

CLASSroom

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Austerity, Class War, and Classrooms: Why We Need Community Unionism

In recent times, organized labour has been ineffective in rallying its membership and the broader working class community against the continued assault on working people through the capitalist austerity agenda - downloading the costs of the 2008 economic crisis via lower wages and cuts to public services. More urgently, the government is attempting to make strikes illegal and to erode our collective bargaining rights.

The Government of Ontario has imposed a public sector wage freeze for the next two years and shrunk the legal number of sick days from twenty to ten - effectively seeking to cut a benefit that allowed workers to collect unclaimed sick days for a retirement payout up to \$46,000. Predictably, the unions' official position has been to essentially "hold the line" on benefits. These demands are, by their nature, insular to the concerns of its membership and aren't likely to inspire support in non-unionized workers who depend on services staffed by public sector trade unions.

One way of combating the cynicism and disconnectedness of the wider working class from the struggles of organized labour is for unions to take a more combative perspective on the capitalist crisis and its effects in restructuring the public sector services gained by the post-war generation. This should mean the building of solidarity unionism - raising the demands of the community and fighting for the defence of the public education system. This is especially critical, given that the "Drummond Report" on Education details cuts to full-day kindergarden (acting as a buffer for childcare) and education support staff, and calls for the introduction of de facto tuition fees for high school

students taking extra courses. These attacks against the public education system need to be at the forefront of demands made by our unions that seeks to legitimize themselves in the eyes of working people in Ontario by taking up the role of defending our class and classrooms.

What's needed for today's labour movement is to distance itself from unsustainable traditional trade union practices. It should also recognize that political solutions in the social-democratic left have resulted in little by way of sustainable gains for working people. It's unclear what social-democratic parties can do to protect working people from a globalized capitalist environment that will likely see capitalists divest assets needed to fund the coffers of the state to provide public services. Even when the "left" wins by the electoral means - parties are under enormous pressure to cede their social-democratic aspirations to accommodate the needs of capitalism.

A fighting labour movement with ambitions to win wider class solidarity must not fall into the trap of social-democracy or liberalism; relegating our fellow workers to act as little more than the foot-soldiers of the so-called "progressive" electoral machine. We cannot short-cut class solidarity through these electoral vehicles, but rather we should create an organic united front of our class and our unions through collective community demands. Change will not be sustained through the ballot box, but by establishing meaningful relations between our labour movement and the working class through the slogan of community demands and class defense. ✍

Labour Unrest at BC Schools



SFU strikers welcome visitors to campus

On October 29th, members of CUPE local 2278, which represents undergraduate and graduate teaching assistants, graders, as well as some sessional instructors, walked off their jobs at the University of British Columbia. Their main bargaining issues include wages, job security and tuition costs. After more than a week of job action, the union's bargaining team reached a tentative agreement with the administration, which was ratified on November 15th. While it resisted concessions, the bargaining team failed to make gains in the key areas it had prioritized: cost-of-living adjustment, childcare, preferential hiring for Master's students. In a blog post, the bargaining team noted, "we strongly believe that it is the very best deal we could secure given the current bargaining climate in this province." The union's contract will be up in less than 2 years.

Meanwhile, at Simon Fraser University, support staff organized with CUPE 3338 began work actions on November 1st. Teaching assistants in the Teaching Support Staff Union (TTSU), which is also in bargaining, have refused to cross the CUPE picket line, resulting in class cancellations.

Additionally, CUPE college support workers at five BC colleges are on strike, demanding the same deal the government approved for similar work at BC universities. The striking locals have been without a contract since 2010.

Folks in the labour movement have often said, "the longer the picket line, the shorter the strike." It's with this in mind that we're encouraged by the coordinated work actions in BC and happy to see solidarity put into practice in the most direct way by the labour movement. ✍

Toward Industrial Unionism in the Education Sector

Advocates of industrial unionism think that all workers in the same industry should be organized into the same union. This is not to say that all workers or workplaces are exactly the same, but rather to say that, by organizing people doing similar or related work together, all of those workers have more power.

Workers in the education sector across Toronto are extremely diverse in who they are, but also in what they do. They include students (as current and future workers), elementary, middle, and high school teachers, teaching assistants, teacher's aides, tutors, university and college professors and instructors, and more. Additionally, there are other workers that allow for educational institutions to function, although they are often unrecognized: food service and janitorial staff, technicians and IT workers, and office support staff. While some of these workers are unorganized, others are separated into various student and labour unions and associations: CUPE, OPSEU, UNITE HERE, OSSTF, ETFO, OECTA, CFS, etc.

This all means that coordination and communication, (never mind collective action) *as education workers with similar class interests*, is extremely difficult. All too often, union officials and staffers are responsible for joint information sharing and planning, rather than rank-and-file workers. When we face struggles at our workplaces, we're lucky if other workers in our industry even know about it.

We should work within our unions to push for solidarity with others in the industry, as well as to increase communication and engage in joint action. We should also build bodies and organizations that allow explicitly for industrial-level planning and action. Moreover, these bodies should be based on principles of rank-and-file participation and democracy. Such organization would strengthen the position of all workers in the industry, and would diminish the likelihood of conflict between workers and union officials, or between union officials themselves. Most importantly, an organized education industry would be able to sustain a fight back against austerity agendas, struggle for better working and learning conditions, and work toward quality and accessible education for all. ✍

Ontario Teachers' Struggle Continues

CLASSroom spoke with C. Hewitt-White, a Toronto-based teacher and member of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF) about the ongoing education-sector strike. Her views are her own, and do not necessarily represent those of OSSTF. To read the full interview, please visit torontoiww.wordpress.com

CLASSroom: I understand that OSSTF has been escalating its strike actions. Why is this happening?

C. Hewitt-White: The Toronto district of OSSTF started our official legal strike action on Monday November 12. Many other districts have joined in since then. In Toronto, we are striking in response to two levels of attack: local and provincial. At the local level, school boards usually seek an increase in on-call supervision every round of bargaining. This is a crass cost-saving measure (it costs less than hiring occasional teachers) with nasty consequences. For example, teachers have less time for preparation during their workday, so they intensify their prep work in the limited time they have, work longer hours, or come to class less prepared. Students clearly don't benefit from increasing on-calls.

The issue that everyone has been hearing about is the provincial attack. In early spring of this year, the government announced that it would cut education funding for a two year "period of restraint," and that it would enforce cuts through legislation if the education unions did not accept them. In the months that followed, negotiations crumbled between the government and all unions save for the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA), which signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the government in July – behind the backs of its members and allied unions. Minister of Education Laurel Broten introduced Bill 115 in August and it was passed by provincial legislature on September 11.

Bill 115 imposed terms and conditions on OSSTF members, retroactive to September 1, identical to the terms and conditions in the OECTA MOU, which are: a two year wage freeze, a 97 day salary grid movement freeze for teachers who have been teaching less than 10 years, cutting our sick days from 20 to 10, and deleting accrued sick days as well as the ability to cash out a percentage of accrued sick day value upon retirement. Furthermore, Bill 115 stipulates that its measures trump existing law: it cannot be found by arbitrators or courts to be in contravention of the Ontario Labour Relations Act, Employment Standards Act, or Ontario Human Rights Code – even though it contravenes all of these.

Effectively, collective bargaining no longer exists for OSSTF, CUPE and ETFO members affected by the Bill because it is hamstrung by austerity parameters and the Minister of Education has ultimate say over our agreements.

CLASSroom: Why has OSSTF chosen to strike in response? What sorts of actions are taking place?

C. Hewitt-White: As far as I can understand from OSSTF communications and discussions with my coworkers, our strike action is a tool designed to put pressure on our local boards to stop their attempts to increase on-calls and to dismantle our contract. But we are also putting pressure on the province to allow us to negotiate beyond the parameters of Bill 115.

However, union members have reason to suspect that our current negotiations are aiming for contracts that would be approved by the Minister of Education on the basis of being "substantially identical" to the entirely concessionary and undemocratic agreement that OECTA leadership signed. Our current negotiations basically accepts austerity measures, but tries to implement them

on the union leadership's own terms. For example, we know that OSSTF already, in the spring, offered a general wage freeze in exchange for not freezing newer teachers' movement up the salary grid, and offered to take on the unfunded liabilities of members' benefits plans.

The union decided on a strike strategy that would have little to no impact on students. Teachers are continuing to provide teaching-related labour but are withholding administrative labour. We are not attending meetings with administrators and we are also not doing parent-teacher interviews after school hours. Contrary to media reports, this is not a work-to-rule action, and we have not collectively withdrawn extra-curriculars (though some individual elementary teachers have). We are continuing to mark, prep, teach, offer extra help outside of class time, contact parents during our work day, informally monitor student behaviour in the hallways, and supervise extracurriculars.

CLASSroom: What do you think that the union is capable of accomplishing?

C. Hewitt-White: The union is a wealthy and well-oiled political machine that has helped many Liberals and NDP candidates to win their seats in parliament. In the past, at both the provincial and local levels, OSSTF has mobilized tons of its members to work on election campaigns, to attend rallies, and to attend our provincial conventions. OSSTF has the means to mount an intense fight-back outside of the courtroom and beyond the negotiating table, but lacks the political will to do so.

For instance, OSSTF could run train-the-trainer sessions for door to door campaigning, allowing us to engage directly with the public about how Bill 115 sets an anti-democratic precedent for all workers. It could hold public assemblies. It could publish literature for the general public about how education workers' unions have won improvements for the school system through the very process of collective bargaining that has come under attack. It could hold educational events that bring workers from the three main education unions in Ontario together. In short, it could use organizing methods to build broad support for our case and against Bill 115. Right now, rank and file members are trying out these methods because official union bodies are refusing to.

Broad education and engagement now will help us mobilize beyond December 31, when Bill 115 will come into full effect and strikes and lockouts will be banned. For education workers, what I mean by mobilization is "illegal" labour action, like a full walkout. Workers are scared of wildcat action because of fines and disciplinary action. They also lack confidence, knowledge, and skills – and union leaders are directly to blame for this by having failed to direct resources to rank-and-file education or provide training over a period of many years.

The unions have launched a legal challenge to Bill 115 that experts agree will win. But it will take from three to six years to finalize the case. That's three to six years of destructive ripple effects throughout the public sector, of wages lost, of people losing income when they are sick. Some union officials are hoping that Liberal leader contenders like [former ministers of education] Kathleen Wynne and Gerard Kennedy will make amends to OSSTF and repeal the Bill if elected. I think this is redundantly naive.

We are facing a situation in which there are few ways to overturn Bill 115 in the next year other than by creating a situation in which the public is mobilized, and students, parents, and workers take to the streets. This creates the same kind of pressure and purposeful chaos that a strike does – it disrupts business as usual and shifts consensus, as we saw happen in Quebec last spring. ☹



WHO WE ARE

THE INDUSTRIAL WORKERS OF THE WORLD IS A FIGHTING UNION FOR ALL WORKERS. THE 620 INDUSTRIAL ORGANIZING COMMITTEE IS A GROUP OF STUDENTS AND EDUCATION WORKERS FIGHTING FOR BETTER CONDITIONS TODAY AND A BETTER WORLD TOMORROW. IF YOU'RE INTERESTED IN ORGANIZING WITH US, PLEASE GET IN TOUCH!

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UPCOMING EVENTS

November 30: **Education Worker and Student Social** - A chance to meet and socialize with folks across the education sector. Hosted by the Toronto IWW. 8:00/Duke of York. For more info, email: iwwtoronto@gmail.com

"If you're on a college campus then that's where you are. The idea that you going into a factory is going to make a significant difference to the working class is nonsense. That you can support workers' strikes as an intellectual, sure. Concretely, I think one of the most important things is some kind of a press. Even if it starts out as just a little newsletter that shares ideas, that discusses ideas, that presents experiences." - Martin Glaberman