

Education workers fighting back: Interview with Laura Walton^[1]

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EXCERPTS

CUPE's Ontario School Board Council of Unions represents 55,000 education workers in Ontario. They are fighting for higher wages and better working conditions. Currently members are in the midst of a strike vote. Spring recently spoke with Laura Walton, the President of OSBCU – CSCSO, about how education workers are organizing to fight for decent wages and a fair contract.

OSBCU represents 55,000 education workers in Ontario. Can you tell us more about the members you represent and the important role that the OSBCU members play in the province's education system?

The Ontario School Board Council of Unions is made up of all of the education workers that are represented by CUPE in the province of Ontario. So we are 55,000 strong and we come from all four school systems. My coworkers are custodians and caretakers, maintenance workers and tradespeople, educational assistants, early childhood educators, communication disorder assistants, IT workers, library workers, clerical workers, and more. Basically, if you're not a teacher, principal or superintendent, chances are you are a CUPE member.

Can you tell us a little about how working on the frontlines during the pandemic has impacted education workers?

A lot of people forget that my coworkers across the province were on the frontlines, because there was a lot of rhetoric about how all the schools are closed and nobody is in school. For the majority of our custodial maintenance and caretaking trades group, they were back in schools in March 2020. They were seen as indispensable, they were at the job site on the job again within days of a global pandemic being announced. The majority of us were at work in schools throughout the pandemic. And that's because the services we provide don't translate to the virtual world. For instance, it is very hard to be the caretaker in a school from home. As well, the services that we provide are often one on one, and very unique to a particular group of students. So there is a need to be at school to support the students who were not able to learn virtually. Also many of our coworkers deal with IT, all of the equipment that had to go out for virtual learning, all of that was done by us.

We were in schools doing what we love to do, and ensuring that students were safe and successful at the peak of the pandemic. A lot of people didn't recognize or understand that. That's why we started doing our Education Worker Wednesdays where we would be highlighting the important work frontline education workers do.

Education workers have been in the midst of bargaining. The collective agreement expired on August 31. Could you tell us a little about how the government's approach to education and bargaining over the last decade, under both the Liberals and Tories, impacted your members?

In 2012 the then Liberal government pulled together the central provincial table, this was before it was the school board collective bargaining act. This was the year when Bill 115 came into play. Bill 115 froze the wages of education workers only. There was another proposed piece of legislation that was set to do the same in the broader public sector, but it never was passed. Not only was a contract imposed on us for zero percent wage increases, but it also ripped apart anything that my coworkers had even negotiated locally. So things around sick leave were ripped apart, and an imposed contract was put in place. That was really the signal that things were going to be dealt with differently. And although Bill 115 was eventually ruled to be unconstitutional, any remedy to that has never been enough to make up for what workers lost.

In 2014 the Liberals put forth the school board collective bargaining act which mandated that every education worker must negotiate provincially. Before this you had a chance to opt in and opt out of the central table. The act set out that everything monetary, such as wages, sick leave, vacation, entitlements, benefits would have to be negotiated centrally. And then workers' local unions would also have a local bargaining table where they handle things more around language. We had gone through this imposed contract world, then we moved into this world of legislated central bargaining, and then there was an extension agreement where the Liberals came in and said, 'hey, here is a minimal amount of money, that we'll make available to extend your collective agreement'.

2019 was a really tough year, because that was when the Ford government decided that Bill 115 worked really well for the Liberals and they were going to try the same thing, only bigger. That is when they brought in Bill 124 for the broader public sector. So in 2019 our wages were again legislated, without meaningful collective bargaining, this time to be capped at 1 percent. We were successful in pushing

back concessions on our sick leave. We were successful in getting investments into services that kids needed, but we were not able to get a wage increase because it was a legislated cap. And I think once we put ink on the document in November 2019, that's when, as a team, we started talking about how things have to be different. We can't do this again. And that really became what you see today, which is a very large, grassroots organizing, member-to-member campaign, looking towards high participation, and asking for what it is that we need, which is a real wage gain and protection for the services students need.

What has been the impact of Ford's first term on the education sector and on your members?

Under the Ford government, the difference for education workers has been a total lack of opportunities for our voice to be heard. The spaces where we used to have pilot projects and different opportunities to give feedback have just ceased to exist. The Ford government doesn't know who education workers are, they kept talking about teachers, but they never mentioned us. Labour minister Monte McNaughton will talk about the importance of trades workers, but many of my coworkers are trades workers and he completely ignores us. When Stephen Lecce came in as education minister, he really was adept at spinning the narrative for the government. We learned that focusing on the facts and being transparent is key when dealing with this government. They are not transparent at all, but we are.

The government talks a lot about how it has increased funding in the sector, but in reality education funding per student has gone way down.

It has gone down to \$800 per student in the Ford government's first term. That's \$1.6 billion taken out of kids' schools last year alone. Lecce makes all kinds of wild claims.. The reality is any increased funding in the sector is simply due to moving responsibility for child care under the Ministry of Education. Child care was not under the Ministry of Education previously. He makes it look like they are doing something major when in reality they are decreasing funding for education, for schools.

Over the last 10 years education workers had an 11 percent wage cut in real terms. So you are proposing a \$3.25 a year increase each year over three years. And Stephen Lecce, the minister, has called the demand "astronomical" and "unreasonable" and even likened it to schoolyard bullying.

My coworkers and I have suffered 10 years of government-imposed wage cuts and now we're facing high inflation. The status quo is not acceptable. The education minister can manufacture big numbers to sound scary as much as he wants, but the truth is his insulting offer of 33¢ to 53¢ per hour won't pay the bills and won't keep workers in schools or recruit new ones.

We're asking for \$3.25 more per hour. That would be enough to make it a bit more likely education workers can support themselves with just one job, instead of two or three. When I tell you, my neighbour, or any work that we're just asking for a loony, a toony, and a quarter, people are like, oh, wait a minute, that seems reasonable..

We are adamant that it needs to be a flat rate because percentage increases, which are the norm in the sector, further the disparity between low-income earners and high-income earners. And that disparity also plays out in a gender wage gap. Also the majority of the workers who are low-income workers are racialized workers. And so bargaining a percentage increase would be furthering these divides that already exist and we're not going to do that.

And they are offering what is a 2 percent increase for people making under \$40,000 a year and 1.25 percent per year for people making over that. Could you just put that in relation to cost of living.

What they are offering is the equivalent of 35 to 55 cents per hour, or less than the cost of a tank of gas per month. A quarter of my coworkers are facing food and housing insecurity. And the majority of people are subsidizing their education job – personally subsidizing Ontario's schools – with another job to earn what they need to get by. The government's offer is just not sustainable. What is happening now is people are leaving the workforce because it's no longer feasible to do this work. On top of that, people who have the qualifications do not want to take jobs in education because the wages are so low.

Beyond wages, which have been front and centre, what other issues are priorities for education workers? I know that you're also demanding equal pay for equal work for casual and temporary workers, improved staffing levels, and minimum standards for full-time hours.

If you are a casual worker, you're paid significantly less than what a permanent employee is paid. And so what's happening is people are not coming to work casual, because quite frankly, they cannot afford to work casual. The other day, I drove by a Tim Hortons that is hiring people at \$16 an hour, where you would be guaranteed your hours of work. And yet, our coworkers who are arbitrarily labelled "casual" by school board management are often getting paid less than that without any guaranteed hours of work.

Ensuring there is proper funding for services is also really important to us. Recently, the Peel District School Board announced quietly that they were rescinding every clerical job posting because they no longer have any service security language. So they are saying there is no need to post those jobs anymore, they just are not going to fill them. This has been an ongoing problem that we're seeing across the provinces, as boards are struggling to make ends meet with declining funding and more demands. They are seeking out ways to find money and the ways that they're finding money is to pretend work doesn't need to be done, to not replace the worker when a position is vacated. This has become a real workload issue, but it's becoming an even bigger service delivery issue. Parents are starting to see that.

Boards are removing educational assistant support from students who need it, children who just last year had EA support. Boards are also removing custodial workers, saying COVID is over and we just don't need them anymore. But every-other-day cleaning was never safe or healthy. Parents don't care if you're in the midst of a pandemic or not, classrooms should be cleaned every day. That should just be a standard thing we do. But unfortunately, because of declining funding, it's not happening. For us, we are thinking about what are the

services that kids need to be safe and successful. And how do we ensure that those are enshrined in the collective agreement.

Historically, education workers have been underpaid and undervalued by the province. CUPE has launched the \$39,000 is not enough campaign. Can you talk about this campaign and how it fits into the bargaining strategy?

This came about after the last time the provincial government misused the power of the state to interfere in and dictate the terms of what should be free and meaningful collective bargaining. So many workers were saying this isn't really fair. One percent for us is not the same as one percent for someone earning more. We spent a significant amount of time in the last year surveying our coworkers. We did a wage specific survey, rather than just a bargaining survey, which we also did, that asked education workers not just what would you like your wage to be? But asking what does your current wage mean to you? And what is the impact of your current wage, on your life, on your family's life and on your working conditions. Based on that, we published a wage report that we made public earlier this spring, which led to us launching the \$39,000 is not enough campaign.

It was really important for us to ensure that the public will know who we are and how our issues are different. The government is working overtime to mislead people into believing we make six figures, like MPPs do. Our campaign and website allows us to talk about who we are, what we do, and how little we get paid. It has also given us a space for member's voices to be heard. Members can actually talk about what it is that they do and how their wages impact their lives.

In 2021, 20,000 New Brunswick public sector workers with CUPE went on strike for higher wages against a Conservative government and won. Many of those workers were education workers. Was that a strike that education workers in Ontario were following or inspired by?

Absolutely! I was fortunate enough to be able to go down to New Brunswick during the strike. We witnessed what they were doing, it was a real turning point for us. I come from a union that strongly believes in local autonomy, but you couldn't tell anybody's local when you were there. It wasn't just different locals of CUPE but also members of the public. It was pretty moving to us realizing they engaged the public in a way that the public helped them fight. When we came back we said, "how do we do this in Ontario?". We weren't going to be able to do it right away, it was long-term plan.

In New Brunswick, they did a lot of coordination to line many sectors. But we thought if we could just start with the education sector, how would we do it. And so that brought on our commitment to transparent open bargaining and that brought on our commitment to member to member engagement and building high participation. It challenged us to think outside the box and think about maybe the reason why we always get what we always get is because we always do what we've always done. That became our mantra, if we wanted something different, we were going to have to do it differently. It was a big turning point. It is something that we remind ourselves that if they can do it, then we can do it and if we can do it, then hopefully other workers can make a change as well. Having a majority Conservative government – which everybody likes to remind me about on a regular basis – isn't a reason for you not to fight, it's actually a reason to be more organized.

You have a strike vote coming up at the end of September and early October. How can people in the community and other trade unions support education workers?

Our team is in a get out the vote mode. We are doing a "count me in" campaign about why we should vote yes and how our coworkers are being counted on to deliver education in Ontario. We are going to be looking for allies and parents and other workers to say they want to be counted in for the fight to demand a better education system. This pandemic has isolated workers, and it's moved us into this world where workers can be removed from each other. Education workers are happy to come out and speak at other unions' meetings or at community events and make those connections. Being at the Toronto Labor Day Parade recently I was looking around and thinking if we all just got on the same boat, we would be unstoppable. Member-to-member grassroots organizing is really gonna be key to turning around labour in general.

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