

Neoliberalism, the Liberals and Living Wages

By Greg Albo



It is now one year since Ontario gave the hard right Tories of Mike Harris and Ernie Eves the boot from office. Dalton McGuinty's Liberal Party, not unlike their Federal counterparts under Prime Minister Paul Martin, pledged an end to the cutbacks and a return to a responsible 'caring' Ontario. To be banished from public discourse was the 'poor-bashing', 'Native-bashing', and 'union-bashing' that characterized the Harris years of government – the 'divided province' strategy of the good risk-taking entrepreneurial Ontarions against the welfare-dependent, ever-complaining and lazy rest. *Punitive austerity* was the theme of the day – a theme that could find certain neoliberal origins in the Social Contract of Bob Rae's NDP government. In contrast, McGuinty promised to pursue a 'one province' strategy, conjuring up again the old ghosts of social partnership, consultations, community hearings. But with little actually to offer, after the incredibly opportunistic and shortsighted decision to sign a pact with the devil on earth – the Ontario Taxpayer's Federation – McGuinty's government has only offered *shared austerity*. Ontario politics now has a new discourse and the repetitive chant that 'we are all in it together' in facing the government's fiscal shortfall, as if the pain of curtailing social spending is felt as equally by Barbara Amiel and Conrad Black as the homeless under the Bathurst St. overpass and the seniors waiting for medical services in Elliot Lake.

The continuance of the neoliberal juggernaut during the first year of the McGuinty government was precisely the theme of a Socialist Project Forum held at Ryerson University on September 15, with several of the most important movement activists in Ontario today. Natalie Mehra of the Ontario Health Coalition addressed the continued privatization push in the health sector despite the accords being reached by the Federal and provincial governments in Ottawa. With one in seven in Ontario living in poverty, Kim Fry of the Ontario Coalition for Social Justice made the case of how little the Ontario government has done to address poverty in Ontario, with social assistance rate increases barely meeting inflation, and the increase in the minimum wage not coming close to meeting the loss of purchasing power through the 1990s. Mary Catherine McCarthy of CUPE continued the indictment noting that the problems of contracting out and public service cutbacks plague the public sector across Ontario, provincially and municipally. And Bryan Evans of Ryerson University and the Socialist Project traced out some of the neoliberal continuities recurring in public policy across different political regimes. The left now needs to see neoliberalism not as just mistaken policies, this or that government, but the way power is organized in our society today.

All the speakers raised the importance of re-establishing the so-

cial coalitions, and union-community campaigns that have waned in recent years. In particular, targeting clear campaign objectives that could be leveraged into wider movement building was noted. The wider political impasse of the left, particularly the deplorable state of the left and rebuilding projects, could also not be avoided, in the eyes of many. To this end, several fightbacks of CUPE in the education sector and the Health Coalitions politicization of P3 hospitals have been critical beacons of light.

It is important that the living wage campaigns developing in the province gather a similar momentum. These have taken to date the form of the OCSJ's Ontario Needs a Raise project, with many community groups and union locals doing educational and campaign work on welfare rates, minimum wages, disability rates, the child benefit clawback, and, in some cases, union organizing. This is an important project which the left needs to get behind to begin reforming the social unionism and movements that neoliberalism has done so much to curtail. Many groups have planned demonstrations, educationals and other events on October 2nd to mark the one year anniversary of the McGuinty regime, insistent that poverty be addressed, against all the dashed hopes that is to date the government's main accomplishment.

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