



Measuring the Miller Regime:



Toronto Politics, Unions and the Left

David Kidd

I'm a Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) activist and a City of Toronto worker. It is different viewing the Mayor David Miller regime if you're working for the City than for activists engaged in municipal issues.

Like a number of other unions in Toronto, there has been a change in the political participation of my union over the last ten years. Ten years ago there was a real caution to reach out to our members at election time to either take a stand on candidates or even contact our members at their homes to participate in elections. Now our messaging goes right at our membership in a direct manner, and we say to our members "vote as if your jobs depend on it." The change is due to what happened at the city level over the past years. The Lastman regime went after us in a very concerted way. Lastman was determined to privatize every service and job that we do. He opposed our union and we had two strikes, the first significant strikes in our history and this transformed our union. All levels of the union now understand the need to participate in elections.

The 2006 Election and the New Miller Regime

In the municipal election of 2006 we mobilized our membership, through flyers and phone banking, and we engaged full time organizers in key campaigns. Members actually phoned the union office and thanked us for informing them how to vote. We also selected organizers who lived in the wards they were working in and so we also encouraged a longer-term involvement. Other unions did this as well.

During the 2006 election, key union issues were, again, privatization and also union sourcing of city purchases. This came up around the replacement of Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) subway cars. The TTC was pushed to keep the production in a unionized plant in Thunder Bay and it became a real debate and a number of candidates unleashed an onslaught of anti-union rhetoric during the debate. The red-baiting of the campaign was aimed at CUPE. In the school board trustee campaign there was a claim that CUPE was manipulating the vote, telling people who to vote for, and that it would be a union controlled school board. The *Toronto Star* ran a front-page story to this end.

There was also a similar right-induced attack on Councillor Joe Mihevc, suggesting he was anti-Semitic because he got support from CUPE, who had identified Israel as an apartheid regime. It's interesting that this was the kind of red-baiting in the 2006 election. In the prior election, the *Toronto Sun* had identified now Councillor Paula Fletcher as pro-communist. Even in the sourcing debate, a number of media outlets and a number of councillors claimed that because we wanted to keep the jobs in Canada, we were blocking the free market, and this was leading to a communist dictatorship!

Mayor Miller's politics can best be characterized as one of a U.S. Democrat. He understands what union support is to get elected and he also knows what it is to get corporate support to get elected. The traditional municipal NDPer does not want to suggest they get union support and they are also often reticent about corporate support, though they would love to have it. But Miller is very

clear: he gets corporate support and union support. And he has very strong white middle class sensibilities. I am a Parks and Recreation worker, and Miller supports programs for kids and youth but he is also clear about protecting trees and parks. Middle class residents have shown through polling that they are more concerned that the parks be beautiful than programs be provided. Miller knows that.

The reason why CUPE supports Miller is that he stopped the whole-scale privatization of city services. Miller, being the mayor, was also instrumental in a number of collective bargaining negotiations – both for the CUPE locals at City Hall but also for the TTC workers as well. His regime helped to solve some bargaining roadblocks that former Mayor Lastman and the right on Council have never wanted to resolve. I work in a poor community and Miller's policies have contributed to a shift in the role that policing plays from the confrontational racial profiling of former Police Chief Julian Fantino to the acknowledgement of racism of the police from the Blair regime and the acknowledged need to improve community relations.

A Miller Agenda Against Neoliberal Urbanism?

In terms of setting the agenda in this election, Miller's campaign failed to lay out any clear objectives, giving political space to the right to do so, and maintain their capacity to sustain neoliberal urban policies. John Laschinger was again Miller's campaign manager this time, after spending years working for Prime Minister Mulroney and other Conservatives. Laschinger's strategy was standard mainstream thinking for a candidate seeking re-election as an incumbent and in the lead. Laschinger made sure there was no popular mobilization for Miller in this election, either from progressive councilors or from unions. The election was run on a stand pat formula. The right on the Council and Toronto business, particularly the Toronto Board of Trade and the speculators and developers around the Toronto Real Estate Board, set the agenda in the election and keep Miller on the defensive over the last year in office.

There are a number of criticisms to be made of the positions that Miller has taken from a union standpoint. The most basic one, for me, is that he has set into play a tax transfer over the next 15 years whereby residential homeowners and tenants will be paying an increased share of the current taxes of the business and commercial sectors. This is the most basic sellout that the Miller regime has done an actual transfer of taxes from the rich to the poor. It is completely consistent with neoliberal policy positions of redistribution to the rich and corporations (and this fall's budget fight to increase city revenues is one of the consequences). There are also other issues: a bylaw Miller initiated has contributed to the criminalization of the homeless; he has not championed effectively immigrant or racialized populations; and the problems of the racialization of poverty and violence continue to fester.

There is a funding crisis of the entire public infrastructure. The privateers lie in wait to put forward their agenda to replace aging public facilities and programs with private capital and with

contracts to extract profits. With declining revenues from the province and the federal government, and provincial legislation directing municipalities on how they can finance themselves, the city is facing a funding crisis and limited options as to how to respond. The budget fight and funding crisis, the failures of waterfront development, the continued decline of the TTC: all suggest that even if Miller and his Council allies govern the city, it is the right and business which still rules.

Union and Local Election Dilemmas

CUPE and the union movement were on the defensive during the 2006 municipal campaign. We did campaign on privatization as our touchtone issue. But we need to be self critical as we did not advocate on other issues of the working class as effectively, particularly on the need for a decent jobs at living wages and the racialization of poverty.

In terms of the school board election in 2006, education issues were again treated as less important than municipal issues. Here a neoliberal agenda to gut the school board of basic services and programs has also been forming over the last year. This issue is mostly under the radar but the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) has become an institution that does not promote or affirm services to the poor and is moving to a board that increasingly provides programs that the parents have to fundraise for. What was also significant in the 2006 election was that the provincial Liberals targeted the local opposition to this agenda. They went after the independent left-wing trustees who do have party machines to rally support. They put in Liberal party candidates and engaged in red-baiting. Liz Hill, a longstanding Communist Party trustee, was defeated. The TDSB local, CUPE 4400, is facing the decimation of its membership – the administrative support staff and custodial services. Whenever the right wants to cut services, they always go after the low-waged sector first. CUPE 400 will have to develop a well-planned fightback campaign.

A key issue for the left in the municipal election was the divide over the support of candidates of colour and the nomination for councilor process. This was played out initially in the councilor candidate nomination race between Tam Gossen and Helen Kennedy in the downtown ward that had been represented by Olivia Chow. Chow threw her support behind her longstanding white executive assistant, Kennedy. Kennedy won the nomination. Goosen, a long-standing →





and establish a union and progressive agenda for Toronto. Little progress has been made, as a new urban left has not cohered in any way that can claim to map out an alternate political future for Toronto. Some key issues can be readily identified, however.

Unions and the left need to make the dismantling of economic and racial divisions a first priority. We need to campaign on the issues and status of immigrant workers and immigrants. Until the labour movement and the left campaigns openly for the immigrants in the city that group will look elsewhere. Immigrants should be able to vote in municipal elections after they have landed status, and not have to wait until they have Canadian citizenship. The left needs to be the inclusive force. Violence is an issue that impacts hard on poor communities. We have to articulate that from a working class point of view. This is not an issue of putting more cops on the street. It is an issue of defending people's rights to live in a safe environment.

Urban environmental issues are of massive importance. There is a need to mobilize around these, and particularly over plans to implement measures to address climate change, from a working class perspective. Otherwise ecology issues will continue to be framed from a business and professional point of view in terms of market incentives and consumer choices. There is, for another example, a huge problem of gridlock and transit in Toronto. But the environmental movement is locked into a transit strategy that does not respond to how we get there with the infrastructure we have now, and workers' use of their own vehicles to get to work and services.

The continued crisis of affordable housing in Toronto will continue to occupy the left. The federal government cuts are coming and there is no agenda to recreate affordable housing in the city; except for public private partnerships as, for example, the redevelopment of Regent Park. That is the model, but this will not address the housing crisis, and housing will continue to be one of the foremost issues for poor and working class people. The current Council has no clear agenda here, and has been adrift over the issue since the election. The fiscal capacity depends upon governments and political movements at the national and provincial levels as well. But as in so many issues, there is no progressive campaigning leadership that has emerged in Council either.

The working class, poor and immigrants in Toronto, and Canadian cities more generally, are open to being mobilized. The challenge for the urban left and the labour movement is to do so. This is an organizational and political test that goes beyond just getting people to vote for certain candidates. The Miller regime and the current forms of left organization have not yet loosened the grip of neoliberal urbanism on Toronto. **R**

Chinese activist and former trustee had mobilized significant support for her candidacy from the Chinese community in the ward. After the nomination vote, many activists who had supported Goosen refused to support and work for Kennedy in the municipal election. Other municipal activists worked to support candidates of colour elsewhere in the City. Many progressive activists of colour worked for Rowena Santos in the Parkdale area against the Miller-endorsed councilor candidate, Gord Perks. Winnie Ng, a leading municipal and labour activist, put a critical letter in the *Toronto Star*, criticizing Miller's support of Perks, and campaigned for Santos. We were not able to have a dialogue in the union movement during the election or after about these issues.

This issue will not go away. City Council is still quite unrepresentative of the demographics of Toronto. And not all candidates of colour are progressive either. Councilor Michael Thompson, who was endorsed by *Share* in this election, is one. He has agreed with the practice of racial profiling and has typically voted with the right on Council. He may run against Miller next time.

An open and democratic nomination process is one of the ways to go. I've been in wards where candidates for nominations have actually signed contracts before the nomination process that stipulate conditions of the process including deadlines; who can vote and endorse candidates; and the agreed support of all who participate for the person who wins the nomination. We have to figure this out. The right works as a bloc consistently and gets their candidates elected whereas as left constituencies are divided.

Unions and a New Local Agenda for Toronto

Since the municipal election, there is still a need to be proactive

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