

Ontario 'Days of Action' Resistance & Betrayal

On Friday 25 October 1996, economic activity in Toronto, Canada's largest city, and financial capital, ground to a halt. The local labor movement shut down the city's transit system, which carries 600,000 passengers on a typical work day. But the predicted traffic jams did not materialize: downtown streets were almost deserted except for picketers. The next day a quarter of a million people marched on Queen's Park, the seat of the provincial government, in the largest political demonstration in Canadian history.

The Toronto "Days of Action" protest was the fifth in a series of city-wide shutdowns called in response to the policies of the Conservative government of Premier Mike Harris. In June 1995, Harris defeated the discredited social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP), waving the banner of a "Common Sense Revolution," based on tax and spending cuts. Since their election, the Tories have moved quickly: healthcare, education and social program spending have been slashed; environmental, labor and safety standards have been shredded; rent control has been essentially abolished; union rights have been curtailed; 12,000 provincial government employees have been laid off, while taxes on business have been reduced. The Harris government recently turned over the province's substantial investment in the now-profitable DeHavilland aircraft plant for a fraction of its value to the private sector, and is announcing plans for similar give-away privatizations of the most profitable publicly owned corporations: Ontario Hydro and the Liquor Control Board of Ontario (LCBO).

The "downsizing of government" has gone hand in hand with the strengthening of the state. With the government's centralizing "Omnibus" Act of 1995, traditional methods of co-opting dissident groups, through consultation and policy submissions, have simply been done away with, along with the niceties of parliamentary approval of legislation. Municipal governments that have displeased the Tories, in particular the City of Toronto, are being unilaterally disbanded, in a manner that recalls Margaret Thatcher's abolition of the Greater London Council in the 1980s. To centralize power further in the Ministry of Education, the number of school boards will be cut in half.

Ontario's jail system is being overhauled: social workers and rehabilitation programs are out, and high-tech mega-jails on the American model are in. The Harris government is gutting the toothless external review boards which have previously (however ineffectually) investigated complaints of police misconduct.

As always, the deadliest consequences of the increased climate of repression have been felt by minorities. Four people were gunned down by Toronto cops in 1996, all non-white. In February, Toronto's "finest" murdered a mentally-ill Chinese man, who was trapped, alone, in the back of a bus. On 6 September 1995, three

months after Harris' election, Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) attacked a peaceful occupation by aboriginals of Ipperwash Provincial Park, fatally shooting unarmed protestor Dudley George. Harris denied all knowledge of the killing, but it has since been revealed that the murder came one day after a meeting between a high-ranking OPP officer and a group of senior Tories, including Deborah Hutton, one of Harris' chief advisers. The Tories have repeatedly turned down requests from George's family and a variety of civil-rights organizations for a public inquiry.

The generalized attack on working people has been accompanied by particularly brutal assaults on the poor. One of the Tories' most cherished programs is a version of the slave-labor "workfare" schemes proliferating in the United States. The Tories' proposal to download welfare costs onto municipalities, to be paid for through increased property taxes, sets the stage for future ugly middle-class "tax revolts," targeting welfare recipients.

Harris has stirred up hostility to the poor with a series of well-planned "gaffes," including labelling homelessness a "lifestyle choice" and blaming the increase in hungry schoolchildren on women who work rather than stay home. The supposedly liberal police chief of Metropolitan Toronto is calling for a new vagrancy law, and for a crackdown on the growing number of panhandlers on Toronto streets. Police spokesperson, Sergeant Marilyn McCann, explained that this was because of concerns that the increase in begging "must have some effect on business and the tourist industry in downtown Toronto" (*Toronto Star*, 12 January).

Not everyone is complaining about Harris. After eighteen months of the "Common Sense Revolution" and a soaring stock market, finance capital has decided to party. Bob Humphrey, president of the pricey Harry Rosen menswear chain, speaks for those enjoying some of the "trickle down" from the current speculative bubble: "There's been an uptick downtown and everyone, the lawyers, the bankers and the brokers, are all feeling it. We sure hope our friends in the financial industry continue to do well" (*Toronto Star*, January 11).

Resistance to Harris: A Crisis of Leadership

The demagogic attacks on the poor and upward redistribution of wealth have reached a new intensity under Harris, but on many important questions, the Harris government is just continuing the legacy of its NDP predecessor. Bob Rae's government made austerity its top priority, trampled union contracts in the name of deficit reduction, and initiated attacks on "cheating" by welfare recipients and injured workers. Under the NDP, Ontario cops were permitted to upgrade their firearms from .38 caliber revolvers to high-caliber semi-automatics; Harris has followed through by permitting them to use deadly dum-dum bullets. In January, Dave

Cooke, formerly the most senior minister in Rae's cabinet, resigned his seat as an NDP member of the provincial parliament to take a job as co-chair of the Tories' committee in charge of "restructuring" (i.e., gutting) education spending. Dismissing outraged squeals from NDP loyalists, Cooke blithely remarked:

"It's basically an opportunity to implement the restructuring of the system, an agenda which I think people will see is quite consistent with the agenda that I was involved in [as NDP education minister]—the reduction of school boards."

—*Toronto Star*, 24 January

While there is a certain consistency between Harris' policies and Rae's, what is new is the level of resistance. Before the Toronto action, four smaller Ontario cities—London, Hamilton, Kitchener and Peterborough—were successfully shut down. When Harris provoked a confrontation with the Ontario Public Service Employees' Union (OPSEU), he was surprised by the sudden militancy displayed by this traditionally conservative union. The combativity of OPSEU's rank and file saved their union from utter annihilation, despite the leadership's cowardly pre-strike concession of thousands of jobs.

The same pattern has characterized the resistance to the Tories so far: rank-and-file unionists have repeatedly demonstrated willingness to fight, but they are hobbled by misleadership. The union leadership recognizes that the Tories mean to do away with the post-war compromise worked out between capital and its labor lieutenants. They would like to stop Harris without permanently rupturing their ties with capital. But Harris' unwillingness to compromise has put them in a bind.

The contradiction between the bureaucracy's desire to protect its own existence and its aversion to a serious confrontation has produced vacillation and a deep split within the ranks of the union brass. On the one side, the NDP-boosters in the private-sector "pink paper" unions, led by the United Steelworkers of America (USWA), are chiefly concerned about keeping the mass movement from getting out of control. On the other side, the public-sector unions and the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), feel their very existence is threatened. The changing configurations of bureaucratic alliance and intrigue have given the movement a bumpy development.

After more than 100,000 people turned out in the cold to demonstrate in Hamilton (the center of Canada's steel industry) on 23 February 1996, the union leadership decided to put the brakes on. The next two cities, Kitchener and Peterborough, each smaller than the last, were clearly chosen to wind the movement down. However, the union brass wanted something from Harris in return. Instead, in a secret meeting with Gord Wilson, leader of the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) and Basil "Buzz" Hargrove of the CAW, Harris refused all concessions, and, in a deliberate insult, had his Labour Minister, Elizabeth Witmer, announce that unionized employees would no longer be covered by minimum labor standards. In response, an angry Wilson, normally identified with the more conservative "pink paper" faction, announced the Toronto "Days of Action."

Toronto Shuts Down

The Toronto strike and protest were hugely successful. In September, the business mouthpieces were huffing and puffing about "illegality" and the dire consequences that would befall those who breached their sacred obligations to their bosses. But as the day drew near, momentum was building so rapidly that almost all major employers threw in the towel, and instructed their employees not even to try to report for work. When thousands of "illegal" pickets defied court injunctions, and turned out at transit depots across the city to enforce the shutdown of the subways, buses and streetcars, the civic authorities sputtered, but could do nothing.

The capitalist media were naturally uniformly hostile to the shutdown, but had considerable difficulty getting their "spin" straight. While raging that "union bosses" must be made to pay for holding the city hostage and causing untold economic damage, they simultaneously denied that anything significant had happened at all. Each daily paper did this in characteristic fashion: the rightist *Sun* ran as a headline "Toronto Yawns!"; the liberal *Star* underestimated the size of the crowd by a factor of three, and the haughty *Globe and Mail* relegated the country's largest-ever political demonstration to page ten. But the action was too large, and too popular, to be affected by the lies of the corporate propaganda machine, and the pollsters were soon reporting a sudden drop in Harris' approval ratings.

Yet the very success of the Toronto Days of Action highlighted the dilemma of the union misleaders. After shutting down Ontario's largest city, anything short of a province-wide strike would be anti-climactic. The pink paper unions (who have dragged their feet through all the Days of Action) publicly denounced the Toronto demonstration's organizers for refusing to invite the NDP onto the platform, and for "alienating" the populace through excessive militancy. The CAW and the public-sector unions responded by calling for yet more city-wide shutdowns, specifying that the details should be determined in conjunction with their "social movement partners," i.e., the various community and single-issue groups representing many of the sectors targeted by the Tories. This move provided the "left" union leaders with a suitably progressive cover, while also permitting them to back away from responsibility for the success or failure of future events.

Failure came sooner than expected. Among the cities proposed was Sudbury, a strong union mining town in Northern Ontario, where the Tories are planning to close two hospitals. The Steel bureaucrats, who had not raised any objections when Sudbury was initially floated, waited until it was publicly announced, and then used their muscle in Sudbury to have the local labor council vote down the planned action. Steel's stab in the back was quickly followed by the surrender of the "progressive" unions.

The capitulation of big capital in the days leading up to the Toronto shutdown signaled that key sectors of the ruling class had begun to wonder if the benefits of Harris' "Revolution" were going to be worth the price. Those fears have been allayed by the display of cowardice, disarray and treachery by the union brass, and the Tories are once more on the offensive.

Leftists & the General Strike Demand

The ostensibly revolutionary left in Canada is small, but the massive mobilization of workers, and the sheer viciousness of the Tories, has presented an unusual opportunity for the “far left” to get a hearing for its ideas. Liberal newspaper columnist David Lewis Stein (a reformist cretin who as a youth reportedly had a brief flirtation with radical politics) is so worried about this prospect that, prior to both the Hamilton and Toronto actions, he was warning that “Trotskyites” turning up as “parasites” at the demonstrations might incite “violence” (*Toronto Star*, 24 February 1996 and 26 October 1996). Watching as hundreds of thousands of protesters marched past the Tory policy convention in Toronto, Harris commented that it was the work of “communists, Iraqis and Iranians”!

There was considerable openness to leftist literature and chants in Toronto. Slogans like “Hey, Mike, Hey Harris--We’ll Shut You Down Like Paris!” and “City by City is Way Too Slow—Let’s Shut Down Ontario!” originated by various left groups, were enthusiastically taken up by the crowd, and were even reported in the media. However, all attempts to organize effective opposition within the labor movement to the bureaucracy’s policy of inactivity have so far proven abortive. In part, this is because the organized left has little presence within the unions. But it also reflects the programmatic weaknesses of the various organizations purporting to offer a revolutionary alternative to the union leaders and the NDP.

For example, while the International Socialists (IS) correctly call for a province-wide general strike to drive Harris out of office, they couple this with a plea to “pressure union leaders to act” on this perspective (*Socialist Worker*, 19 October 1996). Their attitude toward the union brass is doubtless complicated by the delicate relationship between their leading union supporter, Carolyn Egan, and the USWA bureaucracy. In her 30 November 1996 column in *Socialist Worker*, referring to the Sudbury betrayal, Egan had no criticism of Steel’s role, and instead blamed “labor and community organizations” for not first “consulting” the (USWA-dominated) Sudbury labor council!

While the IS intervention provides an example of right opportunism, the response of the Trotskyist League of Canada (TL—local franchise of James Robertson’s Spartacist League/U.S.) is a caricature of sectarianism. Denouncing as “charlatans” all leftists who raise the general strike call in Ontario today, they compare the situation to the Italian workers’ struggle against the Berlusconi government in 1994:

“In Italy two years ago the union misleaders called a number of ‘days of action,’ but kept the working class straitjacketed within a parliamentary framework. The Italian capitalists let the right-wing Berlusconi government be swept away. The result? Today Italy has the ‘left-wing’ Ulivo (Olive Tree) government, which was elected with the union leaders’ fulsome support...and which is carrying out the same austerity policies as Berlusconi.”

—*Spartacist Canada*, Winter 1996/97

The lesson the TL draws from this is that a general

strike is useless unless it leads to a direct struggle for state power. And since a struggle for state power cannot succeed without a mass revolutionary party standing at the head of a section of the working masses, then unionists should stoically endure rightist attacks until the happy day arrives when the genuine communists (i.e., the TL) are finally handed leadership of the movement! Missing from this lifeless schematism is the fact that it is only through their experiences in struggle that the masses of workers will come to reject their existing leaderships and adopt a new, revolutionary alternative.

The *Spartacist Canada* article complains that our leaflet (printed below) nowhere “address[es] the key question: the need to politically defeat and replace the pro-capitalist misleaders in order to achieve a workers’ victory.” Anyone who can read can see that the concluding paragraph does in fact call for a new workers’ leadership with “revolutionary socialist” politics. But regardless of the TL’s careless (or deliberately dishonest) characterization of our position, the key issue is their apparent failure to grasp that the *only* way for communists to “politically defeat and replace” the bureaucrats is by intervening in the actual class struggle to broaden and generalize it.

The masses want a general strike. The bureaucrats are afraid to initiate one. In this circumstance, the call for a general strike can both expose the bureaucrats’ cowardice and demonstrate to militant workers (who may even be anti-communist) that, at least on this one question, the communists are right against their existing leaders. This is the only way that revolutionaries *can* begin the struggle to “politically defeat and replace” the misleaders. But it seems that *Spartacist Canada* imagines that leadership can be wrested from the reformists through sheer denunciation.

The objection that a victorious general strike against Harris would only lead to another pro-capitalist government is equally bizarre. Outside of the unlikely scenario of the explosive growth of a mass revolutionary party that was able to take power, it is indeed likely that a general strike that brought down the Harris government would be followed by new elections, and an NDP, Liberal or some sort of coalition government. But winning such a powerful defensive victory through mass action would alter the entire political landscape, shift the axis of labor politics decisively to the left, and make it easier to win future struggles.

Spartacist Canada criticizes our observation that if the Tories were brought down through mass strike action, a subsequent government would be more cautious in attacking the gains of working people. If this were not true, the working class would never have won a single significant reform. Can anyone imagine that a massive explosion of working-class struggle that successfully unhorsed the most vicious government for 50 years, would not profoundly affect the framework of political life? Although *Spartacist Canada* does not make this explicit, perhaps the TL is really worried about the “danger” that winning a limited defensive victory might create reformist illusions. They need have no fear on that score, for

the whole history of the socialist movement demonstrates that revolutionary sentiments grow much more quickly during times of mass struggles and partial victories than in periods of demoralization and defeat.

Reprinted below is the complete text of the IBT leaflet "For a 'Common Sense' General Strike!", distributed at the Toronto "Days of Action":

Metro's Days of Action, October 25 and 26, promise to be the biggest political mobilization in Ontario in living memory. Hundreds of thousands of people will be hitting the streets to protest the Tory government's attacks on unions, poor people and social programs.

The Tories' first victims were welfare recipients, whose social assistance payments were cut 22 percent a few months after Mike Harris came to power. Half a million kids in Ontario have less to eat as a result. Daycare workers, who average a paltry \$19,000 a year, are currently threatened with a 25 percent wage cut. Thousands of nurses and other hospital workers have already been laid off, as the government slashed healthcare by \$1.5 billion (despite election promises not to touch it). The Tories have chopped \$800 million from education and are announcing plans to cut another \$1 billion this year. Every social service agency has had its grants cut—including services to the disabled, children's aid, job training and battered women's shelters. Non-profit housing projects have been cancelled and rent controls gutted. Now the Tories are talking about introducing user fees in public schools and libraries, and giving rebates to rich people who send their kids to private schools.

The social service cuts and user fees are being pushed through to fund a tax cut that will disproportionately benefit the rich. (Two-thirds of the savings will go to those whose income is in the top 10 percent). Meanwhile the Harris government is proceeding to "get the government off the back" of the corporate sector by hacking health and safety regulations, lowering employment standards and loosening environmental protection. The projected privatization of Hydro and the LCBO, which generate substantial operating surpluses every year, are eagerly anticipated by Bay Street speculators, as is a Tory plan to privatize the provision of water to consumers. Like the new Highway 407, this would be a "joint" project: the public will put up the money and assume responsibility for the debt while private investors run the operation and reap the profits.

Harris' "Common Sense Revolution" is a blueprint for moving toward a rigidly stratified society, with a tiny elite on top; a layer of relatively secure professionals, entrepreneurs, managers and skilled technicians in the middle; and, at the bottom, a huge mass of desperately poor people without access to decent jobs, housing, education, medical care or hope.

Labor Must Defend the Poor: 'An Injury to One is an Injury to All!'

The near-totalitarian regulation of the lives of Ontario's welfare recipients under Harris is providing a testing ground for authoritarian measures to use against

the broader population in the future. The NDP's scandalous campaign against "welfare fraud," and the opening of "snitch lines" for citizens to inform on their neighbors, has paved the way for Harris to introduce a single "universal ID card" and computerized fingerprint records for welfare recipients. In another example of the Harris government's partnership with big business, the Royal Bank, Canada's largest gang of financial pirates, is signing on to administer this sinister program.

The other prong in the Tories' attack on welfare recipients is the introduction of "workfare." This will cost a lot to administer, but Harris is willing to pay the price because he expects to use this slave labor force to displace unionized public-sector jobs and drive down the price of labor generally.

By attacking on all fronts at once, rather than eroding social gains through attrition like his predecessors, Harris has taken a risk: he knows that labor has the power to stop him, but he hopes that the suddenness and ferocity of these attacks will confuse and demoralize his victims.

The high degree of participation in the previous "days of action" demonstrates that there are a lot of rank-and-file unionists, unemployed workers, students, immigrants and members of oppressed minorities who understand what is at stake and are prepared to struggle. Yet the labor leadership has so far been extremely conservative in its response.

It's Time to Raise the Stakes

The Metro action promises to be the biggest "Day of Action" so far, but a week ago the *Globe and Mail* (19 October) reported that the Tories were already sneering that, "the government will not be swayed by protests, no matter how large or effective." That underlines the necessity of raising the level of struggle. Timid legalism and moral witness will not get results. But Harris *can* be beaten.

Last December, as workers in London were carrying out the first "day of action," French workers were engaged in a powerful mobilization that paralyzed the country for three weeks. The French government, which had tried to push through its own package of cuts in social programs, was ultimately forced to retreat, at least temporarily. The French union leadership let the government off the hook and permitted them to try again, but the lesson is clear: *mass militant resistance can defeat austerity attacks!*

This is not lost on the big capitalists, some of whom are becoming a bit nervous about the scope of the union mobilizations. Last Saturday's *Globe and Mail* fretted:

"Trying to close down a city, almost unheard of in English-speaking Canada, is more usual in countries where politically motivated job actions are almost a way of life. "Until now, most Canadians have typically channelled their protests through the ballot box, rather than through extraparliamentary opposition."

Most of Harris' victims know that if we wait until the next election, it will be too late. The answer to a generalized capitalist attack is a generalized response: *i.e., a general strike to defend social programs*. The organized

working class, particularly those concentrated in transport, mining, manufacturing and other key sectors, has the power to smash the Harris offensive. But we cannot expect the professional “labor statesmen” to run an effective general strike. Instead it should be organized and controlled by democratically elected strike committees in every workplace coordinated through delegated regional and provincial assemblies.

Some self-proclaimed Marxists, like the International Socialists, call for a general strike but treat it as essentially a matter of pressuring the union leadership to lead one. This ignores the fact that the union brass is a privileged layer of careerists whose interests and concerns are far removed from the workers they supposedly represent. Weaned on compromise and concessions, they have no appetite for the kind of fight necessary to defeat the Tory agenda. Another ostensibly Marxist group, the Trotskyist League (TL), makes the opposite error and argues *against* calling for a general strike on the grounds that doing so could promote illusions in the bureaucrats! Instead they modestly counterpose a call to build a “revolutionary workers party,” i.e., themselves.

For a ‘Common Sense’ General Strike!

The union officials have initiated the “days of action” both to pressure the Tories and let their members blow off steam. In general they are a cowardly lot who instruct their base that any and all court injunctions must be obeyed. But in times like this, playing by the bosses’ rules is suicidal. No important gain for labor was ever won in parliament or the courts. Every significant legal right, every real social reform has come as the result of *hard class struggle*. The 300 CAW members who got GM’s attention last week by seizing their plant in Oshawa provided a graphic example of the kind of tactics we are going to have to use to beat Harris. Because if the Tory juggernaut is allowed to roll on much further we may soon be facing a capitalist assault on the very existence of the unions.

For years the union leadership has counselled participation in the parliamentary shell game. But when the NDP finally took over the government benches at Queen’s Park in 1990, Bob Rae spent all his time trying to please Bay Street by attacking welfare recipients, cutting social services and finally imposing the infamous “Social Contract.” With this legislation the social democrats ripped open union contracts and imposed wage cuts in an unprecedented attack on collective bargaining. The failure of the public-sector union leaderships to offer serious resistance to this assault demoralized union militants, emboldened labor’s enemies and paved the

way for Harris.

The union brass hope that if they can just hang on until the next election, they may get a government they can lunch with again. Yet both the Liberals and the NDP accept the “necessity” of rationalizing capitalism through austerity, privatization and deregulation: their differences are not so much over the direction but rather the speed with which Harris is moving, as well as the tactical wisdom of his inflammatory rhetoric. The Tory “reforms” will form part of the status quo inherited by the next administration. Without significant popular unrest, any new Liberal, NDP or coalition government would probably leave them in place, as Chrétien did with Mulroney’s GST. If, on the other hand, Harris is brought down through mass strike action, the government that replaces him will have to be a lot more cautious.

An aggressive campaign by organized labor can mobilize millions in an escalating series of actions, culminating in a general strike to smash the Tory offensive and bring down the Harris government. Such a struggle would reinvigorate the workers’ movement across Canada and set a powerful example for our union brothers and sisters south of the border, who face similar attacks by their rulers.

The situation faced by Ontario workers is not unique. It is one front in a global struggle between capital and labor over the shape of the future. Working people will only finally escape the irrationalities of a competitive, market-driven system through creating a social order in which human need, not profit, determines what gets produced. This requires a leadership for the working class that is armed with a different *political* vision than that of the reformist union bureaucracy and its discredited parliamentary allies in the NDP. We in the International Bolshevik Tendency are committed to the long and difficult struggle to forge such a leadership—a revolutionary socialist party capable of leading a successful struggle to uproot the existing social order, expropriate the exploiters and reconstruct society on an egalitarian, socialist basis.

- ***For a General Strike to Defeat the Tory Offensive!***
- ***Reverse the Cuts—Defend and Extend Social Programs!***
- ***Jobs and Decent Housing for All!***
- ***End Unemployment—30 Hours Work for 40 Hours Pay!***
- ***Expropriate the Exploiters—Forward to a Workers’ Government!***