

Ontario Catholic teachers prepare to start job action if upcoming bargaining talks fail

Ontario's Catholic teachers will commence administrative job action as of Jan. 13 if it hasn't come to a tentative contract agreement with the Province of Ontario.

Liz Stuart, president of the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association, made the announcement Jan. 8, ahead of scheduled bargaining sessions over Jan. 9 and 10.

"We have not taken this decision lightly, but we believe it is necessary to secure a fair contract and protect publicly funded education in Ontario," said Stuart in a news release.

The union representing teachers in the province's English Catholic school system has met almost 40 times with provincial representatives and school trustees to work out a deal without coming to an agreement.

Stuart accused the government of Premier Doug Ford of being "disorganized and disrespectful throughout the process, and they continue to insist on an agreement that includes significant cuts."

The job action would follow in the footsteps of Ontario's public high school teachers who have been holding rotating one-day strikes since before Christmas.

OECTA, whose members voted 97.1 per cent in favour of strike action in November, will refrain from preparing report cards, participating in activities related to the government's Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) and attending or participating in Ministry of Education initiatives if a deal is not reached before Jan. 13. Nor will they attend staff or departmental meetings and teachers will engage in self-directed professional development activities on PD days.

EQAO Grade 9 math assessment is set to begin Jan. 13 and Education Minister Stephen Lecce, in a Jan. 8 statement, called out the unions, in particular the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, for their job action impacting students.

"It is unfair that union actions are undermining student success," said Lecce. "They are jeopardizing the learning experience of Ontario's future leaders.... We continue to be concerned by the adverse impacts on students due to union

escalation.”

“We know Minister Lecce and other members of the government will trot out their misleading talking points about union escalation, but the reality is that this type of widespread strike action is rare,” said Stuart, adding “teachers must do what is necessary to protect our rights and ensure quality education for all students, now and in the future.”

The contentious points in negotiations between the province and teachers’ unions remains what the union sees as “massive cuts” to the education system.

“Catholic teachers call on the government to abandon their preoccupation with slashing spending, recognize that publicly funded education is an investment and finally get serious about working toward an agreement that protects our world-class education system,” said Stuart.

A Fraser Institute analysis, however, shows the province is looking to maintain spending levels, adjusted for inflation, each year through 2023-24.

The Ford government has been looking for savings since it came to power in 2018 to tackle a huge deficit left the province by the former Liberal government.