

Critical Education

Volume 13 Number 4

October 15, 2022

ISSN 1920-4175

“We’re Ready to Fight”

*Interview with Ontario Education Workers United
Member, Deborah Buchanan-Walford*

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Citation: Maton, R. (2022). ‘We’re ready to fight’: The story of a protest movement. *Critical Education*, 13(4), 42-49. <http://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/criticaled/article/view/186603>

Abstract

In this interview, Ontario Education Workers United (OEWU) member Deborah Buchanan-Walford talks with Rhiannon Maton about how the OEWU engages in grassroots organizing for improved working and learning conditions in Ontario, Canada public schools. We discuss the learning and workplace challenges experienced in adult day schools during Covid-19, issues of power centralization within the broader educators union, and the significance of activist educators organizing in spaces that are external to their union.



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A common critique of educators unions, launched by their more progressive members, is that their effectiveness is hampered by overly-hierarchical and bureaucratic approaches to organizing alongside long histories of reinforcing the status quo. In response, caucuses have launched in over forty locations across the United States in efforts to push their unions toward more radical politics and tactics. In Canada, there are few social justice caucuses within educators unions. However, education workers in Ontario are beginning to rise up through alternative grassroots mechanisms to demand a renewed focus on improving the quality, social justice focus, and working conditions of the province's public education system. Educators in Ontario recently formed an organization called [Ontario Education Workers United](#) (OEWU), which seeks to bridge members from across Ontario's varied education unions around common social justice and workplace concerns related to improving workers' experiences in schools and the public education system more broadly.

In this interview, I (Rhiannon Maton) talk with Deborah Buchanan-Walford, a teacher in Toronto, about her organizing work with OEWU. The interview was conducted on May 4, 2021, and opens with conversation about Deborah's work as an adult day high school teacher and the challenges her students face amidst Covid-19. Next, we discuss the centralization of power within her union and the emergence of the OEWU in response. Finally, we close with some guiding tips for newly-forming grassroots groups of rank-and-file educators.

Rhiannon Maton: Let's open the interview by hearing a little about where you work as a teacher, and which organizations to which you currently belong.

Deborah Buchanan-Walford: I teach in Toronto with the Toronto District School Board. I'm a high school teacher and currently I'm teaching adults over 21. I'm a part of OSSTF, which is the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation. I am also a part of Ontario Education Workers United (OEWU), which is a combination of education workers from the various panels from elementary through to post-secondary.



Deborah Buchanan-Walford, marching for enhanced adult day school funding at the 2019 All Member Education Strike (February, 2019)

Maton: We are in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, and this absolutely cannot be separated from the kinds of organizing in which we find ourselves involved. Can you tell me how your teaching is going and feeling these days?

Buchanan-Walford: I've been a teacher for 10 years now and teaching has just always been one of those things that, it sounds corny and people say it's a calling and whatever, but I really do feel that way. The reminder of that and seeing how having that mindset of believing that what I'm doing is valuable for my students' lives inspires me, especially now in this context, there is this wave right now of fatigue.

And even with the students, you can just [feel] this palpable sense that they're just pushing to keep going. And their resilience inspires me. They show up, they do the work, they ask the questions. Since I teach adults, it's a different perspective because they also have their children at home, and they have jobs, and they have responsibilities. And they're all just trying to complete their diploma to better themselves under what could not be any worse conditions.

Maton: Do you feel like Covid-19 has made it particularly hard for your adult day school students?

Buchanan-Walford: Yes. For one, I have many students who did catch COVID because they are essential workers. The demographic of adult students in high school are predominantly racialized students who belong to lower income families or multi-generational families and typically do essential work. I'd say [about] 80% of my students [are women]. And many of them have caught COVID, have been home terribly ill. So, that's been very rough. And for those who haven't contracted COVID, just the upheaval again with their children, who one minute they're in the building, then they have to come home to isolate, and then their children have to get tested, and so on. So, that has thrown a lot of things [off] on top of the other systemic barriers that they would already have been facing.

When we had the shutdown in March of last year, just literally connecting to students was an issue because all they had was a cell phone and some of them didn't have home internet. And it took a couple months to get devices into some of their hands. And even then, not all of them got them in time. Now, to fast track a bit to current times, things have settled a bit, but I still find it really hard for some students to connect to the virtual setting for various reasons. One paramount being just the fact, again, they're all at home. I literally can hear their kid's class in the background. And many of them have said, "I can't concentrate right now. I'm sorry. I have to be watching my kindergartener. The teacher says they're not paying attention. I'll be right back." So that has been a challenge for sure.

Maton: It sounds like the caregiving responsibilities that the students are facing on top of their own schooling makes it really difficult. They are having to juggle being a student with teaching and managing their own kids at the same time.

Buchanan-Walford: Yes, a hundred percent.

Maton: Working and learning conditions in adult day high schools sound really challenging right now in general. Have you found that the union has been effective in organizing in response to the myriad challenges faced by you and your students during Covid-19?

Buchanan-Walford: Yes and no. I'll say this, the union has done what they believe they can do, and us as teachers want more done. So we've done more on our own as well. For instance, I've spoken to multiple media outlets, unsolicited by the union. I just literally just did it myself along with a few of my colleagues and so on. So we just took that mantle on because again, we're the ones in the classrooms with these students and we see on the ground the lived impact of this lack of funding.

We don't really have the type of organizing where all of us sort of sit together as a union and say, okay, what can we do? What ideas do you have? What strengths do you have? The [union] Executive sort of just makes these decisions and then tells us, "okay, so our President is going to talk to this person, or our President was here." We actually have rules that of those on the Executive, only the President is allowed to talk to the media. So things like that centralize the power as it comes to organizing. And therefore, us as the frontline workers are expected to go with whatever they decide as an Executive. We don't sit and vote on how we're going to approach these public education issues. And I find that very problematic personally.

Maton: It sounds like your union is operating in a very top-down way, where the elected leaders make the key decisions and members are expected to fall in line in accordance with these decisions. I assume that this is why you sought out and joined the OEWU. Can you tell me more about the OEWU group and what you are trying to achieve together?

Buchanan-Walford: I joined with [OEWU] last year around June, again, right around the Safe September campaign. And they came together [around] a need for an organizing space as union members, because within our own unions we were hitting roadblocks when it came to grassroots organizing and community organizing. So from meeting as a small group together in someone's backyard as colleagues, to expanding to now several hundred members on social media, that's kind of how the group began.

Our guiding principle is the fact that education issues are not separate from other issues. The school is not on some castle somewhere else, separate from the issues of society. So the OEWU group really tries to, if we're not spearheading campaigns, we're amplifying the work of other community groups. So "[\\$15 and Fairness](#)," "[SURJ: Showing Up For Racial Justice Toronto](#)," [Decent Health and Work Network](#) are a few organizations that we've partnered with on a lot of actions as it pertains to social issues.

Maton: Can you tell me a little more about OEWU's relationship to the various Ontario education worker unions. Does OEWU operate as a caucus when striving to transform the province's unions? Or, does it tend to operate in these spaces that are external to the union instead?

Buchanan-Walford: It's definitely [operating in external-to-union] spaces. At some points, when there are opportunities for us to better the union, we try to. So [my union], the OSSTF had their annual general meeting in March of this year, and as OEWU, we had open forums to discuss

motions going to this annual general meeting [And, in the forums people were asking questions like]: “How will [our union] impact other unions? What are other unions doing that we can adopt to better ourselves?” That kind of thing. So not necessarily influencing elections or running for office, but [we are seeking] structural changes within the mechanisms that exist in our different unions. That's sort of the approach that we've taken. And this was the first time we'd even done that this year.

Maton: I could imagine that operating outside of a union might provide advantages like flexibility and responsiveness. Yet, on the other hand, it seems as though pushing for internal union transformation could provide a good organizing opportunity for the future, because unions have so much access to funds, establishing a clear and coherent platform, media visibility, and impacting negotiations and contracts with districts. Can you tell me more about the reasoning behind why OEWU is choosing to operate outside of the union?

Buchanan-Walford: Initially, even the whole beginning of the group was because when you try to make changes in the union, you get railroaded in many different ways. Overall, a common theme is status quo. The union is very resistant to change. They're very resistant to doing things differently regardless of the fact that obviously it's not working. So the group sort of formed because of that. And also the union doesn't have a lot of ways for us to get together. There's so many blocks. We don't do anything together.

Even at our annual meeting we sit together in our districts. You have a seating chart, you have to sit here. It's so isolating, ironically, even though we're all together in the same space. And yeah, normally it would be over four days or at a hotel but only certain people get to go. It's not open to all 60,000 members of OSSTF. And again, this is the same in elementary panel. This is the same in the Catholic [district]. There [are] just so many divisions that we needed a space that we could work together.

And if you think about it, elementary, secondary, post-secondary, we're all doing the same work at different points in the game. We should all be working together, but we don't do that. So the Education Workers United represents that space where we can actually do things for the betterment of education without those barriers.

Maton: Can you tell me about an action you have helped to organize with OEWU during Covid?

Buchanan-Walford: In the COVID time, one of the big things that we did was address the fact that the school board was not [offering] a virtual option for adult students. So, in September 2020, when virtual schools were a thing, adult students did not have that option. And they all had to come into the building, which we were adamant about. We actually staged, what would you call it? A mini-protest outside of the board office with regards to it. We sent tons of emails to MPPs, and Trustees voted, and finally a Town Hall was called by the district's Trustees.

Maton: Being granted the Town Hall by the school Trustees sounds like a tangible win, and your letters and protest must have impacted this decision. Can you tell me more about the protest that you organized?

Buchanan-Walford: This was through the Ontario Education Workers United, [and at the protest] it was myself and a few other colleagues. Really small, because it was in the middle of COVID. We didn't want a crowd. So I would say about 10 or 15 of us, socially distanced in front of the board office. It was not just [colleagues who showed up] from my actual school, but fellow OSSTF teachers, even some that were not in the district (see Figure 2).

Prior to that, all the adult day school stuff is really just myself and my colleagues. We came together unofficially, because I mean, it's kind of touchy, I'll be honest with you. Because the union sort of differs in the way they want things done when it comes to public things. We've sort of had to do things without saying "this is on behalf of OSSTF, Toronto." So they're like, "for sure you can do anything you want on your own, but you can't say that you're doing this with the blessing of the union."



OEWU protesting outside school district offices, demanding that Adult Day School students to have a safe September return during Covid 2020 (Sept 2020)

Maton: That is confusing, because by most accounts a union consists of its members, not just the leadership at the top. Thus the mantra that rank-and-file workers recite, "We are the union." Not to mention the fact that the union leadership's response certainly doesn't sound like strong solidarity to me.

Buchanan-Walford: Yes, because it's not. I don't know if you saw an [article](#) I was in the other day in the Toronto Star, talking about systemic racism in OSSTF. Solidarity's not something that they tend to live up to all the time and you will hear different opinions on that of course. And I am just one example that will speak in dissent, but there's a lot of things about our union that can be better, and solidarity is just really a word for them.

And outside of that, one of the other things, there was a Safe September campaign. This was now with Ontario Education Workers United, and this encapsulated not just the fact that adult students didn't have online option, but for all students we were pushing for proper ventilation in all the schools, for smaller class sizes, paid sick days for essential workers and better protections overall before we came back in September. So I was doing that in the summer [of 2020].

We did a good number of interviews as well with different media outlets (see Figure 3). We had a really powerful video campaign where different education workers would share what it means to them to have a Safe September. And we also did some forums, both for OSSTF as well as other education workers, about how we can be safe, because legally we have health and safety representatives. We have the legal rights to inspect our own work sites and provide data that things are unsafe, which we did, and that did help. And also for public-facing forums, the right to refuse unsafe work as a worker in Ontario. So custodians, everybody should really push the government to make our schools safe before forcing us back in, in September.



Deborah Buchanan-Walford, speaking to the media during the OEWU Car Caravan for paid sick days (April 2021)

Maton: Do you have any words of advice for educators in other locations that are trying to organize and advocate for stronger working and learning conditions?

Buchanan-Walford: For sure. I would say firstly, one of the best things to do is start small because the problems are so big that it can get really overwhelming. And it usually helps to start looking inward in our communities. So for instance, just last week, a small coalition of us did a press

conference outside of the Peel region of public health. And we all just came together around the fact that COVID-19 is ravaging the region of Peel that has already been so underserved even before COVID. Something like that blossomed, pulling in the resources. "You're good at speaking, you can make flyers," and it starts from there.

And then making those connections with the community is so, so important. Every time we do things, the first thing we ask ourselves, "okay, which group exists already that's doing something like this, that we can invite to work with us, or we can amplify what they're doing?" So instead of trying to reinvent the wheel, and instead of trying to put education workers at the front all the time as if we have all the answers on our own, we pull in the community and that helps a lot. And that builds those networks. So when we're ready to fight the government, we have support, we have people in our corner that can reach the people that even us will not be able to reach. So I think that's also very important.

And perhaps the last piece of advice is, be willing to include everybody. And I say that in all the ways I can say that. Representation, age, race, sexual orientation, gender identities. Far too often, you look at education workers, you see a homogenous group. And that sends messages that there is no connection to the issues. So I think it's important to make sure all people are represented and heard and have a real input, not just go consult and then come back and there's a face group, right? Like everyone has equal stake in what we're doing.

One of the things [OEWU member] Muna Kadri says all the time is just that we, as the education workers, are the bridge between the government and the communities. How do we reach them? How do we break things down for them? How do we pull them in and ensure that we're all doing what is actually serving our communities? Because we get in our heads as education workers. We're very theoretical. And we don't realize that actually, maybe this is not what the community wants us to see or do on their behalf. So that's important, I think. I'll say that endlessly, the community is everything when it comes to organizing for education and public education.

Author

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Critical Education

criticaleducation.org

ISSN 1920-4175

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