

MUNICIPAL ELECTION REPORT

The 2014 Toronto municipal elections resulted in the largest voter turnout in memory. Over 60% of eligible voters cast their ballot, a big jump from the 2010 record and far higher than the previous norm of less than 40%. All eyes were on the Mayoralty election. It was a roller-coaster ride right up to Election Day – with Doug Ford taking a third of all votes cast, compared to 23% for Olivia Chow and 40% for John Tory.

John Tory will lead a City Council with roughly the same even split between left, centre and right as all progressive incumbents were re-elected. The one incumbent defeat and the new faces on council replacing retiring right-wingers essentially maintain the status quo.

One major disappointment was the failure to elect Alejandra Bravo in Ward 17. Another was the lack of improvement in bringing more diversity to the Council, despite significant efforts by the labour movement and others to elect a number of strong candidates of colour. There was a disturbing display of racism, sexism, homophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment at various points in the campaign.

The Toronto District School Board did see many new progressive Trustees elected, adding up to a majority who are pledged to fight for the kinds of schools our students and communities need to succeed. There was an important breakthrough on diverse representation with the election of Ausma Malik, Manna Wong and Parthi Kandavel. Only the two incumbents among labour-endorsed Catholic School Trustees were successful in Toronto, while in York Region all four were re-elected.

In York Region, Labour Council endorsed more municipal candidates than ever before, thanks largely to new initiatives by CUPE 905. The results were mixed, but highlighted by the election of CUPE 905 leader Dave Neeson, replacing Brother Dave Szollosy on Georgina Town Council.

Many affiliates devoted immense resources to supporting progressive candidates at all levels. Even affiliates with no direct relationship to city or school board jobs did amazing work in recruiting volunteers, educating members and getting out the vote. The training provided by Labour Council started a year in advance and gave many activists the skills and inspiration to get more involved this time. The campaign website OurCityMatters.ca provided information and links to keep people informed on the issues and new developments.

However, our attempt to transfer a “new normal” of membership engagement from the anti-Hudak fight to the municipal scene was not as successful. For most unions, the urgency in defending basic union rights in the provincial election did not carry over to the issues at city or school board level. For unions directly impacted, like CUPE and ATU, however, the threat of contracting out and privatization is very real.

The first big fight will be over contracting out waste collection east of Yonge Street. This cannot just be a CUPE fight – every union must see the firing of 500 union members as a challenge to our entire movement. Other forms of contracting out must also be fought at every turn. Labour Council will work closely with municipal unions to co-ordinate this crucial struggle.

Our efforts are not limited to jobs. We must also address the crisis of growing poverty and racialization of poverty, youth unemployment, affordable housing, and the fight for a transit system and community services that serve everyone. These are the issues that have created the hardship and anxiety felt by many Torontonians. This is the fertile ground that Ford Nation has grown in, and we ignore that reality at our peril.

At the School Board level, the relentless pressure to sell off assets, close schools and reduce staff must be resisted. While a new majority of progressive Trustees at TDSB will have a central role, the work cannot be left to them alone. Education affiliates will be focusing on provincial funding policies as the root cause of education problems. They are also in the midst of bargaining for new contracts this fall.

Thanks go out to everyone who put themselves forward as progressive candidates in these gruelling electoral races. Thanks also to every labour volunteer and campaign worker who put in hours of time assisting these candidates across the region. We did whatever we could in a complex and difficult election. Now we continue fighting the good fight over the next four years for the kind of City and Region we want.