

The Agitator

A Bulletin for the Student Left

January 10 2009 ★ no.22

York University & Carleton University

TAs are under attack

The teaching assistant and contract faculty strike at York University has now entered its third month. Negotiations in early January managed to bring CUPE 3903 and the administration closer to a settlement.

On January 8, union members voted 90 percent against the administration's latest offer at a 600-strong general meeting. The York administration has responded by breaking off negotiations and is now seeking a forced ratification vote on the offer that was rejected by 90 percent. Employers can do this once due to the pro-employer nature of the labour laws. The union has called this a "waste of valuable bargaining time."

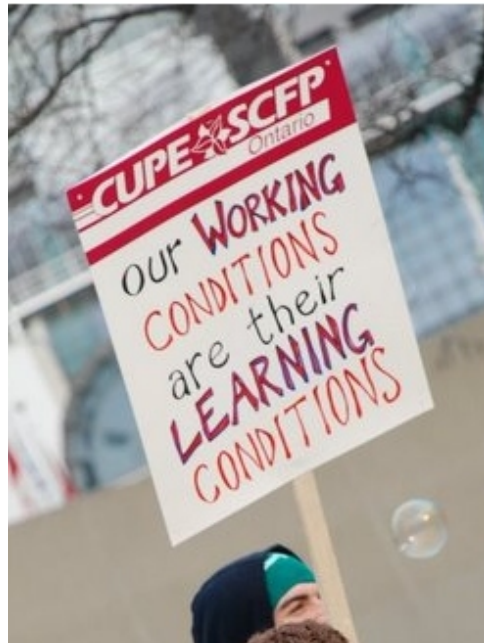
Meanwhile, a number of undergraduate and graduate students have mobilized to bring about a prompt and fair settlement. On January 7, a York Federation of Students petition with 4000 signatures was delivered at a press conference. Both the administration and CUPE 3903 were invited to send representatives. Only CUPE 3903 sent someone.

A sit-in has also resumed at the president's office. More than a dozen students have been occupying the office since January 3.

Carleton University

The strike at York University may not be the only TA strike in Ontario this term. Teaching assistants of CUPE 4600 at Carleton University are being forced to take a strike vote on January 13-15 in the face of unreasonable demands being made by the administration.

The administration wants to dramatically weaken "Tuition Increase Protection", a part of the contract which protects TA wages from increasing tuition fees. The administration wants to move



On strike at York University
Photo from 3903strike.ca

the index year from 2005 to a "rolling index" set at when a student becomes a TA. Right now, Carleton's TAs - both domestic and international students - pay their tuition up front but receive a rebate at the end of each term that makes up the difference between 2005 tuition levels and what they paid. Creating a rolling index will mean raising fees dramatically as 2005 was the last year of the Ontario tuition fee freeze.

If the union accepted the concession, half of all Carleton TAs would see their take-home pay cut in the first year. Furthermore, the administration refuses to negotiate anything else until the union accepts the concession.

Students United

This frontal assault on the union has prompted Carleton undergrads and graduates to build a campaign called "Students United to prevent a TA strike". The campaign includes a petition drive, class talks, as well as a rally, activist workshops and educational events. The campaign is intended to build pressure on the administration to take the concession off the table and thus avert a strike.

The attack on Carleton TAs is significant, especially while York TAs are on strike. Carleton and York TAs are the only TAs in the country that have "Tuition Increase Protection." If York TAs lose their strike and Carleton TAs have their "TIP" weakened, it will make it far more difficult for other TAs in Canada to win this necessary contract item. In the early 1990s, tuition fees used to be 20 percent of take-home pay. Now it is 80 percent. Students have to be united to defend teaching assistants and stop the attacks.



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FREE PALESTINE

Israel's assault on Gaza has left hundreds dead and thousands wounded in a matter of days. Like Israel's attack on Lebanon in 2006, condemnation of Israel has been global and loud, as millions begin to understand Israel's role as a settler colony serving Western imperialism in the region.

Despite popular protests, Western governments continue to support Israel in its war. Canada has taken a lead in this respect by being the first state to cut support to the democratically-elected Hamas government of Palestine in early 2006. Harper did nothing to condemn the brutal siege of Gaza which left hundreds dead. The siege was not lifted as it was supposed to in the six-month truce with Israel. Israel violated the truce

on November 4 when it assassinated Hamas leaders. By portraying Hamas rocket fire as the problem ignores these facts and the inviolable right of Palestinians to resist occupation. It also ignores the root of the conflict - Israel's founding as a settler state based on the expulsion of over 700,000 Palestinians from their lands in 1948 and the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967 - and other wars of aggression. Only when these injustices are reversed will the conflict begin to be resolved.

Build the anti-war movement

Until this happens, those of us in the West have the responsibility to pressure our governments to end their political, financial and military support for Israel,

and part of this process will include ending the Canadian state's renewed militarism and occupation of Afghanistan. Staying the hand of Canadian imperialism in Afghanistan will facilitate our ability to stop Canadian support for Israel and other dictatorships, like Mubarak in Egypt. On the campuses, we have the opportunity to launch boycott campaigns to oppose ties with Israeli academics and institutions that serve the Israeli state. We must also recognize that hope lies in the working-class and the poor of the Middle East, particularly in Egypt. They have the potential to topple the US-backed dictatorships that prevent grassroots actions of solidarity that can help liberate Palestine.



Ottawa students supporting bus drivers (left). Solidarnosc (right) was the Polish union that challenged state capitalism in the early 1980s.

Unions, workers and the recession

Workers who are on strike or who are threatening strike action during this recession are being accused of “greed” and “selfishness”. This accusation has been lobbed at TAs and contract faculty at York University, bus drivers in Ottawa, and others.

Are unions “greedy”? Do unions hold “the public” hostage when they go on strike? Are unions being “selfish” when they take strike action during a recession that is hurting everybody (some more than others!)? The answer to these questions is a resounding NO.

Unions are necessary because they are the only organizations workers have to defend themselves against employers, and the best weapon workers have to collectively improve their working conditions. Political parties, like the NDP, have at times improved working conditions through legislation, but the vast majority of workplace improvements have been achieved by strikes. Improvements won directly by workers are also much more difficult to rollback than laws implemented from above with the passive involvement of workers.

Capitalism in crisis

The current recession was not caused by unions or workers. It was caused by the problems inherent in capitalism itself. Capitalism is driven by “competitive accumulation”. Different centres of capital (states, corporations, etc) are locked in a battle for profits. The more profits they accrue, the more they can reinvest to improve productivity and lower unit costs, thus gaining an advantage over competitors. But competition leads towards overproduction. Multiple companies competing for one market will produce based on the market share they wish to achieve, not based on what people will buy. The overall result is overproduction. This is what leads to the boom-bust cycle of capitalism as companies are unable to realize profits as products go unsold. When this happens in key sectors of the economy - like the auto-sector - the entire economy can be dragged down into a recession or depression. It is capitalism itself, not workers or unions, that cause recessions.

Competition also leads to attacks on workers because the source of profit is human labour. Increasing profits can be extracted by either lengthening the working day or reducing wages (including the “social wage” such as corporate taxes going to social programs). Workers

are unable to buy all the products, which again leads to a fall in profits.

These attacks are common in recessions as companies seek to restore rates of profit. Governments will cut or privatize social spending to allow for corporate tax breaks and new areas of profit-making. We see both these things today. Corporations are seeking concessions, like those demanded of autoworkers, in order to restore profit rates. Governments are attacking public sector unions that stand in the way of privatization and social spending cuts.

Solidarity

When governments, employers and the corporate media paint the unions as greedy and selfish, they are in fact trying to pit one section of workers against another section of workers. By battering down the most well-organized workers, the working-class as a whole loses out. When unions win better conditions, it creates possibilities for other workers to make gains.

In these struggles, solidarity is a necessity and can help rebuild the confidence and organization of workers to resist capitalism. The power of workers lies in the workplace. Collective struggle against a common enemy is the training ground for a greater challenge to the system as a whole.

New School occupation wins

After occupying a cafeteria building for over two days, students of the New School in New York City won their struggle for more student space and improved democracy on their campus. The administration agreed to some of the students' demands, including student representation on the Board of Trustees, and amnesty for all students involved in the occupation. The building occupied, which the administration had planned to bulldoze, was promised as student space and the administration agreed to form a Socially Responsible Investment Committee, to increase the transparency and ethical utilization of university finances.

Students of the New School had also demanded that the President, Bob Kerrey, be immediately dismissed. Kerrey has been implicated in a massacre of Vietnamese civilians during the Vietnam War when he was a Navy Seal.

The occupation was a result of the university's refusal to address student demands for greater student participation in the workings of the university.

Students of the New School have built alliances with other struggles. The occupation galvanized support from other New York student. Cafeteria workers, members of the union UNITE HERE, refused to cross the picket lines set up by students.

Sam Ponting

Justice for Janitors at Langara College

Since last November, students at Langara College in Vancouver have organized a support campaign for the college's janitors. Like many universities and colleges, custodial services are contracted out. Janitors at Langara make between \$8 and \$10 an hour despite working there usually between seven and ten years, and have no real benefits. Despite being unionized, workloads usually cut out break time.

Langara's Social Justice Committee has organized a “Justice for Janitors” campaign, involving a petition campaign to raise awareness. The petition demanded that the union remain if the administration contracts the work out to another company, and that seniority and wages are protected. Langara's administration has responded with underhanded methods, “accidentally” double-booking space, and setting up new bureaucratic hoops for posting and so on. Langara has since changed companies. For the full report on this campaign, visit: socialist.ca/agitator.

Chloe Mirfield

Charges dropped for “Fight Fees Fourteen”

At the end of December, the Crown dropped criminal charges against nine of the fourteen students involved

in the March 2008 Simcoe Hall sit-in at the University of Toronto. These nine students have since signed “peace bonds”, which prevent them from demonstrating in UofT buildings and must give 24 hour notice before entering Simcoe Hall.

The administration, which is committed to a full-scale program of privatization and tuition fee deregulation in their “Towards 2030” plan, has been accused of completely over-reacting, painting political actions as criminal actions.

Hillier to be rewarded at University of Guelph

Retired General Rick Hillier is being awarded the “Lincoln Alexander Outstanding Leader Award” by the University of Guelph's College of Management and Economics. The rationale behind Hillier receiving the award is for his “exceptional abilities as a communicator with soldiers, the public and the media” and for “improving the image and sustainability of the [Canadian] Forces both domestically and internationally” and his “efforts to lobby the federal government for increased military funding.”

Hillier was centrally involved in Canada's occupation of Afghanistan and under his watch, Canadian Forces became implicated in widespread and systematic abuse of “detainees” within Afghan

prisons. According to a Globe and Mail which corroborated numerous human rights reports, prisoners once held by Canadian troops were “beaten, whipped, starved, frozen, choked and subjected to electric shocks during interrogation.”

As Hillier infamously stated, “We are the Canadian Forces, and our job is to be able to kill people.”

Hillier is a war criminal for his role in this, as outlined by the Geneva Conventions on the Treatment of Prisoners of War. He faces a legal challenge from Amnesty International and the BC Civil Liberties Union. Yet, Hillier was also appointed chancellor of MUN by Nfld. Premier Danny Williams.

Greek protests continue

The police murder of a 15-year-old teenager on December 6 has sparked weeks of rioting, protests and general strikes in Greece, shaking the right-wing government and sending shockwaves through Europe. Universities have been occupied while primary and high school students have struck alongside their teachers. The protest movement has also seen large anti-war, pro-Palestine demonstrations. The combined crisis of capitalism and imperialism is already producing a challenge to the system from below.