Socialist Studies / Études socialistes 7(1/2) Spring/Fall 2011: 116-140

SPECIAL ISSUE ON ORGANIZING FOR AUSTERITY: THE NEOLIBERAL STATE, REGULATING LABOUR AND WORKING CLASS RESISTANCE

Workers Versus Austerity
The Origins of Ontario's 1995-1998 'Days of Action'

PAUL KELLOGG
Interdisciplinary Studies, Athabasca University. Alberta, Canada.

Abstract
The Great Recession has left in its wake an expected "age of austerity" where deficits accumulated to stave off economic collapse, are being addressed through steep cuts to government spending, with profound implications for social services and public sector employment. In an earlier era of austerity, eleven mass strikes and enormous demonstrations swept through the major cities of Ontario. This Days of Action movement – which has real relevance for the current period – began in the fall of 1995, continued through all of 1996 and 1997, and came to an end in 1998. This article, part of a larger research project, focuses on the movement's origins. Two themes shape the overall project: the relation between social movements "outside" the workplace and union struggles themselves; and the relationship between the energetic inexperience of newly-active union members, and the pessimistic institutional experience embodied in a quite developed layer of full-time union officials. It is the former – the dialectic between social movements and trade unions in the Days of Action, that will be the focus of this article.

Résumé
La Grande récession a donné naissance, comme on pouvait s'y attendre, à une « ère de l'austérité » où les déficits accumulés pour contrer l'effondrement économique sont pris en charge via des coupes brutales dans les dépenses des États, avec des répercussions majeures pour les services sociaux et l'emploi dans le secteur public. Durant une période d'austérité précédente, onze grèves de masse et des manifestations monstres se sont succédées dans les principales villes de l'Ontario. Ce mouvement des Journées d'action – qui est tout à fait pertinent dans la période actuel

Paul Kellogg, is assistant professor in the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies at Athabasca University, where he is steward for the Work Organization and Leadership Stream in the M.A. Program in Integrated Studies. His articles have appeared in several scholarly journals, including *Canadian Journal of Political Science, Contemporary Politics (U.K.), International Journal of Žižek Studies*, *Labour/Le Travail, New Political Science, Political Studies (U.K.), Praxis (Brazil), Science & Society, Socialist Studies and Studies in Political Economy.* He is currently completing a two-volume study, *After Left Nationalism: The Future of Canadian Political Economy*. He received his Ph.D. from Queen's University in 1991 and his M.A. from York University in 1986. He can be reached at pkellogg@athabascau.ca

Paul Kellogg est professeur adjoint au Centre d'études interdisciplinaires de l'Université Athabasca où il coordonne le profil Organisation du travail et leadership du programme de maîtrise en études intégrées. Ses articles ont paru dans plusieurs publications académiques incluant : *Canadian Journal of Political Science, Contemporary Politics (U.K.), International Journal of Žižek Studies*, *Labour/Le Travail, New Political Science, Political Studies (U.K.),Praxis (Brazil), Science & Society, Socialist Studies and Studies in Political Economy.* Il travaille présentement sur une étude en deux volumes, *After Left Nationalism: The Future of Canadian Political Economy*. Il détient un doctorat en philosophie de l'Unversité Queen's (1991) et une maîtrise de l'Université York (1986). Il peut être rejoint à pkellogg@athabascau.ca

ISSN 1918-2821

– a débuté à l'automne 1995, s'est poursuivi durant les années 1996 et 1997, pour se terminer en 1998. Cet article, une composante d'un projet de recherche plus vaste, met l'accent sur les origines du mouvement. Deux thèmes traversent l'ensemble du projet: les rapports entre les mouvements sociaux situés hors des lieux de travail et les luttes syndicales, et les liens entre l'inexpérience énergique des syndiqués à l'implication récente et l'expérience institutionnelle et pessimiste incarnée dans une couche bien développée de responsables syndicaux à temps plein. C'est la première des deux relations, la dialectique entre les mouvements sociaux et les syndicats dans les Journées d'action, qui sera l'objet du présent article.

Keywords
austerity; bureaucracy; conservative; New Democratic Party (NDP); rank and file; social movement; union

Mots-clés
austérité; base; bureaucratie; conservateurs; mouvement social; Nouveau parti démocratique (NPD); syndicat

From 11 December 1995, through all of 1996 and 1997, until coming to an end in the fall of 1998, eleven one-day general strikes and "days of action" were mounted in major cities throughout Ontario, Canada's biggest province and the heart of its manufacturing sector. There are good reasons to re-examine the Days of Action experience, as we enter our own "era of austerity."

A major recession punished the Ontario economy in the early 1990s, eliminating thousands of manufacturing jobs. In Ontario, it was a social-democratic government which dealt with the first effects of this recession. The Ontario New Democratic Party (NDP) administration of Premier Bob Rae rang up considerable deficits while in office from 1990 to 1995. Part of this was a result of their first budget, which bucked the trend by increasing spending in the recession conditions of the early 1990s. But most of the deficit had the same roots as those created by Liberal and Conservative administrations in other provinces: the recession of the early 1990s was extremely harsh, damaging revenues, and forcing social service expenditure upwards. Importantly, as will be shown below, the provincial deficit problem was compounded by policies imposed in the mid-1990s by the federal Liberals. Kicked out of office in 1995, the NDP was replaced by the Conservatives under Mike Harris,, which set about to deal with the debt-burden through an extreme austerity program, euphemistically called the "Common Sense Revolution".

This article will focus on the origins of the movement against this austerity program. It is a story that can't be told simply through an examination of the official institutions of the labour movement. In the first months of the Harris government, there was little response from the leaders of that movement. Ontario's labour movement is, and was, closely tied to the NDP, and it was in the final years of the NDP government in Ontario, that the austerity program had begun, although in a milder fashion than was to be the case under the Conservatives. Having said little during the NDP-led tightening of social assistance, cuts to education and cuts to health care, union leaders in the first months of the Harris government were frozen, uncertain how to respond.

But a response did come, and to understand that response, the analysis has to depart from the plane of institutions, and engage in the much more complex work of assessing social movement activism. A series of small community coalitions sprang up, hounding the Conservatives at every turn. 27 September 1995 – the opening day of the fall provincial legislative session – between 5000 and 10 000 marched on Queen's Park, in a demonstration organized by the Labour Council of Metro Toronto and York Region and the Embarrass Harris Campaign. The crowd included seventeen busloads of protesters from Ottawa, Peterborough, Sudbury and St. Catharines and members of the Canadian Autoworkers, United Food and Commercial Works, United Steelworkers of America, Canadian Union of Postal Workers, Canadian Union of Public Employees and the Ontario Public Service Employees Union – as well as hundreds marching with the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) (Monsrebraaten 1995; Kellogg 1995, October 30)

The environment of resistance was reflected a few weeks later, when the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) met in session. The 2000 delegates – much closer to the anger of the rank and file than the cautious and demoralized central union leadership – voted to launch a series of one-day, one-city general strikes to oppose the Liberal/Conservative cuts, general strikes which came to be known as "Days of Action" (Rusk 1995; Kellogg 1995, 04 December).

It is this interaction between social movements and organized labour that will provide the frame for this article. Implicit in this story is another crucial frame, the relationship between the base of the trade union movement and its leadership. There is a very rich literature grappling with this important question. Richard Hyman among others has provided us with key insights into the dynamics between the rank and file and the bureaucracy (Hyman 1971) and the equally important recasting of this

issue taking seriously the question of apathy and disengagement on the modern shopfloor (Hyman 1979). The Days of Action provide a very rich case study where the theories in this literature can be put to the test. But this article will only pose these questions, and leave to a later occasion their in-depth examination. Here it will be sufficient to set the stage, tell the story of the first key actions in the anti-Harris movement, and indicate the dialectical relationship between social movements outside the workplace, and those inside.

It is appropriate that this moment in Ontario working class history be the subject of sustained analysis. These "Days of Action" were unprecedented. The first, in December 1995, shut down the industrial city of London, Ontario in the middle of winter. Workers by the thousands illegally walked off the job, some of them carrying signs "London, Paris," inspired by the great wave of strikes breaking out in France that year. The February, 1996 strike in Hamilton Ontario saw a massive crowd of 100 000 take to the streets. Without a doubt, the high point was the magnificent Toronto strike. 25 October 1996. That day, one million people stayed away from work. The next day, 350 000 marched past the frightened Tories, separated from the massive crowd by hundreds of police outside the city's convention centre (Kellogg 1996, 08 January, 04 March, 30 October).

This article focuses solely on the origins of the Days of Action, and its first key events, and takes the story up to its emergence as a mass movement: the one-day general strike in 1995 which shut down London, Ontario. From this story, it will then sketch out a few key analytic points which these events suggest. Among these points: our notions of class and class struggle have to expand beyond the organized working class at the point of production. The Days of Action would not have even begun without the actions of social movements outside of the ranks of organized labour. Second, there is a complicated relationship between the base of the workers' movement and its institutionalized leadership – a relationship mediated by the history of resistance in which it is embedded. That relationship would prove decisive in the unfolding of the Days of Action.

25 January 1995 – The Dress Rehearsal

By January 1995, the threads which were to combine to create the days of action movement, were visible if you looked for them. Politically, there was real confusion. In Ontario, an NDP government had been the governing party for almost five years. Greeted at first with euphoria, it was now isolated and increasingly desperate. Its policies had alienated the NDP

from the very people who had put the party in office – organized labour, students and the poor.

Their hiring of welfare police to crack down on "welfare fraud" was a straightforward mimicking of the scapegoating policies of the right-wing. The NDP government eliminated student grants for university and college students, presided over a significant increase in tuition fees, and laid the groundwork for Ontario post-secondary students becoming some of the most indebted in North America. And most centrally, their attack on public sector wages – euphemistically called a "Social Contract" – had split the labour movement, and turned thousands of once enthusiastic NDP supporters into indifferent bystanders. Waiting in the wings were the parties of big business – the Liberals and the Conservatives – preparing to take advantage of the disillusion at the base of the NDP, to ride into office.

But politics is not just a story of the official parties. Deep forces were at work, pulling people from passivity and into mass action. The first sign of this was not in the workers' movement, but in the student movement. This was part of the story of the first moments of what was to become the Days of Action movement. Forces outside the ranks of organized labour went into action, and in turn had an impact on the confidence and combativity of unionized workers.

25 January 1995 had been called as a day of action by the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS). This was not unusual. CFS had frequently called demonstrations against government education policies. But this time, the issue was more serious than usual. The federal Liberals were proposing cuts to university and college funding which, if implemented, would see tuition fees double in just three years. These cuts were part of an overhaul of federal financing, unprecedented in its scope.

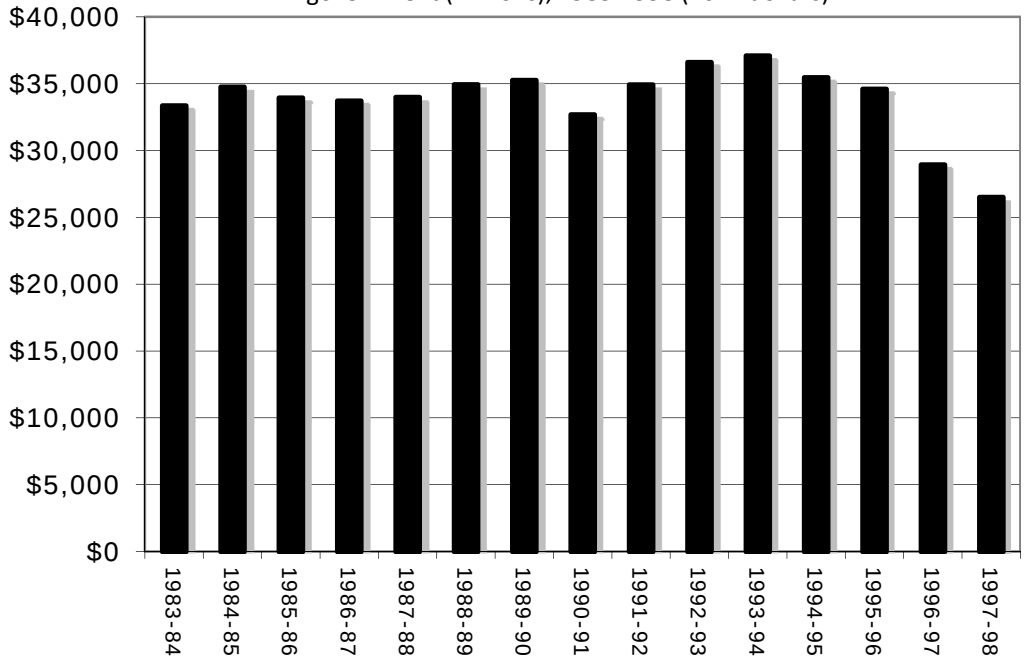
The Liberals had taken office federally in November 1993. The recession had sent budget deficits to record levels – forty billion dollars for the federal government, more than sixty billion if the provincial government deficits were added in (Department of Finance Canada, 2008). The Liberals announced that this had to end, and they ruthlessly set about to do so. Martin and Chrétien began a process of cutbacks that devastated health education and social assistance across the country. In a very short time, federal government spending had been slashed by 20 per cent. Close to 50 000 public sector workers, employed by Ottawa, were let go (Oliver 2009, White 2009).

These federal Liberal policies were directly complementary to the policies that were to unfold provincially under the Tories. They were policies deeply embedded in the bureaucratic institutions which comprise

the modern state apparatus, and were also reflective of class priorities shared across countries. In the summer of 2009, two figures from that era's Liberal administration – former top bureaucrat Jocelyne Bourgon and former cabinet minister Marcel Massé – flew across the Atlantic and met with leading British Conservatives including Philip Hammond, the shadow chief secretary to the Treasury (Oliver 2009). We are not privy to the discussions which took place at these meetings. But it might not be a coincidence that the Conservatives in Britain, now in office, have embarked upon a serious austerity offensive that has many similarities with Canada's experience in the 1990s.

One of the principle mechanisms used by the Liberals to slash spending was to change the rules by which tax money was shipped out to the provinces. The effect was to reduce by billions of dollars the amount of money given to the provinces – and this was critical, because it is the provinces in Canada which fund health care, education and social assistance. These central components of the "welfare state," while delivered provincially, are extremely dependent on "transfer payments" from the senior level of government. To deal with debts accumulated during years of Tory rule, the federal liberals had redefined the way in which transfer payments were to be delivered to the provinces, the net effect of which would be to reduce those payments by billions. Chart 1 (Department of Finance Canada 2010) captures this starkly. From 1983-84 until 1995-96, transfer payments stagnated at around the thirty five billion dollar mark, in fact a long slow cut in per capita terms. But from 1995-96 until 1996-97, transfer payments plunged by seven billion dollars, and then by another two billion dollars between 1996-97 and 1997-98. This is the picture of the austerity measures behind the construction of the neoliberal state, one aspect of which was the threatened doubling of tuition fees.

Chart 1 - Major Transfers from the Central Goverment to other levels of government (millions), 1983-1998 (2011 dollars)



Department of Finance Canada 2010

The response to the CFS call for a day of strike and action, was extraordinary. More than 60 000 participated in rallies and demonstrations across the country. If you include those who stayed away from classes, the figure of those involved rises to well above 100 000. And significantly, the mobilization had been done in conjunction with non-students – with social movement organizations, anti-poverty organizations and trade unions.

> [M]ore than 140 local, provincial and national organizations endorsed the Day of Action … Steelworkers Local 9196, miners in Stephensville, Newfoundland, called in their support and congratulated students for "kicking butt." … In some cities, Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) members took the initiative to approach student unions and offer concrete organizational support. In other cities, postal workers participated in events leading up to January 25th. And throughout Canada, Public Service Alliance offices, CUPE offices and labour councils opened up their offices to provide students with access to photocopying. In Regina, 100 people defied temperatures of 22 degrees below zero and arrived on campus at 7:30 am to completely shut down the campus. The picket line was comprised of students, faculty and CUPE support staff who

> were not working that day. Cafeteria workers used their breaks to bring coffee to those staffing the picket lines. In Windsor, 250 Autoworker union members participated in the 2000 strong rally (Kellogg 1995, February 5).

The different sectors of society do not exist in isolation. Six months later, we will see the critical role of the feminist movement in helping to initiate struggle against the provincial Tories. In January 1995 it was students who initiated struggle against the federal Liberals. It is impossible to measure the impact of these "non-trade union" struggles on the union movement itself – but for anyone involved in the movement in Ontario in 1995, it is clear that they did have an impact. The trade union movement across Canada was, at that moment, extremely passive. Strike levels were at a low point not seen since the early years of the depression in the 1930s (see Chart 2). In Ontario, this passivity was compounded by the demoralization felt after the NDP failed to meet the expectations of those who brought it to office, all this in a context of chronically high unemployment and a government cutback offensive, as governments at all levels set about the process of reducing the deficit by savaging social programs.

But the 25 January student mobilization had a real impact on a layer of trade union militants.

> A Steelworker who marched with the students on January 25th, said that when he saw 5000 demonstrators from the University of Toronto round the corner to join the rally, a charge went through his body. "It was like a shot of adrenaline! I haven't felt that way for years, not since the Radio Shack strike, when busloads of miners came down from Sudbury and scattered the cops and the scabs. You can feel the power that we have" (Egan 1995a).

25 January was an anticipation, a dress rehearsal if you will. Students had responded in numbers far bigger than any had predicted. The militancy of these young people – many demonstrating for the first time in their lives – caught labour activists unaware. It awoke memories in veterans of mass struggles in the past, and began the process of spreading the idea that mass action was possible against the government cutback offensive.

For the moment, it remained an anticipation. The story in Ontario shifted to the election. To no one's surprise the NDP lost. To everyone's surprise, it was the Conservatives and not the Liberals who took office. Led by former golf semi-pro Mike Harris, these Conservatives were committed to an agenda of cutbacks on a scale never before seen in the province.

The Tories Go on the Offensive

The scale of the Tories' offensive against the poor, against social services, and against workers' rights was unprecedented. 27 June, one day after being inaugurated, the Harris government announced a thirty-day review of all public housing projects (Canadian Press 1995) Al Leach, the minister chosen by Harris to be responsible for housing, made no secret of his agenda. "As we've stated all along, it's our desire to get out of the housing business," he would tell reporters, later in July (Girard and White 1995; Small 1995). Three weeks into power, the axe really fell.

- Social assistance for Ontario's poorest residents was slashed 21.6 per cent, a cut of $938 million per year.
- New non-profit child-care spaces were cancelled, a $13 million per year cut.
- The JobsOntario training program was shut, an $86 million cut.
- Toronto's Eglinton subway and other rapid transit programs were shelved, even though $54 million had been spent digging the Eglinton tunnel, and another $42 million had to be spent filling in the hole (Small 1995), a cut of $200 million.
- The planned Jumpstart youth employment program was killed before it started, a cut of $60 million.
- $8 million was cut from the Employment Equity Commission, $10 million from the Advocacy Commission and $16 million from the Workplace Innovation and Demonstration project.
- The Royal Commission on the Workers Compensation Board was scrapped.
- Pay equity funding was capped at $500 million annually.
- Payments to all social service agencies were cut 2.5 per cent effective October 1 to be followed by a 5 per cent cut in 1996-1997.

In all, the cuts totalled one point nine billion dollars, more than half of this coming at the expense of social assistance recipients (Walker 1995). This was just the beginning. As the months unfolded, it became clear that the Conservatives were set on a complete re-ordering of life in Ontario (MacDermid and Albo 2001). Some of the changes were ideological and not fiscal. In June of 1996, for instance, for the first time since the 1930s, the Conservatives would introduce workfare into the province. Up to 300 000 social assistance recipients would be forced to work up to seventeen hours a week. If they refused, they would be cut off social assistance. The implication, of course, was that the unemployed were out of work out of

choice, not because of poor economic conditions. Jamie Kristensen of OCAP expressed a different view, 12 June 1996, at the raucous news conference where Social Services Minister David Tsubouchi announced the new program. “I’ve been through upgradings,” Kristensen told reporters. “I’ve gone through college. There is no work for me out there” (Mittelstaedt 1996). The Ontario unemployment rate in June 1996 was 9.5 per cent. For young people, aged 15-24, it was 15.6 per cent (Statistics Canada 1996).

From the Beginning, Small Battles

The election of the Harris government, the open war on the poor and the open war on workers was felt like a body blow by working people everywhere. But in spite of the shock and disorientation that was widespread throughout the province, there was from the beginning, a minority that was willing to take to the streets and protest. Harris rolled to his majority government 08 June 1995. The next night, three hundred and fifty gathered in Toronto for a protest against the former NDP government's refusal to legislate same-sex benefits. The demo was transformed into a denunciation of the “Tory bigots,” probably the most popular of the signs carried by the protesters (Kellogg 1995, 14 June). 19 July, the day before Harris was to announce severe cuts to daycare subsidies and attacks on daycare workers' wages, one thousand daycare workers went on an illegal strike in protest, demonstrating at Queen's Park (Kellogg 1995, 24 July). 21 July, the Embarrass Harris coalition rallied several hundred people outside government offices in downtown Toronto to denounce the attacks on the poor and on social programs (Monsrebraaten and Moloney 1995). On 29 July, two thousand demonstrated against the 21.6 per cent cuts to welfare slated to be implemented 01 October. "They were joined by one hundred and fifty people who marched fifteen miles from Scarborough, North York and Etobicoke" (Kellogg 1995, 08 August; see also the picture in the *Toronto* Star which reported the demonstration as five hundred, not two thousand, Toronto Star 1995). 02 August, three hundred demonstrated outside the provincial government building in Ottawa, also protesting the welfare cuts. "The demonstration shut down the intersection at Rideau Street and Sussex Drive" (Lachance 1995). August 3, one hundred and fifty demonstrators gathered outside the local Conservative MP’s office in Peterborough (Kellogg 1995, 07 August). 05 August, seventy-five members and supporters of “Harmony Hollow Home Co-operative” in Hamilton pitched tents and slept outside over night to protest cuts to 385 non-profit housing projects in Ontario (Andrus 1995). 22 August, six hundred people

in a march organized by OCAP made their way from Regent Park in Toronto, "one of Toronto's poorest neighbourhoods, to Rosedale, home of some of Toronto's wealthiest business tycoons" (Kellogg 1995, 09 September; Clarke 2010) . The message, from the left-wing OCAP, couldn't have been clearer: Harris was ruling for the rich, and ignoring the poor.

These were just some of the actions across the province that summer. In places the actions involved just dozens. Often they involved hundreds. On at least three occasions they surpassed one thousand. But they proved to have an importance far in excess of their numbers as events unfolded in the fall and winter of that year one of the Harris reign.

The Backlash Against Activism

So the summer of 1995 saw a rag-tag army of the poor, social activists, rank and file workers and socialists agitating against the Harris cuts and taking to the streets. But at the top of the movement, union leaders and respected figures on the left were either doing nothing or worse, openly criticizing those who were on the streets.

Central to the developing movement against Harris, was the June 26 demonstration against the Conservatives' swearing-in, called by the Embarrass Harris coalition. This coalition had emerged not from the union movement, but rather from the feminist movement. The weekend after Harris was elected, there was an Annual General Meeting of what was at the time Canada's main feminist organization, the National Action Committee (NAC). Inspired by a speaker from Alberta, who spoke about organizing against the Tories in that province, several Ontario women decided to form an ad hoc coalition to call a demonstration that would directly confront the legislature during the swearing-in. Kam Rao, one of the organizers, explained that:

> Some of us were really hell bent that it had to be there while they were on their stage. People know the difference between standing in front of an empty legislature building and standing in front of a legislature building where a government's about to dig its heels in on an agenda that's going to seriously hurt all of us.... We hoped that we wouldn't humiliate ourselves and that we'd have more than five hundred people and in the end we had two thousand five hundred (Rao 1996).

Those two thousand created an extraordinary scene. At times their angry chants could be heard inside the legislature (Kellogg 1995, 03 July; Ibbitson 1995). For anyone with an historical memory, it was a remarkable

event. The swearing-in of Bob Rae's NDP government, just five years earlier had been held in Convocation Hall. Rae and his new cabinet were met by 2000 cheering trade unionists and social activists "many weeping unashamedly, too choked up to utter a word if our lives depended on it" (Caplan 1990). Five years before that, when Liberal David Peterson was sworn into office, he held the ceremony "on the front steps of the Legislature at noon. The party had taken out newspaper ads inviting the public to attend the ceremony in an effort to show how open the new government intends to be" (Harrington and Christie 1985). From a lawn-ceremony in 1985, to a love-in in 1990, to an angry protest of two thousand five hundred in 1995 – for those who understand that the key to social progress is social activism, this was a significant shift. But this activism came under a sustained assault.

Leah Casselman, president of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union, "said before issuing ultimatums she would try to work with the government to improve services" (Van Alphen 1995a). She and Harry Hynd, Ontario director of the United Steelworkers of America, wanted "to meet with him [Harris] and give the Conservatives' 'Common Sense Revolution' some different common sense" (Van Alphen, 1995b). She refused to back the 26 June anti-Tory demonstration (Waugh 1995). Sid Ryan, head of the Ontario wing of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) said, "to be going into an all-out war now with a government that clearly has a mandate, before they even take office, I think is the wrong strategy for labour" (Brennan 1995a). Sections of the left echoed these criticisms. Wayne Roberts in the 1970s edited a socialist newspaper. In the 1990s he was a regular writer for the leftish *Now* magazine in Toronto. He wrote in that publication an analysis of workfare, which said in part, "the left needs to do better than merely protesting the changes … with the energy saved from kneejerking, activists can promote dialogue on how workfare … can achieve pride of place in a full-employment economy" (Roberts 1995). Even Naomi Klein, who a few years later would emerge as a leading figure in the anti-capitalist movement, was extremely dismissive towards at least one of the early attempts to challenge Harris. "Rallies don't always mean you're stuck in the '60s, but they have to be a culmination of something. Slogans in themselves … you look like an idiot. That 'Embarrass Harris' stuff was stupid" (Hurst 1995).

But it wasn't stupid. Within months there would be tens of thousands on the streets against the Conservatives, a movement with its roots in the very actions dismissed by established union leaders and established left-wingers. What would have happened if Harris had taken

office and the small marches, the small rallies, the small protests not taken place? You don't create a mass movement out of nothing. Mass movements emerge when there is a growing feeling of confidence that action can make a difference. That confidence is not built all at once, but is a culmination of battles, which of necessity begin on a much smaller scale. The lesbian and gay rights activists, daycare workers, anti-poverty activists, social assistance recipients, and feminist "Embarrass Harris" organizers who took to the streets in the days and weeks following the Conservative victory helped nurture the flame of resistance during what were very difficult times.

The small battles during the summer of 1995 slowly began to build confidence that the Conservatives could be challenged. But for that challenge to become mass and effective, the ranks of organized labour would have to be brought on board. In Ontario, that meant the forty two unions grouped in the OFL, with 650 000 members, by far and away the biggest mass organization in the province. Nowhere do ordinary people have mass organizations on the scale of trade unions. It is here that working people have their greatest strength. In Ontario, close to forty per cent of working people were members of unions in the 1990s. If the anti-Tory movement could move from the streets to organized workers in the workplaces, then Harris would face a much bigger fight.

September and October 1995 – The Dam Bursts

The breakthrough came in August, 1995. The Embarrass Harris Campaign was joined by two major Toronto-based union organizations – the Labour Council of Metropolitan Toronto and the Building Trades Council – in the call for a mass protest outside Queen's Park when the legislature reconvened 27 September. For the first time, the rag-tag army of anti-Tory activists had been joined by organizations with links to the mass organizations of the working class.

On Labour Day in Toronto, more than ten thousand flyers announcing the demonstration were distributed to union contingents. "Hundreds of workers carried signs calling for unionists to join the protest" on 27 September. OCAP organized a rally for the same day to culminate in a march from Allan Gardens to Queen's Park. The Canadian Federation of Students built the action on campuses across the city. Buses from around the province were organized, including three from Guelph organized by the Guelph anti-cuts coalition and the Guelph and District Labour Council. "Solidarity actions are being planned for the same day in many communities throughout Ontario" (Kellogg 1995, 17 August). The anti-

Tory street activists were now working in synch with student organizations and key labour organizations had come onside. The "big battalions" of the labour movement were not yet involved, but for the first time at least a section of the labour movement's official organizations was backing the protests.

The result was beyond anyone's expectations. Press reports put the demonstration at five thousand. Some organizers put the figure at seven thousand (Gadd 1995; Mittelstaedt 1995; Edmonton Journal 1995). Many who were there put the figure at more than ten thousand. No matter which figure is correct, it was the biggest protest yet against the Harris cuts, the first where the majority were organized workers, and the first which gave a sign of the mass movement which was building in the province.

> Never before in Canadian history has the opening day of the legislature for a newly elected government been greeted by a demonstration as angry and large as the one that gathered on the 27th. The poor Tories even had to cancel the traditional horse-drawn carriage which drags onto the grounds the province's biggest scrounger, the lieutenant-governor, "representative of the Queen." There was no room on the lawn for this aristocratic dog and pony show – it was jammed with angry anti-Tory workers and students (Kellogg 1995, 04 October).

The protest was also the first one to penetrate into the workplaces. More than a demonstration, it involved workers collectively leaving their workplace, and marching to the legislature:

> Workers streamed out of the hospitals on University Avenue, they came by the thousands out of government offices at Queen's Park, clerical and administrative workers crossed the road from the University of Toronto. The Labour Council of Metro Toronto bucked the trend so common today in other labour bodies. Because of the urging of rank and file delegates, at its last meeting it unanimously decided that it would organize with other sectors to make Harris and his Tories understand that they were in for a fight. The Labour Council called on trade unionists in the Toronto area to come out and stand up for their rights, and the rights of every oppressed and exploited person in this province. The result of this call put a lie to earlier pronouncements by union leaders who declared that demonstrations were premature and wouldn't work (Egan 1995b).

The OFL had not backed the 27 September demonstration. But its success created enough pressure to finally push the top union leaders in the

province to call an anti-Tory action. The OFL would be having its convention in November, and the call went out from the OFL Executive Board that during the convention there would be a mass anti-Tory demonstration 22 November. From Embarrass Harris and OCAP to the Labour Council, the pressure had now built up sufficiently to put the ball in the court of the mass organizations of the Ontario working class. But it was not yet clear which way the OFL leadership would go. Often in the past there had been token action programs and token protests, sufficient to let off steam, but insufficient to build a real movement. Would this time around be any different?

Two things ensured that this time would be different: first, the deepening of confidence among rank and file workers that the Conservatives could be fought; second, the intensification of the Conservative assault.

Up to this point, the brunt of the Conservative assault had been on the poor and on social programs. But in the fall of 1995, the Conservatives turned their attention to labour. The previous NDP government had introduced anti-scab legislation, making strikebreaking illegal in the province. This was an offence to the Conservatives and their big business backers. 31 October, the Conservatives rushed through Bill 7 in order to repeal the provincial anti-scab law, a day before a planned protest by public-sector workers. At the same time, they adopted draconian labour legislation that would make it harder to unionize, easier to decertify unions, and pave the way to large-scale privatization of services.

Elizabeth Witmer, Minister of Labour, tried to portray the Conservative approach as "restoring the balance, a very delicate balance in labor relations, and adding a few measures that will democratize the workplace" (Crone 1995) But the real agenda was revealed by Dave Johnson, Chair of Management Board of Cabinet, who was quoted as saying that "civil servants must be stripped of their union rights for the economic good of Ontario" (Brennan 1995b). If the first round of cuts had been a war on the poor, this new Bill 7 was a war on organized workers.

Suddenly, the union movement moved to the front of the line in the battle against the Harris Conservatives. The summer of street activism had given people confidence that the Conservatives could be fought. The 27 September breakthrough had shown that if major union organizations put out a serious call, thousands of workers would respond. The vicious attack on workers' rights intersected with this rising confidence leading to an explosion of anger in the ranks of organized labour.

After the Labour Council of Toronto and York Region, the next major mass workers' organization to respond was the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW). 31 October, the day Bill 7 passed into law, "almost six hundred leaders of the Canadian Auto Workers … voted unanimously to lead a general strike before the end of the year" (Waterloo Region Record 1995). Suddenly, the top leaders of the Ontario union movement were caught between two opposing forces. From above, they were being hammered by the most vicious anti-union legislation in Ontario since the 1930s. From below, they were being pressed – first by the Toronto Labour Council's 10,000 strong 27 September protest, and now by six hundred local leaders of the province's strongest private sector union – to call strike action against the attack.

Their response was to vacillate. The weekend before the bill was passed, Gord Wilson, president of the OFL, said that strike action was being planned against the bill. Wednesday, November 1 was floated as a possible date for a strike. But the day came and went and no strike call was issued. "There was talk in a lot of our Cambridge plants that people were upset they didn't have it [the strike] today," said Tom Rooke, president of local 1986 of the CAW in Cambridge. Friday, 03 November was floated as a new strike day, but when the day arrived instead of a strike there was a meeting of top OFL union leaders (Cannon 1995). The truth is, there was considerable opposition at the top of the movement to taking strike action against the Conservatives. Many union leaders simply did not believe that workers would heed the call.

Then in the second week of November, word spread like wildfire through union and activist circles in Ontario – the CAW on 14 November was going to strike the massive Autoplex complex in Oshawa – the biggest centre of vehicle production in Canada. The walkout would have been illegal. There were then, and are to this day, severe restrictions on what strike activity is allowed between collective agreements. But there was such anger against the Conservatives that there was every reason to believe the walkout could have worked, and a successful walkout would have inspired the fightback across the province. This was particularly true for a job action involving the CAW, whose "social unionism" (or "movement unionism" in Sam Gindin's words) meant it had a much greater affinity with the social movements – particularly the anti-poverty organizers – which had been at the forefront of the anti-Harris movement to date (Gindin 1995, 254-282)

The leadership of the local, CAW 222, backed the call and threw themselves into organizing it. The Social Action Committee of the CAW was

enthusiastically organizing to bring in activists from other trade unions and social movements. The strategy was to call on the day shift to stay away from work and reinforce this call with picket lines before the day shift at 6 am, 14 November, staffed by other trade unionists, anti-poverty activists and others opposed to the Conservatives. From Toronto to Kingston, plans were afoot for buses of activists to go to Oshawa to support the stay-away. For students, anti-poverty activists and trade unionists from the public sector to stand side by side on picket lines with one of the country's strongest private sector unions would have seriously built the solidarity necessary in the fight against the Conservatives.

But after setting the wheels in motion for the stay-away, on November 9 the plug was pulled. The phones rang across the province to tell people the strike was off. CAW officials were not forthcoming with the reasons for calling off the 14 November stay-away. Apparently, there was fear at the highest levels that the rank and file of local 222, many of whom voted for the Conservatives in the provincial election and for the Reform Party (predecessor to the Canadian Alliance, now folded back into today's federal Conservative Party) in the previous federal election, would not respond to the call for a stay-away.

But this was one more example of union leaders looking for a way to blame the rank and file for their own hesitancy. Reform Party arguments did have a hearing in a section of local 222. Right-wing Reform Party types led a call for the local to disaffiliate from the NDP. But those same individuals were trounced in the subsequent local elections.

The Reform Party based its politics on, amongst other things, welfare-bashing. But in October, the month before the announced strike date, anti-poverty activists from OCAP met with 200 stewards from local 222. At the meeting was a single mother on welfare who explained her plight to the stewards. There was an absolutely enthusiastic response from the stewards at the meeting. John Clarke, provincial organizer of OCAP put it clearly.

> In the course of our work, we've had dealings with local leadership and with rank and file members of 222, and have always found that if the issues were presented from the standpoint of working class unity, we have got nothing but a warm reaction(Kellogg 1995, 05 December).

The General Strike Movement Begins

The elation of 09 November gave way to dejection, then back to elation. There would be no Oshawa strike 14 November. But the OFL Executive

Board was recommending to the upcoming OFL convention that a one-day general strike take place in London on 11 December.

This was a second-best choice. Striking Oshawa at the heart of the Canadian economy would have sent a quick message to the Conservatives that the movement was serious. It would have galvanized hundreds of thousands – in Ontario and in the other provinces – that a fight back was on the cards, a serious fight back. No one could question the power of the workers of Oshawa. That city, along with Winnipeg, Windsor, Sept-Îles and a few other places, is iconic in Canada as a location of historic working class militancy. London was more of an unknown quantity. There was some feeling that the OFL Executive Board was putting forward London in the hope that it would be rejected out of fear that London workers would not respond. Nonetheless, a date had been set, a place had been chosen, and all eyes turned to 11 December and London.

When the time came for the OFL convention to vote, there was no stopping the general strike call. The top leaders were preoccupied with the issue of labour's relation to the NDP and what some of us called, at the time, "an extraordinarily uninspiring executive election." There was little push from the top to build support for general strike action. But when the vote came on 20 November, the two thousand delegates, "much closer to the shop floor anger than the officials at the top of the movement, pushed these petty disputes aside to massively endorse the action plan" and its call for a one-day strike in London, 11 December (Kellogg 1995, 05 December).

Suddenly, there was a road map for activists, showing the way to building a mass movement against the Conservatives. Shut down London 11 December. Move to another major city in early 1996. Build towards a province-wide general strike to stop the Conservative attacks. A general strike had brought the Conservative government in Britain to its knees in the early 1970s. A general strike in Ontario would reveal the extent of the isolation of the Conservatives, and build the confidence of people who wanted a way out of the devastation the Conservatives were leaving in their wake. As the buses were booked to travel to London, as the leaflets and picket signs were being prepared, there was a sense throughout the province that everything was to play for.

And on the day, 11 December showed that we had the power to build such a movement. In an event bigger than any had expected, 40 000 of the city's 60 000 unionized workers stayed off the job (Egan 1996a). General Motors' London diesel plant (2200 workers), Cami Automotive in Ingersoll (2300 workers), Ford Talbotville (500) -- all were shut for the day (Scotland 1995) as were the Labatt brewery, Kellogg's, the McCormick

cookie factory, 3M, the Accuride auto parts plant, the Canada Post sorting plant and many others (Lakey and Edwards 1995). All the work stoppages were illegal. Ford management received a court injunction banning pickets at the gates of the Talbotville plant, but workers from Cami showed up anyway, and picketed the plant shut (Scotland 1995). "Police watched the scene, but did not enforce the court injunction" (Lakey and Edwards 1995). In weather that was minus forty with the wind chill, 16 000 marched through the streets chanting "It's not as cold as Harris"(Kellogg 1995, 08 January).

The days of action campaign had begun. The debate about moving to a province wide general strike was now the most important political issue by far in the Ontario workers' movement.

Preliminary Conclusions

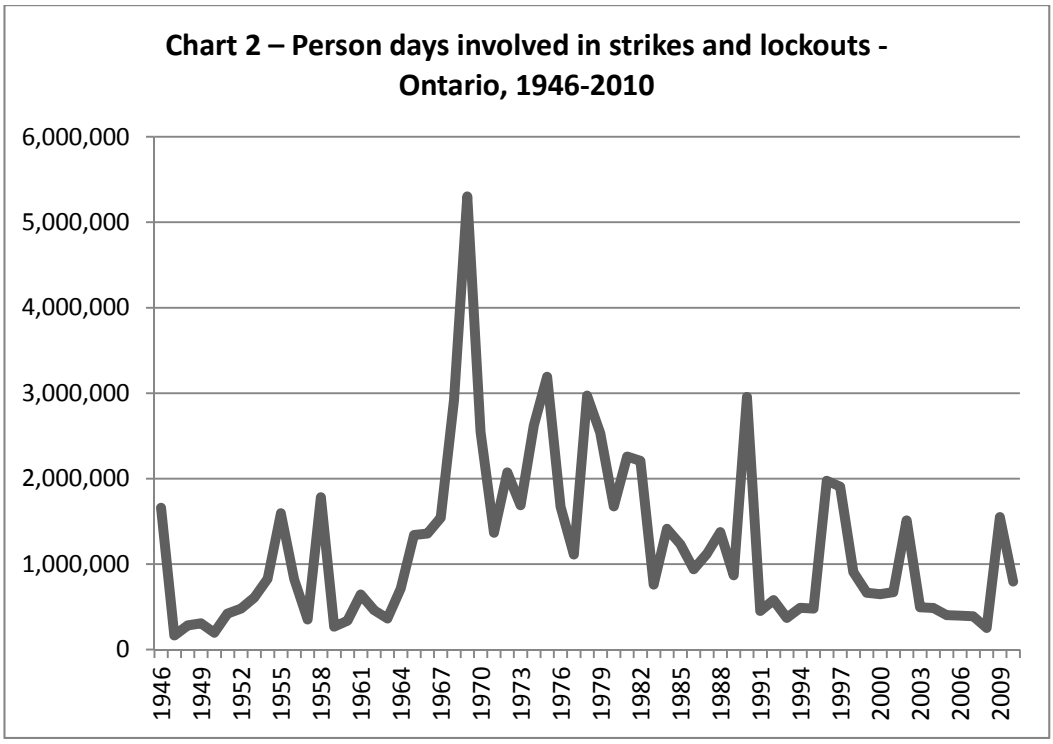
Future articles will examine the three lost opportunities – the February 1996 moment of a general strike in Hamilton followed by a massive public sector strike; Toronto's general strike in October of 1996; and the two-week, illegal, province-wide teachers' strike in October and November 1997. This article has a more limited purpose – to sketch out the origins of Ontario's Days of Action. Any conclusions, therefore, must be preliminary and tentative. Here, one main point will be emphasized. The "Days of Action" moment presents itself at one level as a classic confrontation between a party sympathetic to big business (the Conservatives) and the "serried ranks" of organized labour. That dimension is of course present. But what the article has tried to show, is that without the activity and presence of thousands outside the ranks of organized labour, the Days of Action movement would not have even begun. The "serried ranks" of labour were in fact quite passive in the first months of the Mike Harris government. It was the actions of students, social assistance recipients, feminists, community-based social movements and heretofore relatively isolated left-activists, who provided the initial spark for the movement. It is no longer tenable, if it ever was, to conceptualize class struggle as solely a workplace-based affair involving as agents only those organized into unions. This lesson is clearly of pressing importance in the newly-industrializing world where millions exist in a kind of "class limbo" – half-way between the countryside and the city, half-way between a life of hustling on the streets and collective labour in a sweatshop. But even in a fully advanced industrial society such as Canada, where the question of urbanization was settled a long time ago, this "broadening" of our sense of class and class struggle remains critical.

Think only of the Embarrass Harris moment. It is absolutely clear, that the class struggle of workers against Tories in Ontario in 1995, has as a key component part ,the deliberations and discussions taking place in the AGM of NAC, the central feminist social movement in English Canada in the 1990s. The idea of class struggle appropriate to the Days of Action, then, cannot just be an idea of the workplace and unions. It must also be an idea of women's oppression and resistance, whether at the workplace or not. To restrict our notion of class struggle in this instance to unions and the workplace is to make it an idea which cannot grasp the totality of the forces which were to create a vast, class-based movement.

Many other issues have been implicitly raised here, but which can only be headlined in a short article. Throughout the story, there is an ongoing tension between the base of the movement – both in the unions and outside – and the institutional representatives of that movement itself. It is too simple to paint a picture of a rebellious rank and file, chomping at the bit, being held back by "misleaders of the class." However, what can be said is that the routinism and conservatism and resulting lack of imagination and vision displayed by the principal representatives of the trade union movement, again and again led to squandered opportunities, and confusion in the movement. This was clear right from the movement's beginning. The anti-Harris movement began in the context of mass anger over the attack on social assistance, and the poorest of the poor. The 21.6 percent cut in social assistance rates was horrific to many. But this did not galvanize the union leaders into action. It was Bill 7, which was seen as an affront to their authority and influence viz. both government and the employer, that moved the anger from the streets to the union offices. This is interestingly symbolic of a leadership more attuned to its own institutional concerns, than it is to the plight of the poorest in the province. Implicit in that tension are a whole host of issues that need to be developed in much greater detail.

Finally, this tension between the institutional representatives of the workers' movement, and the movement itself (the "rank and file"), needs to be approached very concretely through an appreciation of the ups and downs of the class struggle at the workplace. Unions present themselves in two different ways in modern society – as agents of collective bargaining, and as agents of mass struggle, typically represented through actions on the picket line in strikes and lockouts. The background to the Days of Action in Ontario in the 1990s – not dissimilar from the experience in the United States, Britain and other advanced industrial countries – was a background of many years where the level of class struggle, as measured in

the statistics of strikes and lockouts, was exceedingly low. Chart 2 (Statistics Canada 1946-2010) documents this, showing a steady decline from the peak levels of strike activity in Ontario in the late 1960s, to the very low levels in 1992, 1993 and 1994, the years just preceding the Days of Action when the NDP was in office in the province. In terms of the "social impact" of these strikes, the decline is actually much steeper than is represented here, as the population in Ontario in the 1990s was far higher than in the 1960s. In such an environment, it will not be surprising that the often conservative traits of the institutionalized collective bargaining routine would come to dominate the union leaderships, while the characteristics appropriate to the "war of manoeuvre" on the picket line, would recede.



Department of Finance Canada 2008

But this is more than enough for one article. For the people of Ontario, the Days of Action from 1995 until 1998 remain a very big experience, one that shaped a generation of workers, students, and anti-poverty activists. Its lessons are still being discussed today, many years after the fact. Indeed, with the shift to austerity again a matter of daily political talk and action, there has been renewed interest in the Days of

Action experience throughout the province. Perhaps some of this discussion of the recent past will have relevance to the movements against austerity of today and tomorrow, here and in other countries.

Acknowledgements

This article is an edited version of "Workers versus Austerity: Lessons from Canada's 'Days of Action', 1995-1998", presented to the Annual meetings of the British Sociological Association, (Work, Economy and Society stream), April 6-9 2011, London School of Economics, London, U.K. The preparation and presentation of this research was facilitated by a Research Incentive Grant as well as an Academic and Professional Development Grant from Athabasca University.

References

A Note on Sources

The author was a full participant in many of the events described in this analysis, both as an activist and as editor of the then bi-weekly *Socialist Worker*. For an equivalent event today, I would use, for my own writings, material from my web-blog, *PolEconAnalysis*. Modern "political blogging," of which that blog is a sample, actually represents something quite old – the original longer versions and "first drafts" of articles – some of which make it to the printed page, some of which settle into the "dust of history". The forthcoming weblog *PolEconJournal* will be this author's modest attempt to make his own political journal, from the pre-blogging years, available and accessible to the Internet generation. The articles on which this blog will be based, exist in print form in an unpublished collection, organized into four archives. The archive relevant to this article is *PolEconJournal II: Days of Action,* (Kellogg 1995-1998), and articles from this archive have been cited throughout, indicating date written rather than page number, the dates representing the actual date of writing, as in a contemporary weblog.

Andrus, Rob. 1995. "Protesters pitch tents to oppose co-op cuts." Toronto Star, 06 August: A.11.

Brennan, Richard. 1995a. "Long, hot summer for Harris." The Spectator, 24 June: A1.

Brennan, Richard. 1995b. "Civil servants' union rights threatened." The Spectator, 14 October: A.3.

Canadian Press. 1995. "Harris hit list names photo radar, bureaucrats and public housing." Canadian Newswire. 28 June.

Cannon, Steve. 1995. "Unions plan general strike: Ontario labor law will be protested, leaders vow." Waterloo Region Record, 02 November: A3.

Caplan, Gerald. 1990. "Ontario NDP comes of age at Convocation Hall." Toronto Star, 07 October: B3.

Clarke, John. 2010. "OCAP Marks its First Twenty Years." Znet. 27 November. http://www.zcommunications.org/ocap-marks-its-first-twenty-years-by-john-clarke.

Crone, Greg. 1995. "Repeal Bill 40 and jobs will come, Witmer says." Waterloo Region Record, 26 August: A.1.

Department of Finance Canada. 2008. "Table 45: Actual, cyclically adjusted and primary-cyclically adjusted budget balances (millions of dollars)." Fiscal Reference Tables: 2008. http://www.fin.gc.ca/frt-trf/2008/frt08_8-eng.asp .

Department of Finance Canada. 2010. "Table 11: Major transfers to other levels of government." Fiscal Reference Tables. October. http://www.fin.gc.ca/frt-trf/2010/frt-trf-1002-eng.asp#tbl11.

Edmonton Journal. 1995. "Police beat back Ontario protesters." 28 September: B.6.

Egan, Carolyn. 1995a. "A shot of adrenaline." Socialist Worker, 08 March: 10.

Egan, Carolyn. 1995b. "The OFL must give a lead." Socialist Worker, 04 October: 10.

Egan, Carolyn. 1996a. "Tough challenges for labour." Socialist Worker, 10 January: 10.

Egan, Carolyn. 1996b. "What's next?" Socialist Worker, 01 May: 10.

Gadd, Jane. 1995. "Police push back demonstrators." The Globe and Mail, 28 September: A.8.

Gindin, Sam. 1995. The Canadian Auto Workers: Birth and Transformation of a Union. Toronto: James Lorimer & Company Ltd.

Girard, Daniel, and Vicki White. 1995. "385 housing projects dropped." Toronto Star, 26 July: A1.

Harrington, Denise, and Alan Christie. 1985. "Peterson takes over as Premier of Ontario." Toronto Star, 26 June: A01.

Hurst, Lynda. 1995. "What's left of the Left?" Toronto Star, 15 July: E1.

Hyman, Richard. 1971. Marxism and the Sociology of Trade Unionism. London: Pluto Press.

Hyman, Richard. 1979. "The Politics of Workplace Trade Unionism: Recent Tendencies and some Problems for Theory." Capital & Class 3, no. 2: 54-67.

Ibbitson, John. 1995. "Protesters call for his political head as Harris is sworn in." The Spectator, 27 June: A5.

Kellogg, Paul. 1995-1998. PolEconJournal II: Days of Action. Edmonton: Author's Collection.

Lachance, Denise. 1995. "Opposition to workfare grows." Socialist Worker, 09 August: 10.

Lakey, Jack, and Peter Edwards. 1995. "Mass action slows city life to trickle." Toronto Star, 12 December: A1.

MacDermid, Robert, and Greg Albo. 2001. "Divided Province, Growing Protests: Ontario Moves Right." In The Provincial State in Canada: Politics in the Provinces and Territories, eds. Keith Brownsey and Michael Howlett, 163-202. Peterborough: Broadview Press.

Mittelstaedt, Martin. 1995, "Protests mark Throne Speech." The Globe and Mail, 28 September: A.1.

Mittelstaedt, Martin. 1996. "Ontario launches workfare amid jeers." The Globe and Mail, 13 July: A.10.

Monsrebraaten, Laurie. 1995. "Protesters, police clash at Queen's Park." Toronto Star, 28 September: A.16.

Monsrebraaten, Laurie, and Paul Moloney. 1995. "Needy left with $6.50 a day." Toronto Star, 22 July: A.10.

Oliver, Jonathan. 2009. "Whitehall lines up 'doomsday cutbacks'." TimesOnline. 05July. http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article6638323.ece.

Rao, Kam. 1996. "Embarrass Harris." Ginger: Bulletin of socialist debate, Fall.

Roberts, Wayne. 1995. "Welfare's Fraud." NOW, 13-19 July: 12-13, 18.

Rusk, James. 1995. "Ontario unions target London for shutdown." The Globe and Mail, 14 November: A.3.

Scotland, Randall. 1995. "GM, Ford hit by protest." The Financial Post, 12 December: 8.

Small, Peter. 1995. "Closing bill on Eglinton $42 million, TTC figures." The Toronto Star, 03 August: A6.

Statistics Canada. 1996. "Table 2820087: Labour force survey estimates (LFS)." CANSIM (Canadian Socio-Economic Information Management System). Database. 1976-2011.

Statistics Canada. 2008. "Table 45: Actual, cyclically adjusted and primary-cyclically adjusted budget balances (millions of dollars)." Fiscal Reference Tables - 2008. http://www.fin.gc.ca/frt-trf/2008/frt08_8-eng.asp.

Statistics Canada. 2010. "Table 2780009 - Person days not worked in Canada as a result of work stoppages." CANSIM (Canadian Socio-Economic Information Management System). Database. 1946-2010.

Toronto Star. 1995. "500 protest shameful Harris cuts." Toronto Star, 30 July: A2.

Van Alphen, Tony. 1995a. "Labor to stand fast on legislated gains." Toronto Star, 10 June: A12.

Van Alphen, Tony. 1995b. "Unions predict 'struggle in the streets'." Toronto Star, 21 June: A21.

Walker, William. 1995. "The axe falls 3 weeks in power, Tories chop $1.9 billion in spending." Toronto Star, 22 July: A1.

Waterloo Region Record. 1995. "Unions plan general strike: Ontario labor law will be protested, leaders vow." 02 November: A3.

Waugh, Phyllis. 1995. "Relaunch the fight." Socialist Worker, 05 July: 10.

White, Michael. 2009. "Taking an axe to public spending the Canadian way." *Guardian.co.uk*. 08 July. http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/jul/08/michael-white-axe-public-spending.