

RESPECT and SOLIDARITY

Transit Workers, Dignity, and the Politics of Privatization

Thursday, March 4, 2010

Toronto's transit workers are just the latest victim. Last year autoworkers bore the brunt of media ridicule and contempt. Then municipal workers – specifically those who collect our garbage – felt the rage whipped up daily by columnists and talk radio hosts. At one time it was teachers, the favourite target of the common sense revolution. Even nurses were belittled and told they were disposable, just like the skilled trades during a construction downturn.

Although the focus is often on public sector workers, the attacks aren't just about them. Today, miners in Sudbury and steelworkers in Nanticoke are locked in bitter strikes to defend pensions and benefits, while relentless outsourcing undermines the jobs of manufacturing and knowledge workers in the private sector.

Let's be clear. This is about a political agenda. Most of the corporate elites in this country are determined to impose a new reality for the 21st century. Anyone who has a strong collective agreement, decent wages, and good benefits will be under the gun. And more specifically, public assets and services are being targeted.

There is a classic strategy of setting up public assets for privatization. First, starve the system of funds needed to maintain and update the operation. Then, denigrate those involved in delivering the service. And finally, assert that only private sector "efficiency" can cure the problem. There is a specific end game to it all. Billions of dollars in profit can be realized from transit, healthcare or hydro if corporate players can claim a big enough piece of the action.

And so, the bus driver taking a washroom break finds his picture on the front pages – one more image to fuel the frenzy of worker-bashing. Demeaning workers doesn't improve service or make the system better – that takes good organization and proper funding. Nobody deserves to be ridiculed and pronounced guilty without the opportunity to defend themselves. It's time to raise our voices and challenge this noxious stream of disrespect for working people.

We also must say clearly that our public services can be improved, and management bureaucracies re-invented to make way for creativity and empowerment of front-line workers. In the process we need to demand respect for every person who serves the public, and contributes to the quality of life the rest of us often take for granted.

Past generations exercised a profound level of social solidarity by investing their taxes in physical infrastructure, a wide array of social programs, and strong public services. In the face of intense pressure by business and media to turn our backs on each other during these difficult times, our answer is “No!” The labour movement will stand united to re-assert the spirit of solidarity and determination that has been so important to working people throughout history. That is truly the foundation of a decent and just society for the future.

The Executive Recommends:

That the Labour Council, affiliates and all union activists undertake a vigorous defence of the right of transit workers to have a harassment-free workplace, and to be respected for their skills and dedication to moving over one and a half million people per day in Canada’s largest urban centre.

That Labour Council demand that the Premier, David Caplan, and all other provincial politicians desist from attacking or belittling the fundamental right of transit workers to withdraw their labour.

That Labour Council call a Public Sector Leadership Summit to bring together front-line leaders from all levels of the public sector to shape a common response to the growing attack on public services, the threats of outsourcing and privatization, and the attack on workers rights and standards.