

JUSTICE AND DIGNITY FOR CLEANERS

Good jobs, strong communities

The fight to defend the jobs of nearly a thousand cleaners at the City of Toronto in 2011-12 pitted the city's labour movement against Mayor Rob Ford and his City Council majority. The campaign won against all odds by claiming the moral high ground and shifting the debate to focus on the impact of poverty jobs in society. It became a powerful effort that integrated the key principles of campaign planning.

Under the auspices of the Good Jobs for All coalition, city cleaners were joined by private sector cleaners to challenge the fundamental disrespect for their work. Labour Council and CUPE Locals mobilized union members and highlighted the voices of front-line members; academics provided critical analysis on the social impact of poverty wages; community allies stepped up help spread the message across neighbourhoods; and City Councillors developed tactics that derailed the momentum of Ford's outsourcing initiatives.

It took a hard-fought campaign supported by key community allies to ensure that the work of City of Toronto cleaners was protected for years to come.



In November 2010 Rob Ford was elected as Mayor of Toronto riding a wave of populist discontent captured by the slogan “Stop the Gravy Train”. Ford had been a maverick right-wing Councillor from Etobicoke North, where his father had been a Conservative Member of Provincial Parliament during the Mike Harris years. He became infamous for his anti-establishment tirades at City Hall, and for an obsession with dealing personally with constituent’s problems. When David Miller decided not to run for a third term after the contentious city worker’s strike in 2009, Ford swept past the other contenders to win the mayoralty, and his brother Doug took Rob’s Council seat in north Etobicoke.

The stage had been set for Ford by the turmoil created by the 2008 financial collapse, as business determined to use the crisis to impose austerity and reduce social spending. At the national level, Stephen Harper drove an austerity agenda through federal policies and at the G20 Summit in July, while the Toronto Board of Trade ramped up a media campaign with the theme “Toronto has a spending problem!” in the months leading to the city election. Future Mayor John Tory used his talk radio program to amplify the message that the progressives at City Hall were wasting the taxpayer’s money. South of the border, the Tea Party was transforming politics while Republican governors launched wholesale attacks on unions.

Once elected, Ford acted immediately. Solid waste collection was privatized west of Yonge Street, budgets were cut for everyone except police, and Toronto Community Housing directors were sacked. Ford hired KPMG to undertake a “Core Services Review”, and by the summer of

2011 he turned his sights on city cleaners. The first opportunity for outsourcing was for cleaning services provided to the Toronto Police Services. Just over one hundred positions were involved – CUPE Local 79 and 416 members who cleaned police facilities including jail cells. In June Ford advised the unions of the intention put this work out to tender.

As this was unfolding, Toronto’s labour movement was trying to mobilize against Ford’s agenda. The Labour Council convened a network of social justice groups under the umbrella of Respect Toronto, and carried out a series of actions on the streets and at City Hall. Public opinion was in flux, but right-wing populism had found a base in “Ford Nation” and Ford had a majority at City Hall. The bitterness over the 2009 strike meant there was little sympathy for the public sector, or the CUPE locals.



Respect Toronto rally

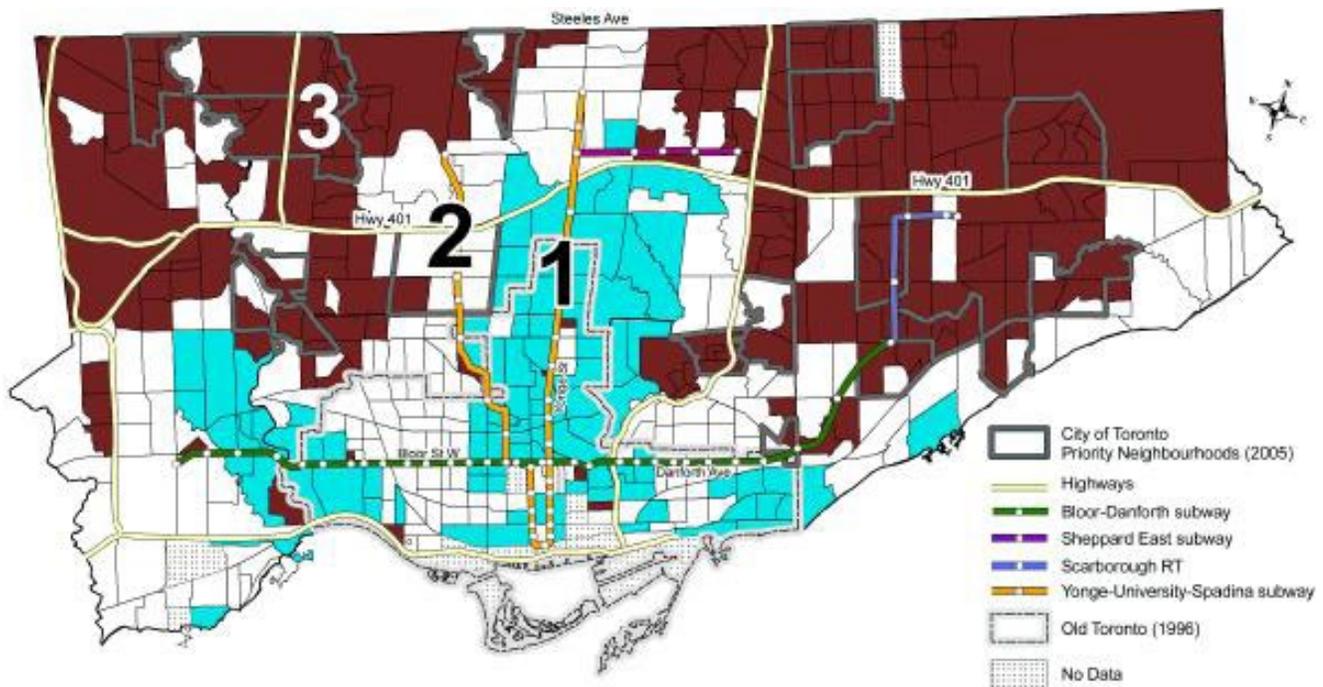
But another dynamic was also playing out – the Occupy Wall Street movement framed the global struggle in terms of the wealthiest 1% vs the rest

of humanity. Corporate greed and economic injustice became topics of everyday discussion as similar occupations were set up in global cities, including Toronto. Professor David Hulchanski of the University of Toronto had published a widely-

read report describing the dramatic change of income levels in city neighbourhoods. His map of Three Cities became a reference point on poverty issues for policy-makers and activists alike.

The Three Cities Within Toronto

Change in Average Individual Income as a Percentage of the Toronto CMA Average, 1970-2005



City #1 Increase of 20% or More

City #2 Increase or Decrease is Less than 20%

City #3 Decrease of 20% or More

FRONTLINE ORGANIZING

In the previous decade, one of the most inspiring examples of labour organizing came out of Los Angeles. The Justice for Janitors campaign led by the Service Employees International Union combined militant tactics, sophisticated corporate pressure strategies, and a determination of immigrant families to realize the American dream. Thousands of cleaners were organized in the effort to raise standards across the entire contract cleaning industry, and the spirit of their movement was brilliantly portrayed in the Ken Loach movie *Bread and Roses*. SEIU represented a number of cleaning contractors in greater Toronto, and in 2007 had created a Justice for Janitors campaign here.



SEIU Toronto Cleaners

A similar effort had been pursued by the union in the hospitality sector, UNITEHERE. Its continent-wide Hotel Workers Rising campaign had been launched in Toronto in 2006, to confront the giant hotel companies with a demand to lift working people out of poverty. Those doing the hardest work were room attendants, cleaning 17 or 18 rooms each day. And in most places, they

were mostly immigrant women. The concept of Immigrant Workers Rising was being infused into the labour movement's culture, and became an essential part of the narrative that led to the city cleaner's victory.

The Canadian Union of Public Employees had led many campaigns to improve public services and fight outsourcing. It had created a comprehensive program focused on a progressive urban agenda, the value of cities, and the need to resource frontline services. CUPE locals were part of the Good Jobs for All coalition of dozens of unions and community groups, founded at a 2008 Summit with a thousand participants.

PLANNING THE FIGHTBACK

In July 2011 the Labour Council convened a meeting of key groups to start planning the fight. The timeframe was short, as the City's Government and Management Committee was set to meet at the end of the month. But labour had built an extensive infrastructure of solidarity through previous campaigns, and there was a strong level of trust at both the organization and personal level within the broad progressive movement. The decision of those attending was to set up a working group immediately and launch ***Justice and Dignity for Cleaners***.

Labour Council had taken on two key staff who would be foundational in this effort. Preethy Sivakumar had helped organize Woodbine Casino workers into the Public Service Alliance of Canada before being hired as an organizer with the Labour Council. She served as the co-ordinator of the Good Jobs for All coalition. Rob Fairley came on as Director of Strategic Services, after a long career

of ground-breaking campaigns in his own union CUPE and for education unions. His disciplined methodology would provide the framework for the work ahead.

But the most powerful stars in this fight would be cleaners themselves. Here is how the Toronto Star reported the deputations on July 25th:

Two City of Toronto employees whose job is to clean cells at police stations gave city councillors an eye-opener on what the job entails.

“I clean HIV blood off the walls, I clean feces off the walls,” said Trish O’Brien. “I clean bedbugs. I clean scabies. Are you going to get somebody to do that for \$10.25 an hour?”

O’Brien, 34, and co-worker Christopher Idrovo, 30, appeared before council’s government management committee which is reviewing consultant suggestions to save money, including contracting out police station cleaning.

In August, the campaign profiled Nezrene Edwards:

Preparing the Launch

During the remainder of the summer, the campaign team met and prepared for a public launch. The team was drawn from the unions, Labour Council and community, operating under the banner of the Good Jobs for All coalition. It’s power analysis helped focus some of the tactics designed to move City Councillors to oppose the Mayor’s outsourcing plans. Council was split fairly evenly into left, centre and right, but Ford had most of the centrist Councillors under his control.

The goals were identified:

- Protect cleaners’ jobs
- Establish accountability at City Council for decisions about possible job cuts
- Create awareness about the human impact of contracting out good jobs by telling the stories of cleaners whose work is usually not visible
- Create awareness about the overall social and economic impact on our city
- Recruit more cleaners and allies to be prepared for future fights against job cuts



NEZRENE EDWARDS

“For 20 years, I have been a Toronto housing cleaner. The residents here know me and I know my work makes a difference for them. Every morning, I come in and clean the grounds, the buildings, compact the garbage, hose the floor to clear maggots and bugs. It’s not pretty, and I am responsible for work that many people would just find really difficult to do. We get shots to prevent things like hepatitis because there is a real risk of getting sick. People need to understand that just because we pick up dirt doesn’t mean we should be treated like dirt. We deserve to be treated with dignity.”

யோகேஸ்வரன் விக்னேஸ்வரமூர்த்தி:



12 வருடங்களுக்கு முன்னர் நான் கனடாவுக்கு வந்து, எனது குடும்பத்தைப் பேணுவதற்காகக் கடுமையாக வேலை செய்தேன். எனது தேவைகளைப்

பூர்த்திசெய்ய, ஏனைய தமிழர்களைப் போன்று இரண்டு வேலைகள் செய்தேன். ஒப்பந்த அடிப்படையிலான வெளியிடத் துப்பரவுப் பணியாளர் வேலை அவற்றில் ஒன்றாகும். நான், ஏனைய துப்பரவுப் பணியாளர்களுடன் சேர்ந்து, எங்களது நிலைப்பாடுகளை மேன்மைப்படுத்தவும், நகர சுத்திகரிப்பாளர்களின் நியாயமான சம்பளம், நிலைப்பாடுகள் ஆகியவற்றைப்போல் நாங்களும் அவற்றைப் பெற்றுக்கொள்ளவும் போராடுகின்றோம். நகர், இவ்வேலைகளைக் குறைப்பதோடு, இவற்றை ஒப்பந்த அடிப்படையில் வெளியாருக்குக் கொடுப்பதன் மூலம், அப்பணியாளர்களை வருத்துவதுமட்டுமன்றி, நானும் மற்றைய தமிழ் துப்பரவுப் பணியாளர்களும் நல்ல சம்பளத்தையும் ஊதிய நன்மைகளையும் பெறுவதில் கஷ்டமான காலத்தை எதிர்நோக்குவோம் என்பதை உறுதிப்படுத்தப்படுகின்றது. நல்ல வேலைகளை இழப்பதை எங்களது சமூகம் இனியும் தாங்கிக்கொள்ளாது.

The Task List for the steering committee laid out a number of key aspects of the work. Material was translated into Spanish, Portuguese and Tamil – the communities from which many contract cleaners were drawn. A media strategy was developed, highlighting the voices of cleaner and community allies, and cleaners from diverse backgrounds who would be the public spokespeople were given training. Flyers were distributed at public events, including farmer’s markets and the Arts Fair. Good Jobs for All coalition co-chair, Winnie Ng, helped to bring cleaners to meet with City Councillors. The work of sympathetic economists and academics would be utilized, and a special message to union members would be distilled and widely distributed across the labour movement.

But none of this was happening in a vacuum. NDP Leader Jack Layton died in August after

a tough fight with cancer, and Nathan Phillips Square became a virtual shrine, bedecked by art and messages of affection. On September 7th, the Ontario election was called, and provincial political campaigns went into high gear for 29 days. The labour movement was stretched thin with many other fights.

Ford had control of the Police Services Board and the City Committees, but there was one body where progressives had a strong presence – the Community Development and Recreation Committee (CDRC). It was scheduled to have public hearings in Scarborough and the Jane/Finch community in early September, followed by a Committee meeting on the 15th. That became the date for the first media conference demanding Justice + Dignity for Cleaners.

CLEANERS AND ALLIES

A broad movement was growing as the impact of Ford’s budget cuts became felt across the city. On September 26th thousands attended a rally at City Hall. At one point, nine cleaners took to the stage wearing full protective hazmat suits as Trish O’Brien spoke of their fight. It was a powerful image, reversing the normal invisibility of their work.



A few days later, the campaign suffered a setback. It had targeted Councillor Frances Nunziata for her role in moving the motion at the Police Services Board to outsource cleaning. Nunziata had often proclaimed her support for working people – her ward was heavily immigrant and blue-collar. But as a key Ford ally she helped lead on his outsourcing agenda. A hard-hitting flyer in four languages was dropped across her ward, asking residents to challenge her on this issue. Her response was immediate. She went after Good Jobs for All member groups that received city funding and forced some to distance themselves from the campaign. The decision to put out the flyer was made by the cleaners steering committee without consultation with GJFA coalition members and was a regrettable mistake.

In spite of that setback, the campaign was attracting support from a wide range of allies, including faith groups and community leaders. Articles were appearing in different language media and the Catholic Register. Labour Council Executive Board member Andria Babbington did a tour of different local union membership meetings. CUPE Education Workers Local 4400 booked off one of their Portuguese-speaking members who had been a key organizer of contract cleaners with SEIU to speak about the stark contrast in working conditions and safety in the private sector.

CUPE Local 79 members went out to drop thousands of (less controversial) leaflets in a number of wards. At Toronto Community Housing, a pilot cleaner apprenticeship program for tenants had been ended abruptly and the work given to a private contractor. CUPE Local 416 met with program participants and recruited Rachel Rocca, a single mother of three. Her story appeared in the Toronto Star at a crucial point in the campaign.



JULIO SILVA

“For almost 10 years, I worked for various private cleaning contractors for and saw up close the kind of cut-throat operations they ran. The pay was so low that I had to work three different jobs to make ends meet.

My fellow cleaners and I struggled very hard to try to unionize ourselves so that we could have a little bit of protection. It was really difficult because the employer tried various tactics to intimidate us. We won a first contract, which was a step in the right direction and gave us hope.

I am now working as a custodian at the school board. I have only one job and when I am done work, I can go home to my family without worrying about how to pay the bills. But there are still thousands of cleaners who are struggling in Toronto for better working conditions. They look to their counterparts in the public sector to raise the standards just a little bit. Unfortunately we have a Mayor who is trying to push hundreds of cleaners into that same situation. It just doesn't make sense for our city.”

In December the Toronto Star published an op-ed by Labour Council President John Cartwright slamming the “slash-and-burn” approach of Ford.

The campaign attracted a lot of intellectual firepower. Hugh Mackenzie of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives authored a damning critique of how Ford's budget victimized some of the worst-paid employees of the city. Progressive academics led by Tania das Gupta and Aparna Sundar developed an open letter to City Council signed by nearly a hundred university professors.

Academics speak out as city management contracts out cleaning jobs

An open letter urges the mayor to backtrack on privatization, citing the social cost of pink slips for newcomers and older immigrants.

Toronto Star February 16, 2012

Professors Grace-Edward Galabuzzi and David Hulchanski appeared at the City Hall press gallery to speak of their own lived experience, of having family members who worked as cleaners when they first arrived in Canada. There was a significant amount of research being done on poverty issues, including by the United Way and Toronto Community Foundation, which was used extensively to frame the cleaners' fight.

WINNING TRANSPARENCY

A key strategy was to ensure transparency in the outsourcing process. The existing rules allowed the City's Bid Committee to award contracts up to \$20 million without having to go to Council. There was no requirement to examine the impact on job quality, other than where the work was subject to the Fair Wage Policy. Cleaners were included in the outdated Fair Wage Schedule, but the rate was listed as the minimum wage. The campaign worked closely with Councillors McConnell, Mihevc and Bailao to design motions that would get staff to report on the social impact of turning nearly a thousand city positions into poverty jobs.

McConnell and Mihevc were long-time New Democrats with ties to faith and social justice

communities. Bailao was a progressive Liberal who came from the financial sector, but had worked with her mother as cleaners when the family first immigrated from Portugal. She would play a pivotal role in the dynamics at City Hall. It was her recommendation to CDRC that became an official request for a staff report on the social impact. Deputations to the CDRC came from frontline cleaners, the United Church Social Justice Committee, and other community leaders.



NELIA BETTENCOURT

“I'm a Heavy Duty Cleaner at the Toronto Police Service. I wash the floors, steam the carpet, clean the cells and washrooms, pick up garbage and more. I've been doing this for 9 years. We are there every day, and we are all almost like family to each other. There's a familiarity and trust we've developed and that's important, especially in a police station where there's sensitive information and security issues.

I used to work with a private cleaning company where I made \$11 an hour and got only five hours a day with no benefits. That's how they made their money. I had to work two jobs. Now at the city, I have a decent wage, benefits, and more job security.

Unfortunately, if the Mayor outsources cleaning to a private company, not only will I be let go, but those standards will also go down. Personally, it scares me to think about how I would support my son's medical expenses with no job and no benefits. There are many more people like me with families to support.”

The staff report came at the end of December, and drew heavily on research from renowned urbanist Richard Florida along with others who connected the change in neighbourhood incomes with growing inequality and social determinants of health.

The January 17th meeting of City Council was a watershed event. As thousands protested outside, the majority of Councillors (23-21) voted for an omnibus motion by Councillor Josh Colle to reverse many of Ford's proposed budget cuts. It was the first time that a number of centrist Councillors broke from Ford, but a subsequent motion to defer contracting out cleaners jobs narrowly failed.

The coalition ramped up its efforts. Richard Florida joined his colleagues at the Martin Prosperity Institute to write to City Council with an analysis of economic trends and the need to protect good jobs for cleaners. The Metcalf Foundation released a major report on The Working Poor in the Toronto Region, which also went to Councillors. Jim Stanford and Robert Dryden of the CCPA published a powerful critique – The Unintended Consequences of Outsourcing Cleaning Work. Myer Siemiaticki helped highlight concerns about democratic process.

When the contract for Police Services cleaning was finalized in early February, the award went to Impact Cleaning. Eight companies took out the RFP for cleaning police facilities, but SIEU's research suggested that many were hesitant to meet the severance liabilities of existing employees under the Employment Standards Act. Only two submitted bids, but one was disqualified, leaving Impact as the only qualified bidder. The company had a history of using a series of subcontractors to avoid employment standards, and the issue of employee misclassification was added to the campaign narrative of defending good jobs.

At the February meeting of Community Development RC, new deputations came from faith leaders, academics, and frontline cleaners. One of the most powerful presentations was by Ritch Whyman of SEIU. He laid bare many of the practices used to exploit immigrant cleaners, including shared identification papers to get around security requirements such as police facilities.

VICTORY

The Committee recommended putting a hold on all future cleaning contracts until the entire impact was fully examined. More lobbying took place by constituents of politicians who could be swing votes on Council. When the report went to City Council on March 7th Council voted to support Ana Bailao's motion by 32 to 8. The campaign had won its first major victory.

The stage was set for a climax at the April Council meeting. On March 19th the library workers (CUPE Local 4948) went on strike to defend their conditions and the services they delivered. Unlike the 2009 CUPE dispute, this strike won wide public support and further eroded Ford's credibility. In early April there was also a timely reminder of the prevailing ruthlessness of contract cleaning. A noisy rally was held at a downtown office building where immigrant cleaners had been terminated after the building's contract was flipped.

Progressive Councillors crafted a series of motions to ensure transparency for future tendering, and comprehensive standards to be enforced. They included a limit on sub-contracting; annual evaluations of multi-year contracts for the impact on job conditions; a requirement that contracts be dealt with publicly; and consideration of how to establish a Living Wage. This was public policy expertly crafted to prioritize the social impact of procurement decisions instead of the typical

practice that only considered the lowest cost. This framework allowed a wide range of Councillors to support the motion, including some who were seldom seen as pro-union. The vote was 29-12, and effectively derailed Ford's attack on cleaners. Everyone involved in the campaign was ecstatic. They celebrated with a public screening of the Bread and Roses film a few weeks later.

Over the next year further work on this issue resulted in a Job Quality Assessment Tool to help guide decision-making, as well as an updating of the Fair Wage schedule to reflect the prevailing private sector collective agreement rates of SEIU and LiUNA Local 183, the other major union representing cleaners.

LESSONS FROM THE CAMPAIGN

The Justice and Dignity for Cleaners campaign won an important victory for working people in Toronto. It utilized the principles of the Campaign Planning Handbook to establish a strategic plan guided by a steering committee that drew key activists, staff and leaders together. There was strong organizational commitment from CUPE local unions and the Labour Council, and a crucial alliance policy that brought many other voices to the debate. Researchers and academics helped provide a narrative around poverty jobs vs. good jobs in communities and the economy. While the level of membership mobilization was not as deep as the organizers hoped for, frontline cleaners who stepped up to tell their stories helped win the moral high ground for the campaign.

The dynamics within City Hall were crucial. Progressive Councillors were resisting every aspect of Ford's scorched-earth approach, but seldom had the votes to win on Council floor. Intense organizing at the community level put pressure on the "middle" Councillors to risk Ford's ire and vote against cuts. The fact that

the cleaners fight was situated within a broader resistance was essential. So too was the crafting of the key motions at City Council. Ana Bailao's emotional recounting of her own family's experience as cleaners, combined with the strategic clarity of the Council motions, helped shape the political climate for key votes.

Toronto's labour movement drew many important lessons from the Justice and Dignity for Cleaners experience. It confirmed the elements of building power – strategic planning, membership engagement, and a strong alliance policy. Framing the fight around a city where everyone counts transformed the debate to one of justice and dignity instead of Ford's slogan "respect the taxpayer". The Labour Council's Campaign Planning Handbook proved to be an essential asset, and has been utilized for many other efforts.

As with any campaign, much was determined by the skills and determination of individuals who carried out the work, both on staff and as union activists. But if it had stood alone, it may not have succeeded. Toronto's labour movement had built a culture of struggle and solidarity across sectors and with diverse communities. The Good Jobs for All coalition had been forged two years before, and Respect Toronto was actively mobilizing on the streets and in communities. The timing and the terrain on which the cleaners fight took place was crucial.

The campaign won the moral high ground, and helped shift public opinion as many diverse voices spoke up about the short-sighted and mean-spirited agenda of Mayor Rob Ford and his allies. Overall, while there were some initial losses, the work of nearly a thousand city employees was protected. A hard-fought victory had been achieved.

Authored by John Cartwright 2024