

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

Part 2: Unions work to diffuse swelling working-class opposition

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8 October 2018

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

Within weeks of the June 1995 election of Mike Harris' Progressive Conservative Ontario government, "Embarrass Harris" protests erupted across the province. The Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) stood aloof from these initial actions, which focused on the Tories' brutal 21.5 percent cut in welfare benefits. By the end of the year, however, the OFL had changed course and was seeking to use its financial-organizational muscle to place itself at the head of the opposition movement, the better to politically control and contain it.

Ontario's union apparatuses had been bitterly divided in the preceding years over their response to the anti-worker policies of the union-backed Rae NDP government, which under pressure from the Canadian and US banks and credit-agencies had imposed sweeping social spending cuts. Fearing that they would be utterly discredited in the eyes of their own members if they signed onto the government's wage- and job-cutting "social contract," CUPE, the other public sector unions, and the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW—now Unifor) mounted an ineffectual protest campaign against the pay freezes and "Rae Days"(unpaid leave) that were imposed on a million public sector workers. Twelve major private sector unions, including the United Steelworkers (USW), United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), and Machinists (IAM), the so-called "Pink Paper unions," meanwhile, openly supported the social-democrats and denounced the worker opposition to their "social contract."

The bureaucrats at the OFL had no appetite to launch a militant fight against the Tory government, but, with significant protests erupting in the late summer and fall of 1995, felt it necessary to offer at least a fig leaf of opposition to safeguard their bogus claims to represent working people. As a November OFL convention convened, thousands of childcare workers staged a province-wide one-day strike. High sounding resolutions at that convention, and two subsequent OFL gatherings, mandated the leadership to organize a general strike. Predictably, no date was ever set, nor any other organizational initiatives ever taken toward realizing such a strike.

As a CAW executive member present at the November 1995 convention reported in David Rapaport's book *No Justice, No Peace*, "The labour movement was dragged into [the anti-Harris protests] kicking and screaming. The vast majority wanted to do nothing except just educate our members to just vote NDP in the next election. That

was more or less the consensus. But we had a strong sense that this was not going to work. We started out thinking we could organize a Day of Action and build it up to 3 or 4 or 5 events. But it was absolutely clear that we couldn't get the majority of unions, both public and private, on side and that it would be a challenge for us."

To placate those delegates calling for a more militant posture, and more importantly to ensure the unions remained in control of a radicalizing working class, OFL President Gord Wilson backed a motion to organize a "community protest." "Let's do a community," he proposed, "and see what kind of response we get." The city of London was subsequently chosen for a December 1995 day of protest. If turnout was sporadic, as union leaders postulated, they could always argue that London was never a bastion of working class militancy.

The response from rank-and-file workers and students in that mid-sized Ontario city on a bitterly cold Friday two weeks before Christmas stunned the labour bureaucracy. Thirty thousand workers struck. Thousands of students stayed away from school. Picket lines spread across the city. Autoworkers at GM Diesel and, in outlying towns, at CAMI Ingersoll and Ford St. Thomas shut down production. About 20,000 marched through London's streets.

In January 1996, 40,000 teachers demonstrated at the provincial legislature in Toronto. In February, a second Day of Action was held in the union stronghold of Hamilton, Canada's "Steel City." Some 30,000 workers walked off the job for the day, including many members of the "Pink Paper" USW, which had opposed any worker job-action. The following day, over 100,000 people marched in the city of 520,000. Crowds chanted, "Mike. Mike. How would you like a General Strike!"

Autoworkers at Ford's giant assembly plant in nearby Oakville sought union sanction to participate in the strike, but the CAW, which had joined with the OFL to oppose widening the "days of action" to regional strikes, squelched the mobilization. The union bureaucracies, hoping all along to "ride the tiger," became increasingly concerned that the "tiger" might escape their control and ride them.

In February, 55,000 civil servants in the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) began what became a five-week strike against the Harris' government's demands for draconian contract concessions and job cuts. The strike witnessed the infamous "Whack 'em and Stack 'em" police riot in March to break picket lines at the provincial legislature. Fearing that the mass upsurge in the working

class could develop into an outright fight to bring down the Harris government, the OFL left the public servants to fight alone. By early April, OPSEU called off the strike, having capitulated to the government's principal demands. Two weeks later, 10,000 workers received permanent layoff notices.

Two decades on, with workers once again entering into a pivotal struggle against a Tory government, the pseudo-left, as part of their efforts to rehabilitate the discredited unions and provide them with a "left" cover, are deliberately falsifying the unions' criminal role in the anti-Harris movement. Turning reality on its head, Sam Gindin, a former CAW research director and the principal leader, along with "Marxist" academic Leo Panitch, of the Socialist Project, argues in a recent article, "Will the Ontario Labour Movement Return to Class Struggle?" that the union bureaucracy led the anti-Harris movement and had to convince a reluctant rank and file to follow. "Though the protests against Harris had begun among the social movements," writes Gindin, "... only [the labour movement] could effectively interrupt the daily functioning of workplaces and cities and the OFL proved especially adept at organizing these shutdowns."

Later we will rebut Gindin's claims that the OFL's "Days of Action ran out of steam" and that the anti-Harris movement should not be viewed as a defeat, even if, as he himself concedes, it left Harris and his "neoliberal" reforms in place.

Here it should just be noted that despite some "left" sounding criticisms of contemporary unions for failing to articulate "a social vision ... or strategy for addressing the power of the state," Gindin adopts the same hostile attitude as did the then OFL President Gord Wilson to a working-class challenge to the Harris government.

In a bid to reassure Harris and the corporate elite that the unions were leading a protest movement with the double aim of keeping control of the working class and reaching an accommodation with Harris—not developing an independent working-class political offensive—Wilson emphatically declared, as the working opposition to the Conservatives swelled in the first half of 1996, that there was no question of the unions seeking to bring down the Harris government. "I accept," said Wilson, that Harris "has a constitutional mandate" to govern.

Gindin, for his part, cynically justifies the unions' opposition to the "especially uncertain terrain" of a "general strike." He claims the call for a general strike lacked "traction" since the "unity" among the unions "such a strategy demanded was simply absent," and, in any event, the working class had not given "a mandate for such a radical step."

While opposing any struggle to force Harris' resignation or new elections, the OFL leadership sought to create the impression that the reactionary policies of the Ontario government were simply the product of Harris' political proclivities and personality. The demonization of Harris, who was depicted in union propaganda as the fount of all the attacks raining down on Ontario workers, played an important part in the union bureaucracy's efforts to politically undercut the opposition movement.

By focusing entirely on Harris, the unions obscured the real stakes in the struggle and sought to politically quarantine the increasingly militant Ontario workers from their class brothers and sisters elsewhere in Canada. The Conservative attacks were unprecedented, but they were only the advance column of a big business offensive in which parties of every stripe were conscripted.

They occurred at the same time as the Chrétien-Martin Liberal government was imposing the largest social spending cuts in Canadian

history at the federal level. Moreover, while unions like the CAW and CUPE postured in Ontario as opponents of Harris' attacks, in Quebec they openly supported the Lucien Bouchard-led Parti Québécois government in its "zero deficit" campaign. This included helping draft an "early retirement" scheme that resulted in the permanent elimination of tens of thousands of education and healthcare jobs.

In an attempt to deescalate the burgeoning working class movement, calls to move toward a general strike were ignored by the OFL. Instead, two smaller cities were earmarked for "Days of Action," Kitchener in mid-April and Peterborough in June 1996. But with the provincial Conservative Party scheduling its convention in Toronto in October and workers still clamouring for an escalation of their struggle, the unions reluctantly called two days of protests, including a one-day strike, for Toronto, the country's largest city. OFL leaders hoped that one final maneuver would bring Harris back to a round-table discussion with the unions on stabilizing the situation.

In the interim, a three week autoworkers strike at General Motors Canada was consciously kept separate from the general mobilization against Harris. The CAW wound up that dispute two days before the Toronto action was due to begin.

Going beyond the unions' plans for the first day of protest, striking workers shut down the entire Metro Toronto transit system on Friday, October 25, while tens of thousands of workers struck their enterprises, called in sick or booked time off. Government agencies, including sorting at the country's principal postal sorting facility, ground to a halt. Convoys of truckers staged rolling "go slows" on the highways. According to estimates, over a million Toronto commuters, unable or unwilling to go to work, stayed at home. The country's financial institutions headquartered in Toronto, as well as the city's hospitals, were reduced to essential services. Television coverage likened the streets of central Toronto to a "ghost town." So much for Gindin and the union bureaucracy's blather about the lack of desire among workers for a general strike!

The following day, one of the largest demonstrations in the history of Canada wound its way through the city. Crowd estimates varied between 150,000 to a quarter of a million participants. From his perch at the Toronto Convention Center, Harris took the measure of the trade union bureaucracy. "It was a good show," he told reporters, "A good parade." For his part, OFL president Wilson stayed away from the Toronto rally to attend an NDP fund-raising event in northern Ontario.



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