

Canada: Workers and unemployed protest outside Tory conference

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Several thousand trade unionists, unemployed workers, students and welfare rights activists participated in a series of protests last weekend against seven years of Tory rule in Ontario, Canada's most populous province. Elected in 1995, Ontario's Tory government has spearheaded corporate Canada's assault against the working class, making massive cuts to public services, slashing welfare benefits and otherwise victimizing the poor, lengthening the legal work-week to 60 hours, and attacking trade union rights.

The focus of last weekend's protests was the Ontario Progressive Conservative (Tory) leadership convention, which chose a successor to Mike Harris as party leader and provincial premier. As expected, Ernie Eves, who served as Finance Minister and Deputy Premier from 1995 to February 2001 and then took a high-powered, million-dollar-a-year Bay Street job, won the Tory leadership race. The corporate media has trumpeted Eves' claims to be a moderate who will eschew the confrontational-style of his predecessor. But in his victory speech, Eves paid a gushing tribute to Harris. "We begin," Eves told the Tory faithful, "with a strong foundation, and for that, Mike, we will never be able to adequately express our gratitude to you ... The greatest compliment we can give to him [Harris] is to continue the common sense work that he began." (Mimicking the Gingrich Republicans, the Ontario Tories dubbed their radical, right-wing program the Common Sense Revolution.)

The largest of last weekend's protests was a march by more than 2,000 trade unionists and their supporters. It concluded at a park across the street from the Metro Toronto Convention Centre where the Tories were meeting. By far the largest contingent at the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) protest was a 1,500-strong delegation of striking Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) members. Across the street from the

park, were scores of riot police protected by steel barricades.

While the union protest proceeded without incident—the OFL had sent the police a letter reassuring the authorities of their peaceful intentions—the police set upon a later demonstration organized by the Ontario Coalition against Poverty (OCAP) at the same park.

When the OCAP supporters tried to leave, police, including several on horseback, blocked their way and a melee ensued. Police arrested twelve protesters and bloodied many others. Several of the OCAP supporters required medical attention.

The previous evening, police had brutally expelled OCAP supporters from an abandoned building they had occupied near the convention site and arrested more than fifty people. Over the past five years, the police have repeatedly engaged in violent confrontations with OCAP, which, under conditions where the unions and social democrats have abandoned any serious opposition to the Tories, have won support from welfare recipients, the homeless and student youth.

In the wake of the latest police-OCAP confrontation, Toronto Police Chief Julian Fantino called for the police to be given new powers to deal with protesters.

The OFL rally heard ritualistic anti-Tory speeches from the union officialdom. OPSEU President Leah Casselman, an accomplished demagogue, said, "The [Tory leadership] candidates were all there during the cuts. They're just trying to repackage themselves with new bows and ribbons." OFL President Wayne Samuelson, who was instrumental in scuttling the popular opposition movement against the Harris government in 1997, enumerated some of the Tories' crimes. "People won't forget Walkerton; Dudley George; Kimberly Rogers, who died under house arrest—her crime?—being poor; overflowing emergency rooms; schools starved of cash; workers killed on the job no longer protected by

legislation and the homeless in ever-increasing numbers living on the streets.”

Significantly, none of the trade union speakers made any mention of a renewal of mass actions against the Tories or of a political alternative to the current government. Although not explicitly stated the message was clear: the union bureaucracy is banking on the election of the Liberals at the next provincial election, slated for 2003 or 2004. Both the Liberals and the unions’ traditional ally, the social democratic New Democratic Party (NDP), have accepted the central tenets of the Tories’ Common Sense Revolution, including massive corporate and personal income tax cuts and the shrinking of Ontario’s public and social services.

In addition to various other union bureaucrats, the OFL rally heard from two speakers who have been tragically affected by the Tories’ actions. Sam George, brother of Indian protester Dudley George who was murdered by police in 1995 while demonstrating at Ipperwash Provincial Park, made an impassioned plea to any future premier to call a public inquiry into the death of his brother. As a result of a lawsuit brought by the George family, evidence has emerged that indicates the unprovoked police assault that resulted in Dudley George’s death was mounted on orders from Premier Harris himself.

Bruce Davidson of the Concerned Walkerton Citizens sharply criticized the government for its role in the tainted water tragedy that left seven people dead and made thousands more ill in May of 2000. (An inquiry established by the Harris government concluded that the Tories’ deregulation of water-testing and massive cuts to the Environment Ministry were directly responsible for the Walkerton tragedy.)

“I think it’s only fair,” said Davidson, “that the real role of the government and its performance is judged by the people who’ve lived with the consequences of what they have done to us... They told us it was simply belt tightening. Well I would suggest to you that when you tighten the belt to the point where your abdominal muscles give way and your abdomen falls out, it’s gone a little too far... We cannot look at short-term economic gains and then end up with long-term disasters and say that’s just ‘OK.’ If we have a public service that is going to be responsible for us, let’s have enough public servants in sufficient numbers to make sure that it’s still safe.”

Davidson’s remarks won the most enthusiastic response from the crowd. Especially supportive were OPSEU members, who have seen thousands of jobs eliminated

from their places of work in recent years, increasing their work loads and endangering public safety.

The OPSEU strike is the second under the current Tory government. The same Leah Casselman who castigated the Tories in her speech on Saturday, led Ontario government workers in an even larger strike in 1996, which ended with the union accepting an agreement that gave the Tories the green light to eliminate 12,000 public sector jobs.

The WSWS spoke to a number of people at the rally. An OPSEU official described the outcome of the 1996 strike as a “tremendous learning ground for that sector of our union.” With regards to the present job action he said, “Our folks are focused and powerful and will win.” With regards to the NDP, which opened the door to the Harris Tories by repudiating their own program and making massive social spending cuts, he declared, “I think the NDP are in a rebuild position... but there will always be an NDP.”

One worker named Debbie, who is employed by the ministry of the Attorney-General, expressed her frustration with the strike. “We haven’t gained anything, we’ve lost a lot. They keep hiring contract workers without benefits. If we’re so essential, why are they hiring contract workers? We’re being forced to cross our own picket lines.” (Almost one third of OPSEU members are prohibited from striking due to essential service provisions and in many cases have to cross their own picket lines to get to work.)

Jill, who has worked with disabled people for many years, denounced the press portrayal of the strike. “There’s a misconception out there that it’s just about the money. And that’s not it at all.... Those people are out of work six months after they become disabled before they come under our program.”

There have been no negotiations since the strike began March 12. The union is asking for five percent wage increases in each of the next two years and improved job security. The government is insisting on yearly increases of only 1.95 percent in a three-year contract and cuts in benefits.



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