

Ontario's teachers unions facilitate right-wing Ford government's reckless back-to-school drive

By Matthew Richter
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The right-wing government of Progressive Conservative Ontario Premier Doug Ford is currently enforcing a homicidal reopening of Ontario's schools, with the aim of forcing 2 million students and over 200,000 teachers to return to unsafe classrooms and school buildings in less than two weeks. Contrary to the government's absurd assertion that it has presented guidelines to ensure a "safe reopening," the reality is that it is rushing to cram children into overcrowded and poorly-resourced schools so that their parents can be forced back to work to turn a profit for the ruling elite.

The Ford government's plan calls for the in-person return of elementary students from kindergarten to grade 8. Elementary school students will return for the full five-day school week. There will be no reduction in class sizes to facilitate social distancing. Students from kindergarten to grade 3 will not be required to wear masks. High school students will be subjected to the so-called "hybrid model," with a cohort of up to 15 students returning to the classroom for part-time, in-person instruction, alternating with the other half of the class learning remotely.

Dr. David Williams, the Chief Medical Officer of Health for Ontario, had significant input in devising the plan. Williams came under fire earlier this year for suggesting that testing for the coronavirus should be confined only to those who exhibit symptoms, despite the fact that it is scientifically proven that those who are presymptomatic or asymptomatic can be infectious. This policy guided the Ford government earlier this year when they forced asymptomatic migrant farm workers back to work. At least three young migrant farm labourers are known to have succumbed to COVID-19.

Predictably enough, nothing is being done to offer regular COVID-19 testing to students and teachers.

The government's guidelines specifically state that schools have the choice of whether to contact public health authorities or parents if students are unwell, because these are "frequent occurrences" and students often display "non-specific symptoms." Even if an outbreak occurs, which is defined as two or more cases in a school within a 14-day period, the facility will not close. Instead, the government has instructed

schools to put up extra signage, restrict extracurricular activities and manage staff and student movements. In the event a school is forced to close, the guidelines also declare that the outbreak need not be over for the school to reopen.

Initially, the reopening plan called for an additional \$309 million for the education budget, but a further \$244 million was added for improved ventilation and cleaning on August 13 after a public outcry about the inadequacies of the government's plan. This sum is a pitiful drop in the bucket given the systematic cost-cutting to education budgets pursued by successive Liberal and Tory governments.

The criminal drive to reopen schools is provoking widespread opposition. Nearly 250,000 people have signed a petition on Change.org calling for major changes to the plan.

The Ford government would not be able to proceed so recklessly without the intimate collaboration of Ontario's education trade unions, whose main priority is to ensure that no social opposition or protests develop against the reopening of schools.

The Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO), the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF), the Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens (AEFO) and the Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association (OECTA) have limited themselves to claiming that the government has violated the Occupational Health and Safety Act. In an August 13 letter complaining about the lack of union involvement in drafting the back-to-school plan, they issued a token threat to go to the pro-employer Ontario Labour Relations Board (OLRB) to contest the government's plan. The OLRB has upheld only 1 of over 300 COVID-19 related claims since the start of the pandemic.

The unions' bitter hostility to any struggle by teachers against the dangerous reopening policy is in keeping with their role in suppressing opposition to the Ford government's attacks over the past year. Beginning with the expiration of the contract for 250,000 teachers and education staff at the end of August 2019, the unions deliberately sought to isolate the teachers and prevent them from fighting together. Support

amongst teachers for strike action in defense of public education was overwhelming: 98 percent of ETFO members, 97 percent of OECTA members, and 95.5 percent of OSSTF members voted in favour of a strike.

However, the unions flagrantly ignored these huge strike mandates and systematically suppressed the initiative of their members, preventing unified action against the Ford government. Instead of a combined effort, the unions conducted a series of rotating one day strikes and work to rule, with all of the unions following separate job action schedules and pursuing their own negotiations with the government. It was only after six months that the unions, in the face of overwhelming public support for teachers, eventually acceded to a one-day strike on Feb. 21.

The one-day walkout was the largest teacher strike in the province in over two decades. In opposition to the Ford government's austerity program, teachers demanded substantial increases in education spending to reduce class sizes, repair dilapidated school buildings, increase teacher pay and provide support services to students. They were also opposing the Ford government's imposition of the introduction of four mandatory online learning courses for high school students, many of whom lack the equipment and internet access necessary to participate in them. (See: 200,000 Canadian teachers strike, as global worker counteroffensive continues)

Given the depth of popular hostility to the Ford government's across-the-board assault on spending on health and social services as well as education, including a 1 percent pay and benefit cap for over 1 million public sector workers, the teachers' strike could have served as a launching pad for a broad-based working class struggle against austerity that would have inevitably raised the question of a general strike and political power.

But the unions had other ideas. Terrified by the strong public support for the one-day strike, they swiftly called off or delayed any further regional strikes and work-to-rule plans. They then seized on the coronavirus pandemic as a cover to step up their closed-door talks with the Ford government. This resulted in all four unions ramming through concessions-laden contracts during March and April that met none of the teachers' demands.

The unions' shutting down of the teachers' strike and the acceptance of large portions of Ford's cuts has created conditions in which teachers, students, and their families are being forced to risk their lives in unsafe and under-resourced school buildings amid a raging pandemic.

Consider, for example, the issue of class sizes. In their joint letter of Aug. 13, the four education unions identified the problem of large class sizes as their main concern in the government's back-to-school plan. Large numbers of students crammed into poorly-ventilated classrooms will create ideal conditions for the virus to run rampant. Yet just four months earlier, the OSSTF agreed to an increase in class sizes in the

final agreement it reached with the government and forced its membership to accept. The increase in class size from an average of 22 to 23 students, first introduced in the 2019–2020 school year, was made permanent. A similar increase in class sizes was agreed to by the ETFO. (See: Citing COVID-19 crisis, Ontario teacher unions impose concession-filled contracts)

The only way teachers can stop the criminal reopening of schools and save lives is by forming independent rank-and-file safety committees in opposition to the trade unions. These committees should call for the immediate closure of all schools until the pandemic is brought fully under control, and demand a vast expansion in funding for public education to ensure all students can access online instruction and additional support services, including mental health care, special education assistance and food security. To fight for these demands, the rank-and-file safety committees must strive to unite all workers—educators, school bus drivers, janitors, maintenance workers and other support staff, with manufacturing, health care, logistics, grocery and food processing, retail and restaurant workers—to carry out a nationwide general strike to prevent the reopening of schools and save lives.

Teachers in the United States, where thousands of infections among teachers and students have been reported across the country since schools began reopening in late July, have already taken the decision to establish rank-and-file safety committees to fight for this program. (See: Form independent rank-and-file safety committees of educators, parents and students)

We strongly encourage all educators, students, parents, and family members in Ontario and across Canada who agree with this program to register today to attend the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee's next online meeting at 3 p.m. Eastern time this Saturday, August 29. The coronavirus knows no national boundaries. Only a coordinated, international response to the pandemic can save the lives of teachers, students and their families.

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>