

'It's not just teachers': The forgotten workers in Ontario's school strikes ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

When Kim Thompson scrolls through Facebook or watches the news, the hot topic is the teachers' strikes that are closing schools sporadically across the province.

She's been walking the picket line, too.

An early childhood educator at Steve MacLean Public School, Thompson works alongside the teacher in a kindergarten class, guiding kids as they paint, play with blocks and learn their letters.

But the public doesn't hear as much about Thompson and other school support staff who are among the education workers engaged in contract disputes.

Even the name of Thompson's union — the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation — obscures the fact that about a third of its 60,000 members work at a wide variety of other jobs. They include office administrators, custodians, social workers, IT staff, library technicians and educational assistants who work with special-needs children.

The other three unions staging job actions have fewer support staff members. Overall about 12 per cent of education workers involved in the current disputes are not teachers.

Thompson says it irks her to read snarky Facebook comments about well-paid teachers on strike.

"They don't know it's not just teachers, and it's really frustrating sometimes."

Support staff like Thompson typically earn half the salary of a teacher, and are laid off in the summer.

Across Ontario, the average salary for OSSTF support staff, excluding professionals such as psychologists, is \$38,415, according to the union. OSSTF professional staff, including psychologists and speech and language pathologists, earn an average of \$75,892.

Teachers in Ontario earned an average of \$86,689 in 2017, according to the education ministry.

Thompson and other support staff interviewed on the picket lines say they are concerned about the same issues cited by teachers: The want more support for kids with high needs and action on violence in the classroom. They oppose larger classes and mandatory online courses for high schoolers. They want full-day kindergarten preserved.

But most also said wages are a key issue and they deserve a raise that allows their salaries to keep pace with inflation.

The government has offered all education workers a one-per-cent increase, in line with the wage-restraint legislation passed last fall for public servants.

Unions are asking for a raise equal to the increase in the cost of living — around two per cent.

"I love my job, and I'm not doing it for the money," says Thompson. "But yes, I would like (a raise), there is no doubt about it.

"My rent is going up and I have to find the money for it somewhere. The cost of food doesn't get any cheaper. Cost of living is not an unreasonable request."

"I consider my work valuable," she says.

Thompson says support staff are deeply concerned about the quality of public education declining.

"I know parents want the best for their kids, and we do, too. Educators, regardless of their position, cannot give quality when all they are doing is managing numbers and special needs. So for that reason, if no other, that's why I'm on strike."

School administrator Rachelle Ferron, who works in an Ottawa French Catholic school, snorts when asked what she thinks about a one-

per-cent raise.

“So that’s ridiculous,” she says. After deductions, Ferron says she takes home about \$1,000 every two weeks. She can’t immediately locate the pay stub to find the exact amount. “I never look at my pay because it’s too discouraging.

“For the secretaries, the Number One issue is keeping our salary and benefits,” says Ferron.

Ferron says her colleagues at Sainte-Geneviève elementary school on Arch Street are terrific, the principal is awesome and she adores the kids. “I love it here! I love the kids and I love working in a school.”

But her expenses rise faster than her pay. “It just seems like my pay cheque is getting smaller and smaller.”

The support staff who are part of the OSSTF unit for the Conseil des Écoles Catholiques du Centre-Est earn an average of \$38,000, says unit president Marie-Claude Thibeault.

Many of her members are educational assistants who help children with disabilities, mental health and behavioural problems. When a student who has difficulties gets a high school diploma, “that’s like a salary for us,” she says.

Support staff also worry about students “sitting alone in front of a computer trying to do an e-course,” or struggling in crowded classrooms where they don’t get the help they need, she says.

“We love the students. For us, this is our priority. We want them to be happy at school, to be safe at school.

“Our education system is the best in the world. Our students deserve better than what will be arriving soon.”

Thibeault worked in a school office before she took the union job. She too loves working with kids.

“You know when they arrive at school, and see madame the secretary, and smile at you and say, ‘Hello, how are you?’ That is so nice.”

The educational assistants are on the front lines dealing with the increase in violence in classrooms, says Thibeault.

“My people face violence every day in school. A lot of them they wake up and think ‘I don’t know if today I will be hit, be bitten.’ The teachers face violence, too, but my workers are on the front line and it’s not very good for them.”

Several educational assistants at the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board who work with children who have autism or have severe behaviour problems said they feel underpaid for the difficult job. None wanted their name used because they wanted to protect the identity of the children and also fear reprisal for speaking out.

One has a permanent back injury suffered while restraining a violent teenager who was attacking another student.

After more than 20 years on the job, the person’s salary is \$47,000.

“How can you live on that? Nobody else wants the job. But I really like working with the kids. It’s my life. And I’m really good at it.

“And the parents are behind us. They know it’s an impossible job.”

Another said educational assistants feel “dismissed and devalued.”

It’s tough hearing Ontario Education Minister Stephen Lecce repeatedly talking about high school teachers who earn \$92,000, says the assistant.

“He will never mention us. Never. His narrative is the greedy teachers.”

Some OSSTF member wages at the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board

- **Library Technician:** \$32,500 to \$41,600 for 10 to 10.5 months of work
- **Speech language pathologist** (Masters level): \$61,568 to \$78,675 a year
- **Social worker** (Masters level): \$69,669 to \$80,155 a year
- **Educational assistant:** From \$23.67 to a maximum of \$30.30 a hour with seven years’ experience. They work for 10 months and are laid off in the summer.
- **Early childhood educator:** From \$19.58 to a maximum of \$27.74 an hour with five years’ experience. They work for 10 months and are laid off in the summer.
- **Office administrator at secondary schools:** \$47,000 to \$61,000 a year with seven years’ experience for those who work year-round
- **Office administrator at elementary schools and board departments:** \$39,000 to \$50,800 with seven years’ experience for those who work 10 months a year
- **School office assistant:** \$28,300 to \$35,800 with seven years’ experience for those who work 10 months a year
- **Custodian:** From \$35,949 a year for a beginning “floater” to \$61,995 for a chief custodian at a secondary school. For part-timers, pay is pro-rated to \$35,949 a year, while casual staff earn \$14 an hour, the minimum wage in Ontario.

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