

ETFO continues job action in protest of education cuts



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By Nate Smelle

Over the past two weeks the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario has expanded its job action in protest of the Ford government's cuts to education by holding a pair of strikes each week. Working without a contract since Aug. 31, 2019, ETFO's current job action has resulted from a breakdown in negotiations between the province and the union.

Schools were closed again on Feb.10 and Feb. 11 for students between junior kindergarten and Grade 8 in the Hastings-Prince Edward District School Board.

While one of ETFO's weekly strikes engages its entire membership, some 83,000 teachers and education workers province-wide, the other targets specific school boards as part of a series of rotating strikes. Through this full-withdrawal of services, the union hopes to encourage the province to address its key issues of concern in their contract negotiations ? larger class sizes, less supports to deal with violence and mental health issues in the classroom, the preservation of the current kindergarten model and that the province ensure fair and transparent hiring practices would be maintained. Though ETFO has repeatedly identified these issues as being of primary importance to its membership, so far the province has focused most of its attention on ETFO's request for a cost-of-living increase that keeps pace with the rate of inflation.

ETFO's Local president in Hastings-Prince Edward Dave Henderson said it was beginning to look like a deal was possible during the talks that took place between Jan. 29 and Jan. 31, however, at the ?11th hour? the province placed a demand on the table related to hiring practices, he said they knew would cause the talks to break down.

While mediator Denise Small is trying to get both sides back to the table as soon as possible, Henderson said she is also aware that to accomplish this some movement by the government and the Ontario Public School Boards' Association on the union's key issues will be required. In the meantime, he indicated that ETFO members in Hastings-Prince Edward and across the province will continue with its planned weekly job action.

?When you take an approach to bargaining like this, it is pretty clear that you don't actually want a deal,? said Henderson.

?That is the attitude of the government at the present time. ETFO is continuing to communicate with the mediator daily in an effort to keep the conversation alive on our outstanding bargaining issues.?

For the bargaining process to move forward, Henderson said the government and the OPSBA need to get serious about the issues. Noting that it was not until the talks in January that they would even send their negotiators to the table to discuss issues such as special education supports or measures to address violence, he said they need to stop trying to mislead the public that the biggest issue is compensation.

?The minister's talking points on salary are becoming increasingly tiresome, because we know there are bigger issues,? Henderson said.

?This is true for all the teacher

affiliates. Good faith bargaining requires both sides to engage in full discussions and a willingness to find solutions. All sides agreed on which issues would be discussed at the central table last August, and the government has spent a lot of time and energy since then trying to shut those discussions down. That is not good faith bargaining.?

On Feb. 7 Minister of Education Stephen Lecce issued a statement in response to ETFO's ongoing job action, in which he declared: ?Our government has put forward reasonable proposals at the negotiating table, including a commitment to maintain full-day kindergarten, and it is deeply disappointing parents are still seeing repeated escalation at the expense of our students to advance higher compensation, including more generous benefit plans.?

Lecce added ?We [the government] firmly believe students should be in class, and we continue to stand ready to negotiate and reach a deal Ontario students deserve.?

Considering negotiations remain stalled, Henderson said it is important for the public to realize that throughout the bargaining process the OPSBA has also had a seat at the table along with the provincial government and education unions.

As chair of the board of trustees for the Hastings and Prince Edward District School Board and the local trustee in North Hastings, Lucille Kyle said she supports all staff (both union and management), because they are there for the students, and she trusts them to do what they believe is best. As the dispute continues, she said her job is to make sure the work they are doing is about the students. ?Public education in Ontario is supposed to be about our children, about our youth,? explained Kyle.

?In the ongoing action both sides say it's all about our students, yet it is the students themselves who are being the most negatively impacted in this. It's frustrating ? Most teachers realize that trustees are members of the board and are community-minded people. Trustees also have many perspectives and frequently have information that the public may not be aware of. I support the appropriate action required to have staff in schools and students learning.?

In Kyle's opinion, if any progress is to be made at the bargaining table, she said both sides will need to put aside their differences and remind themselves that the students are not in class. For this to happen, she said ?There needs to be leadership at the senior levels of both sides, union and government, to get a conversation going.?

Noting that ?Job action affects everyone,? Kyle added, ?North Hastings is a great community filled with incredible human beings. I am grateful for all our teachers and support staff who have moved here and stayed for the long haul, and also for those who travel back and forth every day to be here for our children. As employees and families, they have established life-long relationships with our school board and our schools. We need to stick together. I am hopeful that our leadership will be strong and we will come through this and remind ourselves we are here for our children?our future.?

Henderson said one of the most puzzling things about central bargaining for him, is that the school boards seem to be on the same side of the government. Pointing out that 98 per cent of ETFO's members voted in favour of strike action, if necessary, he said Kyle is mistaken by implying that the union is somehow separate from the teachers on the picket line. Having been out on the picket line for each of the first four strikes this year, Henderson said ?I can tell you that teacher morale and public support is strong, and teachers do not see themselves as separate from the union in fighting for what's right for education.?

?Why are school boards not fighting for more staffing and resources for special needs students?? questioned Henderson.

?Why are school boards willing to collaborate with the government in sweeping the issue of violence in the classroom under the carpet? You would think that school boards would be looking for proper funding from the government, not working with them to undermine public education. Instead, OPSBA only seems interested in going back to the old ways of hiring teachers where one of the most important qualities was who you knew.?

All one needs to do in order to understand how damaging the budget cuts will be for students and teachers requiring supports dealing with violence in the classroom and mental health issues is look at the statistics regarding long-term disability claims, explained Henderson. In recent years, he said the number of claims have ?skyrocketed,? with the biggest increase in claims due to mental and physical stress in the primary grades. Although ETFO has been trying to raise awareness about violence in the classroom at the provincial and local levels for several years now, Henderson said there has been little progress. Noting that the ETFO Local executive have tried to engage trustees on this issue, he said ?A few of them have been willing to listen, but most have not. Without proper supports, classroom evacuations are becoming normalized, with a detrimental effect on the education for all students in the class. It is the single most frustrating issue for me as a Local leader. Teachers call almost every day of the week having been bitten, punched, kicked, threatened, and having objects thrown at them. It's hardly an adequate response to have little more to say than, ?Have you completed the paperwork??"

While Kyle couldn't speak directly to specific data regarding an increase in violence in the classroom, she said awareness and sensitivity around mental health and students needs are now greater than ever before. Locally, she pointed out how a lack of

resources for schools and poverty in North Hastings continue to rob local children of basic needs and supports to help them succeed in school.

These factors not only impact one child, they interrupt and impact all students in the classroom, said Kyle. Additional resources to support our students are always welcomed. North Hastings students already experience a shortage of community services and mental health services. Rural schools and communities have a harder time accessing adequate services within the schools, and this has the potential to impact us more than larger centres where there are more options to choose from and access to public transit. ETFO plans to continue its job action until a deal is reached, however there were no strike dates or negotiations scheduled for next week as of press time Tuesday.