

EDUCATION FIGHTS THIS FALL– DEFEND QUALITY, PUBLICLY-FUNDED EDUCATION AND THE WORKERS WHO MAKE THIS HAPPEN



October 6, 2022

This fall, there will be a big fight to win fair collective agreements for all of our education workers. We knew that with the election of a provincial Conservative majority in June that we would need to spend the next four years defending our public institutions such as education and healthcare. With the cuts to education that each successive government brings, the Conservatives are creating a system in which more and more are calling for the privatization of education – charter schools and private schools that can fill the gaps for those students whose needs are not being met within the current under-funded system.

Quality, publicly-funded education matters to all of us in this province as it is one of the great equalizers in our society. We need to give students and education workers what they need to succeed – to thrive not just in our classrooms and schools, but also in society. Now, more than ever, in a post-pandemic society, students and education workers need to be given the supports that can help them bridge the learning gaps created by the pandemic.

With a current inflation rate sitting at 7% in Ontario, it is outrageous for this Minister of Education Stephen Lecce to propose a 2% wage increase for workers making less than \$40,000, and a 1.25% increase for all other workers. What Stephen Lecce is proposing as “reasonable” and “responsible” is insulting and an actual wage reduction for most workers, especially in light of the \$2.1 billion surplus that is projected at the end of this fiscal year.

Frontline education workers – much like healthcare and other frontline workers – are exhausted from this ongoing pandemic, from struggling with and meeting the needs of their own aging families while also going to work every day. This has propelled a mass exodus of workers leaving education. Many positions remain unfilled every single day in school boards across Toronto and York Region – simply because no workers can be found to fill them. At a time when people are hurting in this province, the Ford and Lecce government is sitting on a surplus budget and strategizing how to further “starve the beast”, a cycle of cutting more taxes to bring about budget deficits, leading to Conservative demands for reduced government spending.

We applaud the internal organizing work of CUPE 4400 and other CUPE members under the Ontario School Board Council of Unions, representing early childhood educators, custodians and school administrative staff, in achieving a 96.5% strike mandate with nearly an 83 per cent in turnout of its 55,000 members. This provides a good position for the union to bargain against this Conservative government who isn’t interested in a “just” recovery for workers, but lining up the pocketbooks of its friends on Bay Street.

However, in order to win this fight for our CUPE comrades (and for our elementary and secondary and Catholic teachers who are also bargaining), we need to have a united front against Lecce who continues to try to divide workers from students and parents, claiming that a potential strike is “not fair on families.” As trade unionists and as allies, we need to speak truth about this education fight instead of stoking fear.

It is *unfair* that this Conservative government is offering 2% and 1.25% wage increases to workers who make an average of \$39,000 per year. It is *really unfair* that Lecce is willing to jeopardize the

stability of our schools and the learning conditions of our students, who have already had so many disruptions since the beginning of the pandemic because his government is unwilling to fairly compensate workers. It is *extremely unfair* that Lecce and the Ford government continue to cut spending on public education and are unwilling to invest the resources to really give students what they need to succeed. Cuts are cuts, regardless of whether there are fewer dollars, or refusing to pay for inflation and more students.

An injury to one IS an injury to all. If Ford's government can get away with applying Bill 124-like wage conditions to low-paid education workers under these circumstances, which workers will they go after in 2023. Next time this government tries to stoke fear in parents of a potential strike and disruption in their children's learning, let's speak the truth about what this provincial government *isn't doing* for our families, for our neighbours, and for our communities.

This Labour Council resolves to:

- That all affiliates join this Labour Council in calling on the Ford government to bargain fairly and offer all education workers a decent wage increase that is at minimum aligned with Cost of Living Allowance (COLA);
- That all affiliates and concerned activists join this Labour Council in calling on local school boards, trustees and MPPs to invest in public education, and demand reform to the outdated education funding formula (so that students are given the necessary support for what they need to succeed);
- That every affiliate and concerned activist write letters to the Ford government demanding true investment in publicly-funded education, and show leadership in providing funding for smaller class sizes and improved ventilation;
- Support our CUPE comrades and teacher unions at any picket line or strike support in the near future
- That this Labour Council and affiliates get ready for similar fights in other sectors