

Courage My Friends Podcast Series III – Episode 7
From Contract Negotiation to Political Protest: Reflecting on Ontario's
Education Workers' Fight for Jobs, Rights and Dignity

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ANNOUNCER: You're listening to *Needs No Introduction*.

Needs No Introduction is a rabble podcast network show that serves up a series of speeches, interviews and lectures from the finest minds of our time

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COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: COVID. Capitalism. Climate. Three storms have converged and we're all caught in the vortex.

STREET VOICE 1: I was already worried about my job, food and housing. So now I have to worry about healthcare as well?

STREET VOICE 2: Seems like we wanna jump back to normalcy so bad that we're not even trying to be careful at this point.

STREET VOICE 3: This is a 911 kind of situation for global climate crisis. This planet is our only home and billionaires space-race is not a solution. The earth is crying for survival. It is time for action.

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COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: What brought us to this point? Can we go back to normal? Do we even want to?

Welcome back to this special podcast series by rabble.ca and the Tommy Douglas Institute (at George Brown College) and with the support of the Douglas-Coldwell-Layton Foundation. In the words of the great Tommy Douglas...

VOICE 4: Courage my friends; 'tis not too late to build a better world.

COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: This is the *Courage My Friends* podcast.

RESH: Why are education workers so vital to Ontario's school system? How did a labor action turn into a protest for fundamental human rights? What were the wins of this historic moment in labor history? And where do we go from here?

In this episode of The Courage My Friend's podcast, From Contract Negotiation to Political Protest: Reflecting on Ontario's Education Workers' Fight for Jobs, Rights, and Dignity, we are very pleased to welcome Laura Walton, President of CUPE's Ontario School Boards Council of Unions.

Just days after CUPE education workers voted to ratify a new four-year contract that includes a hard fought for \$1 flat-rate, hourly wage increase, and two days

repayment for a fraught political protest, we reflect on the momentous and contentious labor action taken on by Ontario's education workers.

Laura, welcome and thank you for joining us, especially in this very intensive week.

LAURA: It's been a fun week.

RESH: I can imagine.

So from its beginning in contract negotiations last summer, through two bouts of failed bargaining and two calls to strike, through to the ratification of a new labor contract for CUPE's education workers on December 5th; I don't think it's overstating it to say that this has certainly been a dramatic five months. So before we get into the details, how are you feeling right now?

LAURA: Well, I get that question a lot. How am I feeling? And I think when you've been on kind of this rollercoaster for, as you said, five months, it's hard to believe that the rollercoaster is coming to an end. And so I have I think, a mixed bag of emotions. I feel hopeful. I feel beyond proud of my coworkers. I feel still really disappointed and disgusted with this government. I feel there's so much more learning I can do and so much more each of us can do. I just.. It's a mixed bag, is the best way to say it.

RESH: Indeed. Negotiations for a new labor contract between CUPE education workers and the government of Ontario began on July 18th. So take us back. What were the key demands by workers?

LAURA: Yeah, so we served notice on July 3rd, or on June 3rd, pardon of me. And we had to really push this government to even come to the table to start talking with us.

They gave a multitude of excuses. The election just happened. They weren't sure who the Minister was going to be. They didn't have the mandate from the Treasury Board. And so that gave us some pretty early signs of what was about to come.

But you know, when I think about what was on the table, what were our key demands; that work started three years prior, really almost just following when we signed our Collective Agreement in 2019. And we knew that wages were going to be a big concern because we were one of the first groups coming out of Bill 124 to be negotiating a collective agreement. And I think we all really felt, some pressure. in recognizing that moving forward, this would be setting a pattern.

But we also were coming out of a pandemic. And, you know, the pandemic really pulled back a curtain in so many aspects of our public lives. Which is funny when you consider how isolated we were. But public services really were revealed for the issues that we are facing, for the struggles that workers have in those sectors.

And education workers were no different. We had been on site throughout the pandemic. We were not afforded the same opportunity to work from home as some of our colleagues were in the education sector. And, you know, there were a lot of big concerns that were brewing.

RESH: Right. So these education workers then were those frontline essential workers within the school system.

When people think of education workers, they tend to think teachers. And certainly throughout the past months, I've seen this mistake made by media, by members of the general public. So to clarify, the approximately 55,000 education workers represented by CUPE/OSBCU are not teachers. What jobs are we talking about?

LAURA: So what we represent are the custodial caretaking maintenance trades, so those facilities folks that maintain, that keep our schools safe, that keep them properly maintained. We represent EAs (educational assistants) and ECEs (early childhood educators), communication disorder assistants, psychometrists, speech and language pathologists, blind/deaf interveners, braillists, ASL interpreters. So more classroom-based folks, CYWs so child and youth workers are in there as well. We also represent administrative folks; so secretaries, payroll, purchasing - a whole host there. Supervision monitors, lunchroom supervisors. We also represent library workers, IT. Basically if you're not a teacher and you're not a principal and you work in a school, chances are you're represented by CUPE.

RESH: That's a lot of jobs, a lot of people, right?

LAURA: Huge diversity! And I think that's one of the questions that has been really brewing the last couple of days. But I think our diversity is our strength. We represent such a broad group of people that we truly are the backbone of schools.

RESH: Right. And yet, as you said in a recent press conference, these are also workers who tend to be overlooked and underappreciated, but as you're saying, are still incredibly essential and vital.

And we saw this when they were in a strike position and ready to walk off the job. The government actually called for schools to stay open, but schoolboard after schoolboard after schoolboard, right across Ontario said, "No, Can't do it. Not without them."

So just go a bit more into this. How vital are these education workers to really the life-force of our educational system? What would schools look like without them?

LAURA: They would be empty. And we see that, and it always makes me so sad that the only time people appreciate the value of your work is when you choose to withdraw it.

But really from the minute that a child or a member of the public steps into a school; you are stepping into a space that is impacted by the work performed by CUPE members.

So the cleanliness of the school, the safety of the school. Being buzzed in the door in our elementary schools. The supports that students need in order to be successful and to thrive are all performed by education workers, CUPE education workers, but also other education workers in other union groups as well.

It's one of those situations that I think people take it for granted. They just assume that this work is always going to get done. And it won't always get done. And that's one of the real issues that we're seeing right now, is that this has been such a neglected group that there's recruitment and retention issues because of it.

And what we're seeing as the outcome of that is really the downfall of our publicly delivered, publicly-funded education system.

RESH: Right. And so, you know, all jobs take skills, but there seems to be sort of a failure certainly by officials to recognize that these are all actually skilled jobs, that we need these people to do these jobs. You can't just bring in anybody to do them.

LAURA: You can't just bring anybody. And they're trying right now, right? Even with this collective agreement being ratified, we're seeing school boards in Durham, in London, in Belleville, across this province, hiring unqualified workers to come in and do the work because the wage is so low.

And assuming that things are going to be done well and be done safe. For instance, our custodial caretaking folks do the water-testing to ensure that the water is drinkable. Now imagine how somebody who's unqualified is going to be able to do that. I think there's been this kind of elitism when we think about education in that you must be degreed or double-degreed in order to be working in a school. But really, there are some significantly skilled professionals beyond our teaching colleagues that make those schools work.

RESH: And so as you've said, some of the key demands for the new contract were around wage increases and staffing levels. So what led to these demands? What has life been like for education workers over the last four years? And as you point out, that includes a really game-changing pandemic.

LAURA: Well, I think it actually goes back even more than four years. If I think about when things really started to change for education workers. You have to go back to 2012. You have to go back to the Dalton McGinty government and you have to go back to Bill-115.

And what Bill-115 did is it came in and it stripped every single education worker of their collective agreement. It ripped apart their locally negotiated sick-leave

programs. It froze their wages. Where boards had put in place gratuity programs, it ripped those apart and demolished those. And that was really the big turning point.

Not that things weren't great following Mike Harris, but we often go back to Mike Harris and we sometimes forget that there was another real catalyst, in what has happened.

So a decade ago that happened. They had zero wage increases and it was enforced upon them.

Later the Bill was repealed; it was found to be unconstitutional. But the remedy that we received was not even close to making up for what we lost.

Fast forward six years, we received another two years of wage freezes. And then three years ago we found ourselves in a situation where in the midst of bargaining, Doug Ford's Conservative Government decided to pass Bill-124. And Bill 124 capped our wages at 1% along with the broader public sector.

At first it was like, oh, this is 1%. And you know, that's more than we've seen sometimes. But I think the combination of that 1% wage-cap, the continuous declining in investments, the continuing decline in funding in schools, brought us to the pandemic. And then in the pandemic you saw these frontline workers, the lowest paid, not being treated the same way as the highest paid.

These were workers that were in onsite, often overlooked, for vaccination priority often overlooked. In one case in Hamilton, we had a school board that delivered tests and N95 masks to everyone but our custodians.

There was some significant things that happened during the pandemic. And so coming out of that, we decided to really focus on what the workers need. This isn't about the union. The union is workers, and so what did workers need?

And our first Bargaining Survey gave us some insight into what was really key issues. We then followed that up with a Wage Survey that asked workers to describe what a wage increase would mean for them and what their living conditions were like due to capped wages and frozen wages.

And then we asked them what their working conditions were like. And those things all formulated the demands that you saw in our bargaining proposal.

RESH: Right. So really there has not been a significant wage increase, certainly not to keep up with this rising cost of living. I mean, right now the food and housing prices are just outrageous.

LAURA: It's quite shocking. You know, people just assume that because you're in the public sector that you're making these great wages. And I think what our

campaign did was really expose the fact that there's a huge disparity within the education system.

RESH: And these workers also tend to be disproportionately female and racialized as well as, as you're saying, low-income. So what added issues come in given these populations?

LAURA: Well, I think one of the things that we found was a unique issue and really made us think about how we could move forward. The majority of us work more than one job. They just don't go home at night. They're often heading to jobs providing respite care. A lot of our members work in the developmental service sector. A lot of our workers work in the long-term care sector. Many in the hospitality industry. In the retail industry. They were going out and working another full-time job after working their full-time job. So that made it a challenge for us.

But then a lot of them were moms, single moms. And, you know, the additional struggle trying to put food on the table. We found out that 25% of our members were accessing food banks in order to put food on the table. We found out that many of our workers were staying in relationships that were not safe because their partner supplemented their income and they couldn't afford to leave. And these were some pretty sobering facts to hear.

RESH: Very sobering facts. And there's history here, right? I mean, low-income women, racialized women have historically had to take on woefully underpaid jobs, often more than one, as you're saying, in traditionally female-centered occupations such as care and cleaning and education in order to support their families. So this trend is continuing.

LAURA: Mm-hmm. completely. And I think oftentimes, people will ask, and you probably saw this in the midst of all this, well, you knew what you were getting into when you took the work. And I find that such a disparaging comment. As if, because you take care-work, you can't possibly demand better.

RESH: So CUPE went to the bargaining table initially looking for an 11.7% annual wage increase. And to put it lightly, the government offer fell far short of this. What did this say to you? What did this say to the union and the workers?

LAURA: I think we knew when we were going into it. You know, when you go into bargaining, you don't go in with your final offer. That's the first thing.

But you know, we had done work to show why this was reasonable, why this was necessary and why it was affordable. And we knew that this government wasn't interested in paying workers. We knew that this government, we saw it right away, they were quite happy to say, well, here's another 1%.

So we knew we were gonna have a fight. And we had been building for that fight and organizing in a grassroots way for that fight and inoculating workers about that fight for months leading up to when we actually put the proposal across the table.

RESH: And then on October 3rd, 96.5% of over 45,000 workers who voted, voted to strike.

Now, this is an incredibly impressive mandate for the union. Even more so because, you know, going on strike is not an easy decision to make for any worker. So could you speak a bit about what it takes to go on strike.

LAURA: Well, I think there's one piece that often people kind of jump over and they go right to the 96.5%, but I wanna highlight that over 45,000 of our 55,000 members participated in a strike vote. So the member participation was extraordinary.

Often when you hear strike mandates come out, we talk about how many people voted in favor or against, but we don't hear about how many people participated. And so that was a goal of ours to have what we call a super majority participate in a strike vote. And what that looked like was starting much earlier back in February, having one-on-one conversations with our membership about what do they need? You know. And what are they willing to do to achieve that need? And what if it doesn't go well? And really having those conversations in a focused way to do that.

So it started in February, training up thousands of organizers. It led to us providing the Premier with over 30,000 letters calling for investments in schools as one of our first structure tests.

And we slowly marched on to our strike vote, where we engaged practices like pulling the vote and one-on-one conversations and really connecting with workers. So by the time we were ready to go on strike, and we served notice in October 30th, the members were ready. They knew what was going to come next. And they also knew that there were going to be massive amounts of them together, so it wasn't scary. Right. They knew they had a super majority of their coworkers joining them, and that's what makes it successful.

RESH: Right? Yet, this still takes, it takes metal, it takes you know, courage; because as you said, many of these workers, they're dealing with income and food insecurity, many carry more than one job. When you go on strike, you don't know how long this is gonna last for. You're not gonna get the regular pay, whatever the amount that you were getting. So again, it does take a lot of courage. And that you've got a super majority to do that is really something.

LAURA: Yeah, I think workers found courage in the fact that they were together. We made sure to do mass picket-line, like mass protest sites so that there were hundreds of them together, so they did not feel alone.

We talked about steps that they could do way back in the spring to prepare themselves for an impending strike. We had put in place hardship programs, just in case those things were needed, There were people who were tasked with those things, so that everybody knew that there was a structure behind them.

RESH: And then the drama really began. The usual talking point that seems to always come up around educational strikes was in full swing as the government stated that this action hurts students, hurts our kids, especially given the educational disruptions they went through during the pandemic. Now, not to devalue the concerns of parents and students, but what was the union response? What is your response to this claim that striking workers hurt students?

LAURA: Well, you know, I found it rather rich for a government who failed to put in protocols and practices to keep our children safe and actually kept our children out of school more than any other jurisdiction in North America, would have the gall to even talk about kids being out of school is damaging.

For us, we kept referring back to, you know, this is on you.

I think the government made some significant errors leading up to it. For instance, handing out cheques to parents, in an amount that could have provided more services in schools.

But our response was that we have always been there for the students. During the pandemic, we were on- site for the students. We were on site and working for students all the way along. And we would continue to do that.

And what was really encouraging is we saw parents agree that they weren't going to do online learning; they were going to participate in on-the-line learning. And so parents were bringing their kids to the picket line to see their EA. They were bringing their nieces, their nephews to see their ECE or to say hello to the custodian from their school. And I think, that was an amazing moment when parents were saying, no, we're not buying into this.

RESH: Yeah. And an amazing learning opportunity for the kids, right? You can't get a better class in labor politics than on the strike line. Right. .

LAURA: And it's ...we don't teach in schools, right. It's kind of glossed over, labor politics. And it's been great to see that an entire generation of students is learning this

RESH: And you know, it occurs to me also that if we're going to talk about the kids, then let's talk about all of the kids, because many of these workers are also parents themselves. And so their kids have been experiencing, sure the stoppage, but also the issues leading to the stoppage in a number of ways. And I wonder if you could speak a bit more to that.

LAURA: Well, I think that was a cornerstone of the government's tactic, this divide and conquer. That, you know, it's parents against the workers or taxpayers against the workers. And we kept reminding everyone that as workers, we too are taxpayers and parents. And if not parents, then we're aunts and uncles or grandparents. You know, we don't live in a bubble as a worker. And definitely we represent a huge proportion of people whose kids cannot afford to do extracurricular activities unless they receive those extracurricular activities in schools. They don't have access to supports unless they're in schools. So our kids are already hurting.

And it was just really so outlandish that this government could not recognize that no, you know, that narrative was not falling. Because people recognized that we were moms, we were dads, we were aunts, we were uncles. And that, that was really key and that was really important for me in my messaging as well as a mom of a child who's in the public school system. You know, every decision I make always, goes through the filter of me as a mom.

RESH: Absolutely. And then the province introduced Bill-28: the Keeping Students In Class Act. And this seemed to make good on an earlier warning by Premier Ford to "not to force my hand." Because with this Bill came the use of the Notwithstanding Clause. So first of all, what did this mean for CUPE and the striking workers?

LAURA: When I think back on it, I remember that Sunday when they called us in and they handed us the legislation that was completely written and said, you either remove your strike mandate or we legislate you. And I can remember at that moment thinking, "You honestly have underestimated the power of the worker."

And I walked out of that meeting room and I walked into our meeting room and said, well, now we know.

It was interesting. I think knowing now that Bill-124, the ruling was gonna come out so soon after our tentative agreement being reached; I think that they learned their lesson from Bill-115. They may have had an inkling from their legal around Bill-124.

RESH: Bill 124, which if it had not been struck down, would've stripped workers of their collective bargaining rights like the earlier Bill-115.

LAURA: And they truly believe that they have with their, they talk about their majority which is really a minority of the province voting for them, they really believed that they had the power to do this. And I think it was such an underestimation of the power that had been building with workers. But also an underestimation of just how people would react.

They were not given the mandate to do that.

RESH: Right. Would this have been the first time that the clause would've been used to halt a labor action in Ontario?

LAURA: Yeah, so Bill-28 was actually a two-headed beast, is what I would call it. Not only did it impose a contract which would've provided poverty wages, attacked our sick-leave- I mean, this sounds a little bit Bill-115 reminiscent. It also put in place the notwithstanding clause. But also taking the notwithstanding clause one step further: we wouldn't be able to take them to court, but they also put in pieces where we wouldn't be able to take them to the human rights tribunal. We wouldn't be able to arbitrate it. Really removing any sort of legal avenue that a worker may have and really interfering with the charter rights of workers.

RESH: So under this Bill, the strike would've been illegal and strikers would've been hit with a really hefty fine, \$4,000 a day, possibly arrest. How did this impact those who were about to strike? What were the feelings?

LAURA: So I remember this bill, because of course we knew what the legislation said. We had already seen the Bill. And so we had worked Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, trying to negotiate. And I can remember having a meeting with all of our presidents and then having a meeting with our members. And the meeting with all of the local presidents being extremely emotional. Because they knew as workers the step that we needed to take, which was like you mentioned earlier, striking is scary. Striking illegally, against this government is even scarier. There was an emotional, meeting with all of us. And the one thing that really came out in that meeting is the idea that if we didn't do it, then we would be letting down workers everywhere.

And so there was a decision made by leadership. We then had meetings with members - And that was the overwhelming, "yeah, we're going to do it, but we're going to do it together. We're not going to do it alone. We're going to do it together. And I think that that's another underestimation that this government had.

RESH: Yeah, because it didn't stop them. They went out and they struck anyway, but it was no longer a strike, it was a protest for rights.

LAURA: It was a protest for rights. Now that we've ratified, you know, it was an illegal strike. 55,000 workers across the province of Ontario at 125 different locations walked off the job for two days in a protest and an illegal strike against a government that was ripping apart their rights.

RESH: So just to review, the notwithstanding clause is used to temporarily override certain sections of constitutional rights we are guaranteed under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, specifically legal and equality, rights and fundamental freedoms. And this would include, of course, the ability to organize and to strike.

It is an option of last resort, often described as the "nuclear option" and yet, here it was and it set off, as you say, quite the reaction across the province, across the country, and from unions. So could you go a bit more into that, that reaction? Why such a strong reaction and how did it impact support for CUPE workers?

LAURA: Well I think what happened right away for workers, and I think this was again, this government underestimating workers. But whether you were unionized or not, you suddenly saw the government attacking. And what we heard from so many people is, well, if they can do it to you, then they can do it to us.

And that really was appalling for a lot of workers. I think, you know, when Doug Ford had attempted to use the notwithstanding clause previously and when indeed he did use it, it still was very removed from day to day life. But this was used against workers. And at the end of the day, everyone working knows that you're a worker.

And so I think it really solidified that this was problematic. We reached out automatically to our colleagues in the sector and said, here's the plan. We're not taking this because if they do this to us, they'll do it to you and we can't have them do it to you. So they knew right away.

OPSEU came out in full support. Their members did not go to work as well. And there just was a snowball. It was like a snowball that turned into an avalanche...

RESH: yeah.

LAURA: ...of worker power, where private and public sector workers came together and said, yeah, this isn't.. This isn't right. And I think that's amazing.

RESH: Amazing. I remember looking at that press conference and it really was an unprecedented showing of solidarity, as you say, between the public and private sector unions.

How were you feeling at that moment? Cuz I saw you there, I saw JP Hornick speaking there, all of you were speaking there. So what did that mean to you as a union member, as a worker?

LAURA: So, I have been a worker for my entire adult life. Started working at 13. And I've been a union activist for 20 years and you know, I remember reading about union activism. I remember reading about labor history and stories in the past.

I was a university kid during the Harris days. And I always kind of pictured what did that feel like? You know? How did you know you were in that moment, when you were in that moment. And looking around, you know, it really hit home. Just some of the cliches that we hear about worker power and there's power in the union. Those became very real. And one of the comments that I made that day is, " Workers are like a family. We may not always agree, but when you attack one of us, you attack all of us. And I really hope that it becomes a catalyst for solidarity moving forward".

RESH: Yeah, and we certainly need that in these days of growing precarity, again, across all sectors, right?

LAURA: Yeah.

RESH: Yeah. So eventually the Bill was rescinded with CUPE's agreement to go back to the table. But for a second time, negotiations broke down. So what was going wrong?

LAURA: Well, I think it really showed the lack of faith that this government came with.

You know, the deal was we will come back to the table. And that was a hard decision to stand down a protest. But at the time that those folks were protesting, they had an imposed collective agreement. They were on strike illegally. And we needed to get back to the table. And anyone who has been involved in negotiations or strike knows that, it's easy to put people out on strike; it's how to get them back in that's always the challenge. Like, what's the exit plan?

And so we saw this as an opportunity to show in good faith, to the province, to the parents, to everyone, that we are committed to bargaining. This wasn't about just having strikes, but that we were committed to getting a fair deal.

And when we got back to the table, we found that the government was very focused on false narratives out in the public. We had to have the mediator speak to them a couple of times about putting out information that was false. And they just weren't understanding that we were ready to fight for what we needed.

And so that's why we served notice again.

RESH: And so again, CUPE announced another strike countdown in November, and that was averted with the announcement of this tentative deal that was just ratified days ago on December 5th. So tell us about the ratification and what were the wins?

LAURA: Ratification was quite stunning in itself.

When we were heading to ratification, I remember thinking; okay, we had 45,000 people who participated in a strike vote. What's going to happen with the ratification vote? The one thing that I knew is that historically ratification votes are not well participated in.

You know, in 2019, our strike vote had about 43% of our membership participate, and only 25% participate in the ratification. So I was worried about what that would look like. And the day that I found out the results, you could have knocked me over with a feather. We had over 40,000 people. So the idea that we maintained this worker engagement level of a super majority all the way through.

And I also was surprised with the outcome, I can't lie. I know that there was a lot of people who were really torn. In negotiations you don't get everything you want. I wish it was like that. But there was a lot of people who were really torn.

I myself have been in EA for 20 years. I have never seen this level of wage increase in my entire career as an EA.

The unfortunate part is, is that it's still not what education workers deserve. They deserve more. I think there was a lot of soul searching before people cast that ballot. And I have huge respect for everyone who used their voice. Whether they turned it down or they accepted it, they used their voice all the way through. And I hope they continue to use their voice as we move forward.

RESH: Right. And you went through a bit of a journey here yourself. Because you initially stated you weren't too happy with the deal, but eventually you did vote in favor. So could you speak about that? Why the change of heart? And is this a moment for congratulations?

LAURA: Well, you know what? I think it is a moment for congratulations. But I think it's one of those situations where you know, there's this idea that people can turn off and on the different facets of their life.

As a labor leader, as a member of the negotiations committee, we felt that the entire team, not just Laura, the entire team felt that this was the best deal that we were going to be able to achieve. We had tried several different ways. There just did not seem to be, and at the same time, we also were hearing very clearly from the membership that they wanted an opportunity to vote on it. And the only way you can do that is to bring back a tentative agreement. So, we listened to the worker voice, because the worker voice was always central in everything that we do.

But you know, as a mom of a son that needs supports, I knew there wasn't enough support. I know there's not enough supports in there.

As a worker, I know that so many of our workers are just completely burnt out.

But the one thing that I also realized, is that negotiations are not the only avenue where we can impact change. Negotiations are the avenue where you can achieve wage increases, but it's not the only avenue to impact change.

And so, when I cast my vote for yes, I also was casting my commitment to continue to fight for more and that that fight's going to happen outside of negotiations. And the government needs to be prepared for that. We're not backing down.

RESH: Right. So in this journey for the rights and dignity of education workers in Ontario, ideally, what are those large goals that you will continue to fight for?

LAURA: Oh, there's so many! I think we need to continue really recognizing the amazing work that education workers do, the professionalism that exists. To stop with this classist perception that care-work or cleaning services, you know, that kind of work is somehow below.

It is working class work. It's proud work. It is honest work. And it's work that is integral to the functioning of our school system.

And I think moving forward ... you know, people would say to me, Well, I hope the government would respect us. And I often find that what has come out of this that could never be negotiated at the table is that workers respected themselves and workers found their voice. And they used that voice and they stopped being afraid to use that voice. And that's something that I would never be able to negotiate. My team would never be able to negotiate. But it is a win that I think is going to serve workers far into the future.

RESH: Would you describe this labor action by these education workers and CUPE as an historic moment within labor history?

LAURA: Absolutely. Absolutely. And I hope that one day when the history books are written about this, that the picture that they see is not the picture of the labor leaders at that meeting. I hope the picture that they include in the narrative are pictures from the front line, from those protests, from those picket lines, of workers, hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of workers coming together to use their voice. Because that's the real story of what was won here. And that's who won it.

RESH: And finally, and maybe this is just asking the same question in a different way. But this is still so fresh, right? Just days ago, ratification happened. The union, yourself, your colleagues, really all of us in Ontario will be reflecting on this for a long time. But right now, what are some of your main takeaways from this five-month, perhaps even longer, struggle?

LAURA: Somebody asked me that the other day and I said, my one takeaway is you're going to be scared, but do it anyways. Because there was several times that I think everyone was scared. And we just really relied on each other to get through it.

The other takeaway is that the power is in the worker and workers are holistic beings. And they need to be connecting, not just in their workplace, but in their communities, within their faith groups, their churches, their extracurricular events, their hobbies. I used to make a joke and say, talk about what's going on in your wine group.

Workers are holistic and we need to embrace that whole person that workers are and encourage them to access every single aspect of their life when we're fighting for better.

And involving everyone at the grassroots. When our proposals were brought together, we asked parents, we asked community members, we asked so many people, what do you wanna see? And we did open bargaining. And people have asked me, would you do it again? And I say yes every single time. Because our bargaining is a public service and the public should know what is happening in bargaining.

And I think it forces all of us to be accountable on both sides. And I think that's something that the public should be demanding. That this government should be accountable. This government should be transparent. Not hide behind exaggerations and unfounded numbers.

So those were some of our key takeaways.

And the other key takeaway that I would say is, you gotta rest when you can. It's a roller-coaster. There was times several of us looked at each other and went, where do we go? And it's a marathon. And there are gonna be times during that marathon that you wanna stop. But we kept reminding each other that we weren't here for a participation ribbon. We were here to get a medal. And I think every single worker did that.

RESH: Indeed. Laura, I want to thank you for joining us after a momentous number of months. It has been such a pleasure speaking with you.

LAURA: Thank you.

RESH: That was President of CUPE's Ontario School Boards Council of Unions, Laura Walton.

I'm Resh Budhu, host of The Courage My Friends podcast. Thanks for listening.

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