Elementary Teachers' Union Asks for Conciliation in Bargaining

October 22, 2019

On October 16, 2019, the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) asked the Minister of Labour to appoint a conciliation officer "to help the parties at its two central tables reach fair agreements".

ETFO represents permanent and occasional teachers, as well as education workers and early childhood educators. The union has over 83,000 members.

ETFO is continuing to negotiate at the central table and is holding strike votes across the province until the end of October, 2019.

"ETFO's goal is to reach fair agreements for our members that also embrace learning conditions for Ontario's elementary students", said Sam Hammond, ETFO President. "These are achievable goals, and ETFO will do everything it can to reach them. That includes participating in the legal steps of the collective bargaining process, like conciliation and taking strike votes."

Mr. Hammond said that during negotiations, the government told ETFO that it is seeking cuts of up to 2.5 per cent in overall education sector spending. Mr. Hammond indicated that as part of achieving that reduction, the government expects ETFO teacher and occasional teacher members to agree to up to $150 million in cutbacks.

ETFO collective agreements expired on August 31, 2019. Discussions have taken place at two central tables since June 2019: the ETFO Teacher/Occasional Teacher Central Table and the ETFO Education Worker Central Table.

On October 15, 2019, the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF) announced that it would be holding strike votes in November. A memorandum sent to the union's 60,000 teachers and support staff on October 15 stated that negotiations will continue but there has been "no indication that meaningful discussion will take place (so) the Ontario Secondary Teachers' Federation feels it now has no choice but to begin the process of continuing strike votes among members across the province in the coming weeks".

The votes will conclude by November 15, 2019.

Harvey Bishop, the President of OSSTF, said that the move to hold strike votes should put pressure on the government as it did with the CUPE, which represents custodians, office staff, educational assistants and early childhood educators.

“Unfortunately, that seems to be the only thing they respond to… We have taken a very measured approach, and we saw how they responded at the other (CUPE) bargaining table and certainly there is a lesson in that,” stated Mr. Bishop.

Prior to October 15, there had been five days of bargaining between OSSTF, the trustees associations and the Crown at the central table.

Education Minister Stephen Lecce urged the unions not to resort to job action. He said, “As families across our province know, strike action disproportionately hurts our kids, especially the most vulnerable in our classrooms… Our message to our labour partners is always to put kids first, and continue to work with us in good faith to make sure kids remain in class each and every day.”

On October 20, 2019, the Ontario English Catholic Teachers’ Association (OECTA) stated that its members would vote on a province-wide strike in early November. OECTA indicated that negotiations can continue while the strike vote, which is scheduled to end on November 13, is being conducted.

The province has already announced that it wants to increase high school class sizes from an average of 22 to 28 over the next four years. In addition, the government is introducing four mandatory online courses at an average of 35 students per teacher. The result of these proposed changes would be a significant reduction of secondary school teachers and classes, and course options for students.

These are the latest developments in the education sector following a work-to-rule campaign by the 55,000 member school support staff unit of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). That job action lasted three weeks before a three-year agreement was reached on the eve of a potential strike.

Among other terms, the CUPE deal included:

- A one per cent increase in salary per year over three years
- *Status quo* sick leave at 11 sick days at 100 per cent and 120 short-term leave days at 90 per cent pay
- School boards have the ability to request a doctor’s note for short-term leave
- The government will spend up to $20 million each year on 300 full-time equivalent CUPE jobs across the province
- Allocation of $58.3 million per year for three years to a local priorities fund for special education supports
- The CUPE contract will expire on August 31, 2022

The CUPE agreement will inform the strategy used by the other unions at the central table negotiations. The ETFO, OSSTF and OECTA union leaders appear to be borrowing steps from the CUPE playbook in terms of attempting to gain advantage at the bargaining table. The possibility of ETFO, OSSTF and OECTA being in a legal strike position at similar times could put considerable pressure on the government. The Minister of Education has indicated that he is willing to listen to “innovative” proposals

from the unions on how to offset larger class sizes that fall within the government's "fiscal realities".

By

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