

# Canada: The unions' suppression of the 1995–97 anti-Harris movement: Political lessons for today

## Part 1: The significance of Harris' "Common Sense Revolution"

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*This is the first part of a four-part series. The second part can be accessed [here](#), the third [here](#) and the fourth [here](#).*

Since taking office as Ontario's new Premier in late June and declaring the province "open for business," Doug Ford and his Conservative government have declared war on the working class and shifted politics in the province and across Canada sharply to the right.

The Ford government has made a series of policy announcements aimed at demonstrating the new government's resolve to slash social spending, while further reducing taxes for big business and the rich. It has also underlined its support for a reactionary "tough on crime" agenda and is employing Trump-style rhetoric to scapegoat refugee claimants for Ontario's chronic lack of social housing and dilapidated public services. As a down payment on the coming austerity drive, Ford has imposed a provincial government hiring ban, an across-the-board freeze on incidental expenditures, and an indefinite wage freeze for civil service managers and administrators.

Over the past two weeks, the Tory government has released a projection of a \$15 billion budget deficit this year, and a report on government spending that claimed outlays rose by 55 percent during the previous 15 years of Liberal rule. The transparent aim of these announcements is to lay the groundwork for wide-ranging privatizations, user-fee hikes, and social spending cuts, or, as the spending report puts it, "decisive action."

Within hours of the government taking office, Health Minister Christine Elliott made sweeping regressive changes to a recently introduced, aged-limited Pharmacare program that provided free prescription drugs for all Ontarians aged 24 or under. Now these benefits will be restricted to those without any existing drug coverage. Days later the government passed strike-breaking legislation against a five-month strike by York University teaching assistants. On Tuesday, Ford announced the government would rescind the modest improvements in provincial labour standards the Liberals introduced late last year in a vain attempt to avoid retribution at the polls for imposing years of austerity. "We're going to make sure we're competitive around the world," declared Ford. "We're getting rid of Bill 148."

Ford and his ruling class backers are well aware that this reactionary agenda cannot be implemented democratically. That is why Ford's declaration that he was ready to invoke the Canadian Constitution's "notwithstanding clause" to cut the number of seats on

Toronto City Council in the face of judicial opposition, and that he would invoke it again to suspend democratic rights whenever needed, was eagerly welcomed by much of the establishment, including the *National Post* and *Toronto Sun*. Ford's power-play was rightly interpreted as a warning that he will use the full force of the capitalist state apparatus and turn increasingly to authoritarian forms of rule to impose his socially incendiary, pro-corporate policies.

Workers will bitterly resist the ruling class' attempt to destroy what remains of the social rights it won through the mass struggles of the last century and do so as part of a growing rebellion of the working class in the US and around the world. But to mount a successful counter-offensive, workers in Ontario and Canada must break free of the political and organizational grip of the pro-capitalist trade unions and the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP), and advance their own solution to the capitalist crisis—the fight for a workers' government and the socialist reorganization of society.

At the NDP's main post-election rally, party leader Andrea Horwath said the social democrats would be the "voice" for the people of Ontario who "did not vote for cuts." Ontario Federation of Labour President Chris Buckley later claimed, "The labour movement will hold Doug Ford's feet to the fire," while Jerry Dias, the president of Unifor, Canada's largest industrial union, said the premier-elect will "be very surprised" if "he thinks that the result of this election is a carte blanche to wage attacks on workers and unleash cuts to public services."

All this is hollow bluster, aimed at positioning the unions and NDP to contain and politically derail working class opposition to the Ford government and ensure it does not become a threat to capitalist rule.

The NDP is a pro-austerity party and like social-democratic and labour parties around the world utterly subservient to big business. If it was relegated to third-party status for a generation in Ontario, it was because the only ever NDP government in the province's history, headed by Bob Rae between 1990–95, cruelly betrayed the hopes of working people, slashing public services, suspending collective bargaining rights in the public sector, and imposing a wage- and job-cutting "social contract."

As for the unions, over the past 15 years they were close allies of the big business Liberal government in Ontario just as they are currently partnering with the federal Trudeau government.

In order to cover for this treachery, the pseudo-left groups that orbit

around the NDP and the trade unions have called for these organizations to resurrect the anti-austerity campaign that was launched against a previous Thatcher-Reagan styled Conservative government led by Mike Harris. That campaign of civil disobedience, contract disputes, and a series of 11 one-day “Days of Action”—“political protests” involving rallies and one-day walkouts—began in 1995. When the opposition movement threatened to escape the unions’ control and a province-wide illegal teachers’ strike raised, once again, the need for a political general strike aimed at driving the Conservatives from office, the unions shut the movement down.

A closer look at the events during this time will show that rather than being a vehicle for resistance, the unions and the NDP are in fact the principal obstacles to the mobilization of the working class against the Ford government. Only by drawing the lessons of the failure of this movement will it be possible to politically prepare a working class counter-offensive to Ford’s depredations.

The anti-Harris agitation in Ontario was the largest and most sustained working class opposition movement in North America during the 1990s. During that time, governments across Canada and of every political stripe imposed sweeping social spending cuts in the name of eliminating budget deficits. What distinguished the Harris government was its readiness to slash taxes—in their first term the Tories cut personal income taxes by 30 percent—thus exacerbating the budget shortfall and increasing the pressure from the province’s creditors for public service cuts. (During Harris’ first four years in office, the province’s accumulated deficit rose by \$22 billion.)

While other governments claimed the “deficit crisis” left them no choice but to cut expenditures, the Conservatives unabashedly declared that their aim was to “roll back government”—that they were intent on redistributing money from public services and transfers to the poor to “beleaguere” taxpayers—in reality, to the more privileged sections of the middle class and the rich.

The Conservative tax cuts had a three-fold purpose: to garner votes by appealing to discontent among working people, the vast majority of whose incomes had fallen or stagnated for well over a decade; to swell the incomes of the well-to-do by clawing back an increasing portion of the tax revenue that previously sustained public and social services; and last, but not least, to ensure that future governments did not have the financial means to reinvest in social and public services.

Years of under-funding, Harris calculated, would so undermine the quality of healthcare, education and other public services that a popular constituency would develop for privatization. As Harris’s first Education Minister John Snobelen once conceded, the Tories aimed to provoke a crisis so they could push through deep cuts.

In subsequent years, the Conservatives took further steps to boost the share of social wealth appropriated by the privileged and to ensure that no future government had the means to redress the crisis in public and social services.

Harris introduced a vast array of cuts to personal income, corporate and capital gains taxes. Corporate taxes were reduced by \$1.3 billion in the first fiscal year, and were halved over the next five years. By 2004 corporations were paying \$4 billion less in taxes per year. Over the same period, the portion of capital gains subject to taxation was reduced from 75 percent to 50 percent. Corporate high-flyers also benefited from a new tax exemption on their first \$100,000 in annual earnings from stock options.

With billions going to tax relief for the well-off, social service cuts left the public health system on life-support. Hospitals closed, nurses

were laid off and new investment stalled. Regulatory changes, privatizations and cuts to health and safety supports led to reduced water-quality standards and the eventual poisoning of the water supply in Walkerton, Ontario, that left 7 dead and over 2,000 sickened. Toronto also experienced the worst outbreak of SARS in the developed world in 2003, when at least 32 people lost their lives—an outcome directly attributable to the Tory cuts.

In education, over \$5 billion was hacked from the budget. University fees were hiked by as much as 20 percent. Private for-profit universities were enabled and the length of the working day for high school teachers was increased even as wages stagnated. Cuts in property taxes and increased enrollment meant school boards received less per student in each year of the Conservative reign. With their education “reforms,” the Tories effectively stripped teachers of their collective bargaining rights and arbitrarily rewrote their working conditions. Teachers no longer had the right to negotiate workload and working conditions. Grade 13 in the high schools was eliminated. Thousands of teachers were laid off.

Harris introduced a welfare “reform”—a 21.5 percent cut in welfare benefits and the introduction of “workfare”—and billed it as his government’s most significant accomplishment. Military style “boot camps” for young offenders were introduced. “Super-jails” were built. Provincial transfers to municipalities were gutted. As homelessness became a national emergency, a Tory budget actually cut \$90 million from the municipal affairs and housing ministry. Panhandling was criminalized. The minimum wage was frozen for a decade. Labour law protections for workers were eviscerated.

This right-wing, anti-social agenda spearheaded a mounting class war in which all levels of government and all parties—from the NDP and Parti Quebecois through the Reform Party/Canadian Alliance—participated. In October 2000, when the Chrétien-Martin federal Liberal government implemented the biggest-ever tax cuts for big business and the rich, Harris gloated that the Liberals were “talking my kind of language.”

Workers came forward en masse in opposition to this reactionary agenda. Between 1995 and 1997, over a million workers and young people joined protests, strikes and other anti-Harris actions. But the treacherous role of the union bureaucracy proved decisive in shutting down the anti-Harris movement. With the Ford government now preparing attacks that go even further than Harris, it is critical that workers make a political appraisal of the rise and fall of the 1995–97 anti-austerity movement in preparation for the bitter class battles to come.



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