

# 'No Cuts to Education' The Story of a Protest Movement

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Résumé de l'article

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## *‘No Cuts to Education’ The Story of a Protest Movement*

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### **Abstract**

*The return of the Conservatives to power in Ontario, Canada in 2018 saw major attacks on the province’s K-12 education system, centering on increases to class size and mandatory e-learning courses for students which, taken together with other budget cuts, amounted to the elimination of thousands of teaching and support staff positions, as well as threats of privatization. These policies provoked widespread resistance from education workers, who as union members and grassroots activists conducted extensive outreach to build public support, engaged in job actions, and participated in the largest strikes in Ontario for decades as part of the campaign for “No Cuts to Education.” The start of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020 ended the movement. This article assesses the victories and defeats of this key struggle in defense of public education. It considers the strategies and tactics of provincial and local union leadership and activist members, in which the battle with the provincial government for the alignment of public support was widely recognized as being of decisive importance. The author uses autoethnographic research as a local union leader, interviews with active union members, policy documents, union statements and media coverage to construct an historical account. This experience has relevance for studies of teachers’ resistance to the neoliberalization of education, as well as social movement unionism and its challenges.*



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In July 2018, the Conservatives were returned to power in the province of Ontario after a 14-year absence and initiated an agenda for K-12 public education under Premier Doug Ford centered on the elimination of thousands of teachers by increasing class sizes, requiring high school students to complete some courses online and other budget cuts. Over the following two years, Ontario's quarter million teachers and education workers, affiliated with five unions and employed in over five thousand publicly funded elementary and secondary schools, engaged in job action and strikes, campaigned for public support and in some cases built alliances with parent networks and other groups. It was the largest scale struggle in Ontario since a two-week "political protest" by teachers closed the province's schools in 1997, in an effort to stop cuts and the centralization of power under the previous Conservative government. This time, the stakes were arguably even higher. The proposed measures of the newly-elected Progressive Conservative (PC)<sup>1</sup> government built on the longer term neoliberalization of the province's school systems to amount to a hollowing out of the capacity especially of secondary schools to provide a comprehensive education. Activists and unionists feared that affluent families would flee to private schools while children from low-income families struggled with larger classes and fewer options. Meanwhile, thousands of teachers and support staff faced job loss over the coming years of phased-in cuts.

Numerous scholarly assessments have been made of the struggle over the initial neoliberalization of education in Ontario during the tenure of Conservative premier Mike Harris (1995 to 2002), which saw large-scale strikes and public campaigns against cuts to funding, school closures and attacks on teachers' working conditions (Sears, 2003; Basu, 2004; Rezai-Rashti, 2009). The initial years of the subsequent Liberal governments of premiers Dalton McGuinty (2004 to 2012) and Kathleen Wynne (2013 to 2018) were a period of relative education peace as reinvestments were made back into the system, and were more likely to be lauded by centrist policy consultants (Fullan & Doyle, 2014) than subject to critical scholars (Sears & Cairns, 2018). The significant labour conflicts that emerged from 2012 as the Liberals turned to fiscal austerity in the wake of the 2008-09 recession has received limited treatment, aside from MacNeil (2014), Hewitt-White (2015), Mancini (2020) and Bocking (2020). These works, several written by teachers, centre on some of the key issues that later came to define education conflicts under Ford's PC government from 2018 onwards, the institutional-legal challenges faced by unions within the context of the centralization of governance, questions of union strategy and internal democracy, and the overall neoliberalization of education.

This article assesses the battle between education unions and the Ford PC government, from the entrance of his party to power in July 2018, concluding two years later with the signing of collective agreements under the pressure of the COVID-19 pandemic. It focuses on the political conflict surrounding collective bargaining between the provincial government and five unions representing teachers and support staff in the publicly funded K-12 education system following the expiration of their collective agreements in August 2019: the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF), the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO), the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA - representing elementary and secondary teachers employed in publicly funded and operated Catholic schools - a particular feature of the province's education system), the Association des Enseignantes et des enseignants Franco-Ontariens (AEFO - representing educators in francophone school districts), and locals of the

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<sup>1</sup> Conservative, Progressive Conservative and PC are used interchangeably throughout this article to refer to the Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario.

Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE)<sup>2</sup>. I assess the strategies employed by the leadership and members of these unions that insisted on “no cuts to education” and that “class size matters<sup>3</sup>,” but whom ultimately felt compelled to acquiesce to some concessions in these areas. I argue that the success of the movement can be attributed to winning the battle for public opinion, viewed by both unions and the government as a key terrain of struggle, while building towards and conducting province-wide strikes. Where it was most successful, this was achieved through organizing by both official union leaders and member-activists.

Following an overview of research methodology, the context will be described in which the Conservatives attempted unsuccessfully to frame a public narrative of fiscal crisis in the province. It will then describe the characteristics of the education cuts subsequently announced by the government in March 2019, including increases to class size and mandatory e-learning, with ensuing cuts to school staff and a legislated cap on wage increases for public sector workers in Ontario. The following section describes how, concurrent with collective bargaining that largely centered on class size and e-learning, the unions and allies organized rallies, grassroots outreach, and public relations on these issues to force the Ford government to shift course by eroding popular support. The Conservatives countered through their own engagement with the media. The next section details member mobilization and the escalation of negotiations by the four teachers’ federations from September 2019, leading to rotating strikes from December 2019 through early March 2020. The final two sections address the end of the strike and the broader movement, as public attention shifted to the emergence of the coronavirus pandemic, and classrooms moved online for the remainder of the school year. They assess the contentious debate over the settlement, particularly for secondary teachers, as well as what the aftermath portended for issues that subsequently emerged during the pandemic under a government ideologically predisposed to fiscal austerity and privatization, and hostile towards organized labour.

## Methodology

At its core, this article is shaped by my personal involvement with its subject matter. I have worked in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) since 2008, initially as an adult education teacher and then as a substitute secondary teacher frequently employed in full-time term positions. Since 2010 I have also served on the union executive of the unit of OSSTF representing substitute teachers in Toronto. While in these roles, I completed my PhD in geography with a dissertation on the neoliberalization of education and its implications for teachers’ professional autonomy, drawing on case studies in Toronto, New York and Mexico City, and subsequently published as Bocking (2020). That research, and this article, are anchored within my experiences as a teacher and a unionist. Inspired by the critical scholarship of Chicago education activist and academic Pauline Lipman, I “[reject] the binary of rigorous research and political involvement,” (2017, p. 6). There are certainly risks to conducting “insider research,” including unexamined bias, parochialism and taking for granted the familiar (Hillier & Milne, 2018). Provided one exercises critical reflexivity over their own social location in relation to their research (Thurairajah, 2018), there are also advantages, such as familiarity leading to more informed and grounded questions, and greater access and acceptance from participants (Kleinknecht, 2018; Hillier & Milne, 2018). As a result, this article draws considerably on autoethnography, based on my experiences as a union activist and local leader engaged in OSSTF’s campaign for “No Cuts to Education” from

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<sup>2</sup> The membership numbers of these unions were respectively 60 000, 83 000, 45 000, 12 000 and 55 000.

<sup>3</sup> The campaign slogans of OSSTF and ETFO, respectively.

July 2018 to June 2020. Following the announcement of major cuts in March 2019, I participated on an almost daily basis by co-chairing Toronto's political action committee, attending local executive meetings and provincial councils of OSSTF leaders, facilitating member training workshops, joining activist gatherings in living rooms and classrooms, waving banners at rallies and later, by marching on picket lines.

In this article, I provide a historical record of key government policies, union and activist responses and broader public opinion during this struggle. I use coverage from major Ontario media including the *Toronto Star*, *Globe and Mail*, *Ottawa Citizen*, *CBC News*, *Global News* and *CP 24*, as well as internal memos and reports from unions, school districts and the provincial government. This account is enriched by confidential interviews of 60 to 75 minutes in length conducted online using video with six teachers in the Greater Toronto Area, selected by a snowball approach (Babbie & Benaquisto, 2002), who participated within the official structures of their unions, as well as grassroots networks that emerged during this time. I prioritized their perspectives to balance the greater prominence of official narratives both from the unions as institutions and from mainstream understandings represented here by media accounts. As a result of the deepest cuts being proposed by the government at the secondary level, as well as my own roles and experience, while surveying the panorama of the conflict over public education across Ontario, this article focuses on OSSTF and draws much of its context from Toronto.

## The Context

What became the signature education policy of Premier Ford's government — the raising of class sizes, introduction of mandatory e-learning courses, and the elimination of thousands of teachers — was never mentioned during the 2018 election. Adopting a vague populism on the campaign hustings, Ford promised no jobs would be cut as a result of fulfilling his commitment to “save 4 cents on the dollar” in government spending.<sup>4</sup> His campaign avoided talking explicitly about austerity, in sharp contrast to the previous provincial election in 2014 when the PC party, appearing to draw inspiration from the contemporary US-based Tea Party movement, asserted the virtues of free market ideology while demonizing public sector workers and unions. Then PC leader Tim Hudak made headlines with his promise to eliminate one hundred thousand public sector jobs, including around ten thousand within K-12 education, to facilitate cutting corporate taxes, which would purportedly generate a million private sector jobs (Canadian Press, 2014). Hudak's pledge likely helped save the embattled governing Liberals.

Upon taking office in July 2018, the central message of the PCs was that alleged mismanagement of provincial finances by the outgoing Liberals had resulted in a budget deficit of \$15 billion, over twice as large as was previously believed. The PCs insisted urgent measures must be taken to reduce public spending and commissioned a multinational consulting firm to conduct a “line by line audit” of trends in Ontario's finances over the past 15 years, 14 of which were under Liberal governments.<sup>5</sup> The well-publicized report emphasized that both spending and the

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<sup>4</sup> The two main planks of Ford's education platform consisted of blaming a recent decline in standardized test scores on the implementation of “fuzzy” Discovery Math by the governing Liberals, and pitching to the PC Party's social conservative base, a vow to rescind a recently updated Health and Physical Education curriculum which included discussion of gender identity and consent in relationships.

<sup>5</sup> The report favourably observed, “Governments around the world are moving towards alternate arrangements for funding, including tying funding to the achievement of outcomes, and providing funding to

province's debt had risen significantly, particularly as a result of the Great Recession of 2008-09. It observed that salaries in healthcare and education accounted for the largest share of the budget and recommended that the government maximize its control over labour negotiations to limit compensation increases. The 49-page document contained no direct reference to the provincial deficit (Ernst & Young, 2018). By September 2019, facing increasing skepticism from the media, particularly following the resignation of the government's senior auditor, the PCs conceded the deficit was \$7.4 billion, close to where it was originally reported (Benzie, 2019). In 2019, the Ontario economy was growing. Although average wages saw little growth in line with the broader precarization of Canada's labour market, unemployment was relatively low.

As a result, the PCs faced greater skepticism than had previous governments when they declared the fiscal need for a drastic cut to K-12 education funding. In March 2019, the PCs announced that over the following three school years, class size averages in secondary schools would increase by six students, from 22 to 28, and from 23 to 24 in grades 4 through 8 in order to reduce the deficit (Jeffords, 2019). In addition, beginning in the 2020-2021 school year, high school students would be required to take at least one course online at each grade level. The government also announced it would discontinue a \$235 million Local Priorities Fund negotiated by unions in 2017, used to hire additional Special Education teachers and support staff. Initially, the PC government claimed these changes would result in 3,475 fewer teachers. However the government's Financial Accountability Office estimated that 10,000 teaching positions would be eliminated by the 2023-24 school year: 9,000 at the secondary level and 1,000 at the elementary level, saving \$900 million a year (Miller, 2019b; Jeffords, 2019; FAO, 2019). The government announced a \$1.6 billion fund to purportedly ensure no teachers would be laid off due to increasing class sizes and mandatory e-learning and that the staffing reductions would be achieved through retirements, resignations and leaves. However the plan would not prevent layoffs due to the cancelled Local Priorities Fund or for teachers returning from leaves and seconded positions. In all, over 600 teachers and support staff (including social workers, psychologists, custodians and learning coaches) were laid off in Toronto and neighbouring districts (Herhalt, 2019). The government's cuts contributed to a \$67.8 million 2019-2020 budget shortfall for the TDSB (Rushowy, 2019), part of a reduction in funding for districts across the province by \$430 million, a two percent real decline from the 2017-18 school year (Tranjan, 2019).

The proposed class size increases generated widespread opposition (Miller, 2019b). Public scorn was poured on the education minister's suggestions it would develop students' "coping skills" and "resiliency", and that "by increasing class sizes in high school we're preparing them for the reality of post secondary as well as the world of work" (Jones, 2019). When the first incremental step of the increases was implemented at the start of the 2019-2020 school year, moving the average from 22 to 23.6<sup>6</sup> in the TDSB, the media published accounts from teachers of how their classrooms had become more crowded, leaving them less capable of providing individualized support. Toronto history teacher Terry Maguire observed, "With my attention split among a bigger population, some students saw an opportunity to chat, nap or escape into cellphone oblivion" (Toronto Life, 2019). They explained how the status quo average of 22 meant that Special Education classes with six students offset the many classes with 30 to 34 students. The

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individuals, who can then choose their service providers through a form of market activity and discipline" (Ernst & Young, 2018, p. 23), prompting concern that the PCs intended to introduce school vouchers.

<sup>6</sup> Finalized class sizes released in March 2020 based on shifts in enrolment found that the average in 2019-20 was 22.8 (TDSB 2020a).

loss of numerous courses meant classes with over 40 students even before the full average increase of six students was phased in (Cheema, 2019; Toronto Life, 2019; Miller, 2019a; CBC, 2019a). Particularly in smaller high schools in rural areas, public concern turned to how the loss of teaching staff necessitated cutting elective upper year courses and consolidating students in fewer classes. Advanced math, science and technology courses were among the most affected, which was ironic considering the Ford government's rhetorical commitment to STEM (Miller, 2019a; Dunn, 2019).

While second in public profile to the increase in class sizes, mandatory e-learning also received broad criticism, with scarce defenders to be found outside the government. TDSB teacher Beyhan Farhadi's doctoral dissertation on the school district's existing (optional) e-learning program concluded that it tended to perpetuate inequity and undermine social cohesion. Students from the most affluent and privileged families performed the best, while students from low-income and some racialized backgrounds were most likely to drop the courses (Farhadi, 2019; DiManno, 2019). A province-wide survey conducted by high school student trustees found that 95% of over 6,000 responding students opposed mandatory e-learning, with many citing a lack of direct support, structure and guidance from an in-person adult (OSTA, 2019). A TDSB survey in February 2020 of Grade 7-12 students, parents and secondary teachers with a total of five thousand respondents found that 87 percent of students, 81 percent of parents and 97 percent of teachers opposed mandatory e-learning (TDSB, 2020b). Citing the experiences of five US states that require one e-learning credit for high school graduation, Farhadi (2019) further found that the expansion of e-learning programs by governments tended to be motivated by fiscal expediency, rather than enhancing student learning. With a lack of publicized details on how it would be rolled out except that it would not be operated by local school districts, mandatory e-learning could amount to privatization and union-busting, were the courses to be delivered by private firms employing low-wage instructors (DiManno, 2019).<sup>7</sup>

In November 2019, the PCs passed a bill to cap compensation increases for the provincial public sector at one percent per year (Goldblatt Partners, 2019), citing a need for fiscal austerity. The teachers' federations filed legal challenges claiming the law was contrary to the guarantee of freedom of association under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Dhanraj, 2019). The unions insisted to the public and to their membership that their top priorities in contract negotiations were reversing the class size increases and stopping mandatory e-learning<sup>8</sup>, but were obliged to oppose a circumvention of collective bargaining rights. The unions had tabled proposals for compensation increases matching the rate of inflation, estimated in 2019 at 1.9 percent. The principal counter-assertion of Ford's newly appointed media savvy<sup>9</sup> education minister, Stephen Lecce was that the unions only cared about the salaries of their members, drawing on well-established right wing tropes that public sector workers were an overpaid burden on tax payers (Keefe, 2010). The context for the battle over public education in Ontario over 2019 and 2020 had been set.

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<sup>7</sup> Presentation by TDSB teacher Seth Bernstein at OSSTF Toronto Political Action Committee Professional Development Day, February 14, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> A Message to OSSTF/FEESO Members from the Provincial Executive (January 10, 2020 and February 12, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> Prior to being elected Member of Provincial Parliament in 2018, Lecce ran a public relations firm and was director of media relations under Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper. His limited personal experience with public education (he graduated from an elite private high school) is frequently cited by teacher activists.

## The Battle for Public Opinion

Unlike the last two rounds of education union negotiations under Liberal governments in 2012-13 and 2015-16, where the issues were either opaque or centered on compensation, making the elicitation of public sympathy difficult (MacNeil, 2014; Bocking, 2020), Premier Ford's government made the issues starkly clear by introducing the class size increases and mandatory e-learning in the March 2019 provincial budget. Local units of OSSTF, the union whose members were most affected, and school districts publicized projections of the numbers of teachers who would be laid off in the fall. Providing details on the number of teachers and courses that would be lost at specific schools was particularly effective in gaining sympathetic media coverage, especially for rural districts with a small number of (locally well-known) schools. Many of these areas were held provincially by the PCs; local OSSTF members held "tailgate" rallies and protests outside their constituency offices. Members of Provincial Parliament (MPPs) and chairs of local chambers of commerce, a key Conservative ally, were compelled to respond publicly on the loss of upper year STEM courses from small high schools in rural areas with limited access to high speed internet where nevertheless students would be compelled to take online classes (Hodgins, 2019; Law, 2019; Miller, 2019a; Rivers, 2019). Protests outside PC MPP offices in Toronto were also common. While they provided an activity for union activists to build their organizing capacity in their schools in the months leading up to job actions and strikes, they did not capture public attention through the media to the same extent.<sup>10</sup> Major regional media sources including the *Toronto Star*, *CBC*, *CP 24* and *Global News* did report on overall losses of teachers and courses and corresponding class size increases in Toronto and adjacent suburban districts.<sup>11</sup>

These first waves of mobilization against the education cuts in the wake of the provincial budget in the spring and fall of 2019 centered on a highly visible coalition of the education unions, parent activists and high school students. Two days prior to a rally of over 20,000 education workers and parents outside the Queen's Park legislature in Toronto on April 6, students used social media adeptly to organize walk outs at hundreds of high schools across the province.<sup>12</sup> Parent activists, many of whom coalesced into the Ontario Parent Action Network, organized "walk-ins" in early June at around 350 elementary schools, and again in October 2019 at twice as many. Parents arrived at the schools with their children and rallied outside alongside teachers before the start of class. Parent connections were far weaker at the secondary level; walk-ins here received varying levels of support from local districts of OSSTF and were primarily led by activist teachers and sometimes joined by students.

Concurrent with these grassroots-led mobilizations, the provincial office of OSSTF launched a multi-pronged online campaign, guided by a consulting firm, aimed at undermining Conservative support among voters in electoral swing ridings and the business community. Algorithms on social media websites including Facebook, targeted advertisements to likely

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<sup>10</sup> Author's personal observations.

<sup>11</sup> The unpopularity of Premier Ford by June 2019, one year into his mandate, at a time when education was the highest profile issue of public debate, was best symbolized by the resounding boos he received upon taking the stage before over a hundred thousand spectators and millions more viewers at the victory celebrations of the NBA winning Toronto Raptors.

<sup>12</sup> The latter event was covered with duelling headlines, with the mainstream *Toronto Star* reporting "Lesson Plan: Students Across Ontario Walking out of Class Thursday to Protest Ford's Education Cuts", while the PC Party aligned newspaper *Toronto Sun* printed, "It's War! Teachers using students to fight their battle against Ford's badly needed changes to education".



Conservative voters, with links to [hereforstudents.ca](http://hereforstudents.ca) featuring videos of staff describing the effect of the cuts on their schools, and a button to send an email to their MPP. Targeting business groups and press, the union commissioned the Conference Board of Canada, one of the country's largest think tanks with a centrist pro-business orientation, to prepare *The Economic Case for Investing in Education*. The report emphasizing that every dollar of funding for public education ultimately added \$1.30 to the province's economy, and that higher graduation rates reduced public usage of healthcare and social assistance, was launched at the elite Empire Club in Toronto before a corporate audience in June 2019 (Conference Board of Canada, 2019). The report was promoted on [betterschoolsstrongereconomy.ca](http://betterschoolsstrongereconomy.ca). One OSSTF activist who organized with OEWU was generally favourable towards the union's public messaging strategy, but strongly skeptical of the value of the partnership with the Conference Board, considering its cost in relation to the amount of positive media it produced. She considered it an example of the union leadership's over-reliance on networking within establishment spaces, and the time and money better spent liaising with parent and grassroots community groups (Interview 2).

It is difficult to reach a definitive understanding of the extent that these media campaigns affected the actions of the governing PCs. Provincial OSSTF leadership strongly argued for its effectiveness to local leaders, with internal reports in September 2019 showing [hereforstudents.ca](http://hereforstudents.ca) had received millions of views and that hundreds of thousands of emails had been sent to MPPs, leading to numbers of online supporters in some electoral districts that were larger than the PC's margin of victory in these swing areas.<sup>13</sup> During this time and afterwards, outside the pro-PC *Toronto Sun*, it was difficult to find voices in the media willing to support the government's case for class size increases and mandatory e-learning. OSSTF commissioned monthly polling by prominent market research firm Environics, to track public sentiment on education issues, particularly in the context of job actions by the unions. The polls consistently showed a majority of the public believed the government's education policies were "on the wrong track."

### Preparing to Strike

While outward-facing campaigns were critical to building public opposition to the cuts, their primary importance was in generating popular support for educators to engage in the most significant protest of all: the collective withdrawal of their labour through strike action (McAlevey, 2020). The expiration of collective agreements on August 31, 2019 covering over 250,000 K-12 employees in Ontario represented by the four teachers' federations, some of which also represented support staff, and CUPE, representing other units of support staff, provided the best opportunity to reverse the cuts under the existing government. The strategic subordination of other forms of political action to the ability to strike was particularly the case given the PC government was early into its four-year term, and its majority control of the provincial legislature. Yet the fragmented nature of K-12 collective bargaining in Ontario across five unions contributed to a complexity difficult to follow for both members and the public. Perhaps most significantly, it undermined solidarity across the sector, as each union had a "political philosophy and its own view of its role" (MacNeil, 2014, p. 125) that varied significantly. This complexity was compounded by the centralization of education governance, beginning in the late 1990s when Ontario's previous PC administration uploaded control over education funding from school districts to the provincial

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<sup>13</sup> Personal Notes.

government, and the subsequent creation of a two-tier central/local bargaining structure: monetary issues including compensation and class size were negotiated centrally with the government. Working conditions were negotiated between school districts and local unions (Sweeney, 2013).

Over the fall, as unions campaigned against the cuts and prepared for negotiations, activist members especially of OSSTF Toronto and the Elementary Teachers of Toronto began meeting outside of formal union structures. They were driven by underlying principles of unifying activity across unions, as well as the intrinsic value of rank and file self-organization, and a fear by some that the provincial leaderships would capitulate on the issues of class size increases and mandatory e-learning. Participants drew inspiration from Eric Blanc's *Red State Revolt* (2019)<sup>14</sup>. The book assessed the Red for Ed grassroots-led teachers and education worker strikes that swept West Virginia, Arizona, Oklahoma and other states over spring 2018 despite the initial reluctance of official union leaders. Many readers in Ontario likewise reasoned that grassroots union activists should be prepared to push for strike action to stop the cuts.<sup>15</sup> The network launched itself in September 2019 as Ontario Education Workers United (OEWU) —the name conveying occupational and geographical inclusivity, with an online pledge for members of the education unions to oppose the cuts by strike action if necessary. The pledge was soon overshadowed by impending strike votes and acknowledgement from union leadership that the primary issue was fighting the cuts. However the OEWU Facebook group, quickly joined by thousands of education workers across the province, proved to be the most prominent forum for discussion across unions and local districts. OEWU members were instrumental in liaising with parent activists and organizing their colleagues to join hundreds of school “walk-ins” in October, particularly where support for the action from local union districts was weak. Another outcome of OEWU's efforts was helping to convey the readiness of teachers to strike, overcoming the reticence of local and provincial leaders concerned that the risk was too great that the government would immediately introduce back-to-work legislation.<sup>16</sup>

In 2019, the PCs proposed that the vast majority of substantive issues be addressed centrally, in line with an international trend by administrations concerned with “cost containment” and the tendency of local unions to whipsaw school districts by demanding that gains won at one district be applied to others (Bocking, 2018). OSSTF insisted more issues be negotiated locally, concerned that the government could reverse whipsaw and push superior conditions in some districts down to a lower common denominator. While negotiations officially began in May 2019, central bargaining did not begin in earnest until September 30 for OSSTF.<sup>17</sup>

OSSTF recaptured momentum by breaking with an established practice in negotiations. Rather than keep its proposals and discussion at the negotiating table confidential, the union engaged in “transparent bargaining” by posting its proposals and those it received from the

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<sup>14</sup> Blanc presented his book to dozens of teachers in Toronto in May 2019. A number of school union stewards created book clubs with their colleagues (Personal Notes).

<sup>15</sup> Books and webinars by labour organizer and writer Jane McAlevey were another cross-border influence, as were Barbara Madeloni, former president of the Massachusetts Teachers Association, and representatives of the Chicago Teachers Union and United Teachers of Los Angeles, who spoke to dozens of OSSTF Toronto activists at day-long trainings in member organizing facilitated by the local political action committee.

<sup>16</sup> The observations in this section draw primarily from participation in OEWU meetings in Toronto, informal conversations with OEWU activists from August through November 2019 and Interviews 1 through 5.

<sup>17</sup> The Ontario Labour Relations Board ultimately ruled in favour of the government's position.

government, along with summaries of negotiation sessions<sup>18</sup> on the website [www.bargainingforeducation.ca](http://www.bargainingforeducation.ca). As union leaders acknowledged, it was not “open bargaining,” as practiced in the US by the St. Paul Federation of Teachers and the Chicago Teachers Union, where negotiations are public and bargaining demands are crafted through consultation with non-members including parent and student groups (Bascia & Stevenson, 2017).<sup>19</sup> Yet transparency was a shrewd approach. It was easier for union members to follow the process and feel invested in it. It also enabled OSSTF to respond to government claims that the union was only interested in compensation by inviting journalists and the public to read the bargaining proposals themselves. Education Minister Lecce referred to OSSTF’s transparent bargaining website in his media statements, claiming the proposals posted provided evidence of the union’s intransigence. Given public displeasure with class size increases and mandatory e-learning, this may have actually helped OSSTF’s position (Bennett et al., 2020).

As teachers’ federations entered negotiations in earnest, CUPE Ontario’s education workers council representing 55,000 custodians, school secretaries and educational assistants across the province announced a tentative agreement on October 6, two weeks before Canada’s federal elections, and hours before its strike deadline. The union cited as a key victory the restoration of tens of millions of dollars from the discontinued Local Priorities Fund, bringing back the jobs of 1,300 members (Crawley, 2019). CUPE emphasized in its public communications the services these workers provided for students. Some commentators speculated that the union exploited the provincial PC government’s vulnerability during the federal election. Polls suggested that the provincial PC government’s cuts to education hurt national Conservative candidates in Ontario, contributing to the federal Liberal Party remaining in power (CBC, 2019b). CUPE did not have to negotiate over the class size increases or e-learning which affected the teachers’ federations, making a deal much easier.

On October 24, three days after the federal election, Education Minister Lecce announced to the media that average high school class sizes would rise to 25:1, rather than 28:1. The reduced increase would still result in the loss of an estimated 5,000 teaching positions (4,000 at the secondary level and 1,000 at the elementary level). Additional new proposals would eliminate contractual language for class size caps or protections on the use of teachers’ non-classroom preparation time. Lecce’s proposals were swiftly dismissed by the unions. By mid-November, the federations had completed strike votes from their members of at least 95 percent.<sup>20</sup> OSSTF began a “limited withdrawal of services” on November 26. Members boycotted a range of primarily administrative tasks including carrying out provincial standardized tests and attending unpaid after school meetings or training conducted by the government or school districts. Over the following months, these job actions escalated to include a boycott of staff meetings, not entering comments on report cards and not covering unpaid “on-calls” for absent teachers. As the provincial leadership explained in a letter to members, the intention was to “send a message with as little impact as possible on students.” Meanwhile, members held weekly information pickets before and after school to conduct outreach to the public. Interviewed education activists all considered this the

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<sup>18</sup> This strategy had been agreed to months earlier at a meeting of local OSSTF presidents and chief negotiators (Personal Notes).

<sup>19</sup> In May 2019, the Saskatchewan Teachers’ Federation announced a similar approach to bargaining with its provincial government, while also emphasizing class sizes as a top issue (Soloducha, 2019).

<sup>20</sup> The federations used differing methods of conducting strike votes, from district meetings to online voting. Turnout rates are traditionally not released in Ontario, however after holding school-site votes over several days, OSSTF Toronto proudly reported that 91 percent of its members had voted 95 percent in favour of striking.

most innovative strategy employed by the union, both for its capacity to engage with the public, and for its empowering effect on members who became practiced in doing this. Local union leaders helped by publicizing successful school actions to the broader membership and encouraging emulation.

Refusing to carry out the standardized tests provided an opportunity to directly confront the Ford government's insistence that they were vital metrics to assess education "quality" — a larger ideological battle which was enthusiastically taken up by many teachers. In terms of both generating member support and building bridges with the public, these were superior tactics to the boycotting of extracurricular activities, as was done in previous rounds of bargaining, most notably in 2012-13. Cancelling school clubs and sports had led many parents and the broader public to perceive that students were being targeted for the union's leverage. Individual teachers could justifiably say the influx of more students into their classroom left them too exhausted to run additional after school or lunchtime activities. Yet many teachers considered extracurriculars one of the best parts of their job, often because it provided a more fulfilling way to work with students outside the strictures of the classroom, particularly those students who struggled the most. OSSTF made clear that members were welcome to continue running extracurriculars during the "limited withdrawal" actions.

With little progress at the bargaining table, OSSTF held a one-day full strike on December 4, 2019, closing all public high schools across the province, and some elementary schools where the union represented support staff. On December 11, the union initiated weekly one-day rotating strikes at several school districts at a time across the province, continuing over January, February and into early March 2020. ETFO, OECTA and AEFO subsequently initiated one-day rotating strikes, but days and locations were seldom aligned across unions. On average, each union would strike in each district on a monthly basis. The intent of the strategy was to continue publicly undermining Ford by keeping the conflict perpetually in the news cycle across Ontario, while making it difficult for his government to invoke back-to-work legislation by claiming that the school year was beyond recovery.<sup>21</sup> Pickets initially unfolded outside schools, district and government offices. Picketers, especially across northern Ontario, endured winter temperatures as low as -25C (-13 Fahrenheit).

On elementary strike days, the Ontario Parent Action Network organized a dozen "solidarity camps" across the Greater Toronto Area, providing low or no fee child care. While small scale, the camps were welcomed by participating families and helped generate good will during the strike (Kinch, 2020) Once the strikes were underway, the activity of OEWU became largely subsumed within the official structures and strategies of the unions, as individual activists mobilized their colleagues at school. OEWU's large Facebook group remained a significant site for cross-union discussion, amid the local or single union focus of other social networks. While students at some high schools rallied in support of their teachers, there were no province-wide mobilizations of the scale that had occurred in the spring of 2019 following the government's announcements of the cuts. Teacher activists (Interviews 2 and 4) who had had some communication with leaders of the earlier student walkouts, attributed this at least in part to many of these leaders having since graduated, suggesting the fluidity and informality of high school

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<sup>21</sup> Despite the otherwise aggressive tone of their public statements towards teachers and education unions during this conflict, the PCs signalled a reluctance to use "back to work" legislation to declare the strikes illegal, with defiant unions and individuals at risk of fines and imprisonment. The PCs were likely cautious due to recent Supreme Court of Canada rulings in favour of the right to strike.

student activism. Meanwhile the official Ontario Student Trustees' Association, despite criticizing the Ford government's education policies, issued a statement against the strikes as a disruption to learning.

According to polling in mid-January 2020 by the Environics firm commissioned by OSSTF, teachers continued to hold public support during the strikes. A majority of respondents indicated that Ford's government was doing a "poor job" overall, and that his education policies made respondents less likely to vote for the PCs in the future (D'Mello, 2020). This was confirmed by a poll by Dart Insights released on February 10, which reported 63 percent of respondents believed the dispute was over "class sizes and mandatory student online credits—not because of a disagreement over an increase in teacher compensation," vindicating the federations' message and repudiating the PCs' primary counter-narrative (Dhanraj, 2020). Moreover, 42 percent of respondents found the teachers' unions were "fair and reasonable", compared to 25 percent for the government; perhaps most interestingly, majority support for the rotating teachers' strikes had risen since a poll at the beginning of December, prior to the start of the strikes (Dhanraj, 2020).

Strike action arguably reached its peak on February 21 when, for the first and only time, all four federations struck together, province-wide. All of Ontario's 5,000 publicly funded elementary and secondary schools were closed, and approximately 200,000 teachers and support staff walked picket lines. A mass picket of 30,000 circled the provincial legislature in downtown Toronto, while 20,000 in neighbouring Peel Region marched along a "30 kilometre picket line" from Lake Ontario in the south, through the city of Mississauga, to the city of Brampton in the north (Rodrigues & Dhanraj, 2020; Rushowy, 2020a). The strike was the first time since the two week long unsanctioned "political protest" against the previous Conservative government in 1997, that all federations acted in unison.

### **The End of a Strike**

The euphoria felt by many participants from the strength in numbers, cross-union solidarity, and an unseasonably warm, sunny day of picketing by thousands of OSSTF and OECTA members at the provincial legislature in Toronto on March 5, 2020, was tempered in the late afternoon when word spread that OECTA had entered serious talks with the provincial government. OECTA's concessionary settlement in 2012, which the previous Liberal government imposed on OSSTF and ETFO, led to fear of another precedent-setting sell-out deal. Pressure had continued to build on the government following the February 21 province-wide all-union strike. The results of a public consultation following the announcement of class size increases and mandatory e-learning in 2019, which the government had refused to release, were revealed in a labour board hearing in late February; media headlines reported that the 7,000 respondents overwhelmingly opposed both initiatives (Rushowy, 2020b). Ford escalated his public rhetoric in response, claiming teacher unions "have held the province hostage for 50 years" (Rushowy, 2020c). Yet the next day, on March 3, Education Minister Lecce interrupted informal mediated discussions with the unions to announce to the media that the government would reduce the increased high school class size average to 23 to 1 from the previous 25 to 1, allow students to opt out of e-learning, and restore the (renamed) Local Priorities Fund, which funded hundreds of teachers and support staff in Special Education. His announcement was described as a "near total capitulation" by the Canadian Press (Jones, 2020). OSSTF leadership responded that the new offer would still result in the elimination of thousands of courses and nearly 1,800 secondary teaching

positions<sup>22</sup> across Ontario and continued preparations for the next rotating strike on March 5 (Canadian Press, 2020).

It was to be the final strike day. On March 12, OECTA announced a tentative agreement with the government. ETFO and AEFO had also returned to negotiations. Ministry of Labour mediators contacted OSSTF leadership the week prior requesting they return to the table, but under the premise that the union accept the 23 to 1 class size average, and some form of mandatory e-learning, albeit with opt-out measures that had been put to OECTA. Provincial OSSTF leadership reported to local union presidents and chief negotiators on a conference call on March 13, that while a week prior, following the campaign slogan “No Cuts to Education,” they had held full confidence that the union should continue to fight any class size increase, events had since transformed the education landscape. President Bischof and other leaders emphasized that they were not referring to OECTA’s tentative agreement, but to another announcement that day which had completely overshadowed it: the imminent closure of Ontario’s schools due to the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic. OSSTF suspended all forms of job action. In the right wing *National Post* newspaper, a columnist and former PC election candidate commented on the closure of schools due to the pandemic:

When schools are finally ready to reopen, will parents have to worry about more strikes and work-to-rule activity?... One would certainly hope that the teaching unions realize that the time for disruption has passed. Teaching unions have been consistent in their message that their strikes were about protecting the interests of students. With the government having largely conceded on the issues said to be most threatening, that leaves only a small difference on wages and seniority hiring. There will be limited public sympathy for further strikes on either of those points. (Denley, 2020)

His assessment surely mirrored the Ford government’s interests in reaching an agreement on its terms which, while removed from its original cuts the year prior in March 2019, still included losses at the secondary level. ETFO reached tentative agreements on March 20, later ratified by 97 percent of teachers and 94 percent of support staff members.<sup>23</sup> On March 26, a majority of local OSSTF presidents and chief negotiators voted by teleconference that Provincial OSSTF return to the table on the mediator’s terms. A month later, OSSTF’s local presidents and chief negotiators, after lengthy debate over teleconference, followed the provincial executive’s recommendation and voted to recommend a tentative agreement to the full membership for a ratification vote. Along with the parameters accepted by OECTA, OSSTF had negotiated an expansion of the permanent teachers’ benefits plan to adult education and substitute teachers in term positions of at least three months.

The tentative agreement provoked considerable argument within OSSTF’s formal and informal forums. OSSTF’s Provincial Executive and many local leaders made the case in telephone town halls that the union had lost much of its leverage with the arrival of the pandemic. Not only were schools to remain physically closed for the remainder of the school year, moreover, in light of the union’s strategy of building popular support to undermine the Ford government’s prospects for reelection, polling suggested public attention had moved on from education to the

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<sup>22</sup> Most were positions that went unfilled following a retirement or leave of absence, rather than active teachers being laid off.

<sup>23</sup> The government backed down from most proposed cuts and guaranteed full day kindergarten under the existing model of a teacher and an early childhood educator in each class. ETFO accepted a one percent salary increase.

immediate implications of the pandemic for the healthcare system, as well as the economic downturn and rising unemployment. It would be difficult to bargain in the context of a mounting provincial deficit. The government could use the cover of austerity and a health emergency to rescind its proposal and possibly impose a worse contract. Moreover, it was reasoned, job action could trigger a public backlash, as the union would be more likely to be seen as acting in its self-interest in a time of widespread hardship and uncertainty. It would be better to settle now and negotiate the next collective agreement in two years, hopefully under a new government.

OEWU and dissenting members responded that by settling, the union would lose leverage to negotiate over health and safety and equity issues emerging from the pandemic, particularly in the context of schools reopening. OEWU was much more optimistic that public support could be galvanized to continue fighting, and suggested bargaining (and potentially job action) resume once schools reopen. A flyer circulated by OEWU argued that ratifying the agreement would be a “betrayal of the values we say we stand for... Voting ‘YES’ makes us partners with a deeply unpopular government making even more unpopular cuts. If we reject the deal, we force the government to take full responsibility.” Above all, the group opposed on principle a settlement that did not fully reverse class size increases and mandatory e-learning. On the latter, OEWU feared the government could use potential loopholes to privatize the delivery of online courses. On May 16, 2020, OSSTF’s members ratified the central agreements, at a rate of 90 percent for support staff and 77.5 percent for teachers, with majority votes in favour from every bargaining unit. By comparison, OECTA’s members, about a third of whom were secondary teachers subject to similar terms, voted by a total of 94 percent to ratify their central agreement. While not an argument publicly voiced by OSSTF’s leadership, many members explained their decision over social media in part by a feeling of isolation as all other unions had settled.

### **Assessing the Aftermath Amid the Pandemic**

Over the spring and summer of 2020, Ford’s approval ratings rose to new heights due to public perception that he was responsibly handling the pandemic. Ford had temporarily dropped his trademark partisanship to cooperate with the Liberal Federal government, and publicly distanced himself from the disastrous response by Trump’s administration (of whom he had previously expressed admiration), south of the border. Meanwhile, the annual staffing process for secondary teaching at the TDSB produced no new layoffs, and existing laid off teachers were reassigned (TDSB, 2020a). Yet the government quickly reverted to a confrontational stance towards the teachers’ federations: limiting consultation on reopening schools and defeating their legal challenge which asserted health and safety measures in schools were inadequate. Safety measures recommended by health experts were miserly funded (Herhalt, 2020), and only following protests and social media campaigns led by parent activists. When the federal government delivered additional funding to address the pandemic, Minister Lecce insinuated that it was associated with his government. Described as a support to families during the school closures, his office distributed \$400 to \$500 direct payments to parents, a transfer of approximately \$1.8 billion from the K-12 education budget<sup>24</sup>, some of which was used to subsidize the burgeoning online private tutoring industry. The popularity of Premier Ford and his administration remained high until the spring of 2021, when it plummeted amid widespread perception that he had mishandled

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<sup>24</sup> Ontario Minister of Education Stephen Lecce, “Letter to parents, April 11, 2021”. <https://www.ontario.ca/page/letter-ontarios-parents-minister-education>

the third wave of the pandemic. Given that class sizes were more important than ever during a pandemic, would the union have gained additional clout by remaining in a legal bargaining position within this context, and would it have outweighed the risks of negotiating within a politically volatile public health crisis? A related criticism by some teacher activists (Interviews 1, 2 and 4) was that the networking by unions at both the provincial and local levels with parent groups which had helped sway broader public support during negotiations disappeared when it concluded and the pandemic set in. Part of this was attributable to fatigue and new challenges besetting individual activists and leaders, part perhaps due to an emphasis on high-level court challenges. Amid Ontario schools shifting online for months at a time and physical distancing when in-person, social media became even more important as a forum for the socialization of teachers. The prevailing spirit of unity against the Ford government leading up to and during the strikes shifted into a more ambivalent and charged atmosphere during the pandemic. Similarly, the widely shared common cause of educators and parents resisting class size increases and mandatory e-learning, became somewhat fragmented as the pandemic dragged on by conflict over when in-person schools should reopen, with some vocal community groups arguing they must reopen despite almost any public health conditions, due to the adverse effect of remote learning on student mental health.

A clause in the new collective agreement stipulated that calculations of per-student funding in relation to e-learning enrolment remain at a 2018 baseline prior to implementation of mandatory e-learning. This would ensure that a rising number of students enrolled in e-learning courses which have a higher class size average than conventional classes would not adversely affect the overall funding received by school districts from the government. However omnibus government legislation titled the COVID-19 Economic Recovery Act renewed concerns about a hidden privatization and union-busting agenda. Alongside removing a requirement that the directors of school districts be certified teachers —raising fears that Ontario could follow the well-trod path in the US of corporate CEOs running districts (Bocking, 2020) — the legislation gave responsibility to TVOntario and TFOntario to develop and oversee online courses (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020). While both are public TV stations, these agencies could outsource the development of these courses and then draw students out of school district provided courses to a centralized system administered by nonunion teachers or instructors. One teacher activist suggested, “The class size issue was really egregious, people understood that. But I don’t think people understood what the government was trying to do with e-learning,” assuming that the government simply intended to reduce costs by placing students in larger online courses within existing school districts, rather than eventually circumvent school districts entirely (Interview 1).

## Conclusion

The continual upheavals and crises of the coronavirus pandemic era have already made the strikes and organizing of the “No Cuts to Education” campaign feel like a distant memory for many participants, recalled with the aid of Facebook’s “A Year Ago on This Day” picket line photos. There have been limited attempts to reflect on its significance and the relevance of this experience for the future, despite the continued presence and ideological consistency of Premier Ford’s government.

Yet over the course of 2019 and into 2020, the agenda of the Ford government to drastically scale back public education, particularly at the secondary level, encountered strong resistance from teachers and support staff, who engaged in strike action at a scale unseen in Ontario for decades.



Despite unfolding within the mandate of a recently elected majority government, the movement succeeded in winning a broad base of public support, including in areas that elected Conservatives, thereby undermining the PC's agenda. The groundwork was laid months ahead of time by grassroots and union-supported organizing by members among their colleagues, who then reached out to parents and neighbours. The former was done through an escalated "limited withdrawal" that was tactically effective insofar as members gained experience in collective action while applying incremental pressure designed to minimize its direct effect on students while taking on the bureaucratic aspects of teaching, including standardized testing. Direct public outreach occurred through "walk-in" rallies prior to the start of the school day (particularly effective at reaching elementary school parents, but also at building solidarity among staff at secondary schools), door-to-door canvassing, leafletting and mini-rallies on busy sidewalks, and "tailgate parties" on main streets in rural towns and suburban centres. Many of these tactics were highly creative, the product of years of informal and institutional organizing experience. They were often most successful and far-reaching when a collaborative spirit and fluidity prevailed between grassroots member activists and elected union leaders. After a long period of limited mobilization and a diminishing proportion with direct experience of a sustained public campaign and being on strike, numerous educators across Ontario became leaders among their peers and spokespeople in the fight to protect public education. While seldom explicitly referred to as such by their participants, these steps which culminated in rotating strikes resembled the "structure tests" advocated by union strategist Jane McAlevey (2020), as being critical for the capacity of unions to accurately assess the capacity of their members to engage in escalating actions intended to assert increasing pressure on their employer.

The key issues – class size increases, mandatory e-learning and staff layoffs — created a strong basis of unity between the interests of education workers, the families they serve, and the broader public. This clarity was reinforced by OSSTF's tactical decision to embrace "transparent bargaining," anticipating the PC government's efforts to reframe the focus onto salaries and benefits. While essentially a defensive struggle, unable to address pre-existing shortcomings of the education system, its emphasis on issues directly affecting students suggested the "bargaining for the common good" approach that has exemplified key teachers' strikes in the US (McCartin, 2016; Schirmer, 2019; Jaffe, 2019), though the robust alliances with community and parent groups that underpinned their success remain underdeveloped in most areas in Ontario. Much of the clarity of this framing can be attributed to the policy choices of the Ford government itself. As one teacher activist mused, "The Conservatives were stupid in that they came after everything. The [previously governing] Liberals were smarter managers of austerity. The Conservatives were smashing and grabbing. This made it easier to organize because everyone was pissed off and upset" (Interview 1).

Prior to the Ford government's announced cuts in March 2019, the predominant sentiment among local and provincial leaders within OSSTF was to apply a "hold-the-line" approach to the impending contract negotiations, emphasizing the reasonableness of inflationary increases to salaries and benefits and incremental improvements in other areas to a public deemed to be skeptical and disinterested. It is yet to be seen if in the aftermath of this struggle the education unions as institutions retain a more dynamic public-facing campaigning orientation. Some activists interviewed here described their frustration with what they identified as a limited prioritization by their unions in creating lasting relationships with parent and grassroots community groups. As one expressed:

They [union leadership] don't feel it's necessary or important. They're more comfortable in the political spaces. They want to lobby and throw some money around. They feel they can use PR and marketing firms to do polling and strategic decision-making like the political parties are doing. I think it's really misguided. We're not going to win through slick PR. The only thing we have is authenticity, and our commitment to social justice, and our students and their families. That's the only thing we have that will win against forces that have much more money and much more power in those spaces. (Interview 1)

"Earned media" and organic online content and discussions by committed members with their peers and friends is more effective at changing minds than professionally produced videos. Meetings with parents and the identification of common issues was of greater importance than simply circulating "it's for the students" messaging. However it is also the case, at least in Toronto, that parent networks and therefore parent organizing is far more common at the elementary level than the secondary. This creates problems of strategy particular to Ontario's context of separate elementary and secondary teachers' unions and a corresponding artificial division of struggles which could otherwise be more unified under the general defence of public education.

Much of the difficulty for unions to draw on the power of a broader basis of solidarity can be attributed to the siloing effect of the labour relations system, in which unions are compelled to negotiate separately under the constraint of "two-tier bargaining" in the K-12 education context, on what are considered to be "negotiable" issues. Yet while the extent to which the PCs "came after everything" galvanized members to participate in a resistance campaign and strike while garnering public support, it was still the case that the proposed cuts were uneven in how they affected the elementary and secondary levels, giving unions in the former a shorter distance to travel to defeat the cuts than was the case in the latter. It could have been very different if Ontario's elementary and secondary teachers, and school support staff, were all members of one big education union.

Accurate polling can be important to help inform strategy in a context where winning public support is critical. The problem emerges when polling results are interpreted to determine the boundaries of union action, rather than as popular sentiment within a particular context, which the union and its allies can struggle to change. The narrowed horizons of leftist institutions on the defensive across North America can be contrasted with the optimistic ambition by which conservative political parties and advocacy groups have remade the political landscape into one more hospitable for their vision in the eras of neoliberalism and right wing populism. Unions confronted by a hostile majority government with the next election years away face constrained options. The resistance to the Ford government's cuts would not have been as successful if the struggle had been framed in any terms less than the existential integrity of the public education system.

Within the substitute and long-term contract teachers' unit of which I was an executive member at the time, dozens of new teachers emerged as leaders on picket lines, attending and then facilitating sessions on political action and collective bargaining. While they arrived in their profession possessing a deep ethic of care for their students connected to a larger critical framework of social justice and equity, it was by no means predetermined that they would derive meaning from actively engaging within their union. Despite being precarious workers without permanent employment status, they continued to be assertive advocates for their labour rights and those of their peers amid the disruptions and uncertainties of the COVID-19 pandemic era.

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