

YOU HELD THE LINE

An Open Letter to leadership and membership of CUPE Local 82 and CUPE Local 543

You held the line.

You held the line and by doing so it was a victory for every person in this city who must sell his or her labour for a wage and salary in order to survive, be they union or non-union.

Ninety years ago, in the city of Winnipeg, thousands of government workers, municipal employees and workers in private industry, men and women, proclaimed a General Strike. In a strike lasting 100 days they battled for elemental rights. While that strike was defeated by the combined assault of political leaders, employers and strikebreakers egged on by the press it became a symbol to spur on workers for the rights of free collective bargaining.

The 99 day Windsor Ford strike in 1945 was another momentous event when autoworkers in our community stood against the employer, the forces of an anti-union corporation and two levels of government abetted by the anti-union outpourings of the local press. Forced to end the strike, the ruling of what came to be known as the Rand Formula helped to finally establish the process of free collective bargaining, union security and the legitimisation of trade unionism. Those rights have come under increasing attack as they did in these past many weeks.

History happened in Windsor this summer.

This was more than a strike about a particular set of demands and needs of a section of Windsor's working people and of two union locals holding onto hard won economic gains in a time of general economic downturn.

In this strike 1,800 Windsor CUPE workers placed themselves on the front line to defend the very process of free collective bargaining, those very rights the Canadian working class struggled so hard to win for 150 years. And that is precisely why you encountered the particular intransigence of a mayor, why some councilors slavishly towed the line or remained in silence.

The agenda of the mayor and city council was never articulated beyond shallow references that retrograde battle cry of "fiscal responsibility," a smokescreen to keep the public in the dark and to provide self-justification for turning their backs on you. The job of articulating that message and perspective was left to certain members of the media (and here I single out the particular endeavors of Messieurs Vander Doelen Henderson and Graston of the Windsor Star) who attacked the union as they always

have with such particular vehemence to a captive but increasingly dwindling audience.

The more it became clear that you stood together in union and could not be cowed the more they shrieked about greedy workers stealing money from the public fund, the more they preyed upon ignorance and fear. And it is particularly easy in tough economic times to stir up the pot of suspicion, distrust and mean heartedness to turn neighbour against neighbour. Ultimately they failed.

Their so-called “taxpayer revolt” did not exist beyond those individuals who gave in to fear and ignorance. The real revolt was organised and it was the revolt of thousands against the position of the mayor and city councilors. The mayor and councilors and their pundits will never admit to this or acknowledge it. It is to their political detriment to admit it ever existed because it exposed the lie that the city administration spoke on behalf of the community.

The mayor and councilors should take heed that even after the dust of the strike settles (and it will not settle for a long, long time), that their role will come back to haunt them.

Strikes are momentous life changing experiences. The strike you fought, with a new leadership that underwent trial by fire, and fought for so long at such great personal cost has many lessons each member can take away with them. It revealed to the broad community who you were, what you represented, the principles you upheld, and who was out there with you.

Members of CUPE Local 82 and CUPE Local 543 can be proud of what you have accomplished and what you have inspired others to do.

What the city workers did was amazing because you held the line for all of us.

With much thanks.

Len Wallace