

## “BUILDING RESISTANCE TO AUSTERITY”

Thursday, October 4, 2012

How should labour respond to the austerity offensive of the McGuinty government? His approach is encouraged by corporate Canada, lauded by the mainstream media, and enabled by the opposition Conservatives. Bills 55 and 115 will no doubt be taken to the courts, but in the court of public opinion teachers and other public sector workers have been painted as a comfortable special interest group that refuses to help out – even while the government remains committed to expanding public education.

At a time when private sector workers are seeing cuts to pensions or benefits and enduring two-tier wages, the political right is whipping up the politics of envy against every public sector worker. The challenge for the labour movement is to resist austerity while winning the moral high ground. Essentially, we have to restate the message of the Occupy movement – this is about growing inequality and 99% of humanity vs. the rule of the 1%.

What does our movement’s stance look like? It needs to speak to three things:

The feeling of many Ontarians that they are falling behind in this economy and *something should be done about that*. Right now the *something* has been defined by our opponents as union members, in both public and private sector, sacrificing some of their “privilege”. That needs to change.

The fact that the austerity agenda is not about fairness, but about an aggressive grab of money and power by the wealthy elites.

Labour establishing itself as a champion of low-wage workers, immigrants and poor communities – as a counterpoint to being seen as a privileged group with good jobs protecting the status quo.

Instead of fighting on the terrain chosen by the political right, we should be challenging McGuinty to actually tackle the real problems on people’s minds. Being proactive around economic justice is the key element to attaining the high moral ground. Speaking out for the majority is not just a tactical consideration. Our movement is committed to the well-being of all working people, organized and unorganized. This commitment is the basis of the future growth and vitality of organized labour. And it is a basic requirement for deepening our alliances with youth and immigrant communities across Ontario.

We need to shine the light on the corporate tax cuts that have bloated the deficit by billions of dollars. Our common demands could include raising the Minimum Wage so fewer of our neighbours are working in poverty; cracking down on companies using temp agencies to deprive people of stable jobs; stopping job cuts and privatization of services; and ending legislated interference in free collective bargaining. Labour needs to frame a powerful message to take to the public and our own members as soon as possible.

The attacks we face cannot be met effectively by individual unions or locals. In addition to developing our broader message to all working people, we face the challenge of building a much more powerful labour movement. We will build active resistance efforts in workplaces and in the political sphere, and those efforts will be much more effective when they are framed by a relentless demand for social justice for all working people.