

Paint the province purple! Lessons from the 2022 Education workers strike

By Peter Hogarth



In November 2022, Ontario workers delivered a spectacular blow to Doug Ford's government.

As Ontario's 55,000 education workers prepared to go on strike, then-Education Minister Stephen Lecce introduced Bill 28, the so-called *Keeping Students in Class Act*. Besides imposing a concessionary contract on the

lowest-paid workers in Ontario's education system, it stripped them of their right to strike and invoked Section 33 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (the notwithstanding clause) to prevent any challenge to the bill, to criminalize all strike activity, and to override rights protected in Ontario's *Labour*

Relations Act and the *Ontario Human Rights Code*.

But just four days later on November 7, Ford appeared in a hastily-called press conference to announce Bill 28's full repeal.

Ford claimed it was a good-faith gesture to kick-start negotiations with Ontario's 55,000 education workers, who had entered their second day of

an “illegal” strike, but his actions the previous week painted a very different picture: that of a government hell-bent on stripping workers of their right to strike and free collective bargaining, all on the pretext of keeping students in class.

The reality is that Ford and his government were spooked by the rapid (and unexpected) escalation of Ontario’s unions in response to Bill 28, which included a plan to launch an indefinite general strike a week later on November 14.

Ford’s stunning reversal wiped out his government’s ambitions to legislate away workers’ rights in the province.

So what led to all this?

Education workers

Above everything else, education workers themselves deserve the bulk of the credit for leading Ontario’s labour movement to this victory and, in the process, setting in motion its potential transformation. Represented by CUPE’s Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU), education workers set the stage for the confrontation months before they even had a strike vote. Their systematic approach using member-to-member engagement to organize and mobilize their members produced a record-breaking strike mandate vote in early October 2022: 96.5% in favour with an 83% turnout.

Outside the union, Justice for Workers (J4W) launched an

impressive solidarity campaign, including numerous calls to “paint the province purple,” which created opportunities for union and non-union workers alike to build support for education workers in their workplaces and communities.

In the same spirit, the Ontario Parent Action Network (OPAN) began to organize supportive parents and pushed back on then-Education Minister Stephen Lecce’s attempts to pit students and their families against education workers.

These initiatives, coupled with the union’s success in bargaining for the public good, produced a wave of support for education workers that swept the province. By the time they went on strike on November 4, the public was firmly in their corner.

Bill 28

But the fuse that lit the tinder-box of Ontario’s labour movement was Ford and Lecce’s introduction of Bill 28.

Special 5:00 am sessions were scheduled to force the bill through in record time. Tory Caucus members laughed, back-slapped each other, and mocked the Opposition throughout the proceedings. Their mouthpieces in the media predicted that parents would reward them for being so decisive.

Without a doubt, they thought they would face no opposition from labour. After all, the pundits said, Ford had managed to secure the backing of several

unions during the June provincial election that took place five months earlier. But they were dead wrong.

From backlash to escalation

The backlash was immediate. Within hours of Bill 28’s introduction on October 31, the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) launched its “Hands Off Workers’ Rights” campaign and called an emergency rally for the next day at the Ministry of Labour in downtown Toronto. Almost 4,000 people turned up, giving confidence to labour’s most progressive leaders to push for an escalation. The rally marched to Queen’s Park where thousands chanted for Ford and Lecce to resign.

The ONDP Caucus joined the rally and march, gave speeches at the Ministry and at Queen’s Park (from the back of a pick-up truck), and fuelled protesters’ demands. The next day, they called Ford a liar in Question Period and, one by one, were kicked out of the Assembly.

Throughout the week, thousands joined online and in-person events to support education workers: almost 600 people participated in a Justice for Workers phone action; tens of thousands sent emails to Tory MPPs (over 75,000 on CUPE’s “Don’t Be a Bully” campaign alone); and hundreds of parents and students rallied outside a downtown Toronto hotel on the eve of the strike.

On Thursday, November 3, Ford’s Bill 28 passed, although

Ford was conspicuously absent for the vote.

A divided caucus

From the moment of the Bill's introduction, reports were leaking from Queen's Park about a deep division in Ford's Caucus. One faction, led by Labour Minister Monte McNaughton, opposed Lecce's "nuclear option"—leading to heated confrontations between the two ministers in Caucus meetings.

McNaughton was under intense pressure from the unions he had courted in the lead-up to the election, all of which called and emailed him to denounce Bill 28's attack on the right to strike.

Despite Ford and Lecce's attempt to intimidate and threaten education workers, their walk-out on Friday, November 4 was massive: 126 active picket lines, including over 10,000 people at Queen's Park and tens of thousands in dozens of communities across the province. Parents, students, teachers, and other trade unionists flooded the lines throughout the day.

OPSEU—the largest public sector union in Ontario—sent a letter to its 8,000 members in the education sector, encouraging

them to walk off the job and join CUPE's pickets: "Your union will have your back. You will not have to pay any fines. And you will have the full force of [the union] behind you should your employer attempt to enact any discipline."

Thousands of OPSEU members wildcatted in support of CUPE

Ontario's unions, where rank-and-file members were calling on their leaders to join the strike. The pressure was so intense that the OFL Executive Board (its main decision-making body) held an emergency meeting on Saturday, November 5 where it voted unanimously to call a

mass protest at Queen's Park on November 12 and to launch an indefinite general strike on November 14.

In the 48 hours that followed that decision, Ontario was hurtling towards the biggest labour protests since the Days of Action under the Mike Harris regime in the 1990s.

These threats were real. Immediately after the vote, labour leaders rushed to "Solidarity Saturday" actions, including one at Sankofa Square (then named Yonge-Dundas Square) in downtown Toronto where hundreds of

protesters occupied the intersection.

CUPE Ontario's then-president Fred Hahn hinted at labour's escalation in his speech: "We were delayed in joining because we were meeting with other heads of unions. More will come on that, friends, but let me tell

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General strike

The groundswell of support was growing rapidly, both among the wider public and within

you this, a sneak peek: yesterday was the beginning. It is not the end.”

Hours later, a strike planning committee met to organize actions over the next two weeks. Word of the vote was already leaking on Twitter and Reddit and #GeneralStrikeON was trending upwards all day.

Wildcats

On November 6, OFL affiliates, including the teachers’ unions, began calling emergency meetings to discuss or vote on joining the strike. Hundreds of CUPE staff representatives joined a conference call to prepare locals—in every sector of the union, not just school boards—to discuss the possibility of walk-outs on Monday, November 7. The leadership assured members that the union would protect them from any fines. Commitments to strike immediately came from large locals in the post- secondary and municipal sectors.

By noon, Unifor made public a letter it sent to Ford’s office, hinting at wildcats by its own members in the auto sector to protest Bill 28: “We issue this notice that Unifor’s Auto and Independent Parts Supplier Councils, in coordination with affiliate local unions, will be exploring all options in the coming days to respond to these actions. We stand in solidarity with CUPE members.”

Beyond Ontario’s unions, the wider public was preparing to join the lines on November 7, including non-union workers

who were planning their own workplace walk-outs. The Canadian Federation of Students-Ontario was issuing calls to its locals to join the lines.

Support was also building outside the province: at its representatives’ assembly, the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation voted to donate \$1 million to the education workers’ strike.

Things were moving incredibly fast, with major developments coming every hour.

Growing resistance

In the early afternoon on November 6, CUPE National issued an advisory for a press conference on November 7 at 10:00 am where national and provincial labour leaders would discuss “the growing fightback against the Ford government’s Bill 28.” Later that day, Abacus released the findings of its Ontario-wide poll about the strike: half of respondents supported more unions joining the picket lines, and 71% wanted Ford to change his approach and give education workers a fair deal.

By evening, the *Toronto Star* was the first mainstream publication to break the news about labour’s plans to escalate, including launching a province-wide general strike on November 14. The *Star* repeated its general strike reporting early on Monday, November 7.

On Monday morning, CUPE’s lines were even bigger than Friday’s. Spirits were high and

members could feel the momentum. Everyone was waiting for labour’s 10:00 am announcement.

It felt like a tsunami was building. The only question was when it would break.

Curve-ball

The first sign of a curve-ball came around 7:30 am when Ford’s office announced he would speak at 9:00 am—one hour before labour’s presser.

Word was leaking from Queen’s Park that Ford was going to announce the repeal of Bill 28. Rumours were flying in the lobby and hospitality suites of the Sheraton Toronto Centre Hotel, where hundreds of labour leaders and staffers were camped out for negotiations the previous week. Labour leaders from across the country were arriving for labour’s big announcement at 10:00 am, now postponed till 11:00 am.

By the time Ford spoke, it was clear he had been disciplined. He spoke slowly and deliberately. His tone was conciliatory, despite taking cheap shots at CUPE and education workers. He said Bill 28 would be repealed, but only if education workers called off their strike.

Ford’s defeat

At first, the magnitude of Ford’s defeat was not obvious. Many were anxious to announce the escalation and turn their attention to building it. But as Ford’s announcement began to sink in, and as education

workers started celebrating on the lines (and online), the scale of labour's success came into view.

What happened between Ford's announcement and labour's press conference nearly two hours later requires an article all its own. Suffice it to say that many labour leaders were no longer confident their members could sustain what was about to be set in motion now that Bill 28 was effectively dead (or would be dead soon enough).

Bill 28 turned out to be a gift from Ford: an existential threat that helped unite the leadership of Ontario's unions and stiffen their resolve to take dramatic action. But with the bill gone, the sense of urgency among some leaders started to fade.

The debate within CUPE was whether to keep the lines up or take them down in response to Ford's announcement—a debate that continued among their members (and in the wider movement) despite the decision to collapse the pickets and return to work the next day.

While this was a difficult decision, it was ultimately a tactical mistake: workers should not give up their leverage

with this government, or any government or employer, until a deal is in hand. And the leverage that all Ontario workers held at that moment was truly unprecedented.

As this debate continued, there were many "what if" questions, but whatever disappointment we felt (about what might have happened or could have been) could not overshadow the huge victory that education workers made possible. It was a massive defeat for Ford, and one we should not soon forget, especially as education workers and teachers are heading

towards another potential strike.

Once CUPE made its decision to take down the lines, labour's media conference finally got underway. The hotel ballroom where it took place, and the corridor leading to it, was packed with media and labour leaders and staff. As then-president of the OSBCU Laura Walton made her way to the ballroom, huge cheers went up and the crowd started singing "Solidarity Forever" and applauding wildly.

Solidarity

Nearly 30 national and provincial labour leaders joined Walton and CUPE National president Mark Hancock on stage, an impressive display of solidarity of public and private sector unions (including those currently outside the house of labour). The leaders who spoke noted the historic and unprecedented nature of Bill 28's defeat at the hands of Ontario workers, as well as the urgency of "standing by, not standing down" to get a good deal for education workers.

Walton paid tribute to her members, acknowledging all of them as leaders, and made clear they would not hesitate to return to the lines if necessary.

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The most militant allies on the platform were Unifor's Lana Payne and OPSEU's JP Hornick: both emphasized the power of Ontario's labour movement and the need for more united action, including province-wide strikes, to win other looming and ongoing fights.

"When you come for one of us, you come for all of us," said Hornick in their remarks. "The Ford government may not know what it started, but I know that, as trade unionists, we will finish it. I know that workers united will shut this province down whenever we need to."

Their words resonated deeply in the room, and on the picket lines and in the wider movements outside it.

Later that day, the Ministry returned to the bargaining table and negotiations with OSBCU resumed. Fourteen solidarity actions were planned at Tory MPP offices for November 12 demanding a fair deal for education workers.

In the wake of Ford's defeat, a battle of interpretation was underway about what happened, how workers won, what could have been different, and what should happen next.

Without a doubt, trade unionists across the country were energized about this victory and already discussing what they could do to replicate it. The momentum held the potential to build labour's power everywhere.

Lessons from the struggle

For socialists, rank-and-file activists, and decent work campaigners, there are some lessons to generalize even four years later. Here are five to consider.

First, rank-and-file activity matters more than anything else. What education workers did themselves—in their workplaces and at the local level months and years ahead of time—laid a solid foundation for a powerful strike. It also prepared them well in advance for the difficult scenarios that would eventually emerge, especially defying legislation and engaging in "illegal" political protest.

This approach produced an army of organizers and leaders who helped generate support for the union's demands both inside and outside the union—especially with rank-and-file members of other unions who, in turn, created massive upward pressure on their own leaders to act. It also created a culture of democracy, accountability, and transparency throughout the OSBCU.

The question of leadership at the union-wide level is, without a doubt, important, but even the best leaders need a strong base to back them and insulate them from external or right-wing pressures. An engaged and mobilized base becomes even more urgent when labour leaders are reluctant to act or oppose

escalation; indeed, the near unanimity of Ontario's labour leadership about calling a general strike speaks to the pressure that education workers generated in the wider public and that their own members generated from below.

Second, the kind of solidarity we build must be easy, visible, and everywhere. If we want a strike (or any struggle) to win, or a general strike to happen, we can't sit back and simply wait. We have to build solidarity actively, and understand the purpose of it: to build the confidence of other workers to take action themselves. That's why our solidarity actions have to be easy to participate in (we want lots of people to join us); why they need to be highly visible (so people can find out about them and get a sense of the momentum; we also want the visibility to demoralize and demobilize our opponents); and why they need to be everywhere in the province (anyone can take action no matter where they live in Ontario, and regardless of whether they're part of a union or community group).

The appetite for solidarity exists in every community, but it needs to be organized and made visible. That should be our central task. This helps explain the fantastic success of the Justice for Workers "paint the province purple" campaign, which got underway the day after the OSBCU's strike mandate vote results were announced and continued right

through the strike, the repeal of Bill 28, and negotiations. People anywhere could join in—and they did.

Third, we don't have to wait for an election to take on Ford or to defeat him. A section of the labour leadership pins their hopes for change on getting the ONDP elected, and ends up focusing most of their time and attention on that task—to the exclusion of building a fight-back in between elections.

This victory shows that we can win big and impose defeats on Ford (or on any government) long before an election happens. This one came just five months after Ford's re-election on June 2, 2022 and exposed the deep contradictions of that election result: record-low voter turnout coupled with simmering anger at Ford and his policies.

When the labour movement seriously mobilizes well in advance of an election, the work it does on the ground with its own members and the wider public has the long-term effect of shaping the terms of debate by the time an election rolls around—including pushing the NDP to adopt what workers are demanding—and better positions us to win them.

Fourth, the path to a general strike is shorter than we think. Even in some corners of the left, where the demand for a general strike has become a routine thing (although often abstract), there is sometimes the sense that months or even years of preparation are

required before it could be called.

But the rapid escalation that took place from Bill 28's introduction on Monday, October 31 to its defeat just one week later on Monday, November, 7 shows that labour is actually capable of harnessing its resources and energy on extremely short notice. In this case, it had no choice: the pressure from education workers, rank-and-file members in other unions, and the wider public pushed the leadership into action. The existential threat of Bill 28 tipped the balance.

Even what was set in motion from the moment the labour leadership voted on November 5, 2022 for a general strike to Ford's announcement 48 hours later to repeal Bill 28 was impressive: the threat was a real one and labour was pulling out all the stops to execute it.

The point here is not that we should be calling for a general strike all the time, regardless of the circumstances.

In this case, the conditions were ripe for it: a well organized strike, plus massive public support built weeks before the strike, coupled with wider class anger and a willingness from rank-and-file members in other unions to take militant action.

This August, more than 255,000 teachers and education workers will see their contracts expire.

On June 3, every education-sector union filed

notice to bargain in a joint news conference. These unions include: L'Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens (AEFO), Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO), Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA), Ontario School Board Council of Unions (CUPE-OSBCU), and Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF/FEESO).

The question now, as we prepare for the coming fight is this: **What can we do now, to prepare the ground for the possibility of a strike in the education sector involving more than a quarter of a million workers?** What conversations need to take place now to build the solidarity necessary for education workers to win?

What can union and non-union workers do now and in the weeks ahead to build working-class solidarity for education workers? How can we prepare education workers for the possibility of strikes, and the potential for defying anti-strike legislation? What steps will organized labour prepare for solidarity strikes? And what can we do to support communities that will be affected by strikes across the education sector?

Make no mistake. A win for education workers would be a huge win for students, as well as for teachers and education staff. But it would also be a win for the rest of us, putting this government on the back foot



and building the confidence of the rest of us to keep fighting for better wages and better services.

If you are reading this article, ask yourself this: What can you do now to build support for education workers and lay the basis for the possibility of a general strike to win, not just on the education front, but also for better wages, health care, child care, public transit, and so much more.

In November 2022, just five months after an election with the lowest voter turn-out in Ontario's history, we got a glimpse of a mass movement ready to take off. Workers who were angry at Ford in the lead-up to the election had so

little faith in the system they declined to vote. But their anger hadn't gone anywhere. And when education workers showed they were prepared to fight seriously, solidarity poured in from everywhere.

For a few days that November, it appeared as if that anger was going to find its way to supporting education workers and possibly a general strike. When workers have a place to express their anger, they're more than willing to act.

The 2022 strike by education workers showed what's possible: 2026 could see a repeat of 2022. But with all education workers standing together, our side has more

unity, more clarity, and more preparation time. Our job is to deepen that solidarity among *all* rank-and-file workers, and prepare for action.

Cost-of-living crisis

The cost-of-living and housing crises are more acute today than in 2022. We need to raise working-class demands that challenge the priorities of Big Business, the banks, the chambers of commerce, and their backers like Ford and his government. Four years after the last one, there is real potential to build another mass movement that could escalate to defeat Ford and his agenda, once and for all. ★

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