

Toronto demonstration opposes municipal cuts

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About two thousand people rallied outside Toronto City Hall Monday evening, protesting against a \$29 million package of cuts to municipal services recommended by the city's millionaire, right-wing mayor, Rob Ford, and his Executive Council. As the protest unfolded, city councilors inside the hall were debating a series of measures that would privatize zoos and theatres, close museums and end critically needed programs.

The rally, called by an umbrella group of social service advocates and endorsed by many of Toronto's trade unions, was aimed at pressuring various right-centre councilors into opposing the mayor's schemes. In the event, council voted on Tuesday to accept almost all of the proposed cuts, amounting to \$26 million.

Another \$70 million in social service cuts has been temporarily deferred by Ford's Executive Council because municipal and provincial Conservative electoral machines have deemed across-the-board austerity announcements politically damaging on the eve of October's provincial election. The fact that a paltry \$3 million of the \$29 million package did not immediately pass muster was hailed as a victory by the "left of centre" minority on city council.

The package presented by Ford this week was, in the mayor's own words, "only scraping the surface". Ford has called for "efficiencies" aimed at slashing jobs and services and increasing user fees to cover a projected budget shortfall that is projected to be as much as \$774 million. Every city department has been mandated to cut 10 percent from its budget for a total savings of \$360 million. Ford has said that 7,000 municipal jobs must be eliminated and core services like street cleaning, snow removal, parks maintenance, day care, transit and libraries must be significantly cut back. User fees for the city's 3,700 "customer supported" services

could as much as double.

At the beginning of the year the mayor moved to privatize half of Toronto's garbage collection with an ensuing cut to the wages and benefits of the refuse workers. Ford has also pledged to abolish the city's long-standing Fair Wages Policy, which requires the city to award contracts only to companies that pay their workforce a wage roughly commensurate with the public sector norm.

The lion's share of Ford's austerity program is now slated to be addressed in budgetary committees and brought again before council in November. Ford and his team of councilors have insisted that their so-called efficiencies be supported by a majority of the 44 councilors, otherwise, as Ford ally Norm Kelly stated, "If you think there's blood on the floor now, you wait and see what's going to happen if you don't have the insight and the political will to support the recommendations that have come down to you from the executive committee." The Ford team has sought to stampede public opinion by threatening that municipal taxes could be raised by up to 35 percent if their budget is not passed later this fall.

Union officials had predicted that 10,000 protesters would attend the September 26 rally. If the number of demonstrators fell well short of that projection, it was not due to any lack of oppositional sentiment amongst the population of Toronto. Opinion polls show that Ford's initial popularity after his election victory last year has collapsed. Rather, city workers and working people at large have watched as the unions first extended an olive branch to the reactionary mayor, and then when it was rejected outright, opposed any serious mobilization of the working class to fight against austerity.

Ford had promised during his campaign last year that

he could balance the city's budget without making any cuts to public services. Campaigning on the slogan "Stop the Gravy Train at City Hall", he insisted there were hundreds of millions of dollars of wasteful spending in the city budget. Last summer, he paid a \$3 million commission to the accounting firm KPMG to identify this "gravy". The KPMG auditors, however, could find no obvious "fat" in municipal spending and instead identified a full gamut of core spending initiatives to be axed.

No trade union officials spoke at the rally. Members of various community-based organizations spoke eloquently about how Ford's cuts would affect their families but were unable to offer any solution beyond appeals to city council to "do the right thing". It was left to one of the rally organizers to insist that the politically motivated deferral of the major cuts over to Ford's budget committees was in fact a "victory" for working people. As if to underline this complacency, rally attendees were instructed to begin their march across the square at city hall to the strains of Bob Marley's "Every Little Thing's Gonna Be Alright".

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with a number of attendees at the rally. Mary, a senior from Parkdale, said of the mayor, "I absolutely hate that man. He's taking everything away that makes this city bearable. I like to go to the library, especially on really hot days because they have air conditioning and I can read a book and just relax. But he's going to cut back on the opening hours. I don't care if he said he isn't going to close any of them. He's going to cut back the hours. He'll probably close some of them later anyway, the liar. My husband has to take kidney treatments and he gets on the Wheel Trans for disabled people and believe me, that's important for him, especially in winter, but now Ford says that kidney patients aren't going to be eligible for transport."

Costas D., a Toronto Transit Commission worker, said "What Ford is doing is no different than what's happening everywhere. The rich are getting richer off of our backs. It's sickening, but if I'm being honest with you, I really don't know what to do about it. The unions aren't doing anything. Look at what's happening in Greece. They have rallies and strikes with hundreds of thousands, even millions of people. But the rich guys don't pay any attention. They know they're calling all the shots. Instead of just marching around all

day, maybe the people should just bust through and take over things. I'll tell you. They couldn't do any worse."

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party explained that vital public services and city workers' jobs and conditions could only be defended if the struggle was organized independently of and in opposition to the unions and social democrats. This was the prerequisite for spearheading an industrial and political counter-offensive by the entire working class against the drive of big business to make working people pay for the world capitalist crisis.



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