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RESISTANCE IS FRUITFUL: COALITION-BUILDING IN ONTARIO

It's been two and a half years since Ontario's neoconservative government came into power—two and a half years of unprecedented attacks on public services, public education, and our most disadvantaged citizens. They call it the "Common Sense Revolution"; the slick populist packaging barely conceals the south-of-the-border origin of their policies as well as their rhetoric. What the commonsense revolutionaries and their hefty majority in the provincial legislature did not anticipate was the unprecedented level of resistance their gleeful slashing of services would inspire. In the two and a half years since Mike Harris' Progressive Conservative government took office, labour and community coalitions have shut down nine cities, and hundreds of thousands have participated in actions, demonstrations and occupations. We have built a new social movement here in Ontario, and we have the Tories to thank for it.

Ontario's website (www.gov.on.ca) brashly proclaims that Ontario is "open for business". It certainly is— one of Harris' first tasks was to eliminate progressive labour legislation, reduce workers' rights and make it more difficult to organize. Elected on promises of reducing government bureaucracy, cracking down on welfare cheats, and a 30% tax cut, the Tories government have well exceeded their mandate. They have "reduced government bureaucracy" by outsourcing many public services, costing many public servants their jobs and creating chaos in several departments. They have "cracked down on welfare cheats" by cutting benefits 22%, by declaring some recipients—like sole support parents who are students— ineligible, and by introducing fingerscanning and workfare. They have cut taxes, indeed, but in order to afford it, they have closed hospitals, cut millions out of education and downloaded the responsibility for funding many social services on to municipalities. Ontario is open for business, but closed to everyone else.

Initially, protests were organized by the labour movement and attended by the Usual Suspects—union members, students and social activists. But as the cuts became deeper, the protests got bigger, and the crowd more diverse. The Days of Action, a series of 1-day general strikes, have shut down nine communities (including Metro Toronto, when 250,000 marched to the provincial legislature), are the centrepiece to Ontario's fightback movement. But there have been other history-making acts of protest. Public servants held their first-ever province-wide strike. Students occupied 11 university presidents' offices demanding a stop to a government-dictated 20% tuition hike. Faith groups have planted winter wheat and vegetables on the lawn of the legislature to draw the government's attention to poverty issues. When Harris announced the government's intention to amalgamate Toronto with its five surrounding municipalities, a grassroots citizens' movement erupted, organizing a referendum in each community on the issue. The response from the six municipalities was a resounding 76% against amalgamation. Thousands of small-town residents held vigils at their soon-to-be-closed community hospitals. I've been to

more rallies, pickets, marches and teach-ins in Mike Harris' Ontario than I could possibly begin to count.

Protesting has become socially acceptable in Ontario. It's a family affair—children, grandparents, and dogs abound at demonstrations. Homemade signs are the preferred mode of expression (the more creative, the better). These protests have become as much a celebration of community as they are an expression of anger. Resistance has united community and labour, students and seniors, artists and anti-poverty activists. Members of this new social movement are united in their conviction that working toward a just society is preferable to the corporate-controlled, free marketeering of the Harris government. And we know that the only way to achieve this is by working together, by standing up for each other, and by fighting back.

Coalitions of labour and community organizations are active in over 30 municipalities in Ontario. While there are frequently differences of opinion on priorities, strategy, and tactics, the sense of common purpose—kicking the Tories out of office and into political oblivion—keeps these coalitions going.

And it pays to participate, because when it's your sector's turn to face the Harris guillotine, support comes from unexpected places. When teachers traded the classroom for the picket line in October, they were supported by major unions like the Canadian Autoworkers, by parents' groups, by students, and by ordinary citizens. It was a powerful moment. Strikes by teachers—traditionally, a conservative group—are rare. This protest was unprecedented. Public support was strong, despite the government's massive smear campaign. Many teachers joked that they would gain weight from all of the baked goods and hot chocolates that parents and students were delivering to picket lines.

Unfortunately, the teachers did not force the Tories to withdraw the legislation—legislation that gives the government a disturbing amount of control over our public education system. The teachers returned to work after two weeks, fearful that a prolonged strike would turn the public against them and result in punitive back-to-work legislation, fines, and lawsuits. They left on a high note, and their coalition partners swore that the struggle will continue, committing to further Days of Action and, eventually, a province-wide general strike.

It is not clear what the next major battle will be...but I'm betting on postsecondary education. In mid-December (during exams, of course), the Tories announced a 20% increase in undergraduate tuition—bringing the total increase since they took office to 50%. They also deregulated graduate and professional fees, which may result in massive increases in the cost of postgraduate education. The student movement will likely respond with widespread action through the winter, and will need support from within the university community, from coalition partners, and from the general public. I am quite confident that they will receive it.

The common link between all of the Harris government's actions is their absolute disregard for democratic principles. Their changes to the employment standards act, welfare legislation, the landlord/tenant act and other laws have all reduced Ontarians' ability to appeal government decisions, or achieve justice if they are unfairly treated. The Tories have introduced legislation to speed up timelines and limit debate in the provincial parliament. The magnitude and pace of legislative change is dizzying. They have ignored requests for public hearings, or limited slots at hearings to their choices of groups and individuals. Now one cannot even walk through the parliament buildings while wearing a politically-themed button.

As vital as our movement is, we have had only minor successes with the Harris government. It can be frustrating and disheartening, but the constant influx of new activists has brought incredible energy to our growing coalition. Like every broad-based movement, we have our challenges and conflicts. But only a broad-based, organized, and vital movement can keep the next government (after all, this one won't last

much longer) accountable.

AFFILIATIONS

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