

THE BATTLES, THE WARS, THE VICTORIES

A history of perseverance, determination and leadership *by Rod Albert*

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onday morning. Cold, wet, dark, but exhilarating. Ten years ago, over 125,000 teachers and educational workers mobilized in defence of public education across Ontario. Virtually every public school was closed. October 27, 1997 to November 7, 1997 marked the longest and largest political protest by any group in North America.



DEFENDING PUBLIC EDUCATION OCTOBER 27 – NOVEMBER 7, 1997
Ontario teachers and educational workers mobilize in defence of public education, leave their workplaces and confront the government in the largest political protest by any group against any government in North America

The political protest demonstrated that solidarity is OSSTF/FEESO's greatest strength, and democracy within our union our greatest means of maintaining that strength.

Only OSSTF/FEESO held an all-member vote before the protest. More than 84 percent voted, by secret ballot, to support a province-wide walkout to protest the Government of Ontario's deliberate efforts to destabilize public education.

The political protest was unprecedented in Canadian history. It focused on two pieces of proposed legislation—Bill 136, The Public Sector Transition Stability Act and Bill 160, the government's cynically named Education Quality Improvement Act. Bill 136 dealt specifically with trade union status, seniority

provisions, and the establishment of first collective agreements for educational workers in newly created district school boards.

In early 1997, the Harris government reduced the number of school boards from 129 to 72, reduced the number of trustees from 1,900 to 700, removed the right of school boards to levy taxes and promoted the contracting out of thousands of jobs then held by office and clerical workers, plant support staff, educational assistants and other professional support staff.

There was nothing either new or shocking about the Tory initiatives. The Harris government was following American policies implemented during the Reagan/Bush Senior years. Education Minister John Snobelen deliberately, and cynically, set out to manufacture a crisis that would damage the reputation of Ontario's public schools—in order to smooth the path to privatization.

Bill 160 further intruded into free collective bargaining. Class size and teaching time were mandated for teachers, forcing heavier workloads on secondary school teachers, while reducing the number of teachers in Ontario's schools by over 15 percent. It would take more time, but eventually the public came to understand that Bills 136 and 160 were never about improving public

education. The government's goal was really about extracting \$1 billion from Ontario's schools—primarily through staffing cuts.

The May 2001 budget for Ontario provided final evidence of the government's ideologically driven fervour for two-tiered education. The Conservative government's 2001 budget introduced tax credits for parents whose children attended private schools.

"To save money, perhaps to pave the way for privatization of schools, the government seems hell-bent on destabilizing the education system, demoralizing teachers, panicking trustees and confusing parents. It is a sure-fire recipe for disaster and our kids and our province will be the big losers."

**Gerald Caplan
Co-Chair, Royal Commission on Learning
November 15, 1996**

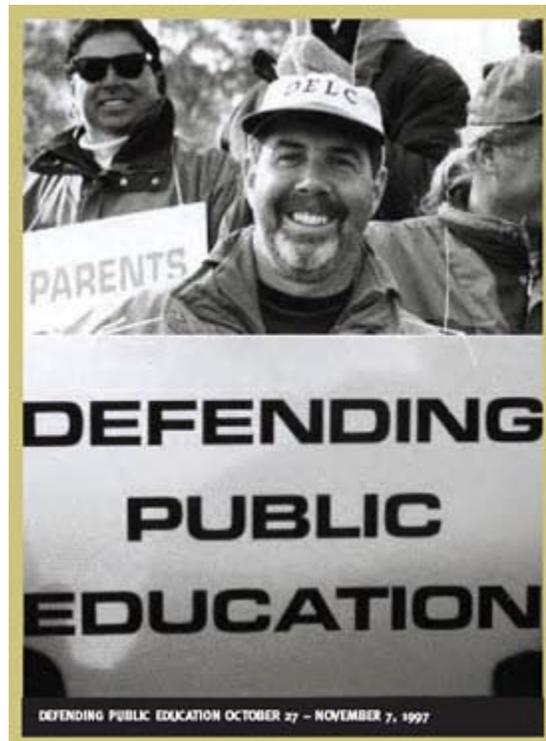
The Harris and Eves governments removed over \$2 billion from Ontario's public schools—an amount confirmed by the government's own appointed investigator, Dr. Mordechai Rozanski. The Harris government weakened local school boards and educational unions. Bargaining rights for all educational employees came under relentless attack. Public education was deliberately kept in a war zone of unending turmoil as the Tories attempted to dictate every working minute in every school. They even threatened to legislate compulsory "voluntary" extra-curricular duties.

Neither the political protest nor the exposure of the government's real agenda to cut a billion dollars from publicly funded education stopped the government's agenda. It would

take until the provincial election of 2003 for the people of Ontario to grow exhausted with the Tories' reckless public policies intended to provide instability and "in-your-face" government.

The 1997 political protest was not the only time that members of OSSTF/ FEESO demonstrated their solidarity to secure and enhance collective bargaining rights.

It seems incredible today, but it wasn't until July 1975 that Ontario's teachers won the legal right to strike.





The early 1970s had seen the rise of teacher militancy across the province. Without procedures for teacher/school board bargaining, with cutbacks imposed by provincial spending ceilings and declining enrolment already evident, the background was being set for what was, up to that time, the biggest teacher walkout in Ontario's history.

The Birth of Bargaining Legislation

Prior to the passage of The School Boards and Teachers' Collective Negotiations Act (long referred to as Bill 100) the Conservative government of Bill Davis had established a committee of inquiry, known colloquially as the Reville Committee. The Reville Report, released to the public in September 1972, was intended to help regulate negotiations between teacher federations and school boards. The report's bias is clear from the following excerpt alone:

"The concept of professionalism must, by necessity, imply a sense of obligation to one's work. The teacher concentrates on the efficiency of his technique and on constant improvement of his performance. Matters such as remuneration...are relegated to a position of secondary importance."

The report recommended that:

- teachers be denied the right to strike;
- negotiations be limited to compensation only;
- a permanent provincial adjudication tribunal be established.

OSSTF was outraged at these proposals limiting free collective bargaining and advised the government that "limiting the scope of negotiations, as recommended, will only ensure more confrontation rather than less." Far from turning back the clock, the Reville Report was soon followed by mass resignations of members in Essex County. Without the legislative "right to strike," teacher unions succeeded in organizing mass resignations in support of their bargaining objectives. By December 1973, mass resignations were planned in 17 areas, five led by OSSTF negotiators.

"You [teachers and educational workers] may have unmasked a real bona fide conspiracy to eliminate publicly funded education.... In short, American-style neo-conservative values are determining our children's futures."

Charles Pascal

Former Deputy Minister to John Snobelen

November 1997

The stage had been set for confrontation. OSSTF also led a mounting political campaign of massive opposition to the government's attempt to implement the Reville Report. The campaign culminated in the largest political demonstration in Ontario (to that time), on December 18, 1973. Teachers across Ontario walked off the job in protest against the proposed legislation. Ever courteous and well organized, teachers participating in the walkout advised the principals in their schools that: "We, the undersigned, will be absent from school on Tuesday, December 18 as a protest against Bill 274."

Against this background, the Davis government backed off and agreed to a new set of principles fundamental to real bargaining:

- that there would be no restrictions on the scope of bargaining;
- that the parties would be required to bargain in good faith;
- that there would be a right to strike by teachers and a right to lockout by school boards.

That political protest on December 18, 1973, led directly to Bill 100, a fundamentally sound piece of labour legislation, which served the public, the government, teachers and school boards well for over 22 years. After the 1973 protest, the government never looked at OSSTF the same way again.

Fighting for Pension Partnerships

Until 1989, the Ontario government fully controlled the pension benefits, the contribution rates and the asset investment policy of what we now call the Teachers' Pension Plan (TPP). Under the David Peterson Liberal government, teachers worked to establish a jointly sponsored pension plan with the "pension employer," the Government of Ontario.

The concept of an "equal" partnership was to provide:

- a process for negotiating benefits and contribution rates;
- an equal responsibility for sharing risks (deficits) and rewards (surpluses);
- a third-party dispute resolution process should the parties disagree.

Needless to say, attempting to establish an equal partnership with sovereign Ontario was incredibly difficult.

To illustrate their commitment to pension fairness, one out of every six Ontario teachers rallied in downtown Hamilton, outside a Liberal Party Convention on April 1, 1989. It was an overwhelming reply from more than 25,000 demonstrators to the Premier, who had earlier said that teachers concerned about their pensions were just "being silly."

And while the Liberals never entered into an equal partnership with the teachers of Ontario, the declaration of war with the government in Hamilton would fuel the fire for a new government. In September 1990, Bob Rae and the NDP were elected with a majority government. The new NDP government quickly delivered on its election promise and established a true and equal pension partnership with the teachers of Ontario. Like December 18, 1973, April 1, 1989, was another day to remember.



Following the success of the TPP partnership, OSSTF/FEESO lobbied for over a decade to secure a similar governance structure to allow our members who contribute to the Ontario Municipal Employees' Retirement System (OMERS) the same pension rights and voice in determining their pension future as our teacher members. Finally, in 2006, the Ontario government revised the OMERS Act to give employers and employees control over OMERS pensions.

The OSSTF/FEESO lobby and the success of our organizing efforts since the mid-'80s resulted in OSSTF/FEESO securing one of the seven permanent seats on the OMERS Sponsors Corporation. OSSTF/FEESO will be able to use its expertise and experience to help set the contribution levels and pension benefits for OMERS contributors for years to come.

Strength in Numbers

From its founding in 1919 until 1944, membership in OSSTF depended upon voluntary sign-ups and dues payments. In 1944, the provincial government established statutory membership for Ontario's teacher federations. By that time, over 90 percent of Ontario's public secondary school teachers had already joined OSSTF voluntarily.

For the next 40 years, statutory teachers constituted the full scope of our membership. Then, in 1984, the Annual Meeting of the Provincial Assembly acted and set a new direction for OSSTF/FEESO. The 1984 Assembly determined to use the provisions of the Ontario Labour Relations Act to organize and represent occasional, summer and night school teachers.

The exhilaration, the hard work and the success of organizing these teacher groups led to further debate within OSSTF/FEESO. Psychologists, educational assistants, office and clerical personnel, custodians and maintenance staff also recognized OSSTF/FEESO's strength and professionalism and actively sought to be a part of that strength. This led to further constitutional changes and revisions to the OSSTF/FEESO Letters Patent in 1987 and 1988. OSSTF/FEESO expanded its vision of membership to recognize the community of interest of all the people who work to make schools possible for students.

Since those historic decisions, OSSTF/ FEESO has conducted one of the largest organizing drives in the recent history of the Ontario labour movement. Today, OSSTF/FEESO represents over 15,000 members in 66 bargaining units, organized under the provisions of the Ontario Labour Relations Act.

The job of organizing and representing educational workers, envisioned by previous annual meetings, continues. Recently, OSSTF/FEESO has welcomed a number of new colleagues from the university sector. Support staff at Brock University, Algoma University College and the University of Ottawa—all of whom contribute to the high quality of public education in Ontario. They are now a part of our strength.

The continued expansion and the increasing diversity of our membership will ensure that our future remains strong and bright. 🐦

"It was back to the basics; it was affirmative action; it was a brave decision." [1988]

Jim Forster

OSSTF President 1974–1976

Associate General Secretary

1976–2001

Rod Albert recently retired as General Secretary of OSSTF/FEESO, a post he held from 2004 to 2007. He was also President of OSSTF/FEESO from 1985–88, and President of OTF from 1988–89. Rod joined the professional staff of OSSTF/FEESO in 1989.