
Interview: Leah Casselman

Union leader speaks out on Ontario public service employees' strike

Leah Casselman is president of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union in Canada. The 67,000 members of OPSEU went on strike on Feb. 26—the first strike by civil servants in Ontario's history—in protest of the anti-labor, union-busting policies of the government of Progressive Conservative Premier Mike Harris. Harris was elected in June 1995 on a "Common Sense Revolution" platform, modeled after Newt Gingrich's Contract with America. Harris has threatened to lay off up to 27,000 civil servants and to slash benefits for those who remain. This interview was conducted on March 8 by Marianna Wertz for New Federalist newspaper, and is reprinted here by permission.

Q: What are the major goals of the strike?

Casselman: The major goal of the strike is to get back some of the rights the employers stripped away from us in legislative change. There were two major changes: The first one was they exempted these workers from a provision called successor rights, which means when the government contracts out or privatizes the work, any other worker in the province can go with their work to the new employer. That won't happen now to government workers. The government exempted itself, so the workers don't automatically get to go, they don't go with their wages, they don't go with their pensions, they don't go with their benefits, they don't go with their union.

The other piece that they stripped away from them was the access to the Pension Benefits Act. Again, where any employer in the province where there's a pension plan makes a decision to contract out or to privatize or close down the operation, they've got to add money to the pension fund, which would pay the benefits for older workers—it's called a partial plan wind-up—so those older workers would be allowed to retire when they normally would have been able to with a full pension, instead of having to wait till 65. The ones not close to retirement would have their pension benefits super-vested.

Q: You've had these benefits since when?

Casselman: Since cowboys! We've had the pension plan for years. We just got joint trusteeship about a year and a half ago.

Q: And these rights were stripped by the Harris government?

Casselman: Yes, they made these legislative changes, so they've exempted themselves from these laws as an employer. They tried the pension one in July. We found out about it, took them to court and won, because what they were doing was *illegal*. So in this other piece of legislation, they've actually made it, now, illegal for us to take them to court for doing something that's illegal!

Q: They changed the law to make it illegal?

Casselman: Yes. To charge them with doing something that's illegal. They are quite heady with their power.

Q: So those are your two major goals?

Casselman: Yes. We know they're in a major downsizing and we want to make sure that the workers are treated fairly when they leave.

Q: Have you challenged the premise of the downsizing, that this is not absolutely necessary?

Casselman: Yes, and we'll do more of that, because we know in the budget, when the finance minister brings the budget out in April, he will be announcing a number of those. But we wanted to get the foundation of the collective agreement in place first.

The struggle that we're in, we've got a deal in front of them, which allows them to do their downsizing, but forces them to treat the workers fairly. It ends up being a "win-win" for both sides. But their ideology is blinding them to seeing the deal, because of all the other nonsense we're in. So, putting aside the direction that they're moving in, and the fact that we're opposed to it, we want to get them focussed on their responsibility as an *employer* to bargain a collective agreement. So we'll have that protection and foundation in place when we go after them on the other things.

Q: The same kind of thing is happening in the United States.

Casselman: Well, I haven't had much time to follow it down there, but it's clearly very similar to what's happening in New Jersey. Gov. Christine Todd Whitman was up here in June, and the communication workers followed her up and we did

some joint picketing with them, when she was around here selling her 30% tax-cut plan. And of course, we've seen the impact of that ahead of time, with the ones who voted for Harris in Ontario. Already the public is saying, "Keep your money, don't cut the services. We don't need the tax cut that bad, thank you very much, if it means gutting everything."

Q: How is the public reacting to the strike?

Casselman: It's been very interesting, when you get into smaller communities. Toronto is like a world unto its own, so it's hard to judge here. But when you get outside of cities the size of Toronto, which has 2 million people, you really see the communities coming together behind the workers, because they realize that not only do they need the services that they provide, but they also are taxpayers, and local community taxpayers, and they spend money in their communities. So they see much more clearly the direct impact of the public-sector paychecks in their communities, in addition to the service that they get. So it's much easier to judge there.

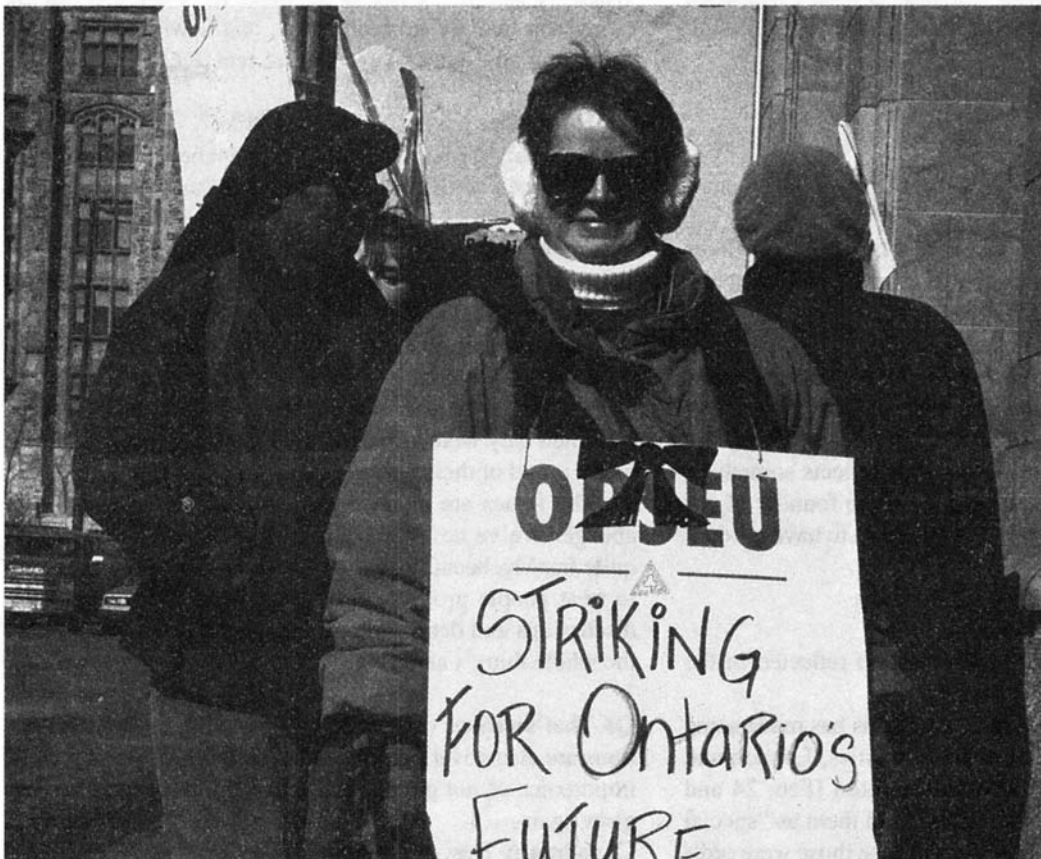
The public support has been really, really good. The ones that are whining the most are businesses that didn't realize they needed the clerks and the computer operators in these ministries to get their deals through. So we made it onto page three of the *Financial Post* up here, because some companies weren't being able to close their multimillion-dollar deals,

because, one of the ministries is called Consumer Commercial Relations, and their computers were down and there were no clerks there to run them anyway, so they couldn't get their deals closed. Housing sales of course, the land registry offices are closed, so they can't register those. Anyone trying to sell a used car, and they have a lot of tickets against it, or a couple of liens is lucky. The dealers are having to take them blind, because there's no way to check! So they're squealing toward the government. We've had a number of independent meat processors—

Q: There was a rumor that meat would run out soon in the province, because the inspectors are on strike.

Casselman: Right. Where's the beef? The private slaughterhouses can't slaughter, because the meat inspectors are on strike. So they took us to court and lost. The court said, sorry, it's a labor dispute, what do you expect?

So, now, of course, the government's spending a lot of time and taxpayers' money in the courts, trying to get injunctions against us. It took us 18 months to bargain the essential services agreement [specifying which jobs must be filled in the event of a strike], simply because it's the first time it's been done, and because of the magnitude—tens of thousands of job descriptions, of jobs that had to be determined whether or not they were essential. And the government didn't argue



Ontario Public Service Employees Union on strike, March 11, 1996. This is the first strike by civil servants in Ontario's history, a protest against the threat of huge layoffs by the government of Premier Mike Harris.

that meat inspectors were essential. So, now, the fact that they couldn't get that off of us, they want to legislate it off of us or get the courts to take it off of us. So if they spent half the time at the bargaining table that they do in the courts, we could have had the collective agreement settled by now.

Q: Do you feel the government forced this strike?

Casselman: Oh, very much so. We have a premier, to show how silly he is, he actually publicly said that this strike would be good for business. So my comments back to the press were, if Mr. Harris thinks that setting a pattern of labor unrest for the next four years is going to be good for business and corporations in the province, he's got his head screwed on backwards.

Q: That's precisely what Newt Gingrich and his cronies said here. They shut down the federal government in pursuit of their insanity. Now their popularity is plummeting.

Casselman: Harris fell fast here too. He went from 50% to 33% already in the polls. I think what's happening is people are becoming much more politically aware, because everyone up here was kind of watching this Newt guy. And Harris, I think, patterned himself after that, the Contract with America. In his campaign [he was elected in June 1995], we actually have been told that some Republicans from Newt's camp had been working in the back rooms with Harris.

But what the folks are now watching is what's happened in other jurisdictions, and they've seen that Newt has fizzled.

Q: He won't even show up in public.

Casselman: Really?

Q: Very rarely. He's gone way into the background. Because people saw that he was heartless.

Casselman: And it makes you kind of think, you can sell off everything you own to make your next quarter look profitable, but then you've got nothing down the road.

Q: What's happened here is that men like Senators Kennedy and Daschle, have come out with a proposal basically saying that without a living wage, your economy is worthless. The living wage drives everything else. This reflects something that has been said by Lyndon LaRouche, the founder of our publication, for years, which is that you have to have productive jobs to have a tax base.

Casselman: Yes, it's workers.

Q: To what extent is this sort of question reflected in the politics in Ontario now?

Casselman: It's interesting, because Harris has made some crucial mistakes. We've shut down two cities, London and Hamilton. At the demonstration in Hamilton [Feb. 24 and 25], we had 120,000 people. He dismissed them as "special interest." That was a major mistake, because those were ordi-

nary people. It wasn't just union folks, it was church groups and social action groups. It really made him look pretty shallow, I think. Very, very arrogant. His special interest group of a thousand people were barricaded behind three SWAT teams and cement blocks, which was at a policy convention to see how they get elected again. But they're not special interests! It was kind of obvious, that he would dismiss so rapidly 120,000 taxpayers and citizens of the province.

So, I think the best thing that he's doing is moving so quickly and so harshly, as opposed to what we had in Alberta with [Premier] Ralph Klein. The resistance is organizing just as quickly against him. Harris has actually pulled together groups of folks which I never thought would be working together at all, like doctors and lawyers and workers and trade unionists and social action groups and churches. They've all got this common struggle now to keep the province from falling apart. It's been startling.

Q: There was a report that there will be a meeting of trade union leaders on March 12.

Casselman: Yes, to review Hamilton and see what we do next.

Q: It was rumored that there might be plans for a general strike. Is that in the offing?

Casselman: That will probably be a topic of conversation. When we last met, I said to the other labor leaders, it's my estimation that we'll be on strike, and it will be province-wide, so if you'd just like to join us, feel free!

Q: Have other unions joined your strike?

Casselman: We had Toronto Hydro out here for three days, but they got a settlement. Ontario Hydro may be out the end of the month. We just got called back to the table today by the mediator. We'll be going back to the table on Sunday [March 10] with the mediator to try to get a collective agreement. So we're really pleased about that. It's a great development.

This group up here is 67,000 people who've never had the right to strike before. On their first strike vote, they voted 66.5% "no" to the employers' offer, and then walked off the job when they were asked to. It's absolutely unheard of. I'm really proud of them.

The issues are simple. They know things are going to change. We've never said that they wouldn't or shouldn't, quite frankly, because everything's changing, but you've got to treat people properly. You need to involve them in the discussions and decisions and treat them fairly. That's what the whole thing's about.

Q: That's why we wanted to cover the strike, and our publications are also covering some of the economic issues and the importance of not giving up the fight to make the economy grow again.

Casselman: Yes, exactly.