

Thousands of education workers in Canada's Ontario launch strike

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A teacher walks in a hallway in an Ontario school

Ottawa, November 6 (RHC)-- Approximately 55,000 education workers have walked off the job in Canada's most populous province, after the Ontario government passed legislation this week imposing contracts on them and banning strikes. Ontario Premier Doug Ford's right-wing government passed Bill

28, the Keeping Students in Class Act, while invoking a contentious clause of Canada's constitution to preempt court challenges.

The so-called "notwithstanding clause" allows provinces to suspend certain portions of the constitution – the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms – for a five-year period. The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), which counts 55,000 custodians, maintenance and library workers, secretaries and other education support staff who are affected by Bill 28, called the legislation an attack on all workers' bargaining rights and staged a strike, anyway.

"The Ford government's trampling of workers' rights in Ontario should be a wake-up call," it said. Their protest has forced hundreds of schools across Ontario to close, and the union also warned that the school support workers would not return to the job anytime soon.

"The 55,000 members of CUPE's Ontario School Boards Council of Unions (OSBCU) ... who are working in publicly-funded schools across Ontario are the backbone of Ontario's public education system," CUPE said in a statement earlier this week.

"They are also the lowest-paid education workers, earning, on average, only [\$28,900] \$39,000 [Canadian] a year which has left many on the brink of poverty." Holding banners and chanting slogans, the striking workers held rallies and erected picket lines on Friday outside Ontario government offices, as well as at the provincial legislature in Toronto, known as Queen's Park.

Gabriel Dolo-Cooper, an educational assistant in Ottawa, said the government's actions were "not fair". "I understand the pandemic was hard on everybody," he told the AFP news agency. "But myself and my colleagues, we're working two or three jobs just to make ends meet. "This is a very important fight," Dolo-Cooper added. "We must make our voices heard."

But Ford's government has defended the legislation, with Minister of Education Stephen Lecce telling reporters this week that the workers' demands were too high. Lecce said in a statement on Friday that Ontario had filed a complaint with the Ontario Labour Relations Board over CUPE's "illegal strike action". "Nothing matters more right now than getting all students back in the classroom and we will use every tool available to us to do so," he said.

The four-year contract imposed on workers includes raises of 1.5 to 2.5 percent – far lower than the union demanded in order to meet surging costs of living. Bill 28 also includes a daily \$2,968 (4,000 Canadian dollars) fine for striking workers, which the union has said it will fight or pay, if needed.

The Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL), an umbrella group representing dozens of unions in the province, accused the Ford government of "attempting to short-circuit the bargaining process and strip workers of a fundamental freedom." "Doug Ford and his government are once again telling workers across the province that their rights don't matter," OFL President Patty Coates said in a statement.

This is only the second time the notwithstanding clause has been used in Ontario's history, and both times Ford was the one who wielded it. The nearby province of Quebec also used the notwithstanding clause in 2019 to pass a contentious "religious symbols" law. Bill 21 prohibits some public-sector workers in positions of authority – teachers, prosecutors and others – from wearing religious symbols on the job, such as hijabs.

Noa Mendelsohn Aviv, executive director of the Canadian Civil Liberties Association, described the passage of Bill 28 in Ontario this week as "horrifying." "An important piece of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms is being shredded before our very eyes," Mendelsohn Aviv said in a statement.

"It is the rights of workers in Ontario that have been assaulted today through Bill 28; it is the rights of some practicing Muslims, Jews and Sikhs in Quebec that continue to be assaulted through Bill 21; and make no mistake that this will continue unless we all fight tooth and nail," she said. "Everyone's rights are

at stake when the notwithstanding clause is used.”

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