

The social significance of Toronto's June 15 homeless 'riot'

24 June 2000

We are living in volatile times. On June 15, that volatility boiled over outside the Ontario Legislature when police brutally broke up a demonstration of more than a thousand people against homelessness. The scenes were frightening: mounted police charging and trampling down protesters, other police dressed in riot-gear pepper-spraying the crowd and then ganging up in threes and fours to beat individual protesters with billy clubs. Twenty-nine demonstrators were arrested.

Predictably, the big business media has blamed the violence on the victims, claiming the demonstrators fomented a riot by charging police barricades. The demonstration was organized by the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) and led by anti-poverty activist and radical protester John Clarke. The politics of Clarke and OCAP, who advocate “direct action” tactics to elicit maximum media coverage, will be discussed at the end of this article. But even if one accepts the police's claim that they came under attack from the small section of the crowd that pushed against the police barricades, the police's response was entirely disproportionate. The police ran amok, attacking not only anyone participating in the demonstration, but even medical personnel tending the wounded. Moreover, the police were acting at the behest of a Tory provincial government that has done real violence to the poor, by slashing welfare benefits by 21.5 percent, eliminating social housing and abolishing rent controls.

What happened on June 15 bears close attention for what it says about the trajectory of politics in Ontario and the country as a whole.

But first some background about the social plague of homelessness, which prompted the demonstration.

* Between 30,000 and 40,000 people are homeless in Toronto. Even if one takes the lower figure, in relative terms, Toronto's homeless population is nearly 16 percent higher than that of New York City, and the weather conditions in Toronto, especially the winters, are much worse.

* The cuts in welfare benefits and the removal of rent controls have meant that many poor are unable to pay their rents. Roughly 1,600 renters are being evicted each month. Meanwhile, under the “Safe Streets Act,” the Tories have given police the power to harass and jail the poor by outlawing squeegeeing and “aggressive” panhandling.

* There aren't enough shelters in Toronto to house all the homeless and the city refuses to open more, leaving anywhere from 1,000 to 2,000 people to fend for themselves every night, sleeping in parks, ravines, garages or abandoned buildings. In the Catch-22 logic that increasingly characterizes official politics, it's against the law to sleep outside, meaning that those who do are liable to be arrested or subjected to other forms of police harassment. As in other North American cities, the police in Toronto are under standing orders to remove the homeless from public view. Recently, the police burned down a homeless site at Spadina and Lakeshore, undoubtedly because this was an “eyesore” for the upper middle class residents of nearby

lakeside condos. Basically the attitude of the state towards the homeless is that they are human garbage.

* The inevitable outcome of that attitude is the horrifying fact that in the last half year, 27 homeless people have been found dead. And even more chilling is the fact that three of the deaths in the last month have been murders, including a man found lying in a bus shelter on June 5 with his throat cut.

* Claiming profit margins were too thin, commercial developers in Toronto stopped building apartments or houses for the low-income rental market 25 years ago. Thereafter, the only low-cost housing that got built was with subsidies from the federal and provincial governments, but those subsidies were wiped out in the 1990s by Chretien's Liberals in Ottawa and the Harris Tories at Queen's Park. Part of Harris's “Common Sense Revolution” was his promise to “get the government out of the housing business,” and true to his word he canceled 17,000 units of low-cost housing in his first term. Governments have withdrawn from social housing at the same time as Toronto's population has rapidly expanded. As a result, Canada's largest and in many respects wealthiest city has a vacancy rate of less than one-tenth of one percent.

This brings us back to June 15. That there should be anger over homelessness in Toronto is not a surprise. What is really surprising is that there hasn't been more anger expressed until now.

The marchers—who include homeless people, anti-poverty activists, union members and students—march peacefully for about a mile from Allen Gardens on the city's east side to the legislature buildings at Queen's Park. After a short speech from Clarke telling the crowd that their request to address the legislature on the homeless crisis has been denied, a section of the marchers move forward, overturning the first set of police barricades. At the second barricade, they are stopped by riot police. There is some shoving. Then the police claim that a Molotov cocktail has been hurled at them and call for reinforcements, including 20 mounted police. A terrifying melee ensues, as the police fire pepper spray, then charge forward, raining blows with billy clubs on anyone whom they encounter.

OCAP has claimed that none of its people threw a Molotov cocktail. Meanwhile, the *Toronto Star* has reported that “the crowd of protesters included dozens of plainclothes officers.” The suspicion that the June 15 riot may have been a police provocation, is reinforced by the fact that, according to the same report, the police put “more than a month's worth of planning” into their response. Two other points are relevant here: first, it is well known that the Toronto police have long targeted Clarke and OCAP as “troublemakers”; and second, the Harris government has a habit of resorting to violence to stamp out dissent.

Judy Rebick, a prominent feminist and CBC journalist, was at the demonstration, and she didn't see a riot until the police attacked: “[A]t

first not much happened except for a few people throwing balls of paper at the police and chanting 'our house, our house'. Then the horses came in.... That's when the confrontation escalated. I've seen it before. When the police want to provoke confrontation, they use the horses. People get stepped on, hit and even trampled and then they get angry. The police used the anger to justify attack after attack.... These were poor and homeless people, many of whom have seen friends die on the streets. Some people were angry enough to fight back. Several times demonstrators retreated and things calmed down. Then the police moved in again.... Other than a handful of people who picked up rocks in the area, none of the demonstrators were armed." This is confirmed by another eyewitness, who says that things had settled down after the first 15 minutes of minor confrontations; then the police suddenly launched an unprovoked attack. "They surged, both on foot and on horseback, at the chanting crowd in what could only be described as a malicious, orchestrated attack."

The police assault was relentless. A medical team that was trying to treat the dozens of injured at the back of the demonstration was attacked by mounted police and forced to disperse. When a nurse tried to call in an ambulance for some of the injured, the ambulance service refused to respond. There were even reports of police getting on to buses and streetcars to drag people off who were trying to leave the demonstration in order to arrest them.

And there is every likelihood that the repression won't stop there. Much of the media and many Tory and Liberal politicians are demanding that the book be thrown at those who were arrested, so as to make them "examples" of the public's intolerance of "mob violence." The police have said they intend to subpoena hours of videotape recorded by television new teams in the hopes of identifying "rioters" and laying further charges. Toronto Police Chief Julian Fantino has also instructed his department's Internal Affairs Division to probe the actions of some politicians who intervened in the latter stages of the riot in a vain attempt to curb the police violence.

A key tenet of the Tories' right-wing populist ideology is the claim that the Harris government aims to get the state off the backs of the people. In fact, while dismantling public and social services and gutting environmental regulations, the Tories have moved to centralize power in the hands of the provincial government and increase the repressive powers of the state. A bill currently before the legislature, for example, would drastically restrict public school teachers' collective bargaining rights and even curtail their right to voice dissenting opinions about government education policy.

The Tories have sought to deflect mounting anger and anxiety over growing poverty, income disparity, and economic insecurity by scapegoating marginal groups, especially the poor. But this formula is now threatened. The Walkerton tragedy, in which up to 14 people were killed by contaminated water, has served to crystallize growing popular concern over the deplorable state of public services. And for all of Harris's squirming, the premier and his government have been unable to escape blame for these deaths. In the month since Walkerton became synonymous with e-coli contamination much has come into the public domain that shows not only that Tories should have known that their massive cuts to water regulation would imperil public health, but that they were, in fact, repeatedly warned of the danger.

The dirty water of Walkerton has burned a hole in the Tories' populist appeal. But without that appeal the Tories have little left to impose their policies except naked force ... and the craven collaboration of the unions and the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP).

Some assessment of the politics of OCAP is in order here, not only to understand what happened at Queen's Park, but more importantly to shed light on the how the struggle against homelessness and social inequality can be carried forward.

OCAP has been subjected to a torrent of criticism in the media and by mainstream politicians. Typically, the group is characterized as a bunch of extremists who exploit the poor and homeless for their own sinister aims. In a front-page column the *Toronto Star*, the semi-official voice of liberalism in Ontario, claimed sympathy with the "inchoate anger" of "the province's underclass," while expressing outrage that the homeless and their supporters would violate the norms of the established social and political order.

Still, one commonly heard criticism of OCAP rings true—that the group's antics play directly into the hands of the Harris government. It is perfectly clear, both from the group's statements and its record, that its intentions were to put on a show for the media at Queen's Park, just as it had done on Parliament Hill in Ottawa in February of 1999. Because the police knew just what to expect from Clarke's group, they had a free hand to turn what was intended as an innocuous protest stunt into a "riot" and to paint the opponents of the government as "violent."

OCAP's rise to prominence is both a product and a measure of the political vacuum that has resulted from the betrayal and suppression of the working class opposition to the Harris Tory government. Between 1995 and 1997, Ontario was convulsed by demonstrations and strikes, but when a province-wide, "illegal" strike by teachers threatened to bring down the Tory government, the unions and the NDP strangled the strike and wound up the anti-Tory movement.

OCAP, however, has drawn no lessons from this experience and consequently can offer no way forward for working people. Indeed, its protest antics serve to direct the attention of workers and youth away from the crisis of working class leadership and perspective, and to promote the belief that at most what is required to beat back the big business offensive on workers' rights, jobs and living standards is a revival of trade union militancy and protest politics.

"Direct Action" is a euphemism for noisier, more muscular protests, that aim to put pressure on the political establishment by attracting maximum media coverage. It is by definition the opposite of a struggle to mobilize the working class as an independent political force, advancing its own program to reorganize economic and social life.

Thus the central demand of the June 15 demonstration was that the homeless should be permitted to address the Ontario Legislature—as if homelessness would be solved if only the Tories and their parliamentary opponents were better acquainted with the extent and scope of the problem.

The labor bureaucrats have themselves taken the measure of OCAP. Recognizing that OCAP does not challenge either their political or organizational control over the working class, the bureaucracy of the Canadian Auto Workers, and several other unions support OCAP to the tune of \$50,000 per year.



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