

Aftermath: the Ontario teacher protest 1997

by Jan Eastman

In the fall of 1997, teachers made North American history. The protest action of 126,000 teachers, principals, and education workers closed Ontario's schools for two weeks. What was it about Bill 160, the Education Quality Improvement Act, that caused teachers to take such strong and unprecedented action? Why were the teachers able to win public support and keep the story in the media? And what is happening in the aftermath of that action and the passage of the bill?

When teachers returned to their classrooms, the dispute moved into the broader context of political and legal action. The next provincial election is but two years away. Resistance continues. On December 1, OTF President Eileen Lennon served notice on the Conservative Government of Mike Harris: "The passage of Bill 160 into law is not the end of our struggle. Parents, students, teachers, and education workers know the fight is not over. We will hold this government... accountable for every dollar cut, every program cut, and every school that is hurt by this legislation."

So will parents. The Apple-Green Ribbon campaign began in response to teachers' call to parents and public to continue the fight against Bill 160. The green ribbons caught the public imagination, perhaps because they signify growth and hope for the future of education. (Large bows tied around trees in front of the legislature at Queen's Park were removed by security forces. MPPs were forbidden to wear green ribbons in the House; instead they wear green ties and scarves and shirts.) Ontario teachers will use the tremendous support they have gained to pursue initiatives on a number of fronts. Ontario's teacher unions have launched constitutional challenges claiming that the rights of association of principals and vice-principals have been violated.

The government pulled out all the stops. It claimed to be the saviour of education, the only group able and willing to make the necessary reforms to rescue the system from failure. It claimed it could improve the quality of education by taking out hundreds of millions of dollars, reducing secondary teachers' prep time (thus removing up to 10,000 teachers), removing principals and vice-principals against union members' wishes, granting itself the power to decree which curricular areas would not need certificated teachers, and removing class size from the scope of bargaining. Less money, fewer teachers, and less-qualified personnel would make for smaller classes and a better system.

The government claimed the unions wanted to run the entire system. "Should the government or the unions control education?" was a debate that raged in the media. Hyperbole and two-liners were the order of the day. So was misrepresentation by the government, which spent millions beaming blue-eyed Mike Harris into Ontario's living rooms. As the strike grew more imminent, government tried desperately to separate teachers from their union leaders, to no avail. "Real teachers" were exhorted to rebel against their "union bosses."

According to the Tories, it was all about "change," and teachers were resisting because their unions had taught them to oppose change. What garbage! All teachers agree that reforms that provide support for teachers, who are often stretched to the limit in attempting to deliver quality education in today's busy, complex, and diverse schools, would be very welcome. Teachers opposed Bill 160 because it offers no vision for public education.

The government and its ministers tried to stifle debate over Bill 160, but ironically, the bill has furnished a rallying point for everyone concerned about the future of public education. The Ontario government's efforts to weaken education's stakeholders may have done exactly the opposite; support for education has never been stronger.

Parents and the public came to understand that despite the government's promise that local autonomy and community involvement would be enhanced, the bill centralizes decision making and puts enormous power into the hands of a few ministers. Regulations that are not yet written, and not for public scrutiny, can ignore the public interest. Some have called Bill 160 a "money grab and a power grab" because total centralization of funding means the government can remove as much as it wants. Locally elected school trustees rightly fear that local initiatives, especially those for students with special needs, will not survive.

Reducing the scope of bargaining was designed to enrage teachers and to make their opposition to Bill 160 look self-interested. Class size and preparation time, which used to be bargainable, are now decree-able, since Bill 160 overrides existing collective agreements. The government claimed that teacher efforts at the bargaining table had increased class size. Class size and preparation time belong at the bargaining table and

should remain there, not in legislation written by a bullying government intent on union busting. Collective-bargaining rights that enable both parties to sit as equals at the table and, through the process of negotiation within the economic context of the day, reach an agreement, enhance the employer-employee relationship, recognize what is most significant to both parties, and offer the opportunities to find solutions to real problems.

Ontario teachers were able to sway public opinion because of teacher credibility. Teachers succeeded in informing, engaging, and convincing the public that some or all of Bill 160 should be withdrawn. They spoke for students, for classrooms, and for the future of public education, and they spoke--undeniably--in the public interest.

Those teachers whose voices were heard throughout November won the hearts of the Ontario public. But questions remain. Does the public understand, long term, what is at stake?

Is Bill 160 a pathway to privatization, perhaps with charter schools? Will it mean more union-busting and further attempts to control teachers? Is democracy at risk as well as local autonomy?

We teachers across the country admired the courage and resolve of our Ontario colleagues. We applauded their efforts on behalf of students and public education. We pledged our support in messages, on the picket line, through the media, and in dollars. We wore green ribbons, because their fight is our fight. And it is not yet over.

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