

# Ontario unions try to provide cover for NDP's support for austerity budget

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About ten thousand workers attended a rally on the grounds of Ontario's legislature in Toronto on Saturday to protest against the vicious austerity budget introduced by the province's minority Liberal government. The budget, which will be voted on this Tuesday, calls for \$16 billion in cuts to public expenditures over the next three years.

The rally was organized by the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) in order to provide a political cover for the New Democratic Party (NDP) as it negotiates a deal with Premier Dalton McGuinty and his Liberals to pass the budget. With the Conservative Party already committed to opposing the government because its proposals do not go "far enough" in attacking working people's living standards, the Liberals need the New Democrats' support to pass the budget and remain in office.

The centerpiece of the budget is a vow to use all "administrative and legislative" means at the government's disposal—i.e. strikebreaking laws and contracts imposed by government fiat—to freeze one million public sector workers' wages for the next two years. The government has also said it will be making major changes to public sector workers' pensions, including increasing worker contributions to 50 percent, another form of pay cut. The Liberals have also declared that they will not make good on deficits in public sector pension plans. Rather these will have to be made up through increased worker contributions or pension cuts or both.

Health care costs, which have been increasing at a rate of 6 percent per annum, are to be limited to increases of 2.1 percent per year. Numerous hospital, highway and other infrastructure projects have either been cancelled, postponed or scaled back.

The government is also freezing welfare payments for "able-bodied" recipients for one year. No matter that food price and electricity rates are both rising far in excess of the overall 3 percent inflation rate and, when adjusted for inflation, welfare and disability payments are now lower

than they were at the end of the Conservative government of Mike Harris. On taking office in 1995, Harris slashed welfare benefits by more than 20 percent, and then froze them for the remainder of his time in office.

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party distributed 1,500 copies of a statement that warned that the NDP, in the name of "making parliament work," is preparing to support sweeping social spending cuts. It declared: "Saturday's show of opposition to the Liberal cuts is political theater meant to disguise the fact that [the unions] and the NDP are preparing to prop up McGuinty's minority Liberal government, ensure passage of its austerity budget, and surrender before its two-year public sector wage freeze... [T]he NDP has for weeks been 'negotiating' its support for a budget that is even more draconian than the attacks launched on working people under the Conservative government of Mike Harris.

"The most radical NDP demand is for a slight increase in the taxes of the top 1 percent... But even this 'demand' is but a suggestion, since Ontario NDP (ONDP) leader Andrea Horwath has explicitly ruled out drawing any lines in the sand.

"The NDP's readiness to support the Liberal budget is not a matter of being 'boxed-in' by parliamentary arithmetic. The NDP has at most minor, tactical differences with the Liberal austerity measures. It agrees with the Liberals that the budget must be balanced by 2017-18 and that this must be done principally through spending cuts—that is at the expense of the public and social services upon which working people depend and by gutting public sector workers' wages, pensions and other benefits." (For the full statement see: "Canada: To defeat McGuinty and Harper, workers must rebel against OFL and NDP")

This perspective was immediately vindicated from the speakers' platform at the Toronto rally. ONDP leader Horwath began her remarks by admitting that the McGuinty budget was "profoundly flawed." This, however, would not stop her party from supporting it should the Liberals provide her with sufficient political cover. In this, Horwath felt

“extremely optimistic.” Repeating a call she had made at the recent ONDP convention for the social democrats to eschew any connection, however tenuous, with social contestation, Horwath declares, “It’s easy to oppose everything. It’s much harder to make minority government work.”

If Horwath was not yet prepared to state outright that her party would support the government on Tuesday, it was only because she did not wish to preempt a scheduled Sunday meeting with the Premier, aimed at concluding the deal. Upon leaving the stage, however, she was left with no doubt about the position of many of the demonstrators, who took up the chant, “Vote the deal down! Vote the deal down!”

OFL President Sid Ryan, who postures as a “left” within the union officialdom and the NDP, was less coy than his party leader, telling the crowd, “*When* [note not “if”] this final deal is done Tuesday,” Horwath must do her best to unfreeze social assistance expenditures. Indeed, when questioned last Thursday by Stephen LeDrew, a local television host, about the possibility of the NDP withholding their votes and forcing another election, Ryan had stated unequivocally that this would not happen.

Many of the speakers who addressed the rally lead unions that have actively supported the Ontario Liberals of Dalton McGuinty and their federal counterparts in election campaigns over the past decade, including Canadian Auto Workers president Ken Lewenza and several teacher union representatives. None of these speakers apologized to workers for having promoted McGuinty as a “friend of labour” or indicated any questioning of their promotion of this big-business party whatsoever. It was again left to Ryan to draw the conclusions reached by the bureaucracy. Referring to the representatives of the labour movement as the Liberal “base,” Ryan declared, “We won’t knock on the doors and we won’t answer the phones (during election campaigns), Dalton unless you listen to our message.”

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party spoke with a number of workers who attended the rally, several of whom were already avid readers of the *World Socialist Web Site*. Scott, a teacher, said he was very upset with the government for its failure to listen to criticisms of their budget proposals. He was unsure of the reasons behind the response of the unions to the government’s attacks. “I think the unions are trying but maybe they are just in shock and unable to do much. The rally today is surprisingly empty considering the extent of these cuts but I’m hoping that since we live in a Facebook society it will be possible to build support. If you don’t get involved, you can’t effect change. I will agree though that the teacher’s union support for the Liberals has come back to bite us. Any political party that ends up supporting this budget will certainly be at risk.”

Jorge, a retired worker from the Canadian Union of Public

Employees and an immigrant from Chile said, “I don’t trust the NDP or the labour leaders. They don’t do what they say. But I don’t think we should break with them. We should fight to take them over.” Asked why one would wish to take over organizations that directly represent the interests of the ruling class, Jorge expressed a degree of demoralization. “We really have to work to unify the movement. Look, there’s less than ten thousand people here. That’s why we need unity now. I think people in Canada don’t yet know what true poverty is like what we have in countries like Chile.”

Eli, a young retail worker, had a very different view. He had approached a SEP supporter and said he had already read the party’s statement that morning on the *World Socialist Web Site*. “I’m so glad to see you here today. Everyone should see this leaflet and rebel against these bastards. No one but you is saying that. But it’s a truth people are going to have to struggle with. It’s getting to be more and more obvious. These people up on the stage don’t represent us. The unions do one deal after another with the corporations and what do we get? Poverty wages and part-time jobs. The NDP is no better. Maybe even worse. Look at this Horwath. She refuses to make poverty an issue. In the last election, she didn’t make a peep even though everyone knew that the powers-that-be were planning on these giant budget cuts. How many speeches did she make during the campaign? And not once did she think it a good thing to do to warn people about what’s happening now. Why is that? Because she’s one of them, not one of us.”



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