

Labour's Crisis: The Challenge of Neo-liberalism

Socialist Project Labour Committee

These are not good times for the Canadian labour movement. In spite of the relentless onslaught of neo-liberalism, we remain stuck in defensive mode.

This isn't exceptional: it is also the case in most of the developed world that the labour movement has been unable to challenge the basic premises of neo-liberalism.

Underlying the defensiveness of labour is a series of critical weaknesses and challenges:

Lack of Political Struggle

In the wake of the Ontario Social Contract in 1993 a new opening for the left in the labour movement appeared. In a number of unions, there were fissures in the limiting of politics to electoral support for social democracy and it seemed that new forms of working class politics would be considered. There were important traditions and new experiences to build upon, such as the 1988 anti-free trade campaign; the mass demonstration for jobs in 1993; the Ontario Days of Action and the Anti-globalization movement. In each, a whole generation of labour activists gained experiences with more radical and participatory forms of political action. In the CAW, a Taskforce on Working Class Politics was struck, which actually opened up space – for the first time in over 40 years – to consider new political approaches and orientations. Now, the labour movement has returned willy-nilly to the “new” NDP of Jack Layton. While this party puts forward a program defending social programs and modest but progressive reforms and may, for the time being represent the only electoral option for the left, its

focus is not to build a movement with the capacity to challenge the power of capital. In government, it has implemented the same neo-liberal policies as the Liberals and Conservatives; it remains fundamentally an electoral machine, rather than a mobilizational instrument; and like its social democratic cousins in Europe it has continued to distance itself from labour and traditional working-class identities.

With the new funding limitations contained in campaign finance reform legislation, labour took hesitant steps to develop independent “issue-oriented” electoral campaigns in the recent federal election. The content of these campaigns was thin and offered limited strategic perspectives – such as calling for corporatist alliances with employers, as a way to guarantee the survival of different economic sectors. Politics within the labour movement has remained “business as usual”, at a time when this is clearly no longer adequate.

Lack of unity

Divisions within the labour movement remain deep-seated. At various times, debates over these differences have played a vital role in creating openings for the left. (Recall the debates over the Rae days, progressive competitiveness, the role of the public sector, lean production and the role of “empowerment”, labour funds and the role of electoral vs. extra-parliamentary politics). To the extent that such divisions reflected differences in political orientations between unions, such debates were vital to moving labour ahead. More recently, however, differences appear to be more about competing jurisdictional interests, with

debates over political orientation and strategies for challenging neo-liberalism receding in importance. Private and public sector struggles remain separated, as well.

Even more, petty, sectarian divisions amongst unions have stood in the way of labour being able to develop common strategies for organizing the unorganized. Mass organizing of key unorganized sectors requires the collective efforts of unions working together with a common project. This is not happening. On the contrary, unions are competing amongst themselves for potential new members. For the growing number of workers in precarious and low-paid employment, this has had a devastating effect.

Lack of an organizing focus

Although there have been organizing successes all too much of the growth of individual unions has been through mergers. While mergers are often necessary and positive, there have been few real organizing *breakthroughs*. Labour needs to develop new and bold organizing initiatives involving collective efforts to bring the majority of workers into the movement. This can only happen if labour sees organizing as part of building a working class rather than adding members, and integrates ‘organizing’ into a larger vision of what kind of unions we are bringing workers into.

Lack of debate

The terrain for debating real differences has shrunk, both inside individual unions and within the labour movement as a whole. Conventions, conferences and councils within un-

ions are important democratic spaces where real debate has historically taken place. All too often real debate has all but disappeared as a new generation of left dissidents has not yet developed the confidence or experience to raise difficult issues, all the more so in the face of a growing intolerance of real differences by leaders. At the same time, in larger labour movement forums, open debate is often discouraged in the name of keeping a paper unity, worked out in advance behind closed doors.

Most important, the crisis labour faces in terms of *external* attacks is also a crisis *within* labour. Real debate and the search for new ways of challenging employers and the logic of capitalism, is a necessary condition for moving forwards.

Weakness of the left

Real, constructive challenges to the status quo depend upon the existence of a strong, well-placed and active socialist left. This clearly does not exist today. New and creative strategies, ideas and criticisms seem to come from isolated individuals (marked by the mixed clarity and limited effectiveness of people working by themselves) and small groups of leftists operating independently of each other. Most workers today have no exposure to left ideas, as left political movements remain small and new. But at least we are seeing the beginnings of new left movements working inside the labour movement, starting again the process of rooting left ideas and orientations inside the working class.

The crisis of labour is part of a more general crisis of the socialist left. Finding new and creative ways to address challenges such as globalization and neo-liberalism and linking up with the leading elements of the working class movement are important ways to rekindle, once again, hopes and dreams of an alternative social system.

Fighting Concessions and Political Challenges

We are living in a moment where the chickens are coming home to roost, as the effects of neo-liberal reforms are beginning to be felt in sectors where they have been held off for decades. Today, the desire to resist – as important as it is – isn't enough. Opposing concessions is absolutely essential, but the structural power of employers is so strong that it forces us to organize, educate and mobilize



against them and put forward alternatives which challenge the logic of competitiveness in each sector. The trade union movement – still tied to social democratic approaches – is left without serious political strategies to use as a basis for putting forward alternatives. Many trade union leaders talk about fighting back. But even those that have held to the most consistent anti-concession stands in the past increasingly find themselves in concession bargaining situations today because of their inability or unwillingness to politically challenge the structural power of employers. Instead, we see them capitulating to the “realities” of competitiveness – realities that flow from the logic of neo-liberalism.

Similar trends have emerged in the public sector. In BC and Newfoundland neoliberal projects have at least temporarily succeeded in defeating public sector union efforts to challenge

them. The HEU strike is still being hotly debated amongst left-oriented labour activists. Whether one concludes that the BC labour movement missed an important opportunity to build, or bargained the best possible retreat under the circumstances, it is clearly a major defeat for the labour movement and an opening for neo-liberal governments with similar goals.

While there have been some

important struggles against employer-initiated restructuring over the last few years in many sectors, labour's fight back has been extremely uneven. Where labour leaders did initiate or participate in broader political activities such as the Ontario Days of Action, the anti-globalization and anti-war movements, they displayed a disappointing pattern of inflated rhetorical flourishes, coupled with limited mobilizational or educational commitment.

Certainly, there is opposition to continued attacks on social programs and further plans to privatize and deregulate existing state assets and programs. And, there remains a willingness to fight employers and resist takeaways. On the other hand, there is little desire or ability to challenge the ideology of competitiveness or the logic of globalization and neo-liberalism. This has helped to create →

a crisis in the ability of the labour movement to respond to the progressive deterioration of the working conditions and job security of their membership. Today, key struggles that do seek to resist employer offensives need orientations which challenge competitiveness and regulate or limit the competitive environment in the sector. If not, all too often, such struggles today end in resignation and frustration.

A Network of Left Activists in the Union Movement

It is in this context, that the Socialist Project initiated efforts to build networks of activism based in workplaces and communities. In November 14th we organized a successful conference that is summarized in this issue of *Relay*. It provided a forum to discuss the overall crisis within the

movement; heard reports from representatives of networks and engaged in general discussions about their reports. The group agreed to meet every 6 weeks for the foreseeable future to discuss key issues facing the labour movement, produce pamphlets and engage in regular communications through *Relay*, and other means. ■

Labour Conference Report

Dan Crow

One of the core features of neo-liberalism is the fact that competitive pressures are pushed onto workers, who are constantly expected to diminish expectations in order to protect jobs. Forces of competitiveness have had distinct negative effects on workers' incomes, working conditions, hours of work and job security. Unions, although still the most effective means by which workers can defend their interests, have not been immune to these pressures, being forced into defensive postures for much of the past 25 years.

It is in light of these pressures on unions (and the need to develop strategies to challenge them), that the Socialist Project Labour Committee organized a well-attended one-day conference on November 14, 2004. The conference brought together labour activists from across Southern Ontario, representing workers in both the public and private sectors. The conference was divided into three panels, with discussions covering the auto sector, municipalities and the public sector, health care, and workplace environment issues.

Sam Gindin opened the meeting with a statement of the goals of the conference, which were twofold. First, the conference was intended to bring forward and discuss union strategies that have been successful at combating competitiveness. These strategies occur in the workplace, in the community and in the broader political system at all levels of government. The second goal of the confer-

ence was to establish an ongoing network of labour activists, not only to rebuild and strengthen the culture of resistance within the labour movement, but also to develop strategies that will put in motion a socialist strategy for labour.

As all conference participants agreed, competitive pressures have had negative effects on the ways in which unions operate. Union executives are feeling greater pressures to enter into partnerships with management to protect jobs. Such partnerships can take the form of union/management lobbying for subsidies for capital, as has happened in the auto sector. But partnerships and defensive strategies can also take the form of local executives and stewards taking on management roles in trying to lower the expectations and pressuring their own members to limit breaks and work faster. In private sector workplaces, the underlying threat is capital flight; in the public sector the threat is that work will be privatized in one form or another.

Although on the defensive, workers and their unions have not been completely paralyzed. Panellists highlighted several strategies that have been successful at mobilizing members, challenging employers and fighting for greater union democracy, while combating neo-liberalism at workplaces and in the public sphere. Furthermore, discussions touched on specific proposals that could be used to protect jobs and living standards, as well as build a labour movement more capable of organizing workers for so-

cial and economic change.

Strategies of resistance have covered traditional union strategies, like the highly organized work-to-rule campaign by CUPE local 4400 workers in Toronto schools used to demonstrate how essential these workers are to the running of education. Yet successes have come through strategies that have been less widely used by unions, such as the broadly based coalition to defend the public ownership of Hydro in Ontario.

A number of other issues were raised in the discussion, covering the range of concerns that left union activists face in the current context. Amongst others, they included: the need for greater space for debate and organizing within their unions; the role of leadership in challenging competitive pressure and organizing resistance; the difficulties of small numbers of left activists in creating an alternative current in their unions and locals; balancing the concerns of workers from different sectors within larger, "general" unions, and a number of other issues.

The conference concluded with unanimous agreement that it is essential to continue organizing to build a long-term network of left and socialist labour activists. This network will include regular meetings, beginning January 16th and occurring every six weeks, to share strategies, create communities of support, and build the left within the labour movement. ■