

## Province-wide Catholic teacher walkout taking place today

Written By ALYSSA PARKHILL

The Ontario English Catholic Teacher's Association (OECTA) will be participating in a province-wide walkout today (March 5).

A series of rotating strikes have been ongoing in recent weeks, with teachers across the province fighting against legislation passed by the Ontario government capping wage increases to one per cent for the next three years, and proposing what have been described as 'devastating' changes inside the classroom.

The four major teachers' unions, Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO), the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF), the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA) and the Association des enseignants et des enseignantes franco-ontariens (AEFO), have participated in the work-to-rule campaign.

The strikes were put on hold when parties were drawn back to the bargaining table last month, with hopes that the government were coming to a reasoning point in negotiations.

However, the unions didn't get the result they were hoping for.

'Instead of coming to the table with a plan to reach an agreement, the government continued to insist on its deep, permanent cuts,' said OECTA President Liz Stuart, in a new release. 'All the while, the Minister of Education has continued his attempts to mislead the public by making baseless accusations against Catholic teachers and our Association and by peddling the inaccurate claim that enhancements to our benefits plan is the sticking point in bargaining.'

Teachers have been off contract since August. Key issues they have with the changes proposed by the Ministry of Education largely focus on class size increases, mandatory e-learning and compensation.

OECTA took action on January 13 and plan to continue until today. Approximately 200,000 teachers and education workers across the province have previously walked out on Jan 21, Feb 4, Feb 21.

'Our Association remains committed to the goal of reaching a fair agreement at the bargaining table. However, we cannot tolerate the Ford government's penchant for misinformation and mistruth, nor its efforts to dismantle publicly funded education,' said Stuart.

She added, 'Catholic teachers understand the long-term consequences of this government's regressive agenda, and we continue to demonstrate our willingness to stand up and make our voices heard. Parents and the public know we are the last line of defence against the Ford government's reckless education cuts.'

As of March 3, there were signs the Ontario government was willing to adjust its initial plan to increase class sizes and implement mandatory e-learning in the hopes of reaching an agreement with the various teachers' unions.

'Enough is enough. It is time for a deal to keep students in class where they belong,' said Stephen Lecce, Ontario Education Minister in a press conference at Queens Park in Toronto on March 2. 'We must commit to keeping the best interest of students at the forefront of education policy.'

According to Lecce, class sizes will remain at the same number for elementary, and total an average of 23 students per high school class, going back on the initial plan of 28 students per class. The Ontario government is also investing into special education funding and giving teachers a one percent in wage increase.

As of press time, the province-wide strike, from Hurontario St. all the way to Lake Ontario, will still take place March 5. Unions declared that if no deal is met by Friday that rotating strikes will start back up.