

The Ontario McLiberal Government:

Reflections of a Trade Unionist

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Now that we are more than one year out from the 2003 Ontario election it's probably a good idea to take stock of the government record.

Coming from Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), where I have been an active member for some 15 years in the health sector, and now as staff for the last six years with the university sector, there is certainly a great deal to reflect on and ask 'what has changed?' Since the 80's, CUPE has been involved with parallel campaigns during elections that primarily focus on issues of under-funding of the public sector. All governments — Liberal, New Democratic Party and Conservative — have deliberately underfunded the public sector.

As an activist I complained about both money and staff being directed to support NDP campaigns and not enough resources to mobilizing members on the key issues of the day. For the last several years especially since the Rae NDP government, our campaigns have been less and less electoral and more issue-based. As well intentioned as these campaigns have been, the results of these efforts cannot be characterized as success. We don't get any closer to electing a labour friendly government. In fact our efforts have backfired with many unions (not CUPE) promoting strategic voting.

Reflection on this recent history leaves few conclusions other than no matter who is in power at Queen's Park we are up against the same policies of starving the public sector, privatizing and creating markets in areas where the

public sector has historically been. How are things different with this Liberal government? A big difference for public sector workers and their unions, and it may be a case of diminished expectations, is that at least they speak with us.

At meetings over the last year, various CUPE Ontario jurisdictions have reported that under the Liberals the attacks on the broader public sector are still happening though perhaps not with the crassness of the Harris Eves regime. Initially the government seemed to have a softer approach to professionals like teachers and nurses (who supported them). More recent restrictions on hospital and education funding have now alienated nurses and teachers. Support workers however are not invited to the discussion and if they are even considered they are not a priority for decent jobs but a service that can be sold to the lowest bidder.

Municipalities are still starved and aside from the more progressive bunch in Toronto many other cities are forcing privatization and contracting out on their municipal employees. The utilities affected by Bill 100 are facing Dwight Duncan, the minister of energy, who thinks that that P3's are the way to go instead of electricity at cost. Hydro workers are being forced to bid on their own jobs through a system of contestability.

Homecare is in crisis with competitive bidding that is putting the non-profits out of business. P3's are still going ahead and more are planned — a major problem because the support staff

jobs are often part of the deal to be contracted out. We saw this in BC where \$18/hr jobs get turned into \$9/hr jobs. Although the Ontario Government has not yet passed the same enabling legislation for contracting out as BC, we expect to see it in Ontario.

In social services the McGuinty Liberals introduced a new initiative using terms like "measurable outcomes" which sounds like the familiar Tory diversion of resources away from actual services to people to more bureaucratic reporting.

In the School Board sector with Education Minister Gerard Kennedy - friend to teachers - workers are expected to play nice without enough money. School board trustees still make \$5000 per year. The Tory damage has not been undone. And in the university sector we have Bob Rae (now that he's a Liberal) back to do a review of post-secondary funding. From initial information it looks like we should brace ourselves for another disappointment. He seems disposed to heaping debt onto the backs of students and is looking at models notably England, Australia and the US for inspiration. All of those jurisdictions burden students and give the private/corporate sector an undue influence over universities. We met with the minister for higher education, Mary Ann Chambers, who seems to believe that corporations fund universities in a selfless philanthropic way. She acted surprised at our CUPE Campus Check findings that reported undue corporate influence

over many university programs.

Phony consultations around infrastructure have put union reps and potential profiteer contractors at the same table to 'brainstorm' solutions. The fact remains that super build was/is a failure and P3's are more expensive. But they won't let it go. What we need is a publicly financed infrastructure program.

Sooner or later they are going to have to raise taxes and recoup the lost revenue. The only good thing about the regressive health care premium was that at least the government realized here is a revenue problem - distinguishing themselves marginally from the Tories.

What are we doing? At CUPE we are intensifying our efforts through our no concessions strategy to coordinate bargaining and to provide strike/solidarity support for locals facing concessions. We are meeting with local leaders to make sure that they are in-

formed about the Ontario Liberal plans regarding "Reinventing Government" using the BC liberal and UK Blair models and we will be making decisions on campaigns beyond collective bargaining to defend our jobs and services. Contract settlements are still by and large coming in around 3% per year but many seem to be slipping to 2% as organizations still have to trim operating costs. Benefit programs and pensions are also under attack. Workload is a major issue now at the bargaining table. Having a union and collective bargaining rights are key front lines of defense to protect the standard of living of the working class. The right to free collective bargaining is itself coming more and more under attack as we have seen in Newfoundland and British Columbia.

The fact that the Liberals are talking to us should not lull us into a sense that they are listening or prepared to act on our advice. The real fear is

that cynicism around electoral political action is immobilizing/demobilizing working people throughout Ontario – and beyond. We would be hard pressed at this point to rebuild the movement which led to the days of action in the late nineties. Aside from the big anti-war demos of 2003, demonstrations on issues have not been effective at changing public policy or even at attracting workers.

We have to develop a plan for government and I believe in working with the NDP to adopt policies and show leadership especially in the area of fighting privatization. I think most of us on the left are a bit too jaded to be disappointed with liberals. We didn't expect much from the liberals. However we are not optimistic enough to form a new socialist party. Perhaps we should expect more from ourselves. The question remains: what we are prepared to do today to build workers' power? **R**