

THE TORONTO STAR

Partly sunny and mild. High 12 C
Friday, November 7, 1997

It's back to school

One million students in class
Monday, the rest could follow

By John Rimmer
AND JANE ARNOLD/STAFF

About a million of Ontario's 1.5 million elementary and secondary school students are going back to class on Monday — the first day of the school year that could just finish.

Three of the five million, or 12,000,000, are teachers, and they "sponsored" before making an eight's decision to end the strike last started Oct. 27.

Inside

- **Elite Teacher's view, A2**
- **The fight continues, A6**
- **Thomas Bellamy's view, A6**
- **What parents say, A7**
- **The Start's view, A20**

in our clinics.

"We will keep up the pressure on the government. The public



Bill 160 - Twenty years on ...

by Leslie Wolfe

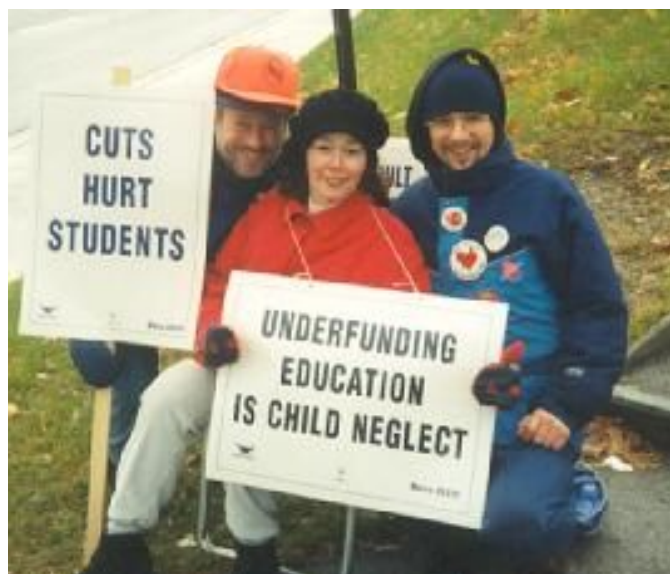
The protest against and subsequent passage of Bill 160 in fall/winter of 1997 can arguably be seen as both the pivotal moment for the current issues we have with education governance and funding, and for the creation of a new generation of political activists in the ranks of Ontario's.



Not unlike the fight for the right to strike in the early- to mid-1970's, and the fight of the 1980's by teachers to be full partners in the running of our pension plan, end-of-the-millennium teachers were faced with a decision about whether to fight to protect publicly funded education against the destructive changes being posed by the Harris Tory government. Their decision to do just that resulted in what is still, 20 years on, the largest teacher strike in Canadian history, and in fact the largest work stoppage in the history of North America. It is not hyperbole to suggest that today's education union political activism was born of the Harris Tory time in power, and his

government's determination to vilify publicly funded education and its teachers.

Ten years ago OSSTF Toronto hosted a panel discussion to commemorate the passage of Bill 160 and the fight against it. To mark this event, Eileen Lennon who was President of the Ontario Teachers Federation at the time of the protest provided us with her reflections on the work stoppage. That article is reprinted here. Following Eileen's recollections you will find two other articles, one by Doug Jolliffe who was a picket captain during the Bill 160 protest, and the other by Michelle Teixeira, who was an OAC student at that time. The final section of the commemorative newsletter is a chronology of events.



Reflections on the Bill 160 protest (written for the 10 year commemoration)

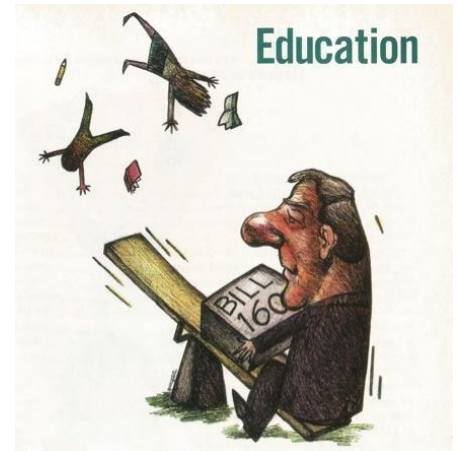
By Eileen Lennon (OTF President 1997-98)

Ten years ago the teachers of Ontario made history. We engaged in the largest work stoppage in the history of North America. We did this, not for any personal gain, but to stand up for quality public education.

This was a government that believed in creating a crisis and was singularly focused on generating money to finance tax cuts by downsizing the public sector and centralizing power. By 1997, the government had already removed almost \$1 billion from education, and had announced plans to overhaul and 'improve' the education system.

By the end of the summer of 1997, the Ontario government was about to introduce The Education Quality Improvement Act (Bill 160) - a particularly perverse name since it was designed to have exactly the opposite effect. This bill would overhaul Ontario's educational system by transferring funding control from local school trustees to cabinet, destroy collective agreements by seizing authority for teachers' working conditions, and would permit non-certified instructors to teach some programs.

We knew that a work stoppage was almost unavoidable and the Affiliates, through OTF began to plan for this eventuality. All-Affiliate committees were created to formulate strategy and a communications plan, both for our own members and for the general public. Rarely had there been such cooperation among the Affiliates. The sense of unity was wonderful and the results were incredible. When the teacher Affiliates of OTF decide to act with common purpose and put traditional rivalries aside the results are unbeatable.



At the same time, education and the possibility of a province-wide closing of schools were becoming front page news on a daily basis. Reporters were camped outside the OTF offices waiting for reports of every meeting. We knew we had to use the media to win support with the public. Mike Harris was trying to discredit us in the eyes of the public and alienate teachers from their leaders by derisively referring to the federation presidents as "union bosses", who had no concern for students, were against change, and were only interested in enhancing our own power. This approach failed.

From September 26 to October 10 regional all-Affiliate meetings and rallies were held across the province to inform the membership what was ahead and why. More than 85 per cent of the teachers attended these incredibly affirming events. For those of us in leadership who had set this plan in motion, we knew that teachers were with us and the individual teachers knew they were not alone. The sense of solidarity gave everyone the courage to go forward in what we knew was a just cause.

Along with teachers and educational workers were growing numbers of parents and others opposed to the Harris government's policies that many called anti-democratic. We received incredible support from the OFL, from CTF and from teacher unions across the country.

During September and October several attempts had been made to try to negotiate changes that would avert a walkout. None of these worked. All efforts at compromise failed. A change in Education Ministers made no difference, since both (John) Snobelen and (David) Johnson were just puppets of the Premier's office.

So, on Monday, October 27, 1997, teachers walked out, and shut all schools in the province. 126,000 teachers held information pickets. Most of their principals and vice-principals joined them. In retaliation, a few days later, the government introduced an amendment that removed principals and vice-principals from OTF and stripped them of their collective bargaining rights – a clearly punitive and vindictive move.

We embarked on a massive public education program. We decided that I, as OTF President, would hold a news conference every day so we could frame the message, making the government react to us and not the other way around. The Affiliate Presidents conducted other media interviews and local Presidents dealt with local media.

Every newspaper and every newscast reported on this every day. Local teachers were interviewed on their picket lines. They were giving the same message as the provincial leadership was – that they were out on the street because they believed in quality education and because Bill 160 would lead to massive spending cuts that would hurt kids. This certainly put the lie to Harris’ claim that the “union bosses” were out of touch with their members, were against change and were only concerned about themselves. I firmly believe that it was those local teachers speaking passionately every night on their local newscasts that won us the most public support. People trusted the teachers in their local schools even if they were suspect about teacher unions.

Very quickly, things began to fall apart for the government. A leaked document showed that the Deputy Minister of Education, Veronica Lacey, would earn a performance bonus if she successfully cut \$667 million from the annual education budget. This proved what we had been saying about the government’s cost cutting agenda. Next, an attempt to obtain an injunction to force teachers back to school failed when Justice James McPherson refused to agree with the Tories that the protest was causing irreparable harm and he did not order us back to work.

Even though the government spent more than \$4 million on anti-teacher and union-bashing advertising, by the time we went back to school, 63% of Ontarians felt the government should withdraw all or parts of Bill 160. Support for the protest had actually grown over the course of protest.

It took a colossal team effort to manage the protest. In provincial Affiliate offices, at OTF, and in local offices across the province people worked from early in the morning until late at night. Teacher leaders and federation staff at all levels put their lives on hold. It was an all-out effort.

As provincial leaders we did everything right leading up to the protest and put in credible effort into coordinating every aspect of it, but we failed to put any effort into an exit strategy and this was our great failure. It was a failure of all of us, not just the three Affiliates who called their teachers back to work first. By the end of the second week of the protest, it was clear that the government was going to ram the legislation through. They were not going to make any substantial amendments or withdraw it. I have always regretted that we were not able to agree on a way to declare a moral victory and all go back into our schools together. We had accomplished so much and it was terrible to see it all end in such a fractious manner. We had let the teachers down.



However, we continued to lobby the government and to work with other coalitions who believed in public education and public services. We did not give up. Teachers became very active politically. It took time to battle back against a powerful majority government, but eventually they were unseated and teachers played a significant role in their defeat.

Although we did not defeat Bill 160, we won the hearts and minds of the public. We caused people to reaffirm their belief in and support for public education. We exposed the Harris government’s true agenda of wanting to centralize power and remove billions of dollars from public education. We talked about our students, about what went on in our classrooms every day. We talked about how much we loved our jobs and cared about our students’ achievements. We all spoke from our hearts and we were believable. We advocated for our schools and our education system. We were never prouder to be teachers.

Bill 160 Political Protest – recollections of a picket captain

By Doug Jolliffe

When the more than 100 teachers left Western Tech the afternoon of Friday, October 24, 1997, the anxiety was such that there was an almost giddy atmosphere, with some teachers wishing the office staff a Merry Christmas. The anxiety was caused by the belief we shared that we would not be returning on Monday as OSSTF, along with all the other teacher unions, had declared a walkout to begin to protest Bill 160, a piece of government legislation that would severely damage public education in Ontario. The unions and government were meeting over the weekend but we did not think there was much of a chance for resolution.

It was not the first time teachers had taken a day to protest the government. A year earlier, as part of the “Days of Protest”, Toronto had been virtually shut down on a Friday by a General Strike. But this time we did not know how many days we would be away from our jobs. There was one main, if very ambitious, demand: the withdrawal of Bill 160.

Bill 160 was a key piece of Premier Mike Harris’ “Common Sense Revolution,” the covering name for his party’s assault on all public services. Education was a primary target because up until then, local Boards of Education controlled funding through property taxes (with additional no-strings-attached provincial in many boards, though not Toronto) allowing local officials to fund local priorities. In Toronto, these included Adult

Education and Heritage Language Instruction. Bill 160 would allow Queen’s Park to grab control of that funding and replace it with the Funding Formula.

I was one of those Western Tech teachers as well as an Executive Officer for Toronto OSSTF. I had been a marshal at a rally in Maple Leaf Gardens with over 24,000 teachers, parents and supporters where we heard speaker after speaker lead the crowd in the chant: “We won’t back down!” After the speeches, we marched along College Street to demonstrate in front of the Legislature



Building. By the time of the Political Protest, nearly all teachers were geared up for a prolonged battle with the government.

In 1997, what is now the Toronto District School Board, was composed of six different Boards of Education. All but one of them, North York, closed the schools. The Board where I worked, Toronto, had two locations where employees not participating in the protest could sign in and be paid. I was assigned to act as the picket captain at one of these, located on Darcy Street in the building that now contains Heydon Park School.

Each day the core group of volunteer Western Tech teachers would be joined by a different school and the picket line stayed solid from 7:00 in the morning to late afternoon. The Steelworkers offered their union hall a few blocks away as a shelter where picketers could go to warm up and get a cup of coffee. The Executive produced a daily newsletter that was delivered around the city.

Only a few teachers crossed the line. One told CTV that God had instructed her to cross and another declared as he crossed that he wasn't going to follow the dictates of feminists! The latter later showed up carrying a large

sign covered so the message was hidden. When asked about this odd behavior, he replied that he would only take the cover off when there were more media present. There were only a handful of others who declined to join the protest.

There was a festive mood on the picket line the first week, buoyed by the news on Tuesday that a judge had declined a government request to issue an injunction to force us back and later by the news that public support for our action had actually increased since we started. On Friday, many picketers dressed up in Halloween costumes.

By the second week, the mood turned to one of grim determination as the government's only response to the protest was to add to Bill 160 by forcing school administrators out of the unions to which they had previously belonged. It was difficult to see how the protest was going to come to a successful conclusion. Rumours (later proven to be false) circulated that in North York, where schools had remained open, teachers were beginning to return in large numbers. A meeting of provincial union presidents was held, to be followed, we were told, by a major announcement which sounded ominous.

I was not shocked when the announcement was that we would be returning to schools on Monday. What began as a fight to the finish (We Won't Back Down) ended with a two-week work stoppage with no change to the bill other than the exclusion of principals and vice principals from the unions. Unfortunately, for me this was not the lowest point of the time.

A year after the protest, the now amalgamated OSSTF Toronto agreed to the worst contract I have had to work under in my career. It contained a clause that stated a minimum time for extra duties but no maximum. As a result, teachers were now required to do 3-4 on calls a week in addition to various supervision duties. To add further salt to the painful wound, the Conservatives were re-elected to another majority government in June 1999.

Was it worth it, then? In the short term, it would be difficult to answer that in the affirmative. However, I have studied Labour History and if it has told me anything, it is that we need to look at the long term effects of any union action. And in the long term, it was certainly worth it. Teachers showed the courage and resolve to take on a powerful government. It would be another 15 years – when McGuinty's Liberals passed Bill 115 in 2012 – before a provincial government again challenged education workers. In addition, while the Tories did not pay an immediate political price, they have been out of power since 2003.



Personally, what I gained from the experience was the realization that, for OSSTF Toronto to have the best chance of success, we must engage our members in many possible ways - job actions to be sure, but also electoral politics and community involvement. This is the strategy OSSTF Toronto has employed since 1999 and we need to continue to do so when - and it's when, not if - the next attack on public education occurs.

Bill 160 – A student's take

By Michelle Teixeira

I was an OAC student during the Bill 160 Political Protest, and recall that it was a very tumultuous time leading up to the protest. There were many student walkouts and as student council president I had to navigate my support of the teachers versus the unsanctioned nature of the walkouts in my dealings with the administration. Little did I know that such a skill would be the basis of much of the union work I do today.

I knew then, as I know now, that my teachers' working conditions were my learning conditions. I knew that Mike Harris was not only out to get teachers, but really – the public education system as a whole. When the teachers walked out I was in support of them 100%. Many of my friends, also in OAC, were worried about what might happen to their year – would they graduate? But I was never worried. I knew the teachers had to do this and I knew they were doing it for me and the students that would come after me.

And so I brought them donuts and walked with them on the line. I had no idea back then that I would be working full-time for OSSTF representing teachers on a daily basis and defending their contract 20 years later. I am humbled to have been a very small part of an action that has had a tremendous impact on public education in Ontario.



A brief chronology of the Bill 160 protest: October 27 – November 7, 1997

June 1995 - The Progressive Conservatives win a majority government in the 1995 election, and John Snobelen is appointed Minister of Education and Training in the Mike Harris government on June 26, 1995. Shortly after his appointment Snobelen is filmed arguing that the PC government needs to “bankrupt” and create a “useful crisis” in the education system so as to initiate significant reforms. This controversy provokes several calls for his resignation and further unsettles the relationship between the government and the teaching community.

24 February 1996 – Hamilton Day of Action

25, 26 October 1996 – Toronto Day of Action

13 January, 1997 – government passed Bill 103 (The Fewer School Boards Act)

March – AMPA – motion passes for a provincial sanction if government moves to restrict collective bargaining rights

April and May- general meetings held in Districts across the province – members endorse provincial action plan

May – OSSTF members vote 84.2% in favour of province wide-action

June – Ontario government introduces Bill 136, the *Public Sector Transitions Stability Act, 1997*

28 July – the OFL holds an emergency convention in Toronto to map out plans to defeat Bill 136

18 September – Labour Minister Elizabeth Witmer announces that the government will make many changes to Bill 136, addressing the demands of the OFL

19 September – Snobelen speaks of possible concessions to teachers

22 September – Snobelen tables Bill 160 (The Education Quality Improvement Act). The Bill gives the Minister of Education regulatory power over class size, teaching time, teaching assistants, and removes school board taxation powers, centralizing all education funding

25 September – Affiliate presidents meet at OTF and OTF President proclaims that Bill 160 has to be removed or the unions will “shut down every school in the province”

7 October – 24,000 teachers, parents and students rally at Maple Leaf Gardens to protest Bill 160, chanting “We won’t back down.” After the rally, the crowds march to the legislature to continue the protest

10 October – Harris reorganizes cabinet and names David Johnson as Education Minister

20 October – Johnson rejects OTF and the Affiliates’ proposals for amending Bill 160

22 October – OTF President Eileen Lennon announces that there will be a walk out over Bill 160; Premier Harris addresses the province on television and denounces the proposed teacher walkout as an illegal strike that will punish parents and children

24 October – *Toronto Star* front page headline “\$660 million school cuts confirmed” based on information leaked about Deputy Minister Veronica Lacey’s contract promising a pay bonus in return for the cuts

27 October – political protest commences and schools are closed – rally at Queen’s Park in the afternoon

28 October – government rejects union leaders’ proposals to end the strike and announces plan to remove principals and vice principals from the union

31 October – Government lawyer Leslie McIntosh presents the case for an injunction to Ontario Court Justice James MacPherson

3 November – Justice MacPherson refuses to grant an injunction to the government saying he had seen no evidence that the strike was causing irreparable harm

4 November – talks again break down with no new negotiations scheduled – *Toronto Star* quotes Phyllis Benedict (FWTAO President) – “We have exposed the government’s deceitfulness and lies and it’s now time to regain the high ground that we have won on this”

5 November – media reports of 59% support by parents for teachers, up from 42% of the general population before the strike

6 November - *Toronto Star* reports that union leaders discussed calling off the strike on November 5, but that determination on the part of union membership caused the leaders to decide to maintain the walk out; 22,000 teachers, students and parents rally at Queen’s Park, yet later that day OPSTF, FWTAO, AEFO announce that their members will return to school on the coming Monday

8 November – OECTA decides to return to classroom. Rally at Queen’s Park – Buzz Hargrove calls for a general strike. OSSTF President Earl Manners is quoted in the *Toronto Star* as follows: “There is no loss here. This has been a phenomenal success. They can never take away the fact that in two short weeks we have taken a government that has been like Teflon when it comes to public opinion, and undermined their credibility.” The *Star* report continued, “Yet when all is said and done, the teachers have achieved few of their goals in opposing Bill 160”

9 November – As a result of an all-member vote, OSSTF members return to work