

LIBRARY WARRIORS



Library workers were seen as unlikely champions in the fight against the City Hall regime of Rob and Doug Ford. Riding the wave of backlash politics and a new political force in Canada's largest city, the Fords had instituted drastic cuts to city services and budgets.

The campaign by Toronto Public Library Workers to defend their own jobs and the integrity of the library system during this time was truly inspiring. It garnered support from residents in every part of the city and gained the public endorsement of many of Canada's leading authors. CUPE Local 4948 shows how labour can build a powerful coalition - on a strong foundation of engaged union members.



Speak out (quietly) for Toronto's librarians

CONTEXT

The Toronto Public Library is the largest and busiest public library system in North America. It was founded after a public referendum in 1884, and took on the role of the Mechanics' Institutes which offered reading rooms and book lending to the city's growing population. Over the years each suburb of Toronto created their own library system. The creation of the megacity in 1998 set in place a series of mergers of municipal unions. Library workers chose to join the newly created CUPE Local 416 along with outside workers of the new city.

The financial crisis of 2008 created massive pressure on all governments to adjust to limited resources. The corporate elites called for austerity to be imposed on public services and public sector workers, and the stage was set for bitter labour disputes in Toronto. In March 2009 the Library Workers voted to leave Local 416 and establish their own Local 4948. Rob Rolfe became the first President and Maureen O'Reilly the Secretary-Treasurer. Roughly 50% of the union membership were part-time, 75% women, and 65% of members had less than 15 years seniority.

In the summer of 2009 both CUPE 416 outside workers and CUPE 79 inside workers were in tough bargaining. Corporate Canada introduced new accounting practices as part of the austerity agenda. Suddenly all banked sick time would be counted as a financial liability for local governments, potentially putting the City deeply in debt. This ruling and the financial crisis put tremendous pressure on the city administration led by progressive Mayor David Miller. Unfortunately, the chief negotiator for the City was then given authority to demand massive cuts to sick time provisions and layoff protection. CUPE called for strike action that lasted for six weeks. As garbage piled up at parks and community centres, the strike proved to be deeply unpopular with the public and led to a political backlash with disastrous results.

Toronto Public Library Workers Union (TPLWU) LOCAL 4948

With the birth of their own local union, 2300 library workers aimed to secure a new collective agreement that held the line on benefits and conditions and addressed their unique issues such as the impact of part-time work. The union created flying squads that visited libraries to speak to both their members and the public and distribute buttons and bookmarks. The slogan was **People Make Libraries Work** and emphasized how libraries are a vital part of communities.



They asked residents to send a message to the Chief Librarian and their City Councillor. Rather than just being on the defensive, the union projected a vision of a “world class library system”.

Neither side wanted a repeat of the earlier strikes, and the union was able to secure a new collective agreement in November 2009 that included contract language on new job creation.

Mayor Rob Ford

In 2010 Mayor David Miller did not seek re-election, and the mayoralty race quickly became polarized. North Etobicoke Councillor Rob Ford swept to victory on the slogan “stop the gravy train” - promising to dramatically reduce public services and outsource solid waste collection. His brother Doug was elected to fill Rob’s City Council seat. Drawing on political tactics from U.S. Republicans, they created a loyal following known as Ford Nation that included many working-class voters. Once elected, the Fords cobbled together a majority on City Council and ushered in a program of austerity and service cuts.

The election of Rob Ford marked a dramatic challenge to city services, including the library system. All solid waste collection was privatized west of Yonge Street and budgets were cut for every department except police. Intimidation became a political tool used time and again against Councillors and staff. The Toronto Community Housing Board of Directors was sacked, and the Library Board filled with new people who supported Ford’s austerity direction.

The Library workers union, now led by Maureen O’Reilly, became more active in the Toronto & York Region Labour Council and the labour-community coalition formed to oppose budget cuts. They mobilized around the 2011 City budget to defend all public services.

Ford announced a Core Services Review to be carried out by the multinational accounting firm KPMG, in order to set the stage for restructuring many city services, while unions and community activists were mobilizing to argue for investment instead of austerity.

But library workers knew they had a unique space in the city because of the public’s appreciation of the direct service they provided. They set out to

test how that might help defend their jobs and the service they delivered.

Maureen O’Reilly connected with veteran communications strategist Bill Reno. The first thing Bill asked was if there was a “Friends of the Library” group of supporters that the union could work with. The answer was no. To set the stage for a new coalition, polling was conducted by Forum Research. It turned out that 75% of Torontonians used libraries, 71% were against privatizing the library, and 50% said it would affect their vote a great deal if they knew their councillor supported closing libraries. As Maureen O’Reilly would later reflect: *“That became the campaign in a nutshell”*.

OurPublicLibrary.TO

A key aspect of the union’s campaign was the creation of a strong digital campaign centred on the website OurPublicLibrary.to. It clearly identified the library system as belonging to the people, and the unique URL ending in “.to” helped identify the message with this city. The subtitle “Project Rescue” told people there was something big at stake, and the website made it very easy for the public to participate.

The goal was to influence City Councillors and Library Board members while creating a database of supporters that could be utilized to shift public opinion and pressure decision-makers. Mass emails were still a new campaign tool at that time, so the impact could be significant.

An unexpected controversy brought more attention to the fight than anyone expected. When KPMG suggested that city hall “rationalize the footprint of libraries to reduce service levels, closing some branches”, award-winning author Margaret Atwood sent out a twitter message asking her 500,000 followers to support the

campaign to keep library branches and their services open. Atwood posted a link to Local 4948's petition that drew some media attention. In response Councillor Doug Ford stated, "well, good luck to Margaret Atwood. I don't even know her. If she walked by me, I wouldn't have a clue who she is."

Ford then 'double-doubled' down on his stance of library branch closures, infamously saying that there were more branches in his riding than Tim Horton's. The union took the recording of those statements and shared it everywhere possible



Using social media to share Doug's infamous quote

This controversy led to massive public support for both libraries and Atwood. Bookstore chain Indigo also jumped on board, tweeting their support of Canadian libraries and offering a 30% discount of Atwood's publications across the country as long as the buyer showed their library card.

As this was happening, concern about cuts to city services was intensifying. The public hearings at the end of July on the KPMG proposals turned into a marathon 22 ½ hour session. One reporter

noted "a heartbreaking scene at 2 a.m. wherein 14-year-old Anika Tabovaradan tried to defend the importance of her local library branch while crying her eyes out. Toronto came into focus again as a city with real people with real values".

Soon other Canadian authors stepped up to support library workers. They held a press conference announcing a contest with the prize being a lunch with Atwood and the author of the winner's choice. The union took out newspaper ads promoting the issue. Within weeks over 40,000 Torontonians signed the online petition against library cuts.

Meetings of the Library Board were packed with residents demanding no cuts to services. But even while the campaign was growing, Library Administrators capitulated and delivered part of Ford's cuts before the full city budget process got underway. In September 2011 the Library Board announced a reduction of 107 Full Time Equivalent positions. It also started looking at American examples of privatization of some management and technical roles in libraries, most prominently in the city of San Jose.

On September 19th another marathon session on the City budget saw hundreds of people opposing the proposed cuts, with dozens of deputants speaking specifically about libraries. The union presented the petition with over 20,000 signatures. The union learned that their campaign had generated more individual messages to Councillors than any other effort in the past. Action alerts kept the public (and library workers) up to date on what was happening. These and other tactics helped establish the union as a fierce defender of public libraries in the eyes of the public.



Our PUBLIC Library



Great people, great library, great city.

Dear Maureen,

With no plan or any idea of the consequences, Mayor Ford and his allies will ask City Council next week to cut the budget of our public library so deeply that branches will have to be closed, open hours slashed, programs cut and collections reduced.

We now know that Mayor Ford wants to cut the library budget 30% more than the Library Board proposed!

Can he persuade a majority of Councillors to support his plan? We just don't know. It's too close to call.

That is why I am writing to you to ask you to send one final message to plead that your City Councillor rejects this devastating plan.

Please send your message right now. It could make all the difference.



Please tell your Councillor to reject all cuts to our public library when they start meeting on Tuesday.

Please send your Councillor a message right now

Yours sincerely,



Maureen O'Reilly

Maureen O'Reilly
OurPublicLibrary.to

OurPublicLibrary.to is a network of people dedicated to preserving the integrity of one of the world's greatest public library systems, the Toronto Public Library and is sponsored by the Toronto Public Library Workers Union.

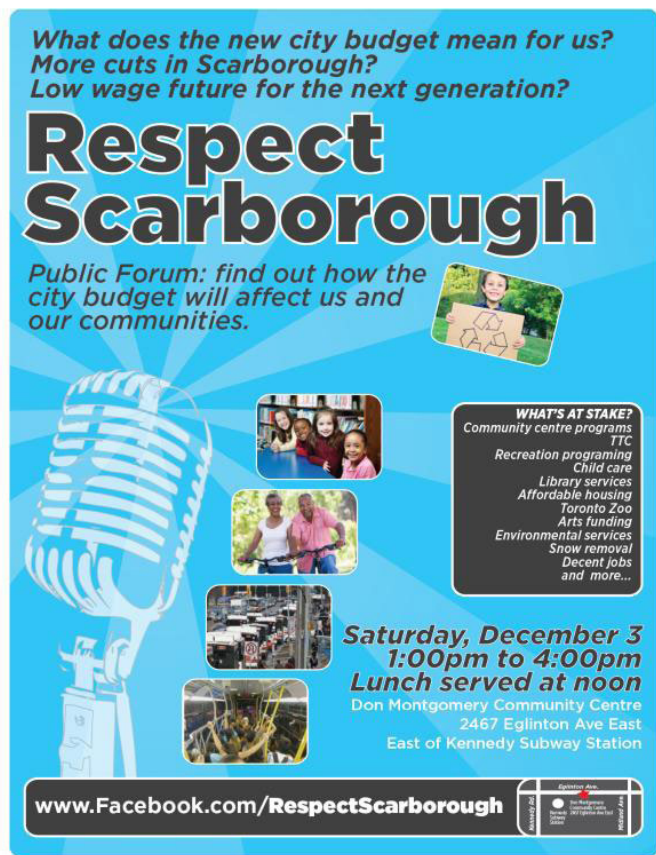
If you no longer wish to receive campaign updates & alerts from OurPublicLibrary.to, please [click here](#) to unsubscribe.

To view our privacy policy, [click here](#).

COLLECTIVE FIGHTBACK

As the fall of 2011 rolled out, the broader labour movement was organizing with community allies to stop the cuts agenda of the Ford administration. Under the banner of Respect

Toronto, thousands rallied at City Hall on September 26th. A careful analysis was made of the City Councillors who could potentially be "swing votes" on key issues, and Scarborough seemed to be the battleground to focus on.



BARGAINING 2012

At the same time as the budget fights were playing out, all three municipal Local Unions (79, 416 and 4948) were preparing for bargaining. In conjunction with CUPE, the Labour Council booked off its Vice-President Andria Babbington of UNITE HERE Local 75 to co-ordinate support for potential job action. A veteran leader of the powerful Hotel Worker Rising campaign, she took Maureen to membership meetings of many affiliated unions with a message about building solidarity for possible job action. Babbington also toured library workplaces along with 4948 leaders to let members know that the labour movement was behind them.

The union had created a mobilization team to visit all 106 worksites and prepare the members for a tough fight. Frequent bargaining bulletins were to become an essential tool to keep members informed about the dynamics of bargaining, key issues and political analysis. And the union was able to utilize a new vehicle for communicating with members - telephone town hall technology. Hundreds were able to join in and get updates directly from the union leadership.

Bargaining for a new collective agreement had a rocky start in February 2012. A key goal of the employer was to eliminate job protection against layoffs for workers with less than ten years of full-time seniority. That could have a devastating impact on 80% of library workers, as so many were part-time. The employer also tabled 50 other concessionary changes to the library collective agreement.

The City of Toronto went to the brink with Local 416, using the extraordinary measure of threatening to suspend provisions of the expired collective agreement and laying off members with

A community town hall was called for December 3rd at the Don Montgomery Centre in Scarborough to examine how the proposed 2012 budget would affect individual neighbourhoods and overall public services. Out of that came an intense lobbying effort to turn public concerns about loss of services into votes at City Hall. For the libraries, Scarborough Councillor Raymond Cho would play a key role.

As the budget process rolled out, he made a motion to reduce the Library budget cuts from 10% demanded by Ford to 5.9%. His motion passed by one vote. Mobilization continued all through the budget process. Finally on February 24th as over a thousand people rallied outside, City Council narrowly voted to amend Ford's overall budget and put millions of dollars back into services.

no possibility of grievance. Local 416 finally agreed to a reduction in job security from ten years to fifteen years seniority, as did Local 79. This put significant pressure on Library bargaining, but the union was determined to break the pattern by insisting on a “made in TPL” contract. Local 4948 was not just resisting the threat of full-time jobs becoming part-time – it was also seeking benefits for the part-time workers that made up nearly half the membership. CUPE polling showed that some 70% of Torontonians sympathized with the workers taking strike action to defend themselves.

STRIKE!



Finally, things came to a head. The union leadership felt they had no choice but to take direct action and picket lines went up on March 19th. For most members, this was their first experience being on strike. The Strike Committee decided not to picket every branch, focusing instead on a few locations. The newly formed Mobilization Committee proved to be an invaluable tool to keep members informed but also served as a vehicle where the union could train more leaders outside of the traditional elected official role.

The union sought to create a unique approach after the withdrawal of labour. Members took

their own skills and passion for literacy out to the streets. There were children’s storytelling sessions and knitting circles which put a light-hearted touch on the interaction with the public. In Etobicoke, they asked people to donate food for a local food bank.

The union also saw the strike as an opportunity to educate the public about the nature of precarious work in the library system. Community groups such as the Toronto Women’s City Alliance came on board, making the connection of decent wages and benefits being a women’s issue in a majority female workforce.

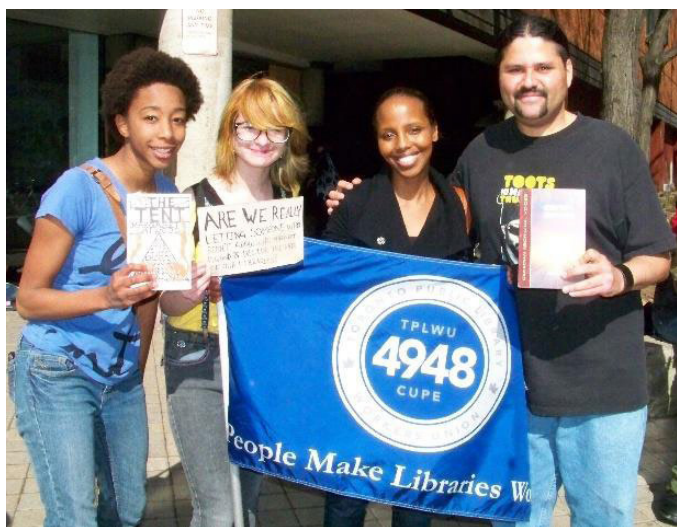
During the strike, the stereotypical image of a librarian with old-fashioned spectacles got transformed into a witty message that worked at every level. The union used humour to disarm the standard anti-union/anti-strike sentiment that the Ford regime plied incessantly.



Two major rallies were held at Nathan Phillips Square, as members and other allies came out to support the cause. The Writers Union of Canada hosted a “read-in” and poets joined the picket line at the Central Reference Library. Throughout the whole time, members’ spirits never wavered and the public sympathy was clearly with the library workers.

By the time the strike settled after 11 days, the employer had dropped all but one of the 50 concessionary demands. Jobs were protected, and the union won a new customized benefit plan for part-timers. As part of the settlement, the Library Board issued a declaration that it would not pursue any privatization of services – a clear repudiation of the direction the Fords were taking the city.

The strike cracked the job security language, protecting members with eleven years seniority instead of fifteen-year mark in the other city contracts. The union felt confident that the library administration would not invoke that language, which proved true in the years that followed. This also set the stage for workers at Toronto Community Housing to win the eleven-year protection in their bargaining soon after. It was a remarkable victory that nobody outside of the union's leadership would have thought possible.



TACKLING PRECARIOUS WORK

The strike and settlement created a new appreciation for the issue of part-time work. The union determined to build on the relationships

and solidarity that had emerged from their struggle. It saw its role in defending and celebrating the public library system as an integral part of the reputation it had earned with communities, media and local politicians.

President Maureen O'Reilly undertook a speaking tour of unions and library conferences to spread that message. CUPE had long-standing networks of library worker local unions that met in conjunction with their Municipal Workers conferences. The fight led by Local 4948 helped to focus the conversation among sister locals about how to defend and celebrate the role of public libraries and improve the conditions of library workers across Ontario and Canada. One positive example was the assistance given by Local 4948 to Oakville Public Library workers to finally organize into a union.

In November 2013, the union launched an initiative called The Great Equalizer. Supported by a report from Gavin Rao of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, it identified the question of part-time work as a real problem for people working in the library system. The union had time to prepare and mobilize around a key issue for the next round of bargaining, and they wanted to build a narrative of the value of providing a decent livelihood for people working in the library system. Many workers started their employment as pages still at school, and the union membership was reflecting the diversity of Toronto's population as the vast majority of the members actually lived in the City.

As the City and Library Board were preparing the 2014 budget, the union launched their next campaign – with a goal to dramatically change the dynamics of part-time work in the system. The Word on the Street festival sponsored by Canadian publishers was the perfect event to spread their message to the broader public. That year the union also sponsored a Library Budget Forum at City Hall. The union was also playing a

bigger role in the labour movement - Maureen O'Reilly became the Chair of the Labour Council's Municipal Committee as it took on the 2014 municipal elections and helped elect progressive candidates to City Council and School Boards. The union never stopped organizing or campaigning. Many diverse young workers were recruited to the mobilization committee, and the Local set up its own educational fund to support activists going to conferences and educational courses. The next collective agreement in 2016 brought new improvements to everyone working part-time at the library, while securing better conditions for full-time workers as well. Local 4948 activists became known as **Library Warriors**.



CONCLUSION

No union takes a decision lightly to go on strike. The experience of Local 4948 in building a resistance movement to cuts to Toronto's library system set the stage for the members to have the confidence to take unprecedented strike action. Working with a wide range of allies, they had earned widespread support - being proactive and using humour as well as hard facts helped change the public conversation in their favour. Being intentional in their positioning allowed them to seize the moment when good luck came their way.

The union leadership felt there was no other choice than to go to the wall on the key issues of job protection and decent work, but it was only through deep engagement of members that the local had the power to take on the Ford regime. It represented one of the first city-wide defeats for the Ford administration and showed its vulnerability.

This struggle took place within a broader context of a fightback against the overall austerity agenda being imposed by the Canadian and global business elites, and became an inspiration for others facing a similar challenge.



Authored by John Cartwright and Maureen O'Reilly