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June 15 Police Riot

Ontario Coalition Against Poverty

Jeff Shantz

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On Thursday June 15, 2000, more than one thousand people attended the grounds of the Ontario Provincial Legislature for a protest called by the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP). The demonstration was supported by 58 allied groups including the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW), the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). People arrived from as far away as Montreal and Sudbury. They consisted of poor people, students, homeless, immigrants, youth, workers, Indigenous people, elders.

Their reasons for attending included: 22 homeless people dead in 24 weeks; forced workfare labor; Olympic bids instead of affordable housing; targeted policing.

They put forward three primary demands:

1. Return the 21.6% taken from social services by the ruling Conservative government as one of its earliest pieces of legislation.

2. Repeal the “Tenant Protection Act” which actually removed some of the protections previously in place for tenants including rent controls.
3. Repeal the “Safe Streets Act” which outlaws squeegeeing and panhandling.

Organizers had notified the government of their intentions months in advance. Their request was only that a delegation of six people who are suffering under these policies be allowed to enter the parliament to address the assembled legislators.

When demonstrators insisted on their right to enter parliament riot police attacked, including dozens of mounted police, to drive people off of the lawns. Rather than disperse, protesters fended off the police assault for almost two hours. The result was the first political riot in Ontario in over 100 years.

Police charged horses into first aid areas attacking medics and wounded alike. They refused to allow ambulances into the area to assist the injured demonstrators, including several with head injuries.

Almost immediately the corporate media declared it a historic day in Canada. Never before had such a battle raged on the lawns of government. June 15 was an important turning point in struggles against neo-liberalism in Ontario. It had been a long time since police in Canada had attacked any crowd with such force and had that crowd hold their ground and fight back.

June 15 was not a media event. People did not show up simply to be recognized. June 15 was among the first of a series of actions intended to make it impossible for the local government in Ontario to implement their policies. It led to a revitalization of anti-capitalist struggles in the province. In the first meeting following June 15, OCAP, which normally had 20 to 30 members in attendance, had 300 people turn up.

Following Since June 15 OCAP and allies continued to build resistance in communities and neighbourhoods which are suffer-

ing every day. Mohawk warriors, union flying squads, anti-poverty groups, anti-racist activists, anarchists and many more organized along with OCAP in streets, workplaces and residences, First Nations, to build a series of economic and political disruptions aimed at making it impossible for neo-liberal policies to be implemented.