

Fighting to Win!

Anarchists and the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty

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The Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) is a direct action anti-poverty organization which, since 1989, has fought bosses and governments of all stripes in Ontario, left (so-called), right and center to defend the needs of poor people and to work for a future where people are able to live decently. In doing so, OCAP has become the focal point of resistance to neoliberal capitalism in Canada's largest province. It has also become a strong pole of attraction for class struggle anarchists in Toronto. This article outlines the political context in Ontario, how OCAP fights, and some of the connections with anarchists. The discussion should make clear why most class struggle anarchists in Toronto are involved with OCAP.

Unlike much of the Left and labor in Ontario, OCAP had no illusions about the ruling social democrats during their reign (1991–1995). OCAP confronted the New Democratic Party (NDP) throughout their years in office as the party moved more and more to the right.

Most of OCAP's battles, however, have been fought against the virulent neoliberal Progressive Conservative (Tory) party and their harsh policies. The 1995 provincial elections saw the backstabbing NDP replaced by a regime led by former golf and skiing instructor (no joke) Mike Harris. The Tories campaigned on a vicious anti-poor platform which demonized welfare recipients and poor people as drains on social services which the Conservatives were keen to dismantle. Upon election, Harris declared Ontario "open for business" and rigorously began a sustained attack on union gains, public services and social programs.

Keeping their election promise to brutalize poor people, among the Tories' first acts was an immediate cut of 21.6% from social assistance. To make matters worse, the Tories cancelled funding for 17,000 units of affordable housing. Later acts included the perversely misnamed "Tenant Protection Act" which did away with rent controls in Ontario.

The Tories have also attacked organized labor. Among many anti-labor acts the Tories repealed NDP legislation which had made it illegal for struck companies to hire scabs. Other pieces of legislation have taken away all penalties against bosses who interfere with organizing drives and force workers to wait one year between drives.

Last year, now into their second-term in office, the government passed legislation attacking the few employment standards which remain in Ontario. The new laws, reminiscent of the "Master and Servant Act" of the 1940s, allow for a 60 hour work week and the end of weeklong vacation periods. It is now mandatory for all unionized workplaces to post union

de-certification procedures. Incredibly, employers can now opt out of such policies as the minimum wage by arguing the their "global competitiveness" is threatened.

Unfortunately, the response of the labor movement to these vicious and ongoing attacks has been to retreat further into hopes that the NDP will win the next election (no chance) and make all the bad stuff go away. That was the position which allowed the Tories to claim a second term in office in 1999 and it remains the only vision for much of labor in Ontario. As OCAP organizer Sue Collis notes, the labor movement, throughout the Tory reign has "failed to stand and fight when called upon to do so, even in its own defense."

Days of Action

The status of large-scale resistance to Tory neoliberalism hasn't always been so bleak. Only months after the Tories' first election victory, unions, social justice organizations and commu-

nity groups launched a series of one-day, city-by-city mass strikes called the “Days of Action.” In each city substantial portions of the workforce struck.

The Toronto Days of Action shut down the city and the second day culminated in the largest demonstration in Canadian history as nearly 300,000 people took part. While results varied from city to city, the Days of Action cost the Tories’ corporate backers hundreds of millions of dollars. The Days of Action brought together diverse participants from a vast range of groups and constituencies into coalitions which held the potential for great social action. Sadly that potential was never realized.

The hoped-for culmination of the Days of Action in a real province-wide general strike, an action which could have brought the Tories to crisis, never occurred. While members of the Ontario Federation of Labor (OFL) voted in favor of proceeding with a general strike the initiative was cancelled in an underhanded manner by conservative bureaucrats tied to the NDP. Fearful that the Days would hurt the NDP chances for re-election bureaucrats worked to withdraw resources and slowly wind the movements down.

Even prior to labor’s retreat, however, cracks were showing between those who wanted a real movement for change organized to drive the government from power and those who saw the Days of Action in primarily symbolic terms. While anarchists tried to take over the stock exchange and invade the Tory policy convention, others wanted to march to an empty legislature and listen to Billy Bragg. Union marshalls acted to police militants, including rank-and-file workers. Some openly questioned the participation of anarchists in the Days.

Ever since the collapse of the Provincial Days of Action and the failure to follow through on a province-wide general strike in 1997 the resistance to neo-liberal government in Ontario has been fractured and confused. From the other side, the disintegration of the Days of Action left the Tories emboldened to surge forward with their agenda sensing that the opposition to them was not serious.

Among the groups most forcefully arguing for a province-wide general strike were OCAP and Anti-Racist Action (ARA). After the collapse of the Days of Action the two groups forged a closer working relationship which has formed a solid pole of resistance against bosses, cops and fascists in Toronto. Many individual anarchists, frustrated by the lack of militant initiative in most community groups on one hand and the relative detachment and “lifestyle” preoccupations of many anarchist efforts, got involved with OCAP as a way to match their militant perspectives with actions rooted in community struggles.

Direct Action

As an organization OCAP recognizes that the only way to confront these attacks is through collective action to disrupt oppressive institutions and practices. Acts of direct action at the point of oppression are the most effective means we have to challenge hostile agendas and make gains. OCAP works on DIY principles in which those affected by harmful policies are directly involved in making it impossible for those policies to be implemented. This power of disruption is used both to defend individuals and families and to challenge broader political practices. In this way it speaks to what Lorenzo Komboa Ervin refers to as “survival pending revolution,” practices which win real gains for people in the here and now but also contribute to building the struggles necessary to bring this rotten system down.

In the first instance OCAP has developed “direct action casework.” In these situations OCAP brings large numbers of members and allies directly to the offending agency, landlord or workplace and insist on staying until we get what we came for. If no settlement is forthcoming we raise the costs of offending agencies to the point where it is no longer worthwhile for them to act in an oppressive way. OCAP “identifies what its members need and fights for those needs with an unwavering clarity” (Sue Collis, 2001). Direct action casework has brought victories in winning social benefits, fighting evictions, stopping deportations and winning back pay.

These same methods of collective direct action have been applied to broader struggles. Recognizing that direct interference with the practices of various levels of government and their business backers is the only way poor people can effect a real measure of control in their own lives OCAP avoids token protest in favor of actions which upset our enemies’ plans. Rather than pleading with them to stop hurting us we act to develop the means to prevent them from implementing their plans.

In 1997 OCAP acted against the brutal situation which sees hundreds of empty apartment buildings in Toronto boarded up by speculators looking to drive up property values or rents on other properties. OCAP marched over 300 people to two abandoned buildings with the intention of opening them up for homeless people. Police used horses to keep people out and laid a variety of charges against participants. A year later the buildings were opened as social housing.

Anyone who took part in 1998’s Active Resistance (AR) anarchist gathering in Toronto will recall that the climax was a march and demonstration of over 1000 people. The “Hands off Street Youth” march was jointly organized by AR, Anti-Racist Action and OCAP. Participants demanded that police and city officials immediately end their harassment of squeegeers. That summer OCAP began fighting tickets in court. “We see that people get a proper defense that is not afraid to challenge the credibility or intent of ‘Toronto’s finest’ and ensure that the judicial system incurs the maximum cost for every ticket that is written” (Sue Collis, 2000). Every ticket fought gets a cop off the street and into court. OCAP has won every case that it has fought.

Safe Park

In August 1999 OCAP organized a several hundred strong occupation of Allan Gardens Park, where cops routinely cleared homeless people out or harassed people because of skin color or appearance. Just prior to the occupation the park had been the site of a major flashpoint in Toronto’s racist policing projects.

“Local homeowners lined up across the street on the south side of Allan Gardens and clapped and cheered as the cops raided the park. Cops rounded up 65 black men who were just hanging out, playing soccer and dominos. The cops made them get down on their knees, searched them, gave out three thousand dollars worth of loitering tickets and told them not to come back (Gaetan Heroux, 2001).”

In the manner of the Diggers in 17th century England, the park was established as a communal “Safe Park.” As OCAP put it in their communiqué from the occupation: “Let the City be on notice that it is our right to secure a safe place to sleep, eat and live that won’t be interfered with” (August, 7, 1999). For three days the park was a beacon of mutual aid in practice: people lived together, fed helped and cared for each other. Police response was swift and vicious.

One of the major lessons concerned the role of mainstream media and the futility of symbolic actions aimed primarily at “raising awareness.”

June 15, 2000: Fight to Win

During the summer of 2000, OCAP and allies from unions and community groups raised the level of resistance by several degrees. A summer of direct action kicked off on June 15 with a mass effort to address the Provincial Legislature, recognizing that the Provincial government has been at the forefront of attacks against poor people in Ontario. OCAP demanded that a delegation of poor people be allowed to address the legislature and notified the government of our intentions months in advance. There were three very specific demands which participants wished to deliver to legislators: (1) reinstate the 21.6% already cut from social assistance by the government since 1995; (2) Repeal the pro-landlord (and absurdly named) “Tenant Protection Act” which removed rent controls within Ontario and has directly led to thousands of evictions in Toronto alone since its inception, and; (3) Repeal the “Safe Streets Act.”

“We took up the slogan of “Fight to Win!” with every intention of making the action a call to all those suffering under this government. We wanted it to be clear that moral appeals to the Tories are worse than useless and the time has come to create a mobilization that can stop them (John Clarke, 2001).”

The action ended in a full-scale police riot during which demonstrators put up so much resistance that many cops contemplated leaving the force. Despite full speed baton charges by mounted riot police it took over an hour for the cops to clear people from the grounds. Longtime officers claimed afterwards that they had never encountered such stiff resistance. The head of the riot squad infamously told reporters afterwards that it was as if the crowd “didn’t feel the blows.”

June 15 marked a potentially significant turning point. First it showed the entire province that we could and would stand up to the state’s horrible force and fight. Secondly, the day brought radical activists together again as part of a broader and hopefully sustained mobilization against the local agents of global capital. It gave the battle against global institutions up to that point in Seattle, Washington and Windsor a specifically local and ongoing focus.

Since June 15, much time and energy has been spent building the fighting spirit of that day in neighborhoods and communities where violence is inflicted everyday. This is the work which OCAP and its allies have begun.

Common Front

Last year OCAP organized in cities, workplaces, towns and reserves throughout Ontario working towards a series of acts of political and economic disruption throughout Ontario and beyond. First Nations, homeless people, teachers, students, rank-and-file unionists and others committed to begin the difficult work of putting forward a coordinated effort to make it impossible for the ruling governors to continue governing us.

The Common Front campaign got off to an encouraging start on October 16 with an economic disruption right in the heart of Toronto’s (and Canada’s) financial district. Over 2000 people

marched through the streets of the business core targeting significant corporate backers of the Tories, especially the major banks and real estate developers. While the snake march did not completely shut down the financial district, it did make it impossible for many companies to carry on business as usual. Overall, the Tories' business backers took a financial hit of hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Actions in several other cities, including Sudbury, Hamilton, Peterborough and Ottawa followed Toronto's model of a march in targeted areas of each city's downtown (October 16 and the problems of replicating the Toronto action in other places has already received some discussion in this publication so there is no need to add to it here).

What should be noted is that the OCF drew many more anarchist individuals and organizations (Freyheyt and Black Touth in Toronto, Haymarket and the Anti-Capitalist Task Force in Ottawa and CLAC in Quebec) into an alliance with OCAP. Actions in Toronto, Ottawa and Guelph would have been much diminished without the crucial parts played by anarchists in organizing, publicizing and putting their bodies on the line. Anarchists put out calls for action in Toronto and Ottawa. In Ottawa the successful snake march on the 16th was an anarchist initiative and anarchists did most of the organizing to pull it off. This is an important step in bringing militant, class struggle anti-authoritarians together to actively develop strategies, tactics and hopefully structures of action.

That anarchists were able to take such active and open roles in the OCF, as opposed to the Days of Action, showed not only the similarity of anarchist ideas and practices with those of OCAP but also confirmed OCAP's respect for autonomy and decentralization. While OCAP initiated the fall campaign, put most of the resources into it and did much of the organizing work to get it going there was never a question that OCAP would direct the campaign or interfere with local actions in the manner of some groups.

Boring Process Stuff

Not surprisingly, anarchists are drawn to OCAP's values, commitment to direct action, self-determination and autonomy. Also agreeable to anarchists are OCAP's radically democratic group practices. Decisions are made at biweekly meetings which are open to all members. Despite many anarchists' preference for consensus decision making, OCAP shows that majoritarian votes can be taken in a participatory, democratic and effective manner. Time is always made for lengthy and vigorous debate and all sides are heard regardless of perspective or ideological bent. Debate is regularly carried over several meetings where further discussion is required.

Ideological fetishes are left at the door and meetings generally maintain a focus on developing effective, winning strategies and tactics. The filibustering and manipulation which divert so many organizations with people from different political backgrounds and perspectives are largely absent. This is largely possible because of shared commitments to anti-capitalism and libertarian socialist visions of a future free of bosses and bureaucrats in which people are able to make the decisions which affect their lives.

Anti-Capitalism

Underpinning OCAP's activities is a grounded commitment to anti-capitalism. When OCAP takes on bosses, landlords and governments we always remember that oppressive institutions and individuals arise from specific contexts. "They are the products of a whole system that is unjust and that creates the poverty and misery we fight back against every day" (John Clarke, 2001). It is this system of social relations, capitalism, which must be overcome not merely the variable policies or figureheads which sustain it. This understanding underlies OCAP's analysis and shapes strategies and tactics. OCAP takes its lead from members' needs, not from what rulers tell us is "possible," or "realistic."

"If decent paying jobs, living income, adequate housing, health care and education are "impossible" under this system, then we have to look beyond capitalism...This is the most simple but also the most important reason why OCAP is an anti-capitalist organization (John Clarke, 2001)."

OCAP shows an important aspect of the recomposition of working class forces in Ontario. It brings together the growing sections of working poor, unemployed, unsecured workers. It is unfortunate but perhaps not too surprising that this convergence would clash with the privileged sections of the working class which are clinging desperately to the last vestiges of status enjoyed under Keynesianism.

Over the years many anarchists have been drawn to OCAP because of its deep vision of the possibilities for a better world and a relentless commitment to act to make those possibilities real. On our terms alone, according to our needs not those of the bosses.

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