

“WISCONSIN - OHIO - ONTARIO”

Thursday, June 2, 2011

Earlier this year, Toronto Mayor Rob Ford mused about challenging Premier Dalton McGuinty by bringing out the “Ford Nation” in the upcoming provincial election. In the recent federal election, Ford explicitly endorsed Stephen Harper and a number of Conservative candidates, adding to the Tory momentum that picked up eight seats in Toronto. Looking forward to the provincial election, it’s clear that greater Toronto will be the major battleground that decides who will sit in the Premier’s chair after October 6th. The credibility of Ford’s politics will be a key factor, including with union members who voted for him last year.

South of the border, the unprecedented assault on workers’ rights was unleashed with the election of a slew of Republican State Governors and their immediate, concerted effort to gut union standards across the entire public sector, and in many states hitting the private sector as well. The news coverage of the valiant struggle in Wisconsin caught people’s attention, and inspired a whole new generation to get involved. Recall votes have been set for some of the Republican politicians, a “citizen veto” process has been undertaken in Ohio, and a judge in Wisconsin has just recently ruled that the anti-union legislation was passed illegally there.

But in Wisconsin, public workers have agreed to massive concessions to their contracts. In other states, these have simply been imposed. Huge cuts are stripping entire programs away, while in Ohio billions are being moved from public education to private charter schools – along with a law to prevent charter school employees from joining any union. In Florida, the right-to-work law is amended so that if union membership drops below 50% in any workplace, the entire union is automatically decertified.

There is no doubt that if the Conservatives were to take Queen’s Park, the anti-union offensive would follow in short order. Tim Hudak is promising to restrict unions’ ability to fund political or social justice campaigns, as well as to take card-check away from construction workers. Harper’s key power brokers are outlining massive cuts to the federal public service, and have postal workers in their sights. The Fords are promising to outsource anything not nailed down, while abolishing the Fair Wage policy. Together with the Liberals at Queen’s Park, they have already stripped transit workers of the right to strike.

How does labour respond to this dangerous situation? We start by challenging the legitimacy of the conservative agenda with its reckless tax cuts, purposely creating the budget crisis that becomes the excuse for the attacks. We engage our members in a dialogue about how much harder it will be to bargain decent collective agreements in a right-wing climate. We partner with community activists to defend public services and neighbourhood programs. And we fight hard for democratic process and accountability from every level of government.

Ford's grip on City Hall is already loosening as Councillors start paying more attention to the views of their constituents than the crude demands of Ford's team leaders. It will soon be obvious that his promise of "no service cuts, guaranteed" won't be kept as he reduces public revenue and squanders millions in transit line cancellation costs. The Service Review exercise is a bogus attempt to provide cover for cutting programs, but that won't fly with the public once the impact is apparent. Time will show the basic truth of right-wing populism – services are cut, deficits balloon, and the rich get richer at everyone else's expense.

The burning question is this – how to expose this agenda before it carries over into the provincial election? Some unions are going out to have this explicit conversation with their members, this needs to be expanded everywhere. Coalitions such as OneToronto are tackling the legitimacy of the Services Review and its outcome. TTCRiders are mobilizing to demand improved transit, while the newly strengthened Toronto Women's City Alliance is forcing the equity issue onto the city's agenda. We set the stage with the inspiring mass rally on April 9th in defence of public services, but that needs to translate into work that engages our members both at work and in their community.

We can learn from what is happening south of the border, and move to a new state of readiness to meet the challenges ahead. Experience teaches us that we are strongest when working together, and with our community allies, advocating for fairness for everyone in our society. We have a few crucial months before the provincial election to turn that into reality.

The Executive Board recommends that Labour Council:

1. Urge every affiliate to support the ongoing struggle to defend public services, particularly at the City of Toronto, and explore ways of explain the true nature of the Ford regime to their members in the coming months.
2. Urge every affiliate to engage their members in a comprehensive discussion about the conservative political agenda as it relates to the ability of their union to defend their working conditions and living standards.
3. Continue to work in coalitions supporting good jobs and social justice, strong public services, and accountability of elected decision-makers.
4. Mobilize strike support for CUPW in its efforts to secure a fair collective agreement.