

New Openings for Toronto Workers

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In the context of an economic crisis where working people in Ontario have suffered major setbacks, organized labour's response has so far been disappointing. Apart from a few public sector strikes forced by employer concession demands, some longer-term strikes against concessions (such as the Vale-Inco struggle), a number of workplace occupations demanding severance and a few demonstrations calling for pension protection and EI changes, there has been little resistance. This has forced activists in the union movement, and the left more widely, to confront the limits of our present organizational situation, and to begin to look for new ways to move forward. It is clear now that this cannot be avoided: rather than dislodging neoliberalism, the financial crisis appears now to be allowing neoliberalism to gain new momentum in efforts to restructure the public sector. Indeed, there appears new momentum for wage and contract concessions in the private sector and for rollbacks in the public sector.

These struggles and the impasse in union responses have sparked two important new initiatives to build union and working class capacities to fight-back. One has come from the Toronto and York Region Labour Council (TYRLC) mobilizing formal union structures, and the other comes from a new alliance of community organizations, socialists and labour activists in the form of a workers' assembly.

THE STEWARDS' ASSEMBLY AND AFTER

The May 7, 2009 coming together of over 1,600 stewards, workplace representatives, staff, and other union reps in Toronto around the necessity of fighting against attacks by employers and

governments was an unprecedented and impressive exception that brought some hope for forward motion. It was organized by the Toronto Labour Council led by President John Cartwright. The meeting brought together a mix of workplace representatives from public and private sector unions from across all of the different factions within the labour movement. It was the first such meeting in living memory and was the result of an impressive organizing effort.

This was the latest in a series of projects by the Cartwright leadership of the Toronto and York Region Labour Council. Previous efforts included the electoral project to tilt the balance of the Toronto Board of Education in favour of those who wanted to challenge the Conservative Provincial government; a movement to raise the minimum wage – and engage different communities as well as unions in the process; fighting against water privatization; arguing for local sourcing rules for the city government; the more recent Good Jobs Coalition project and the ongoing support of labour struggles.

The meeting aimed, as Cartwright noted, to “reach deeply down into the labour movement and engage the true-front-line activists that are our stewards.” It's important to note that rank and file leaders aren't necessarily politically engaged. Efforts to involve them in larger struggles are extremely difficult but absolutely essential to building a response to the crisis. As an introduction to the crisis and the necessity of fighting back, this meeting was very important.

While most of those who attended the meeting felt extremely good about the experience (including me), the jury is still out on whether or not the assembly will actually contribute to developing the mobilizational capacity of the union movement, stimulating a larger movement to resist attacks by business and governments, building support for the current round of public sector struggles and challenging the ideological assault being waged against the rights of unions and working people.

The actual assembly covered a number of areas: a presentation on the origins and causes of the crisis; a series of testimonials from the floor by participants from different key union struggles in Toronto over the past few years and from individuals victimized by outsourcing, workplace closures, racism, and concession demands; speeches by CLC President Ken Georgetti, John Cartwright, Winnie Ng (a leader in the Good Jobs Coalition) among others; a short period set aside for



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Historic Toronto Labour Council's Steward Assembly, May 7, 2009.

small group discussions; speeches by leaders of major union affiliates pledging their collective resistance to the crisis measure of governments and employers; and a “surprise” visit by Toronto Mayor David Miller.

The assembly came away with a commitment to build support for EI reforms and pensions associated with the Canadian Labour Congress campaigns. It ended with a request that the stewards go back to their workplaces, circulate, and discuss the EI petition and mobilize for upcoming political actions demanding reforms.

WHAT DID IT ACCOMPLISH?

Walking out of the session, participants could not help but feel good about the potential there and hoped that it would be the beginning of an ongoing movement. But events that unfolded since the assembly – raise a number of further issues and questions. There were a few limitations to the meeting:

- Rather than being an actual assembly, with open discussion, debate, and space for the stewards to initiate points and ideas, it felt more like a process of conveying information. In order to encourage the creation of an ongoing Stewards’ Movement, a living, more participatory process is necessary.

- The close ties to Mayor Miller, and the constant references to NDP politicians, showed that the politics of the assembly was confined within the “legitimate” institutional parameters of the labour movement. While some NDP politicians did play a positive role in the minimum wage campaign, the party as a whole has notably failed to lead on even such basic campaigns as EI reform and has been absent from any discussions on alternatives during the crisis. Miller’s address to the assembly reflected the wide “popular front” like platform that has dominated labour politics in Toronto in the current period. This alliance has meant a modest political program that rests on lower business taxes and co-operation between labour and private investors. There was little mention of any vision of a different way of creating jobs and shaping investment, or the need for a political movement that might articulate such a vision.

- Even the critique of the financial sector was limited to complaints about speculation and excess profits – rather than a real explanation about the way finance affects jobs, investment, and communities. We need to avoid one-dimensional populism that poses the problem as being “monopolies or financial speculators against the people,” pulling the movement into an alliance with industrial capitalists. The problem with that type of approach is all too evident in the auto sector. There was no mention of demands to control and shape investment through reforms such as nationalizing the banks.

The success of the Stewards’ Assembly raises another set of questions:

- If the Toronto Labour Council was able to organize a Stewards’ Assembly, is this happening in other cities across Canada? If not, why isn’t it?

- The CLC campaign remains tied to uninspired and relatively ineffective forms of action. Since the assembly in May, there has been one demonstration in Toronto demanding action on EI reform and pension protection. The turnout was disappointing and wasn’t followed up (or proceeded) by more militant actions, such as occupations of EI offices. Where will this campaign go?

- Will there be any follow-up with this first effort to bring stewards together from across the city or was this a one-off activity? If there are plans to do it again and build on this initial assembly, what forms might that take? (As of this writing, the TYRLC has announced a planned Stewards Assembly for public sector unionists for April 2010).

- Will there be efforts to build networks of resistance and solidarity between groups of stewards across the city? Are there plans to produce materials to help stewards explain the crisis to their co-workers and argue for new forms of collective resistance, led by stewards within workplaces?

- Are there plans to discuss ways of uniting workplace representatives with workers in communities and those not unionized who are also looking for ways to extend and deepen their struggles?

The Toronto Labour Council has taken the lead in a number of areas over the past few years. Once again, in the current context, the Stewards’ Assembly can represent an important counterweight to the defensiveness of Ontario’s labour movement. But the Council operates within the constraints of the official union structures, limited to a certain extent by the conservatism of the leadership of the affiliates and the political and economic structures of the city – even as it works to stretch the boundaries of those limitations.

Meetings like the Stewards’ Assembly have the potential to become a springboard toward a larger and broader effort to educate and mobilize workers across Toronto in resisting current attacks and developing political approaches independent of business-dominated projects that currently dominate the agenda.

THE CUPE STRIKES AND POLITICAL DEFEAT

The events of the summer and fall also revealed some of the challenges and limits of the Labour Council’s strategy at the time. Governments at all levels have been gearing up for a general attack on the public sector. This was already evident in the CUPE strikes in both Windsor and Toronto during the summer of 2009 and the demands by employers for concessions. The municipal workers strikes were settled with mixed results. The Windsor workers were unable to prevent imposed takeaways after a bitter strike. Toronto workers did prevent the city from eliminating paid sick time (although this survived in a modified form) and held off a series of other demands by the employer.

Overall, the Toronto municipal workers did win an economic victory, but both CUPE strikes against demands for concessions

suffered important *political* defeats. There was little effort or resources used to appeal to the working class as a whole or the general public in defence of the public services involved, or over the stakes involved in defending the rights of unionized public sector workers. Coming on the heels of massive efforts by the business community and their spokespeople to demonize unionized auto workers, the public attacks on the so-called privileges of public sector workers struck a deep chord to a depoliticized general population. The utter lack of a response by CUPE to these attacks helped to undermine the political effects of the important economic victory of the striking municipal workers and will make it easier for future waves of attacks on the public sector unions and the services themselves, sure to come in the future.

The experience of the municipal strike also signalled a crisis in the political strategy pursued by the labour movement in Toronto. The “centre-left” Miller administration failed to differentiate itself from the hard right city politicians who demanded concessions from the workers. In a manner reminiscent of the Bob Rae Social Contract of 1993, the Toronto Mayor attacked his labour base, in an effort to appease (rather than challenge and build an alternative to) the right. Labour for the most part deserted Miller (aside from an opportunistic show of support by the CAW at Labour Day) and, of course, the right only further attacked him for being too soft on the public sector unions. The reliance on the support of Miller – and his alliance with the private sector, and the accommodation of the more left-oriented social democratic voices on city council to the business alliance – left the mainstream labour movement in Toronto and the Labour Council as well, searching for a new strategy.

Since Miller’s withdrawal from the Toronto Mayoralty race, there has been a relentless attack by the right on everything from budgeting to privatization and outsourcing. Given the horrible political defeat signalled by the failure to build a consistent defence of municipal workers rights, even the more progressive voices on Toronto city council are now in the crosshairs of the shrill and hysterical right-wing offensive.

There have been other labour struggles in the late summer and fall. In Toronto, CAW workers at Zellers warehouse – tied to the new U.S. owners of Hudson’s Bay Company – struck against efforts to reduce their wages by 30%; CEP maintenance workers at Cadillac-Fairview fought to protect against mass firings aimed at eliminating the union; Steelworkers at Vale-Inco continued a strike in Sudbury against concessions demands, while, after much bluster and posturing, the CAW gave up concessions at Ford (matching those at GM and Chrysler) – while rank and file workers in the U.S. *rejected* the UAW’s efforts to get them to buy-into another round of takeaways.

It’s hard to see how the Stewards’ Assembly contributed all that much to these struggles. Certainly the Toronto Labour Council did build support for all of the Toronto-based strikes and fightbacks (and publicly responds to the ongoing attacks on the public sector and worker rights being raised by business voices on a regular basis today) but there was hardly any resonance from the Assembly and little to show from the exercise. There was no

effort to transmit the energy and enthusiasm of the Assembly for a fightback to the crisis into the major political struggle that was unfolding in Toronto for municipal workers. Hopefully, a public sector Stewards’ Assembly planned for April will contribute to moving things forward.

THE GOOD GREEN JOBS COALITION

The Good Green Jobs Conference, held in early November 2009, emerged as a key Labour Council project. The conference was extremely well attended and had all kinds of activists from unions and community groups and coalitions. Most impressive was the participation of many activists from racialized communities from across the city, all involved in one way or another in the struggle over the environment. There were lots of social democratic politicians, but genuine left activists as well. The orientation from the front of the platform was around making the environment a space for good job creation in a way that avoided what U.S. environmental justice leader Van Jones referred to as “eco-apartheid.”

There was a lot of emphasis on equity and inclusion, but little on the need to avoid eco-capitalism (although, in fairness, there were some references). The final speaker, after all of the workshops finished, was Clayton Thomas Mueller, the First Nations leader of a campaign against the Tar Sands, led by the Indigenous Environmental Network who explicitly rejected capitalism as a framework for addressing the environment. But by that time most of the discussions had already taken place. By placing it within the discourse of aboriginal justice, it made it somehow divorced from the issue of job creation, easy to embrace in the framework of social justice, but with little implications for what people would actually work toward today.

The workshops were divided into three themes: Green Infrastructure, Green Manufacturing and Youth. Each workshop had over 150 people, but they were divided into table of about 10 people. On those tables, people had discussions on the themes. In my table, the discussion was at a high and very satisfying level (I attended the Green Manufacturing workshop). At each of the workshops, before the discussion started there were panels. In my workshop, the panel included someone from Thunder Bay talking about the struggle to get Toronto to source new streetcars from Bombardier (it was an excellent presentation, but the political framework was social democratic and didn’t deconstruct the unique elements of that experience, such as the partnership with the employer); someone from the private sector (who brought a thoroughly business-oriented perspective), and an activist from a coalition to create decent jobs (he called for a TTC maintenance yard) in the area formerly used by Kodak. His conclusions were very interesting. There was no opportunity to engage with the panellists, however.

It turned out that the level of discussion in the workshops as a whole was very low: most of the points made were formulaic (“we need more education”...) and, apart from the infrastructure section (which people seemed to instinctively see as public, rather than private), there was almost no sense of why the private sector

needs to be marginalized and limited and that a public and co-operative sector needs to be the principal form of green job creation. When our table wrote this out as one of our points, one of the facilitators of the larger workshop remarked, “I guess you guys are in love with big government.” When pressed, she referred to “positive examples of ‘blue-green’ alliances in the USA.” When all of the tables had summarized their discussions, it seemed that the main political issue they tended to address, was the need for equity, participation and such issues (all important, but lacking in the issue of class and private capital).

The conference did bring together a slew of trade unionists. Many from the CAW, for example, were rank and file environmental activists or engaged in important local struggles such as support for Zellers workers, as well as leaders from the union. The workshops were open and the outcome of those discussions honestly reflected where ordinary trade unionists are at on the environment and jobs. Moreover, many of the activists invited to the conference were (and still are) involved in some extremely creative and interesting experiments (such as the effort to engage activist youth in the Jane-Finch area in environmental activism and job creation).

THE GREATER TORONTO WORKERS' ASSEMBLY

What the Stewards' Assembly and the Green Jobs Conference lacked was an anti-capitalist approach, and a collective capacity to push the labour movement toward class struggles beyond where the affiliates individually are at. This is understandable, but it suggests the need for socialists to build new forms of worker and community activist alliances and structures to break the impasse of union politics in Toronto and Canada. One such fledgling effort is the recent efforts to form the Greater Toronto Workers' Assembly (www.workersassembly.ca).

The Assembly process works on a number of levels. On the one hand, it seeks to create a new form of working class organization, bringing together working people in unions, in communities, employed and unemployed and those who are unable to work. Building on a militant, anti-capitalist and class struggle orientation, it will address forms of division and segmentation that neoliberal capitalism has created and working within and outside existing community and labour organizations, it will develop capacities to move beyond the current level of defensive acceptance of the capitalist offensive.

On another level, the Assembly includes much of the socialist and anti-capitalist left and members come from a number of activist groups and movements in Toronto. Therefore, the Assembly serves as a space to create new forms of unity and common practise on the left. The Assembly is not a coalition or network – people join and participate as individuals, committed to a Vision Statement, and building a democratic, activist organization. Engaging in common campaigns, building common approaches, planning together, debating and discussing activities, political discussion and debate and summarizing experiences will lead to a higher level of unity and can contribute to the growth of a more unified and sophisticated socialist left movement.

A BEGINNING PROCESS

The Assembly idea was initiated by the Socialist Project, but it was soon taken up as a collective project of the radical left and anti-capitalist individuals in labour and community movements. A series of Consultas (consultation meetings), held in the summer of 2009 and into the early autumn built momentum toward an initial Assembly. The meetings dealt with important issues underlying the project, such as the relationship between union and community approaches, how an Assembly would relate to the activist Labour Council in Toronto and the issue of class.

The first Assembly, held in October 2009, included about 150 participants from unions, community groups and movements, individual activists, members of left political groups and anti-oppression movements. It established the basic principles of an Assembly, through a series of intensive workshop discussions. The Assembly agreed on the principal of individual membership, set up a voluntary, interim co-ordinating committee, and set about the process of establishing criteria for collective campaigns, a proposed Vision statement, and the next Assembly.

The second Assembly in January 2010 included 200 participants and had a large discussion about possible campaign choices, adopted a Vision statement, debated issues of structure and set up a series of committees on Campaigns, Internal and External Education, Membership and Finance and a Labour Caucus. People also began officially joining the Assembly as individuals and volunteering for the committees. Soon after, a group of artists formed an Art Committee.

The Vision statement gives a flavour of the kind of project that the Assembly is envisaged to be. The following are the third and fifth paragraphs of the document:

The Assembly calls on activists to join together in a democratic process to create a new politics. It is both a space for dialogue and learning within the popular left movement and an organ of common action. Seeking to move beyond coalition and network politics the Assembly is an organization that individuals belong to without giving up their membership and allegiances to community organizations, unions and left groups. We are committed to developing our understanding of what we're up against, who our potential allies are, and to organize and act in new ways that will take us from a politics of resistance to emancipatory alternatives....

While capitalism itself has created ongoing suffering and oppression in its “normal” phases, the crisis has made things worse. But crises do not just come and go; they bring both great dangers and significant opportunities. Historically, they have represented new openings for either the consolidation of, or shifts in, social power. The question is whether we can take advantage of the new openings and threats to build a new kind of politics. The Assembly represents one answer to that challenge. (complete statement at: www.workersassembly.ca/vision)

Currently, the committees are working to further sharpen the Assembly's collective capacity to choose and develop political campaigns, gain a presence and approach to key ongoing struggles, create democratic structures, begin internal educational projects and plan the third Assembly, to be held at the end of April.

REFORMING A WORKING CLASS POLITICS

It is clear that we have a long way to go in order to rebuild a working class movement that has been defeated, fragmented and disorganized by neoliberal capitalism. One element is the efforts by the Toronto Labour Council to take a more activist approach to its work in supporting strikes and seeing the Toronto working class as much more than the members who gather in monthly meetings to report on their local union activities and popularize CLC policies. To keep moving in this direction requires some political daring in the leadership to break out of conventional politics in organizing and inside the union movement, and beyond the increasingly narrow political confines of the current municipal politics in Toronto.

It is difficult to imagine a new union movement emerging in Toronto and Canada, based on historical experience and the current political forces on the left, without the building of a new socialist movement. This movement will have to have its roots in the different segments of the Toronto and Canadian working classes, with all its racial, gender, sexual and regional diversities. Given the legacy of defeats and setbacks over the period of neoliberalism, it is difficult to know where to begin organizationally, as opposed to simply realizing that the coalitional politics and social fora that we have struck in the past have not been adequate to the tasks at hand.

Even if we know where we would like to go in having a union and socialist movement again able to contest political power

in Canada and Toronto, there is no clear map of how to get there. But a big step in that direction that would help build greater political unity and strategic clarity could come through participation in campaigns and other activities in spaces like a Workers' Assembly. This could help shape collective efforts and struggles that would begin to find some basis of unity in working class communities and across their organizations. As this capacity grows, it could begin to challenge the logic and power of capital. Support for major strikes like that at Vale-Inco in Sudbury, or of rubber workers in Toronto, or developing campaigns for free public transit and decent incomes for all working people, are part of re-asserting a capacity in our movements and cities for political struggle, not just as individuals or an isolated union local, but as a class. It would be easy to imagine building from there to defence of the public sector against cutbacks, but also as the core of new economic strategies or political efforts to develop alternatives to the deluge of neoliberal policies currently on hand. Or to even begin taking on the immense – but absolutely necessary and inescapable need – of working from inside and outside to transform our trade unions. Eventually we need to be able to put on the agenda the task of building a mass socialist political party.

The new organizational experiments coming from alternative starting points in the Toronto labour movement are the beginning of recognition that the old ways can no longer continue as they have been. It is time to move on. They are both new openings that need to be encouraged and nurtured. They need to be copied by other labour councils and socialist and community activists across Canada. This is not in the particularities of design, but out of the need and vision to rebuild our union movements and the left. **R**

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