

ence 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**

Wanting Results for Ontario Poor

Greg Albo and Kim Fry

In just a year, everything seems to have changed in Ontario politics. The bullying pulpit toward the poor, unions and many others that the Tories under Premier Mike Harris had turned Queen's Park seems already a distant nightmare. The 21 percent cut in social assistance rates introduced in 1995, followed by a cut in Ontario tax rates of 30 percent the next, starkly symbolized the Tory political agenda of dividing the citizens of Ontario against one another. Fiscal restraint meant punitive austerity: the provinces' workers and poor would pay for restoring balanced budgets.

The Liberal party of Dalton McGuinty promised an end to social divisiveness. He would reunite Ontario, and return to the policies of social inclusion that had once typified the province's politics. McGuinty's victory was based on the widespread sense of the electorate that the Harris-Eves gov-

ernments were too extreme. The Liberals would restore social programmes that the Tories had decimated. In government, the Liberals have re-conjured up the ghosts of social partnership, consultations, and community hearings of the Peterson and Rae years. But they have offered little more. Indeed, the Government's fall 2004 report card on its first year in office, *Getting Results for Ontario*, is completely silent on any social policy measures to address poverty. The shortsighted decision to sign a pact with the devil that is the Ontario Taxpayer's Federation on constraining taxes has made it impossible to square this pledge with the promises to end the cutbacks to Ontario public services or address the burgeoning social divide. It should come as no surprise at all that one year later Finance Minister Greg Sorbara has been bracing citizens of Ontario for another round of government cut-

backs. So far cuts of some \$1.3 billion have been announced, with a flat-lining of expenditures across most ministries. McGuinty's Liberals only seem to suggest that we all should now share austerity in order to pay for what are now so clearly the unviable tax cuts of Harris and ill-thought tax pledges of McGuinty.

The policies the McGuinty government has directed toward the working poor and social assistance recipients illustrate how deep the social policy failure is in Ontario. In the May 2004 Budget, the Liberal government announced a mere 3 percent increase for social assistance in the Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Programme as of March 2005. A single person on welfare will gain just under \$16 per month to raise their monthly rate to \$536. Yet, the average monthly rent for a bachelor apartment in Ontario is \$650 per month! →

A single disabled person in Ontario currently receives \$930 per month. A 3 percent increase will mean only an additional \$28. The government at last has seen fit to lift the odious lifetime on welfare, if a person is convicted of fraud (belatedly restoring some sense of natural justice). In February 2004, the hourly minimum wage was raised from \$6.85 to \$7.15, and will then be raised by a mere 30 cents per hour per year after that. After being frozen since 1995, the increase will not even meet the increase of inflation over this period! The almost 200 thousand minimum wage workers in Ontario will at best earn only \$1084 a month before taxes for a 35 hour work-week. These measures will do little to move the one in seven people in Ontario out of poverty, or improve the lot of the one in four low-paid workers making poverty wages. Meanwhile, the regressive health premium that has been implemented adds to the tax imbalances; the government flirts with massive contracting-out of unionized work to cut wage costs and add to the numbers of low-paid in Ontario; and tuition fees can safely be predicted to be going up as the Rae Commission on higher education reports.

Certainly, there are broader causes to poverty than simply the public policies adopted by the provincial government. Unemployment and poverty are a characteristic of capitalist for a long time, as Marx explained long ago in writing about the reserve army of unemployed necessary for capitalist accumulation. The current problems of poverty and social polarisation have been growing since at least the 1980s when warnings of the impact of neoliberal policies first began to be sounded around Queen's Park. Policies of fiscal austerity and tax cuts at other levels of government have also

done their bit. Apart from some improvement in pensions, the Federal government has not addressed poverty at all since the 1970s, and the sting of the Martin budgetary and tax cuts of the mid-90s are still being felt in the massive fiscal imbalances of the federation.

But this hardly excuses the McGuinty government. There are several immediate modest steps that the government could undertake to ensure 'living wages' for the citizens of Ontario. Social assistance rates need to

wages—low productivity that plagues Ontario business. Families on social assistance would benefit directly and immediately by the government ending the clawback of the National Child Benefit Supplement. The policies of the Ontario government here directly contradict Federal government objectives, and cost a family with one child on social assistance \$1463 per year. Finally, study after study suggests that low income workers have the most to gain from unionization in improving living standards. Unionization has

been central to success in reducing the numbers of low paid workers. The government could take any number of legislative measures that would improve conditions for union organizing in Ontario without spending a penny. This would particularly help in the low-paid service sector ghettos that have come to dominate the job market.

In dozens of cities across Ontario over the winter, anti-poverty activists, unionists and community workers have been out in support of such measures in the Ontario Needs A Raise Campaign. These small steps in the direction of living wages in Ontario will not end the poverty that liberal markets produce. But they will help. It would be a far better usage of society's resources than the tax cuts that have supported the corporate excesses of Conrad

Black and the many other private extravagances of the last decades of neoliberalism. This is the real choice that confronts Ontario Finance Minister Greg Sorbara in the Liberal's second year in office: to adopt a spirit of social justice and address poverty in Ontario, or to continue with the same tax and fiscal cuts that have left the enormous social deficit that plagues the province from the St Lawrence Islands to Fort Frances.



be substantially raised to reflect the real cost of living and indexed thereafter to account for increases in inflation and costs. This would do an enormous amount for single parents, the disabled and others to improve their livelihood and life chances. Similarly raising the minimum wage to \$10 and then indexing would aid low income workers in Ontario, giving them a greater chance to raise their skills. It would also begin to address the vicious circle of low