputes, the essential agreement of all factions of the union bureaucracy and their united opposition to the independent mobilization of the working class was revealed in the October-November 1997 province-wide teachers' strike.

For two weeks, 125,000 elementary and high school teachers struck in defiance of the province's reactionary labour code. The largest-ever unlimited work stoppage in Ontario history, the strike took on the character of a broad social movement,

because it was rightly perceived not as a sectional collective-bargaining struggle but a political challenge to the hated Harris government and its austerity agenda.

The strike was called with the overtly political aim of forcing the Conservative government to abandon its plans—enshrined in the so-called Education Quality Improvement Act (Bill 160)—to centralize power over education financing and policy in the hands of the Education Ministry, so as to enable the Harris government to force through spending cuts and regressive curriculum changes, and gut teachers' working conditions.

The government fully expected the strike would collapse under the threat of legal reprisals and a media witch-hunt that charged the teachers with taking a million Ontario school children hostage. But while the strike undoubtedly did cause hardship to working parents, the public rallied behind the teachers, in recognition that they were fighting to defend public education. To the Conservatives' dismay, even government polls showed that a majority of Ontarians supported the strike. Picket lines and teacher demonstrations were swelled by students, parents, and other workers.

The leaders of the five teachers' unions that comprise the Ontario Teachers' Federation (OTF) called the walkout—which they tellingly termed a “protest,” not a political strike—anticipating that the government would obtain a court injunction ordering the teachers back to work. This would have provided them with a pretext for ending the strike and cutting a deal with the government.

But the Harris government's application for an injunction was denied. The Ontario Court judge hearing the case concluded that popular support for the strike was so high that state intervention against it might dangerously erode the authority of the courts. In effect, he placed the responsibility for ending the strike directly on the teachers' unions.

The OTF, with the full support and encouragement of the OFL, quickly complied. In the immediate aftermath of the rejection of the government's request for an injunction, the

leaders of the teacher unions offered the Tories sweeping concessions. When the government refused their offer, the union bureaucrats declared nothing further could be done and ordered the teachers to return to work.

It was not any lack of support for the strike, nor any lack of militancy and solidarity on the part of the teachers that precipitated the union leaders' surrender. Just the opposite. It was the threat that the strike could fan the flames of a wider popular movement against the Harris government, which could break out of their grip and destabilize the entire national political situation, that frightened the union bureaucracy and caused them to torpedo the strike.

As the Socialist Equality Party wrote in November 1997, in the immediate aftermath of the unions' betrayal of the two-week strike, "[T]he teachers were defeated not by the might of the state, nor by any weakening within their ranks. Rather their struggle was sabotaged by their own leadership."

Other sections of workers were more than ready to fight. In November 1997, just days after the teachers strike was shut down, 45,000 postal workers walked off the job after bargaining broke down. The deliberate isolation of the strike by the Canadian Union of Postal Workers, and the refusal of the OFL and teachers' unions to link the postal workers fight with the struggle of teachers and other sections of workers against the Tory government in Ontario and the federal Liberals, condemned it to defeat. On December 5, the federal parliament passed back-to-work legislation, illegalizing the postal workers' strike.

As the federal Liberals were moving to break the postal strike, the Ontario Conservatives were ramming their reactionary Education Quality Improvement Act through the Ontario Legislature. On December 8, it was given royal assent, making it law.

Within weeks of the unions' betrayal of the teachers, the OFL elected as its new president Wayne Samuelson, a Steelworkers' official and the candidate of the wing of the union bureaucracy that had opposed the Days of Action from the start. The same OFL convention, in a transparent manoeuvre to give the bureaucracy political cover for its abject betrayal of the teachers' strike, voted to authorize a one-day province-wide general strike.

Predictably, this was a dead letter from the start, and the anti-austerity campaign as a whole was officially buried by the OFL the following summer.

Subsequently, the union bureaucracy again fractured over which of the Conservatives' big business political opponents to support in the 1999 election. The majority urged a vote for the NDP, now led by Howard Hampton, who as a minister in the Rae NDP government had championed the wage- and job-cutting "social contract."

A dissident faction, led by the supposedly "left-wing" CAW, and including many teacher union leaders, called for a "strategic vote" for the Liberals, wherever the Liberal

candidate stood the best chance of defeating the Tory contestant.

Between 1995 and 1997, the working class had come forward to challenge the Harris government and its austerity program, but the unions smothered this opposition, scuttling the "Days of Action" when they threatened to go beyond a protest movement, and shutting down the teachers' strike.

As a result, the working class, the only social force capable of articulating a genuine alternative program to the Conservatives, was politically silenced. At the height of the Days of Action mobilization, Conservative popularity in across-the-board polling had plummeted. But with the abject sabotage of the working class offensive by the trade unions, the Conservatives gained a political lifeline.

In the 1999 provincial election that returned a Conservative majority government, both the Liberals and the NDP promised they would pursue austerity and leave Harris' tax cuts untouched. Given that all three parties were parroting the big business mantra of "fiscal responsibility," there was no possibility within the confines of the elections for working people to truly articulate their opposition to the Harris agenda.

Within days of Harris' re-election, former NDP Premier Bob Rae urged the Tories' opponents to take their cue from British Prime Minister Tony Blair and US President Bill Clinton, the respective successors to the Thatcher-Major and Reagan-Bush governments, and recognize that "the paradigm has changed." Declared Rae, "A program based on undoing many of the Harris changes is doomed to minority support."

Questioned half a year later as to why the unions were not mobilizing against the Harris Tory government, Canadian Auto Workers President Buzz Hargrove bluntly admitted that the unions had made their peace with Canada's most right-wing government since the Great Depression, "At this point," claimed Hargrove, "there is no indication that the government is out to attack us or that they want another fight."

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