

Education workers are on the brink of poverty ^[1]

Since 2012, education workers' wages have fallen more than 11 per cent. Workers are forced to choose between buying groceries and paying bills, Laura Walton writes.

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EXCERPTS

A school caretaker living in his car. An education assistant who can't pay for gas to get to work. A school secretary with no savings and who can't afford to retire. An early childhood educator who sees her own children growing up in poverty. Professionals and paraprofessionals with degrees and diplomas who don't earn a living wage.

These are just some of thousands of personal stories shared by Ontario education workers when their union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), asked them in late 2021 what it's like to live on what they make.

Frustrated, fed up, and furious, these workers gave us the unvarnished truth and their words are signs of a workforce at its breaking point. Their stories carry common themes of hard choices, uncertainty, and exhaustion: working two and three jobs to get by; choosing between buying groceries and paying bills; being one car breakdown away from financial disaster; living on overdrafts and in debt.

These same people are the mainstay of our education system. They were in school and on the job throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. They clean and maintain our schools, support young people with special needs, keep students and schools connected and online. They work in school libraries, provide speech therapy, care for students' mental and physical well being, guide children through their first years in the classroom. They are vital to Ontario's public education system and yet they aren't earning enough to live on.

The ironies of their lives as low-wage workers aren't lost on them: the same cheerful people who greet students every day can't afford extracurricular activities for their own children. Skilled and dedicated women admit that it's only their partners' incomes that allow them to work as support staff in schools. Devoted employees are embarrassed by how little they make after decades in their jobs.

The same tales were repeated across the province, painting a heartbreaking picture of the financial and mental stress endured by workers that successive provincial governments have treated as an afterthought.

The roots of the problem go back more than a decade, starting with successive governments that starved the province's education budget of needed funding. The lack of investment shows up in education workers' pay: since 2012, education workers' wages have fallen more than 11 per cent in real terms, with inflation outstripping any increases. In 2022, the average salary of a CUPE education worker is only \$39,000 a year.

Low-wage workers like school support staff — who are, not so coincidentally, mostly women — were targeted by legislation like Bill 115 and Bill 124, which held down their wages with zero and one per cent increases and left tens of thousand struggling.

Education workers may be exhausted, overworked, and vulnerable to financial catastrophe, but they're also angry. They know their jobs — skilled, demanding, and important — shouldn't leave them in poverty.

They also know that the current situation shortchanges students and families, as school board after school board in Ontario faces staff shortages among education assistants, custodians, ECEs, and others. And when there aren't enough workers to provide the services that schools, students and communities depend on, everyone feels it and everyone is worse off.

Education workers have the potential to transform themselves into a movement by standing up to a provincial government — this one or the next — that thinks nothing of making low-wage workers pay the price for austerity budgets. Their greatest hope — and greatest strength — lies in harnessing their justifiable anger, directing it at those responsible for their predicament, and demanding better. The provincial election in June and contract negotiations later this year will provide opportunities to do just that.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

Tags: canada-wide ^[4]

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/22/03/education-workers-are-brink-poverty> [2]
<https://www.niagarafallsreview.ca/opinion/contributors/2022/03/26/education-workers-are-on-the-brink-of-poverty.html> [3]
<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7856> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/9238>