

The Ontario Tory government and the crisis of working-class perspective in Canada

Part 2: The political lessons of the 1995-97 anti-Tory movement

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This is the second of a two-part article. The first part was posted on Monday, May 22.

Since winning re-election last June, Ontario's Tory government has adopted one right-wing measure after another with little opposition. Emboldened by the apparent collapse of working class resistance, important sections of Canada's corporate elite are now intent on using the newly-created Canadian Alliance to establish a national government patterned after Mike Harris's Ontario Tory regime.

Undoubtedly, the Tories' re-election disappointed and dismayed many workers and youth. How could a government that victimized the poor, gutted funding for public services, and attacked trade union and other democratic rights win 45 percent of the vote and a comfortable majority of the seats in the Ontario legislature?

The perplexity and frustration have been compounded by an all but formal declaration of surrender from the trade unions and the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP). Within days of the election, former NDP Premier Bob Rae was urging the Tories' opponents to take their cue from British Prime Minister Tony Blair and US President Bill Clinton, the respective successors to the Thatcher-Major and Reagan-Bush governments, and recognize that "the paradigm has changed." Rae declared that "A program based on undoing many of the Harris changes is doomed to minority support."

Questioned half a year later as to why the unions were not mobilizing against the Harris Tory government, Canadian Auto Workers President Buzz Hargrove said bluntly, "At this point, there is no indication that the government is out to attack us or that they want another fight."

Various facile explanations have been given for the Tories' election triumph. Some have pointed to the rapid expansion of the Ontario economy in recent years. But this ignores the fact that during this period, and in no small part because of the actions of the Tory government, social inequality has sharpened. The lion's share of the increase in income has been appropriated by the richest quintile of society, while the dismantling of public and social services and the never-ending struggle for enhanced corporate profitability have made the lives of working people ever-more difficult and anxious.

Others have attributed the Tory triumph to the first-past-the-post electoral system. It does bear repeating that just 25 percent of the total electorate actually voted for the Harris Tories. But this begs the question, why did more than 40 percent of Ontario voters, the vast majority of them working class, not view any party as worthy of their support? Moreover, how did the Tories, the most manifestly pro-big business government in Ontario in decades, succeed in garnering a significant, albeit minority, share of the votes of workers and less privileged middle-class layers?

To address these questions and find a new course for future struggles requires the drawing of a balance sheet of the past decade of class battles in Ontario, and particularly of the 1995-97 anti-Tory movement. Such a review will demonstrate that the working class confronts a fundamental crisis of leadership and political perspective.

Time and again, Ontario workers' opposition to the big business assault on jobs, working conditions and social and public services has brought them into open conflict with the unions and the NDP. Workers elected an NDP government in Ontario in 1990 in the hope that the social democrats would shield them from the developing slump and mitigate the adverse effects of the reorganization of Canadian capitalism under the Canada-US Free Trade Pact. Instead, the 1990-95 Rae NDP government initiated massive social spending cuts, imposed onerous tax hikes, and suspended the collective bargaining rights of one million public sector workers so as to impose wage and job cuts.

In November 1997, when a province-wide teachers' strike raised the possibility and necessity of a working class offensive to bring down the Harris Tory government, the unions abandoned the teachers' demands, strangled the strike and, shortly thereafter, terminated their anti-Tory mobilizations.

These betrayals have angered many, but workers have yet to find an alternative political axis on which to develop a counteroffensive. Among a significant layer, exasperation with the old organizations has taken the form of hostility to all politics. The Tories, with their attack on the political status quo, have consciously appealed to this sentiment. Another, larger layer, has little confidence in the unions and NDP, but continues to perceive of political struggle as limited to attempts to pressure the employers and big business governments through collective bargaining, protests and the ballot box. Above all, while the impact of the workings of the capitalist market are derided, most workers take the current form of economic organization as given.

The corporate media have sought to intimidate the working class by portraying the Harris Tory government as politically invincible. In fact, the rise of the Harris Tories is testament to the enormous pressure the global struggle for profits and markets is placing on Canadian big business. The measures required to shore up the economic position of Canadian capital intensify class antagonisms and threaten to provoke social upheavals.

Indeed, in 1997, albeit only briefly, the teachers' determined stand in defence of public education led to the evaporation of much of the Tories' middle-class support, revealing the government to be isolated.

In short, the Tories have battered off the political crisis in the working class, produced by the renegacy of the organizations to which it had long

given allegiance and the collapse of the trade unionist-reformist perspective on which most workers based their political activity.

The political terrain for the Tories' 1995 election victory was prepared by the Rae NDP government. Not only did the NDP pioneer many of the policies pursued by the Tories, including drastic social spending cuts and workfare, Rae and his fellow social democrats repeatedly derided their own traditional reformist program and proclaimed that there was "no alternative" to the imperatives of the capitalist market.

Nevertheless, within weeks of the June 1995 election, protests were erupting against the incoming Tory government. The Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) stood aloof from these initial actions, which focused on the Tories' 21.5 percent cut in welfare benefits. But five months later, the OFL used its financial-organizational muscle to place itself at the head of the opposition movement, the better to politically control and contain it.

Successful mass demonstrations and one-day regional strikes in several major Ontario cities soon prompted widespread calls for the OFL to mount a province-wide general strike. But in April 1996, OFL President Gord Wilson emphatically declared there was no question of the unions seeking to bring down the Harris government. "I accept," said Wilson, that Harris "has a constitutional mandate" to govern.

While opposing any struggle to force Harris's resignation or new elections, the OFL leadership sought to create the impression that the reactionary policies of the Ontario government were simply the product of Harris's political proclivities and character traits. The demonization of Harris, who was depicted in union propaganda as the fount of all the attacks raining down on Ontario workers, played an important part in the union bureaucracy's efforts to politically emasculate the opposition movement.

By focusing entirely on Harris, the unions obscured the real stakes in the struggle and sought to politically quarantine the increasingly militant Ontario workers from their class brothers and sisters elsewhere in Canada. The Tory attacks were unprecedented, but they were only the advance column of a big business offensive in which parties of every stripe were conscripted.

In opposing the Harris Tory government's drive to rewrite social policy through the downsizing of social and public services, Ontario workers were not challenging the politics of a single party, but the class strategy of Canadian big business as a whole. During the very same 1995-97 period, when Ontario was convulsed by anti-Tory protests, the federal Liberal government and the Parti Québécois government imposed massive social spending cuts.

Following the success of the Toronto Days of Action in October 1996, 13 unions, representing about a third of the OFL's total membership, announced they were withdrawing from the anti-Tory mobilizations. This faction of the bureaucracy was outraged that protesters had shut down Toronto's municipal transit system for a day, in defiance of a court order. Fearful that the anti-Tory movement was taking too radical a direction and might escape the bureaucracy's control, the dissenting unions demanded the OFL scale down the protests and shift its resources to returning the NDP to power at the next election, slated for 1999 or 2000.

The OFL majority had resisted calls to give the NDP a more prominent place in the Days of Action, fearing that it would be politically compromised if it too closely identified itself with a party that had slashed social spending and rode roughshod over basic union rights.

Ultimately, the essential agreement of all factions of the union bureaucracy and their united opposition to the independent mobilization of the working class was revealed in the teachers' strike. For two weeks in the fall of 1997, 120,000 elementary and high school teachers struck in defiance of the province's reactionary labor code. The strike was called with the overtly political aim of forcing the Tories to abandon plans to centralize power over education financing and policy in the hands of the Education Ministry, which would allow the Harris government to force

through spending cuts and regressive curriculum changes, and gut teachers' working conditions.

The Tories fully expected the strike would collapse under the threat of legal reprisals and a media witch-hunt that charged the teachers with taking a million Ontario school children hostage. But while the strike undoubtedly did cause hardship to working parents, the public rallied behind the teachers, in recognition that theirs was a fight to defend public education. To the Tories' dismay, even government polls showed that a majority of Ontarians supported the strike. Picket lines and teacher demonstrations were swelled by students, parents and other workers.

The leaders of the five teachers' unions that comprise the Ontario Teachers' Federation (OTF) had called the strike—which they tellingly termed a "protest," not a political strike—anticipating that the government would obtain a court injunction ordering the teachers back to work. This would have provided them with a pretext for ending the strike and cutting a deal with the government.

But the Tories' application for an injunction was denied. The Ontario Court judge hearing the case concluded that popular support for the strike was so high that state intervention against it might dangerously erode the authority of the courts. In effect, he placed the responsibility for ending the strike directly on the teachers' unions.

The OTF, with the full support and encouragement of the OFL, quickly complied. In the immediate aftermath of the rejection of the government's request for an injunction the leaders of the teacher unions offered the Tories sweeping concessions. When the government refused their offer, they declared nothing further could be done and ordered the teachers to return to work.

It was not any lack of support for the strike or any lack of militancy and solidarity on the part of the teachers that precipitated the union leaders' surrender. Just the opposite. It was the threat that the strike could spark a wider popular movement against the Harris government, which could break out of their grip and destabilize the entire national political situation, that frightened the union bureaucracy and caused them to torpedo the strike.

Within weeks of its betrayal of the teachers, the OFL elected as its new president the candidate of the wing of the bureaucracy that had opposed the Days of Action. Predictably, the anti-Tory campaign was officially buried the following summer.

Subsequently, the OFL leadership again fractured over which of the Tories' big business political opponents to support in the 1999 election. While the majority urged a vote for the NDP, a dissident faction led by the supposedly "left-wing" CAW called for a "strategic vote" for the Liberals, wherever the Liberal candidate stood the best chance of defeating the Tory contestant.

The Tories, on their return to power, claimed the elections had been a referendum on their "Common Sense Revolution." The truth, however, was that the suppression of the teachers' strike had politically silenced the working class, the only social force capable of articulating a genuine alternative program to the Tories. Given that all three parties were parroting the big business mantras of "fiscal responsibility," "balanced budgets" and "competitive tax rates," there was no possibility within the confines of the elections for working people to truly articulate their opposition to the Tories' "Common Sense Revolution."

In the year since the Tories' re-election, the unions and NDP have moved still further to the right. OFL President Wayne Samuelson has vowed there will be no return to mass anti-Tory protests. Recently, the Ontario construction unions joined with the Tory labor minister and the province's unionized contractors to co-author changes to the construction labor relations regime. According to Patrick Dillon of the Building and Construction Trades Council, "The legislation recognizes the interdependence of labor and management in creating a healthy construction industry.... It is proof that organized labour is willing to work to establish

a framework that ensures that the unionized construction industry remains competitive and viable.”

The proposed Tory legislation provides for an arbitration process whereby workers' wages and benefits can be cut on a regional basis and severely limits the rights of workers in the residential construction industry to strike and negotiate when their current contracts expire in the spring of 2001.

The experience of Ontario workers is, in its essentials, common to workers all over the world. Everywhere, those organizations, be they trade unions, social-democratic or Stalinist “Communist” parties, that advocated a reform program based on the acceptance of the economic foundations of capitalism have emerged, over the past two decades, as enforcers of wage, job and public spending cuts.

By so doing, the bureaucratic cliques that lead these organizations hope to prove to big business that they are indispensable in disciplining the working class and in that way secure their own privileges. As CAW President Buzz Hargrove explained in his recently published autobiography, “3 out of every 4 workers say they don't trust their employer.... Good unions work to defuse that anger.... Unions deflect those damaging and costly forms of workers' resistance (low productivity, absenteeism). If our critics understood what really goes on behind the labour scenes, they would be thankful that labour leaders are as effective as they are in averting strikes.”

The recent actions of John Murphy, head of the 15,000-member [Ontario] Power Workers' Union (PWU), only underscore the fact that the union and NDP leadership are a petty-bourgeois social layer with interests hostile to those of the workers for whom they purport to speak. Last month Murphy politically solidarized himself with the Tories by joining Harris and Canadian Alliance leadership hopeful Tom Long at the party's annual fundraising dinner. Then, on May 16, he quit the PWU to accept a Tory appointment to the post of vice-president of human resources at Crown-owned Ontario Power Generation.

The transformation of the traditional labor organizations into direct agents of the ruling class is fundamentally not a product of personal corruption, but rather the outcome of profound changes in the structure of capitalism. These organizations' basic orientation—the protection of national industry and the national labor market—has been undermined by the globalization of production and the unprecedented mobility of capital. Workers can effectively answer globally organized capital only insofar as they consciously organize their struggles on the basis of an internationalist strategy and reject the subordination of workers' interests to the imperatives of the capitalist market.

The Socialist Equality Party of Canada (and its predecessor, the International Workers Party) intervened in the 1995-97 anti-Tory movement to urge workers to seize the leadership of the opposition movement from the union bureaucracy and transform it into a truly independent political movement of the working class. The SEP explained that past social gains could only be defended to the extent that the working class transcended the narrow framework of collective bargaining and protests to the big business politicians and organized itself as an independent political force, advancing its own programme to reorganize economic life in the interests of working people through the establishment of a workers' government.

The SEP warned against the politics of the middle-class “left,” which insisted that workers accept the political authority of the NDP and OFL and invest their energies in seeking to pressure them to the left. In a 1996 statement we noted: “As to the political alternative to the Tories, these organizations either remain silent or join with the unions in advocating the return of an NDP government.”

Events in Ontario have more than confirmed the warnings of the SEP. But if the bureaucracy has been able to smother the resistance of the working class, it is because workers have yet to assimilate the lessons of

the past two decades of sharp reversals and rally to an alternative perspective based on a rejection of the bureaucracy's claims that the needs of working people can be reconciled with those of big business.

The past period has seen a vast erosion of workers' confidence in the old bureaucratic organizations. The challenge before socialists is to provide the political foundations for the emergence of a new mass working class opposition that breaks not just organizationally with the unions and NDP, but politically, through the building of a new mass socialist party.



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