

Remembering the Days of Action, Re-Orienting Socialist Strategy

by Tanner Mirrlees

Present-day activists and working people can learn from past struggles and experiences, political victories and defeats. When revisited, socialist and working class histories are tremendously useful tools. The past can help us to understand “where we came from,” “where we are” and “where we could be going.” Remembering the past can help us to analyze the political limitations and potentialities of the present, and guide our struggles toward a different future.

The Days of Action (DOA) was a crucial moment in Ontario’s working class history. Throughout the mid to late 1990's, massive numbers of working people, unions, and activists mobilized across Ontario to oppose the neo-liberal re-structuring implemented by Mike Harris’s “common sense revolution”. On February 1st, 2004, a crowd of more than 60 activists, union organizers, students, and workers assembled at the Steel Workers Hall in Toronto to participate in “The Days of Action: Asking Some Hard Questions.” This public forum and process of collectively remembering was organized by The Socialist Project; it brought together different tendencies of the Toronto Left in a constructive dialogue about the limitations and potentialities of the DOA. The first hour of the forum featured a panel discussion by a number of the DOA participants and organizers. The second part of the forum featured group workshops. Throughout the day, forum participants remembered, debated, and learned from the successes and failures, political strengths and weaknesses, and wider historical and global contexts of the DOA.

John Cartwright of the Toronto and York Region Labour Council declared that the DOA was successful. It organized a vast number of Canadian working people in a common struggle, built new relationships and networks between unions and community groups, and gave rise to a widespread and popular opposition to neo-liberal reforms and cutbacks. Cartwright emphasized that the DOA slowed down (or at least postponed) the consolidation of Mike Harris’s vicious “common sense” revolution. Core to Cartwright’s

evaluation of the DOA was his contention that it was a powerful vehicle for developing class consciousness and solidarity, symbolically resisting neo-liberalism, and contributing to the development of the anti-globalization movement.

In a sobering response, John Clarke of OCAP reminded Cartwright that despite the significance of DOA's mobilization and meaningful politicization of working people, it did not stop the Harris regime from ultimately implementing devastating structural adjustments and achieving ideological dominance. For Clarke, DOA was a "squandered opportunity" for the Left: it was simply "not enough" to counter the ascendancy of the political Right to provincial state power (Clarke recounted how Harris regarded the DOA as "a good show"). Clarke argued that the key weakness of the DOA (and the Left in general) was rooted in its inability to articulate a palpable and future-oriented political alternative to neo-liberalism (and capitalism), and its dependence on the leadership of union bureaucrats. For Clarke, union leadership (anachronistically) acted as though employers were still functioning within the mindset of the post-war Keynesian period, when social and economic compromises were made with the working classes to neutralize the potential for radicalization and to feed the consumer-driven economy. Clarke concluded his discussion by reminding the audience that the days of the "Keynesian compromise" were long over. Only by organizing independently of the labor leadership and developing a more radical, militant and oppositional strategy, argued Clarke, could the Left make a genuine political difference.

Natalie Mehra of the Ontario Health Coalition reflected upon the difficulty of cementing together a diverse range of political concerns, cultural interests, and community activist groups during the DOA. Mehra's personal reflections on group in-fighting, disjunctures between union organizers and community activists, and the different levels of political consciousness that existed between and through both the labor movements and community networks, underscored the challenge of unifying a fragmented, sometimes divided and heterogeneous Left. Mehra contended that though the DOA successfully mobilized many people, it was unable to foster a collective political understanding or unified consciousness about the nature of capitalism, capitalist state power, and the

broader social relations, forces, and contradictions that “the system” gave rise to. Furthermore, Mehra touched upon the difficulty of establishing worker solidarity across the divided private and public sector. For the Left to be effective in the future, argued Mehra, it needed to forge networks with diverse political communities; it needed to bridge the gap between private and public sector workers; it needed to establish spaces of communication to support ongoing political dialogue and education; finally, it needed develop new tactics for uniting different group struggles and interests in a coherent socialist alliance.

Like Clarkson, Carolyn Egan from the International Socialists contended that the DOA was a “squandered opportunity” that had resulted from the compromised position of the union bureaucracy. But Egan did not discount the political significance and capacities of organized labor, nor the potential efficacy of socialist activists working within the institutional structures of unions. Rather, Egan asserted that by “working from below,” labor activists could radicalize the less politically conscious members of unions, place upward pressure on the bureaucratic elite, and affect, transform, and shape the political direction of the union as a whole. Egan argued that this process of “building class consciousness” was tremendously important, given that many workers had forgotten about the experience, utility, and purpose of collective action and class solidarity. But all hope was not lost. For Egan, the widespread contradictions and conflicts produced by neo-liberalism and global capitalism signaled the emergence of new political openings for the Left to regroup, recruit, and struggle. Egan concluded by challenging the Left –in all its guises- to embrace rather than “squander” the new opportunity to become history’s vanguard. Only by “speaking with people” rather “than speaking on behalf of people,” concluded Egan, would the Left be able to fulfill its revolutionary role.

Sam Gindin of the Socialist Project, the panel's final presenter, declared that the the DOA was not a “squandered opportunity,” but rather a belated effort to contain and defeat powerful neo-liberal blocs and the forces of global capitalism at a time when these emergent political and economic forms had already become highly organized, disciplined, and increasingly entrenched within the dominant structures and apparatuses

of most national states around the world. Gindin argued that the consolidation of neo-liberalism represented a crucial defeat for the Left. Though some important mobilizations against global capital emerged following the DOA (ie. worker-led mobilizations across the globe in the mid-90s prior to the anti-globalization protests in Seattle), they did not have the political capacities required to reverse existing trends. Hence, during the DOA, Ontario's Left simply didn't have the organizational, ideological and human capacities to challenge neo-liberal hegemony and global capitalism. There was no sense blaming the "Labor Bureaucracy" or "the Big Union" for the failure of DOA –they were not the sole agents of revolutionary social transformation (indeed, many unionized workers elected Harris). Also, it was futile to blame social-democratic parties at the level of national-states for the DOA's shortcomings –their Giddensesque "third-way" compromise with capital was explicitly clear and tremendously popular. Rather, if the Left wanted to be honest with itself about the weaknesses of the DOA, declared Gindin, it must reflect upon its own weaknesses: its inability to expand the social base of protest into unions that had stood apart from the work stoppages; its failure to provide any creative leadership in keeping the local coalitions active after the DOA ended; its inability to propose and place larger political alternatives and issues on the national agenda; and its inability to recruit activists to a more radical politics. For Gindin, the DOA indicated the need for a new Left organization that was rooted amongst both networks of workers and networks of activist groups. Indeed, as much as the revolutionary Left needed the organized working classes to bring about a widespread transformation to existing relations of production, intimated Gindin, the organized working classes needed a revolutionary Left to develop a stronger organizational form and more coherent political strategy to facilitate this struggle and transformative process.

As Herman Rosenfeld, the panel's chair pointed out at the forum's close, much had been collectively learned throughout the day. Remembering the Days of Action was a valuable learning experience. The public forum signaled the need for the Canadian Left to develop new capacities, build a more coherent organizational form, construct a new vision of the future, and work toward the execution of a hegemonic strategy: the ongoing struggle of one political bloc that was oriented by clear goals to organize, win and sustain a position

of popular leadership over a whole social formation on a number of institutional, civil, and ideological fronts at once. Indeed, rather than waiting for crisis build-ups to produce political openings which are either “squandered” or simply mis-recognized as a sign of capitalism’s weaknesses, the Left should engage in an ongoing struggle to hegemonically produce political opportunities, develop capacities, and build forms of class consciousness. Remembering The Days of Action re-oriented many of us to these historically strategic and politically salient goals.