



BOB TYMCZYSZYN ST. CATHARINES STANDARD

Doug Ford's dispute with teachers unions is sexism wrapped in the monk's robes of austerity, Andréa Raymond writes.

Teachers dispute exposes the pink elephant in the room

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It's time to acknowledge the pink elephant in the room. The provincial government's ongoing dispute with Ontario teachers unions, cleverly disguised as a budget exercise, is an attack on both female workers and family friendly policy.

Although Doug Ford's Progressive Conservatives won 40 per cent of the popular vote in the 2018 provincial election, 57.6 per cent of voters chose one of the progressive parties, either the NDP, the Liberals, or the Greens. This means that, during the last election, most Ontarians chose to favour parties with family supportive policies. We knew what was at stake: Polls conducted in April 2018 showed that many Ontario women were already wary of Ford's socially conservative tendencies.

My union, the Elementary Teacher's Federation of Ontario, is 81 per cent female-identified. Contrary to Ford's recent insinuations, teachers unions are democratic institutions. I vote for the union steward at my school, the local executive and the provincial president of my union. They consult us regularly and represent our interests.

Teachers unions exist because teachers have historically been a female workforce, facing the unique challenges of caring for children at work and often acting as caregivers, spouses and breadwinners at home. Over the decades, unions have won protections for their members, which came to be extended to all workers, such as paid maternity leave and health benefits.

Modern teaching still exists at the in-

tersection of ordinary life and the human spirit. On a daily basis, Ontario's teachers deal with the consequences of a rapidly evolving society.

We are on the front lines of immigration and settlement, the province's mental-health crisis and the changing family. Every day, we're called upon to help our students self-regulate, to deal with violence in the classroom and to connect our students and their families to services, such as social work and counselling. As budget cuts decimate those services, we do so with very limited support.

Like nursing, teaching is a profession still overwhelmingly occupied by women. Like nursing, it encompasses evidence-based practice, yet relies upon a seasoned workforce with a well-honed tool kit of empathy, deep interpersonal skills and problem-solving ability.

In other words, it's a form of emotional labour that women continue to provide, even though it's increasingly devalued. In offering parents \$25 to \$60 to cover child care during our one-day strike, the government shows that this work is lowly regarded. When the work of women is maligned, it makes it harder to attract and retain male teachers in the profession, thereby doing a disservice to all genders/expressions.

Elementary teachers are striking to save full-day kindergarten, which allows children to learn with both teachers and early childhood educators in the classroom.

In Quebec, a world-class daycare program has returned many women to the workplace, causing a baby boom and economic upswing lasting many years. Now, Quebec Premier François Legault

wants to extend this child-centred and feminist policy to a full-day kindergarten program based on Ontario's model — the model Premier Ford seems bent on eliminating.

In addition, teachers are walking out to save funding for the special education programs that serve our most vulnerable students and to oppose larger class sizes, which make it impossible for us to provide the kind of individualized attention and instruction families have come to expect.

We're not alone in this fight: Reports suggest 70 per cent of Ontario parents consulted by the Ford government opposed an increase in class sizes.

And, yes, we're also striking to protect our own working conditions. In the egalitarian society Canada claims to be, a woman who holds at least five years of university education and 10 years of experience in her field should not need to justify her desire for compensation that reflects those qualifications. Nor should a person of any gender expression.

In the most recent round of negotiations with the Ontario Police, an overwhelmingly male workforce, officers were granted salary raises of two per cent per year.

It is time for teachers, and all Ontarians, to call out the pink elephant in the room. Ford's dispute with teachers unions is sexism wrapped in the monk's robes of austerity. It hurts women. It hurts families. And it needs to end.



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