

“TRANSIT FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD”

January 2012

The ongoing labour dispute with the private contractors charged with delivering transit service to residents of York Region continues. It is clear that the private operators have no incentive to settle the strike, and that York Region Council is satisfied to see thousands of residents denied transit service.

And yet, the contractors have not moved in any significant way from their “final offer” that led to the strike – one that continues to underpay transit workers some \$7/hour below all other jurisdictions in the GTA. This is certainly a recipe for ongoing problems. No York Region politician would consider paying police or firefighters a dramatically lower salary – why is it acceptable for transit workers?

Over many decades, York Region and each of its municipalities have successfully bargained collective agreements with their own employees without a single strike. So why is this so hard to settle? There is one simple reason – the presence of private operators that are huge multinational companies answerable to CEO’s outside of Canada. Their profit margin comes first – far ahead of the interests of the people of York Region.

It is time to remove these middlemen that have no concern for the people of this region, and create a truly public transit system. One that is accountable to the public, and run in the interests solely of the public. One where everyone can see that every public dollar goes to improved service, not some profit line reported in another country. York Region Council should do the right thing – cancel the contracts with private operators, and set up a truly public system for Canada’s most dynamic growing region.

The problems with privatized transit are not simply a York Region issue. Recent reports suggest that the provincial transit agency Metrolinx is considering a public private partnership (P3) to build and run the new Eglinton LRT line. The arrival of European construction giants bidding on hospital and transit projects may well be a factor, but the embracing of P3 contracts by the Liberal government has increased in recent years. In fact, recent studies show that after the collapse of the global financial markets a number of corporations have focused on taking over public services and infrastructure to expand their profit margins.

During the last municipal election, the Public Transit Coalition featured ads warning of the danger of privatization. There needs to be a determined effort to stop any attempt to privatize Toronto’s transit system. Highlighting the experience of York Region transit riders will be an important aspect of this fight in the future. The only real way to guarantee that transit is fully accessible and accountable is to make sure it is kept completely in public hands.