

Strike means School's out in Ontario

BY SARAH SCHMIDT

TORONTO (CUP) — Ontario teachers walked out of their classrooms and onto the picket lines yesterday in one of the largest strikes in Canadian history.

The 126,000 teachers say they had no other choice but to break the law and not report to work to teach the provinces 2.1 million students on Monday.

"It's obvious the government's going to destroy the education system if they get their way," Joanne Smyth, an elementary school teacher with the Toronto Board of Education, said. She and 15,000 other teachers turned up for a mass rally yesterday at the provincial legislature, after picket duties were over.

"It's really important they're here to see this," Smyth added about her two small children at her side.

Bill 160, the legislation over which teachers are striking, allows for powers — previously in the hands of school boards, teacher's unions and parents' groups — to be centralized in the hands of the provincial cabinet.

Issues which the teachers' unions have raised as specific examples of the sweeping nature of the bill include cabinet's: ability to set classroom sizes, reduce preparation time for high school teachers, control the way property taxes will be spent within the school system and allow non-certified instructors to teach certain disciplines.

"This is a political protest about an issue teachers feel very strongly about," Eileen Lennon, president of the Ontario Teachers' Federation said. The federation represents the five teachers' unions in the province.

Since the strike date was set last week, the federation has focussed on the re-distribution of scheduled cuts — totalling more than half a billion dollars — as the core issue shaping the conflict with the government.

"The Tories caused a rebellion roughly around the same time 150 years ago when all the laws were passed to benefit the rich," grade eight North York teacher Doug Bushey said, alluding to the Upper Canada Rebellion of 1837 which precipitated constitutional change in Ontario. "They don't seem to learn from their past mistakes."

Despite a consistent message from both union leadership and rank and file teachers, Minister of Education David Johnson said he remains confused as to what the strike is about.

"How did we get to this?" Johnson asked rhetorically at a press conference last Tuesday, pointing out neither side wants class size to go up or quality to go down.

When asked about the funding question, Johnson answered, "This is perhaps another myth."

"Teachers unions are indicating we've slashed funding from education."

"I want to tackle that head on," he said. "We're spending the same today as we did when we came into office."

Johnson told reporters his

government has cut education funding by less than \$5-million since taking office in 1995.

But in Tory budgets, funding to the primary and secondary education system has seen cuts of over \$500-million. And last week, Premier Mike Harris confirmed the legislation will enable the government to cut an additional \$500 to \$700-million from the public education system.

Johnson wouldn't refute the Premier's comments about the next round of scheduled cuts.

"We will spend what needs to be spent to ensure the highest quality."

Teachers aren't the only ones who say they don't buy the government's line, students are also very concerned.

"Bill 160 will cut a lot of money from our schools and most of our fundraising money would go to the things we should already have," said

Justin Gray, a grade six student in the Toronto Board of Education.

"The Premier finally admitted this is a huge cash grab," added Jacqueline Latter, a spokesperson for a coalition of parents, education and concerned citizens from the Ontario Education Alliance.

Meanwhile, the sides haven't sat down to negotiate since talks broke down Sunday night. But the Minister of Education says a court injunction to

end the teachers' strike is being prepared. He says he hopes teachers will comply and return to work as early as next Monday.

The legal argument for the injunction rests on proving that the strike has caused "irreparable damage" to the education system.

Johnson adds that if the injunction comes into effect, teachers and union leaders who don't comply, could face fines, or jail terms.

Pot movement picks up steam

BY MICHAEL DOBIE AND SHARON ASCHAEK

MONTREAL (CUP) — The movement pushing for the legalization of marijuana is gaining strength — a pro-pot political party is getting ready to run candidates in the upcoming Quebec election, while Torontonians are being invited on the Can-Abyss train.

The Bloc Pot is being organized by 28-year-old Montreal musician Marc St. Maurice, a six-year veteran of marijuana activism.

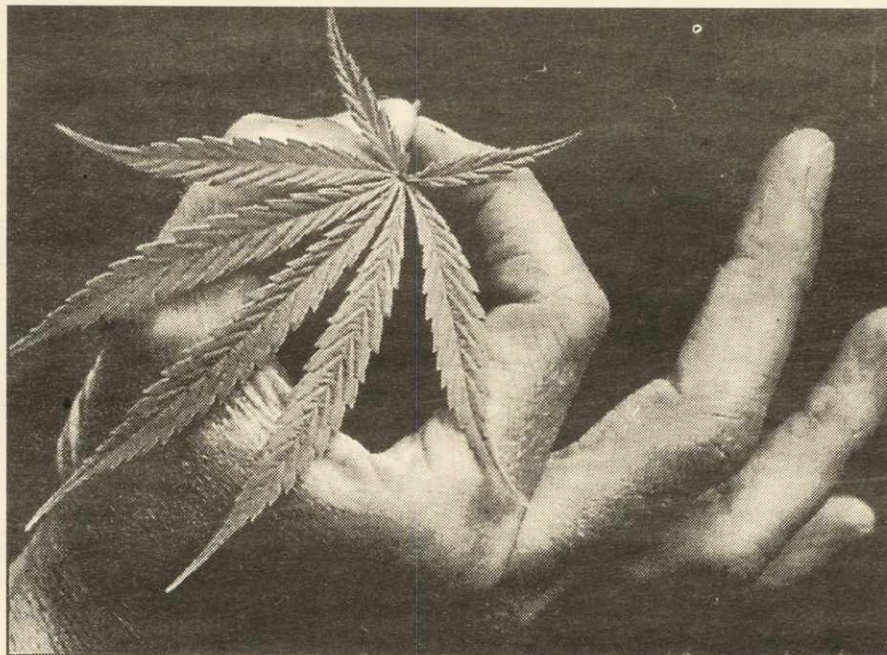
He has nearly collected the 1,000 signatures needed to get official party status and is looking for 10 people to run for office.

St. Maurice says lots of people have stepped forward, adding that it only remains to work out who will run in what riding.

Larry Duprey, owner of a

Montreal pot paraphernalia store has thrown his hat into the ring.

By putting pot on the political agenda, Duprey says activists are looking for a gradual change in official attitudes towards



marijuana.

"We've got to look at the edges of this law. We have to dance around it till we get to the centre," he said.

Charlie McKenzie, former chief janitor of the Parti Rhinoceros, does human rights research for a United Nations Agency and is a consultant for the Bloc Pot.

"Bloc Pot will engage [people] at the provincial level because enforcement is a provincial jurisdiction. Bloc Pot can have an effect because of the polarization

of politics in Quebec," he said.

St. Maurice says that electoral races are so close in Quebec that any percentage lost is a threat to the main parties. He says this will ensure that marijuana will be an issue in the next provincial election.

"I'm confident we'll get a [candidate] in somewhere," St. Maurice said.

According to the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, the number of people arrested for marijuana-related offenses has steadily risen over the past several years. The number increased to 29,562 in 1996 from 27,662 in 1994 the alternative Toronto weekly, *Now*, reports.

And those being caught by the long arm of the law for marijuana offenses are facing stiffer penalties because of tougher anti-drug legislation the federal government brought into effect earlier this year.

There are also efforts in Ontario to raise awareness about the need to take a different legal approach to marijuana.

This fall, the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Law has met every Thursday at the Comfort Zone, a Toronto club, to spread the word about legalizing marijuana.

"The Can-Abyss train is going to go through that abyss, hopefully pick everybody up, and arrive at destination legalization, whereby we remove the criminal records from these people," said Umberto Iorfida, president of the organization. He added that 1.2 million Canadians have a police record for possession of marijuana.

Iorfida says drugs are a health issue and the government's criminal approach has backfired.

"We're treating [marijuana] as a criminal substance [when] we should be treating it as a drug," he said. "We should be sending people who mess up on marijuana, or any drug for that matter, to doctors."

Iorfida foresees the legalization of marijuana by the year 2000 due to government cutbacks.

"It will come, because the country can no longer afford the so-called 'War on Drugs' he said.

The Can-Abyss campaign is also raising awareness about the hemp plant — essentially the marijuana plant grown without the active ingredient that gets users "high". According to Iorfida, there are over 30,000 commercial uses for this plant, most more environmentally friendly than materials and processes already in use.

Penis to roam hallways

BY BRAD MOSCATO

ST. CATHARINE'S (THE BROCK PRESS) — A giant, condomed penis will be shuffling its way through Brock University hallways this year.

The university's student council has endorsed a proposal that — in a bid to promote safer sex — will see a female student costumed as a "giant penis dressed in proper gear".

The mascot will be handing out free condoms to both males and females during its shielded journey.

"For this message to be effective it has to be a well-made penis...and well-endowed," said councillor Trevor Harris, whose comment prompted an outburst of laughter in a recent council meeting.

But for the most part, councillors have engaged in "the most active debate I've seen in

years", said the student union president.

Some councillors attacked the campaign saying it would prove futile. "This doesn't promote safe sex, it promotes sex," said one councillor.

"For this message to be effective it has to be a well made penis...and well endowed."

Those opposed to the safe sex mascot said other schools might view Brock as a "joke university" if the council endorsed the project.

But overall, the plan has been well received in council, and many are embracing the penis for what made it controversial in the first place — its shock value.

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