

“TORONTO UNDER MAYOR FORD”

Thursday, November 4, 2010

The stunning victory of millionaire councillor Rob Ford in the race for Mayor of Toronto has massive implications for working people in Canada's largest city. His simple, focused message hit home with many union members, low-income workers, newcomers, and tenants. But it is important to note that numbers on City Council itself did not shift dramatically. Ford does not have a clear majority government, and will have to recruit centrist councillors to implement his plans. The early battlegrounds will be transit, garbage, and the Fair Wage Policy, but there will be difficult struggles in many other areas.

How does the labour movement respond to this new situation? Firstly we need to recognize the extent of the danger, and forge a strong united resistance that goes beyond city workers to engage all of our affiliates. That means building the capacity for both defensive actions and proactive initiatives that challenge the legitimacy of the conservative agenda. It will require a strong collective effort, where resources are focused and a disciplined approach is embraced by our leadership. We need to improve our ability to communicate to union members, community activists and the public about key issues and the values that we share. We must improve the outreach to workers of colour within our affiliates and in their communities, and to retirees and seniors, whose influence in elections is rapidly growing.

Secondly, labour must continue to strengthen its alliances with others in civil society – students, environmentalists, anti-poverty, social justice and equity activists. We have built strong relationships through the Good Jobs for All coalition, and more recently the Public Transit Coalition and OneToronto. In the budget fights, we must continue our support for investment in social programs and a healthy, diverse city.

We should critically examine how to strengthen our relations with Councillors and Trustees to defend important programs and policies at the city and school boards. During the Lastman regime, skilful work by leading New Democrats blunted many of his attempts to privatize and outsource. Similarly, progressive trustees played a crucial role in resisting the harmful education policies of the Harris years.

Thirdly, we have to connect this fight with the struggle for decent jobs in the private sector. Outsourcing cleaners means giving the work to contractors who pay poverty wages. Abolishing the Fair Wage policy means that companies like Metron Construction will have access to city work even when their lack of safety causes injury or death. Keeping a local content policy, on the other hand, supports manufacturing jobs instead of shipping tax dollars overseas. The city has been one of the few jurisdictions whose policies stood in the way of the thrust of corporate globalization, and we cannot let that go without a fight.

Toronto is also on the cusp of developing the next green economy. It would be tragic to lose that important opportunity due to ignorance or a narrow view of the role of municipal government. We have been developing an integrated approach to tackling the crises of jobs, equity and the environment together. That work needs to expand rather than diminish.

And finally, it is important to point out that the fiscal straightjacket of municipal financing will continue to be a major problem no matter how many politicians and lobbyists suggest otherwise. The provincial downloading and the refusal of Queen's Park and Ottawa to pay a fair share of transit costs create a never ending crisis for Canada's largest urban centre. Right wing politicians try to use that crisis as the excuse for privatization and attacking employees. We need to point instead to the massive corporate tax cuts costing billions in revenue to both senior levels of government, at the same time that they claim there is no money for our cities or improved public services.

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