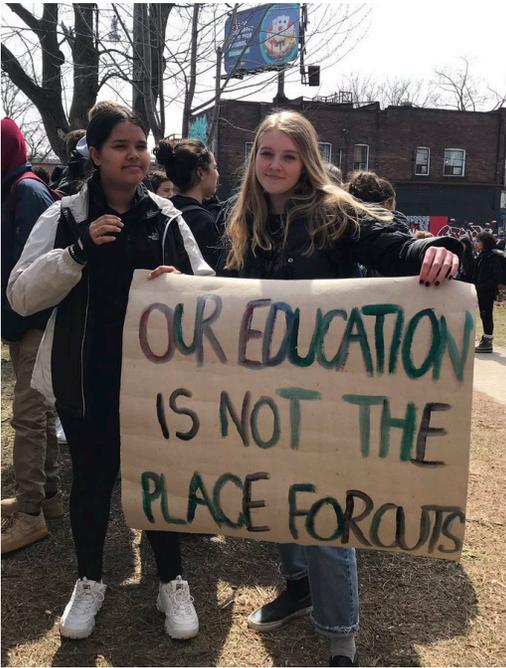




# ONTARIO'S SPRING: STUDENTS LEAD, LABOUR MUST FOLLOW



*By Doug Nesbitt and David Bush*

**Ontario secondary school students organized the biggest walkout in the province's history on April 4. Somewhere between 100,000 and 200,000 students from over 700 high schools participated. Walkouts even spread to elementary schools. This is the second major student walk out in the province since the Tories were elected.**

A whole generation is in revolt against the Ford Tories and their attacks on public education. The students know that their future is in jeopardy. They're opposed to the classroom size increases, the thousands of layoffs, the slashing of supports for autistic children, the dangerous rollback of the sex-ed curriculum,

and the cancellation of efforts to include more Indigenous content in schools. OSAP grants for university and college students are also being cut back.

Back in September, over 40,000 high school students walked out to protest Ford's cuts to the sex-ed curriculum. Learning from that experience, student organizers used Instagram and other social media to coordinate the April 4 protest, even developing an impressive organizing guide to help spread the political message and best organizational practices.

The impact of the protest should not be underestimated because thousands of others are getting organized to fight the government's agenda. The Tories could be in serious trouble here, but the students can't win this fight alone.

### **Fighting Ford requires coordination**

The Ford government will unveil their budget on April 11. It is expected to escalate cuts to public services, healthcare, education and jobs. The wealthy and corporate privatizers will be showered with gifts. The coming weeks are a huge test for the labour movement in building an Ontario Spring and expanding the ranks of the opposition in the streets.

Teachers are mobilizing for an education rally on Saturday, April 6. The Ontario Health Coalition has called for a mass rally at Queen's Park in Toronto on April 30. The for-profit privatization of healthcare means huge amounts of public money flooding into the pockets of wealthy corporations and rich stockholders – instead of frontline health services and jobs.

The Ontario Federation of Labour – the umbrella organization for over 700,000 union members – is also calling for actions around the province on June 7. This is a chance to combine the forces of the new student movement, organized labour, and community

organizations. Large marches and student walkouts can open up possibilities for sick-outs, picket lines, and economic disruption. June 7 can be a major step towards building the political crisis required to stop the Tory agenda.

### **Solidarity with the teachers**

With teachers and education workers heading into bargaining, students have raised the stakes in this battle over the future of public education. The unions know they have a lot of support from students and the broader public to take on the government. The size and breadth of the student walkout is a threat to Ford's political agenda, which is why they've been attacking and demonizing teachers so relentlessly.

That said, the Tories will be determined to defeat the unions and demoralize students. The brutal nature of the government attacks and the mass student movement means that the unions have to fight like hell to win, and will likely require major acts of solidarity. A defeat on the education front will set the entire movement back, as the defeat of the 1997 teachers strike did for the millions fighting the Harris Tories.

If labour can begin pulling many thousands of its members and supporters into the streets on April 6, April 30 and June 7, the movement's ranks will swell, confidence will rise, and new opportunities will emerge to press our advantage. But if labour can't seize the opportunity opened up by the student walkouts, then we're giving the Tories far too much space to manoeuvre. They'll be able to regain the initiative if they can fall back on their usual methods of media spin, bluster, and bullying. The Tories are already banking on this, having changed campaign spending rules to allow huge corporate and wealthy donations. The student walkout points the way forward: the many creating a paralyzing and hopefully fatal political crisis for the few.

# Ford continues to attack workers with Bill 66



By Simran Dhunna, Vidhya Elango and Talia Holy

**Only a few months ago, Premier Doug Ford's Bill 47 repealed many of the labour protections won through advocacy by decent work coalitions across Ontario — including the Fight for \$15 and Fairness campaign. Workers lost two paid sick days; pay equity between full-time, part-time, and temporary workers; and the scheduled increase of minimum wage to \$15 an hour.**

The bill passed despite persistent outcry, proving that Ford is not “for the people,” no matter how often he repeats it.

Following Bill 47, the Progressive Conservative (PC) government passed Bill 66 yesterday. Bill 66, the “Restoring Ontario’s Competitiveness Act,” was tabled in December of 2018, is an omnibus bill which amends several, unrelated laws dealing with child-care, environment, and labour, among other things. The PCs claim it will “eliminate red tape and burdensome regulations so businesses can grow, create and protect good jobs.”

However, the so-called red tape that will be removed crucially protects workers’ rights.

## **When organizing works: the Greenbelt**

When it was announced that Bill 66 would open the Greenbelt for development, the PCs were met with strong opposition. The Greenbelt, an established protected land strip, includes more than two million acres of environmentally-sensitive areas and farmlands. That section of the bill allowed municipalities to create “open for business” zoning bylaws, giving them the option to override legislation that prohibits development in the Greenbelt.

Individuals, communities, and environmental organizations were active in opposing this legislation. A testament to political organizing, the opposition was ultimately successful: Schedule 10 of Bill 66 relating to the Greenbelt was repealed.

However, while Bill 66 has received significant media and public attention around the Greenbelt, less attention has been given to its labour implications. This lack of awareness is partially due to the fact that Bill 66 was an

omnibus bill that makes changes to multiple pieces of legislation at once.

Though omnibus bills save time by shortening legislative proceedings, they limit the ability for MPPs and constituents to express their objections to specific components of the bill. Instead, they are forced to either support or reject the bill as a whole. In majority governments, omnibus bills become a strategic way to quickly push through enormous policy changes — allowing segments of the legislation to fly under the radar without accountability.

## **Bill 66 continues the attack on labour**

According to the Employment Standards Act, for an employee to be able to work more than 48 hours a week, both the employer and employee are required to sign an agreement and gain approval from the Ministry of Labour. This specific provision has existed for nearly 75 years in Ontario thanks to labour advocates. However, Bill 66 removes the extra step of approval by the ministry, allowing employers to ask employees to work overtime with little to no oversight.

Ministry oversight is, ideally, meant to keep the power of employers in check. It can be difficult for many workers, especially workers in low-wage, precarious positions, to say no to their employers when asked to work overtime. Removing a mechanism of formal accountability makes workers vulnerable to abuses in the workplace.

Current laws also allow employers to average out hours worked over two or more weeks, but only with the agreement of workers and approval from the Ministry of Labour. For example, working 30 hours in one week and 50 hours in another could be averaged to 40 hours both weeks — and would thus not be considered ‘overtime.’

Bill 66 scraps the requirement for overtime averaging to be approved by the Ministry of Labour. Without oversight, employers are sure to take advantage of this loophole by avoiding paying workers time-and-a-half overtime pay.

When the Ford government says it wants to get rid of ‘red tape,’ what it really means is that it wants to give the green light to employers to place their bottom line above workers’ safety. Agreements between employers and workers are shaped by a clear power imbalance, in which workers are beholden to the whims of their boss, especially if they are relying on a paycheck to put food on the table.

## **Students are at risk**

Students trying to make ends meet by working in precarious sectors, like retail or service, are especially vulnerable. As Ford’s policies, like cuts to Ontario Student Assistance Program grants, make postsecondary education more expensive, students will

find it difficult to say no to a boss who asks them to average their overtime hours or work excess hours.

Bill 66 also scraps the requirement for the Employment Standards Act poster to be displayed in “a conspicuous place” in all workplaces. While this change is quite small, it is not trivial: it limits workers’ access to crucial information about their rights, making them less likely to seek justice if they have been wronged.

Lastly, the bill harms construction workers. Ontario’s Labour Relations Act has a “non-construction employer” provision, which means that any employer deemed to be a “non-construction employer” is not beholden to any collective agreement that unionized construction workers would regularly be covered by.

Bill 66 expands the definition of “non-construction employer” to include municipalities, school boards, hospitals, universities, and colleges. Workers performing construction work in these settings would not be afforded the protection that their union usually offers them. By allowing these public employers to dissolve collective agreements, Bill 66 effectively undermines the power of unions, hindering access to fair working conditions and wages.

All of the changes to labour laws that this bill proposes are discomfiting, but the changes to the Labour Relations Act especially belie a pattern of the Ford government. Ford’s Student Choice Initiative effectively defunds student unions by making their fees optional, undermining their ability to provide services to students and advocate for structural change.

## **We must continue the resistance**

In moments like these, when another piece of Ford legislation claws back worker protections, it is essential to remember that making noise has worked before and can work again. Though Bill 66 has passed, we can still hold Ford’s PCs and exploitative workplaces accountable by continuing to organize and agitate.

Indeed, many of the labour protections that we’ve retained, such as domestic or sexual violence leave and the \$14 minimum wage, personal emergency leave for all workers are the direct result of tireless organizing by activist groups like the Fight for \$15 and Fairness campaign.

In this political moment, we must not only remind ourselves of the fights that have been won, but also be vigilant in advocating for one another in our workplaces and communities. Under Bill 66, when employers no longer have to answer to the Ministry of Labour, they will have to answer to us: the people.

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