

Organizing Against Hunger and Poverty in the Somali Community

John Clarke

On the last day of March, an office opened in North Etobicoke that represented, for the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP), a major advance. The location will be operated by a group calling itself OCAP Women of Etobicoke. They are all members of the Somali community who have been drawn into our organization by way of some very practical organizing that has touched their lives.

Toronto's Somali community gives the lie to Canadian 'multiculturalism.' Over 90% of its members live in poverty. Any professional qualifications they bring with them are disregarded. They take low paying, precarious jobs or turn to a welfare system that feels it has a right to humiliate them in return for the sub-poverty pittance it provides. The community's young people can't leave their homes without walking the gauntlet of harassment by cops and private security agencies. Those who have not yet secured their right to live here as citizens deal with an immigration system that has a strange way of 'celebrating diversity'. The Somalis of Toronto experience daily the poverty and racism that awaits 'New Canadians.'

OCAP has had a foothold in the Somali Community for a number of years and we have mobilized on a range of issue it confronts. In the last year, that working relationship reached a new level by way of a struggle around an element of the Welfare System known as the Special Diet Policy.

The Liberal Party in Ontario has, since it came to power, worked to consolidate rather than reverse the Harris Common Sense Revolution. It junked any promises it had made to address the needs of those on welfare and has given begrudged increases of less than the rate of inflation. People on assistance have seen the spending power of their cheques reduced by 40% in ten years and McGuinty has maintained this situation. Hungry people work for lower wages and he is not about to interfere with the 'competitive edge' by raising welfare rates if he can avoid it.

After McGuinty took over, OCAP began to explore ways to effectively press for him to 'Raise the Rates.' Our discussions began to focus on the notion that many things people are supposed to be able to get when they are on welfare are kept from them by the system's bureaucracy. We came across the

Special Diet Policy under which those receiving assistance could get up to \$250 a month per person in food allowance if a medical provider deemed it necessary. Of course, this policy was little known and often refused to those who applied for it but we asked ourselves what would happen if we organized community-based clinics to enable people to obtain the food supplement. We also asked what would be the effect of ensuring that welfare officialdom had to deal with applicants who were organized to act collectively. Finally, we considered what would be the result if knowledge of the benefit were communicated through every available channel to poor communities.

The balance of 2005 was an exercise in finding out the answers to these three questions. We made contact with some dozens of health providers ready to work with us on clinics. In Toronto, over



8,000 people were diagnosed as being in need of the Supplement by this method and clinics were held in range of cities in the rest of the Province. From the start, it was clear that the Somali community, with its extraordinary internal communication and sense of mutual aid, would be at the backbone of organizing to access the Special Diet.

Once the Campaign was underway, the City of Toronto's welfare bureaucracy began a frantic round of initiatives to block access to the allowance. Local policies were written and rewritten almost weekly. Families accessing the Supplement were targeted for

denial as suspect ‘multiple entitlements’. Nurse practitioners, dieticians and midwives were suddenly told they could no longer diagnose the need for nutritional adequacy. A round of attempts were made to force people to reapply on new Special Diet forms, even if they had recently been approved to receive the benefit.

OCAP defeated these attacks with an ongoing round of collective action. The Mayor’s office was occupied, the head offices of Social Services were taken over, and local welfare offices received mass delegations of people demanding their right to the food supplement. Many communities that face poverty in Toronto responded. A clinic was held in Spanish. A Chinese language radio station requested an interview with one of our Cantonese-speaking members because they were being flooded with inquiries. Vietnamese people developed their own informal network to co-operate in securing and defending the Supplement. But I don’t believe we ever had an action in this Campaign where the Somali Community was not the main force involved.

The OCAP organized drive to access the Special Diet reached a peak in October of last year when forty medical providers diagnosed 1,100 people, at a clinic on the lawns of Queen’s Park, as being in need of the benefit. As large an impact as we were able to directly organize, however, the informal network in poor communities across Ontario had many times the effect. In 2005, total benefits paid out for Special Diet items doubled in size to \$80 million.

After ten years of trying to reverse the destruction of income-support systems in Ontario, we finally had found a means win back some ground. We realized that Queen’s Park would move against us but the transformation of the Supplement from an obscure provision to a well known entitlement was a potential change in the balance of forces and not something that the Liberals would be able to take away without a fight. The drastic cuts to the Policy that came in November did, indeed, spark a wave of indignation and a fight back that is still ongoing. Still, the recent Provincial Budget, with its miserable 2% increase in social assistance rates, shows that that fight will not be an easy one. The strength that was shown by the Somali community and by many other poor people in different parts of Ontario forms the basis for winning it.

The cut to the Special Diet Supplement has not stopped the organizing momentum in Etobicoke. Delegations from the community to local welfare offices to win benefits for families are ongoing. People have organized actions to force the property management company at a major public housing project to carry out maintenance work



that was being neglected. A recent picket of the 23 Division, to challenge police harassment of Somali youth, has emboldened people to the point where cops are being challenged when they come into areas to carry out their intimidation of the community. One mother recently told a couple of cops who were harassing her son: “Our community is safe, apart from when you show up. You’re not welcome here.” People are starting to stand up and fight back as the situation demands.

The OCAP Women of Etobicoke are a glimpse of the potential for organizing communities under attack. In order to support such initiatives, however, you have to stand on the appropriate side of the line. Union leaderships seeking new, collaborative relations with the Liberal Party, can’t be part of this fight. Those who refuse to challenge an NDP Mayor who boasts of the number of cops he has put on the streets are, similarly, out of the running. To work with working class and poor communities under attack, you must be ready to fight their enemies. **R**

John Clarke is a longtime activist with OCAP.