

CUPE's education workers teaching Ontario students valuable lesson

By Mike Riley

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter The past few weeks saw the Canadian Union of Public Employees' 55,000 education workers in Ontario triumph over the Ford government's egregious attempt to trample on their right to strike under section 2d of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms with Bill 28, a piece of legislation that CUPE called "draconian and anti-worker." While the Supreme Court of Canada recognized a union's right to strike in January 2015 as an "indispensable component of collective bargaining and therefore is protected under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the Ford government would have used the notwithstanding clause in the Charter to force the education workers to accept what they view as an unfair contract and remove their right to strike. This move was widely criticized by CUPE, who urged the government to "negotiate not impose," and other unions across the country lent CUPE their support. To play Devil's advocate for a moment, I suppose that the Ford government was trying to keep kids in the classroom and ensure that an education workers' strike wouldn't interfere with students' education anymore than it has been interfered with over the past two plus years with COVID-19 and its restrictions. A laudable goal, but trampling upon people's rights, specifically their right to strike, is not the way to do this. It sends a dangerous message that the government can trample on our rights whenever it finds it expedient to do so and we can do nothing about it. However, Ontario's education workers did do something about it, and went on strike on Nov. 4. They rejected the government's final offer of an imposed four-year contract that they deemed unfair to both the workers and the students. Despite the strike now being illegal and facing onerous fines, with Bill 28 being passed the previous day, the workers held the line and the Ford government capitulated three days later. Ford promised to repeal Bill 28 if the workers would end their strike, which they did. Hugh Pouliot, CUPE's national English media contact confirmed that CUPE was back at the bargaining table and Bill 28 had been repealed, which he said was encouraging and that he hoped an equitable deal could be reached soon. However, by Nov. 16, CUPE had given five days strike notice, as negotiations with the government had again reached an impasse. Ontario's Education Minister Stephen Lecce said on Twitter that he and his government were disappointed that a deal had not been reached and a strike was once again on the horizon, saying the government had put forward multiple improved offers worth hundreds of millions of dollars and were bargaining in good faith. Laura Walton, president of the Ontario School Board Council of Unions, which represents Ontario's CUPE education workers, disputed this, saying in a CUPE media release that this is not where they wanted to be and that they'd hoped the Ford government would accept their reasonable affordable and necessary proposals months ago and provide more funding for both workers and students. CUPE National president Mark Hancock reiterated that when the government underfunds education, it's parents, kids and the workers who pay the price. By late on Nov. 20, a tentative deal had been struck between the two parties and classes are set to resume Nov. 21 as scheduled, which I'm sure is a relief to everyone involved. However, despite the inconvenience of a strike to parents and kids, it is teaching the kids especially a very valuable lesson and one that cannot necessarily be taught in a classroom. It's a lesson for life in general in fact; not to back down to a bully and stand your ground, whatever the circumstances. Whether or not the CUPE education workers strike again or not in the coming days, I admire them for standing up for themselves, Ontario's students, and holding out for what they're worth and deserve. And for that, I say to them, kudos to you all!