

Lessons of Year One – Organize, Educate, Resist!

Statement passed by Labour Council on May 2, 2019

June 7th is the first anniversary of the Conservative victory in Ontario. It has been a troubling year, and there are three more to follow. It is twenty-four years since the Harris Conservatives were elected on June 8th 1995. Unlike Mike Harris, Doug Ford and his advisors have learned to slash-and-burn less explicitly. Ford's rhetoric is cloaked in fake right-wing populism - he promises "not a single front line worker will lose their job." Meanwhile his words mask an objective that is just as revolutionary as the Harris regime - permanently changing how our province works.

It is important to recognize the parallels between this agenda and previous drives by corporate interests to change the power structure of society. In the early 1980's most countries in the global south were subject to "Structural Adjustment Programs" that dramatically lowered workers wages, sold off public assets and enforced austerity on the population. The UK's Maggie Thatcher and US President Ronald Reagan executed policies to change how the economy operated in their countries –gutting social programs, busting unions, and deregulating services. For Brian Mulroney, the US-Canada Free Trade Deal would accomplish similar goals.

These changes led to greater levels of impoverishment while gaining obscene wealth for multinational corporations. When popular backlash led to the defeat of these conservative rulers, newly elected leaders were either unable or unwilling to reverse the damage to local economies or public services.

Doug Ford combines outrageous actions (changing Toronto elections, slashing legal aid, cancelling green programs) with cunning distractions (buck a beer, tailgate parties). But the most important process taking place is guided by the hardcore ideologues working in the back rooms - the restructuring which will last a lifetime. Classroom sizes will be larger and there will be fewer teachers and support staff, but the real impact will come from the task force that "reviews school board operations."

Why create a health superagency when the Ministry of Health is already a "health superagency"? Because it sets up the dynamic - screened from public view - of restructuring by contracting out, privatizing and cutting staff, while deflecting blame away from the politicians. Forcing colleges and universities to meet market-oriented "performance targets" will fundamentally change how students are prepared for their role in civil society. Stealing the subway opens the door to privatization and selling off air rights to wealthy developers. Allowing corporate CEO's to restructure the labour market while weakening workers' rights will only expand precarious and poverty-wage work.

As well, we are seeing very intentional attacks on Toronto. Slashing the size of City Council, and then taking a billion out of public health and another billion out of transit operations, reduces the city's ability to lead progressive politics. And it gives right-wing politicians tremendous leverage.

ORGANIZE, EDUCATE, RESIST! was the slogan of our movement in response to the Harris Conservatives. We must embrace and popularize that approach for the coming next three years.



Organize:

We have been building and organizing in response to the Ford offensive. Last month we responded to attacks on education, engaging union and community activists to take the message to parents in suburban schools. This month, we are standing up to protect health care. We will continue to defend Toronto's subway system and oppose privatization of transit. As the implications of the 2019 Ontario budget become clear, we will work to counter the attacks on legal aid, public health, and other important public services.

Educate:

At the Stewards Assembly, political economist Linda McQuaig summed up three key messages that help us understand Ontario's new reality:

- The Conservative slogan should be "for the *rich* people".
- The rules of the game have changed dramatically. This has been achieved by corporations that work very hard to elect those who will change the rules in their favour.
- It doesn't have to be this way – a better world is possible. Just by collecting taxes at the same rate today as in 2000, we'd have an extra **\$56 billion a year** that could be used to address urgent needs like child care, pharmacare, public transit, tuition fees and effective action on climate.

Resist:

It is critical that we keep challenging this government and their corporate cronies every day. Yet we recognize we are in a marathon, not a sprint. We need the energy and momentum to maintain an alternative vision and defeat the Conservatives in three years. The fight to protect public education is a key part of the resistance, and through it we are learning how to organize more deeply and hold our elected officials accountable. Exposing the Ford Conservatives today warns people of the danger posed by their federal cousins this fall.

Three years is a long time, and there will be a lot of battles. Lessons from previous Conservative regimes show that they get more ruthless the longer they are in power. Some people may become dispirited or demoralized. But we know that joining in struggle with others is a powerful antidote. Out of knowledge, comes power. Out of struggle, comes leadership.

What becomes clearer every day is that solidarity among working people and our community allies is absolutely necessary. We need to see ourselves as a resistance movement. We call on the next generation of leaders to step firmly forward, and the current generation of leaders to share the lessons of past struggles. Working with allies, rooted in diverse communities and workplaces, this resistance will see us through the tough time ahead.

The Toronto & York Region Labour Council resolves to:

- 1) organize actions around June 7th in Toronto and York Region with key community allies that provide opportunities for ordinary Ontarians to express their outrage;
- 2) encourage intentional development of new leaders, giving them the tools and opportunities to step up in leading these crucial struggles;
- 3) encourage all affiliates to use the 5 Step Guide to organize members for the long-term resistance against the Ford Conservative agenda;
- 4) build active solidarity where affiliates mobilize around struggles of other unions and community allies.