



GREATER TORONTO WORKERS' ASSEMBLY

Discussion Bulletin

JUNE 2011

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On a Workers' Assembly People's Platform

From PDL

I am writing this because I am unable to be present when the People's Platform will be considered by the membership at the GMMs on June 30th and July 28th. I am excited about this project.

Because I cannot be present to say this in person, I want to make my views on this project known in this text.

I want to point out that the People's Platform is a chance for the Workers' Assembly to take advantage of the context of an election to do critical (in both senses of the word) anti-capitalist issue-specific organizing.

The idea being proposed for the People's Platform is not that we campaign as if we were a political party, or that we support particular parties or candidates. Indeed, I am writing now to draw particular attention to the fact that the People's Platform, as proposed, is compatible with the diversity of views that exist within the Assembly on elections, inclusive of those who want the Assembly to engage with the NDP, those who think the Assembly should support particular candidates, those who want the Assembly to become a revolutionary socialist party, and those who oppose any foray into electoral politics as being a waste of time.

No matter what your view on electoral politics, I think the People's Platform, as proposed, will not be a waste of time.

The People's Platform is about developing our politics and expanding our membership as a working class anti-capitalist organization. We could use the election to help us do this. We could leaflet on Free and Accessible Transit (as a major point in the Platform) during the election; we could leaflet on good public services and good public jobs during the election; we could leaflet on workers control of workplaces during the election... and further on whatever is proposed by the membership at the GMMs for the Platform. The People's Platform allows us to tie these issues together and link them to the Assembly and the context of the election.

We could also hold several public meetings in different parts of the city on these issues during the election; we could participate in candidates debates during the election: all of this action connected with the People's Platform is consistent with the position that the best way for the working class to approach elections in capitalism is to boycott the vote and

thereby deprive the elites of their veneer of legitimacy; it is also consistent with the view that the best way to deprive the elites of the veneer of legitimacy is by successfully running an anti-capitalist candidate, or that we should aim to steer the NDP to the left, that we should support other anti-capitalist candidates or the view that the Assembly itself should seek to eventually become a revolutionary socialist party. The goals of each tendency on electoral politics are benefited by growing the Assembly as an organization in the way that the People's Platform allows.

What is compelling about this approach for me is that I don't think the Assembly needs to have consensus on electoralism right now. Many, including those who proposed the motion, are interested in having and acting upon a Workers' Assembly People's Platform because they think that it is best strategically for a revolutionary organization of the working class to engage in electoral politics in some form or other, and that the Workers' Assembly as such should eventually engage in electoral politics. But this is a question that we do not need to address as an organization right now. We need to mobilize the working class into an anti-capitalist organization in order to raise awareness and act against the injustice of capitalist society and its violent state. We need to maintain our focus on extra-parliamentary action through strike support, protests, direct action and leafleting campaigns, and the People's Platform is a way to continue this work while recognizing the context of an election. The nature of our action will change as our capacities grow.

The People's Platform is an opportunity for us to mobilize the working class. It will allow us potentially to expand the membership of the Assembly, and hopefully attract members of the working class who are new to anti-capitalism, and this will, in turn, help the Workers' Assembly with its campaigns and actions in between elections. If we are out on good public jobs and services during the election, our message may be better received when we are out in solidarity actions after the election. Further, we will finally have something to offer in response to the question of what the Workers' Assembly stands for.

It is important to try to catch the attention of the masses of the working class at the same time that elites are asking for their attention and calling it politics. We cannot remain quiet during elections; we must call the bluff. That is all the Assembly

needs a consensus on right now. And if the Assembly does come to the position to consider engaging in electoral politics through running a candidate, or supporting one, we can have that debate after having the experience of the People's Platform, and hopefully with an expanded membership of the working class. That's better for the Assembly as an anti-capitalist organization from any perspective.

One further thing: as a part of the process of producing the Platform and deciding what to do with it, the membership will have to consider the question, at some point, of how to address the fact that there is no consensus in the Assembly on electoral politics. If we have a press conference releasing the Platform, and we are asked if we are running candidates, or supporting a party, or have a view on which party comes closest to our platform, what will we say? If people on the street ask us whom they should vote for, what will we say? I think we should be honest and say that there are a diversity of views within the membership of the Assembly ranging from boycotting the vote, to supporting the NDP, to supporting other candidates such as those run by the Communist Party, independents and others. We can also, as individual members of the Assembly, disclose our own view on electoral politics in these discussions, if

we choose. But, I think we should also rely on the good faith of our comrades from the various perspectives on electoral politics to respect the fact that there is no consensus within the Assembly, and to not engage in non-Assembly campaigning, such as leafleting in particular, during Assembly planned People's Platform actions.

Our goal is to reach the masses and make them aware of the necessity of their participation in an anti-capitalist organization. Simply voting or not voting is not enough. An anti-capitalist organization cannot remain silent when the question is called and the writ dropped. We should have a leaflet that explains all of this as well, so that if we are asked this, we can provide the answer. It could also make the case for participation in the Assembly.

It is my view that eventually we will have to take a position on electoral politics, and if and how the Assembly should engage. This will be a question resolved democratically by the membership. But let's do that with a stronger organization, with more capacities, more members, and the experience provided by doing issue-specific anti-capitalist organizing during an election. The question of electoral politics may be transformed when it is not hypothetical, when our capacities and experience as an organization make it concrete.



Community Organizing Against Austerity

By John Sharkey

On May 17, Rob Ford and his right wing majority won the recent vote at City Council to deliver a staff recommended bid on privatized solid waste pick up west of Yonge. He lost his move to have staff make the choice. An amendment passed to have Council make this decision, following City policies. It's unclear when the final vote will take place but it'll be sometime in the fall.

Ford opened the debate by saying that he was carrying out a major campaign promise and that this came down to a choice between the "Right and the 'tax and spend' Socialists"!

CUPE members were the main presence in the large audience along with community supporters like myself. CUPE 416 has rolled out an impressive outreach campaign to engage community support against the privatization plan. I'd heard about the campaign earlier in the year but it wasn't until I talked to a member of the local during the recent Anti Ford rally that I got the details. He told me to connect with their campaign organizer to get involved.

By the time I met Marty Holdenried I could tell him that two young activists neighbours and me were presenting a motion in support of 416 to our upcoming Bain Coop General Members Meeting where we lived. Marty said this was exactly what he hoped would happen. The motion was presented at the end of a long meeting and passed almost unanimously (one person voted against) by about 25 members.

With Marty's encouragement, I made a deputation as a private citizen to the April 26th City Public Works Committee on the garbage issue a few days later telling them about the Bain motion and made the case for Keeping it Public. There were a large group of union and community activists in the room who make great presentations, which went on until 10:30pm. In the end the stacked right-wing committee moved the privatization project along to City Council.

During the meeting I met Paula Fletcher, my ward Councilor, and we talked about next steps. I suggested a community meeting in the ward and she was very supportive.

East Enders for Public Services (EEPS) was born and its first meeting took place on Thursday, May 12 at the Ralf Thornton Community Center on Queen East. As the meeting was called on short notice we did not put out any general publicity but focused on call outs to community, union and NDP activists in the area who were familiar with the issue. About 70 people, mostly from the Toronto-Danforth riding, showed up.

The objective of the meeting was to get as many people as possible to Council on May 17 when it was voting on the privatization issue as well as to get a sense if there was the desire and commitment for a longer-term public service support campaign. Speakers were Hugh MacKenzie former CCPA, Micheal Prue, former mayor of East York and MPP and Paula. There were great interventions from the audience and a great brain storming moment with participants generating creative ideas about how to support the union. As a result, a template letter and a list of possible swing Councilors to email and to call went out to everyone the next day. Emails went out over the weekend and phone calls were made on the Monday, the day before the vote.

What was very apparent at the first EEPS was a serious desire among a broad selection of progressive activists for a fight back campaign against the Ford/Harper neoliberal austerity program. What is important about this initiative is the opportunity it provides in working with the NDP, unions and the community and experiencing the dynamic relation between the three. Now this is the kind of campaign that could spread across the old city of Toronto and eventually further afield.

EEPS is gathering more interested members and will be holding another organizing meeting in the near future.

Maybe It's Time to State the Obvious

By Laurel Thompson

With unemployment as high as it is, and political leaders in the grip of an ideology that has no place for working people, a series of questions have to be asked:

- What can workers do when there is no work?
- What can they do when the organizations that are supposed to represent them i.e. unions, are afraid to act because there is no work?
- What can they do when the CEOs who closed down the factories and sent their jobs overseas, so that now there is no work, don't care if they bankrupt the economy as long as they get theirs?
- What can they do when the few jobs that are available are McWorker jobs (\$8.89 an hour) hardly enough to sustain a modest lifestyle and pay the bills for one person, let alone a family? [Tomgram: Andy Kroll, Welcome to the McJobs Recovery | TomDispatch](#)

There is only one answer to these questions, though you may not like it.

Workers can no longer wait for unions to negotiate a deal with whatever party says it's on our side -- the Dems or the Liberals -- because they are part of the problem.

There is no chance that CEOs will see the folly of their ways because CEOs have one thing on their minds.

And we cannot hope for leadership from better-paid, unionized, public sector workers because in spite of our large numbers, we workers are separated by class, ethnicity, and education too, and government employees, who led the way in Wisconsin, did not feel enough solidarity with the rest of us to call for a General Strike and went back to work.

There are still a couple of things left we can try. We could call for a General Strike independent of the unions. But how do you go on strike when there is no work?

We could prosecute CEOs for taking taxpayer dollars without creating more jobs. But lawyers cost money and Obama did not make creating more jobs

a condition for taking the bailouts. Corporations were given money with no strings attached.

We could demand more public spending to create jobs, but look at what happened in Wisconsin. When workers occupied the State Capitol building to challenge the governor's Budget Repair Bill, unions and the Democratic party didn't support them and told them to go back to work.

Or we could take affairs into our own hands, re-open those closed factories, bossnap those recalcitrant bosses, retrofit those ancient furnaces and seize control of the shop floor so that we have the wherewithal to start teaching/building/producing again.

Now you're talking.



But how would we go about it?

First, we'd have to research which factories are empty (their content shipped overseas) which companies went bankrupt or are weak and ripe for takeover. We'd talk to their owners about doing a switch, talk to unions about providing enough capital to get them back on their feet in exchange for exclusive access to employees for membership purposes, talk to other interested parties about owning shares.

Then we'd organize ourselves so that each one of us has something important to do -- raise capital, research viable products, analyze production, retrain ourselves, create a workspace, make sure the equipment is usable.

At the same time that we restart production, we'd think about marketing. Do we tell prospective buyers

that we're a worker-run company? Or do we keep it a secret? How much advertising do we want to do? What about packaging? Do we leave it the way it was? Or do we try something different? More environmentally friendly?

For sure there'd be kinks, and we'd tackle them one by one.

We'd ask for advice from the Mondragon Worker Cooperative in Spain and Goose Island Illinois. Since we're the ones who do the work, we know what needs to be done.

There are plenty of sympathetic academics who could help us with the small stuff.

Once we figured out how to take over failing companies, we could then go on to approach other companies that are not as weak but struggling nevertheless because there are no buyers for their products, (because there is no work). Would they be willing to lower their prices? Make them better for the environment? Sustainability costs more when you are the only company that is doing it and when there is not a big demand. But if workers let it be known that they won't use things that harm the planet and that they'd rather buy products from places where workers run the show, there'd be more of a market for environmentally friendly, worker-friendly products and prices could come down.

It's a matter of matching things up. Workers support workers. Everyone supports the earth.

We'd go after small companies that have already left the country or are threatening to leave. They're easier to take over and cannot afford standing armies.

But later on, when we have more experience, we might think about taking over bigger businesses, though since they were a mistake to begin with, why bother? Why not just let them shrivel up and die?

The first steps would be taken by workers, but unions would be invited to organize the new employees as long as they support our goals which are to save the planet and even the playing field with capital.

Of course, this proposal raises a number of questions, so I'll try to answer a few of them here.

How do you take control of operations if you are accustomed to doing the opposite, i.e. taking orders?

This is where the inherent democracy of worker control over the means of production becomes apparent. For it has been remarked that in every situation where they claim the right to make decisions about company expenses, investments, research, operations, and in spite of their past submission, workers rise to the occasion. The opportunity to have more control over their working conditions and the strategic decisions that affect their lives brings something out in them that has heretofore repressed, a hidden genius that has immense potential for the future of industry.

But don't you need special training to run a company?

Maybe. The ones who are running them now don't seem to know what they are doing. (See [The Unwisdom of Elites - NYTimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com))



What if the struggling owners don't want us take over their factories?

If they don't want us to stir up public opinion against them or boycott their products, they don't have much choice. We need to pass a law that says that if you move your company out of the country, you have to leave your land rights, property rights and equipment here.

But wouldn't things get violent?

Back in 2009, workers in France managed to get most of what they wanted from owners without

hurting anyone or being hurt. Sarkozy tried to outlaw worker takeovers, but public opinion was not on his side. This is not France, but we could use it as a model. We could get public opinion on *our* side. The trick will be to get *them* to disdain violence. We have to practice non-violence. Sit-ins. Blockades. Serious boycotts.

You're right. I don't like it. It will inflame the rednecks. CEOs will shit in their pants. The police will have a heyday. It's too risky.

Rednecks are inflamed by nature. CEOs should have forfeited their power over workers a long time ago. As for the police, they will have to decide whose side they are on. Ours or *theirs*.

But the cards are stacked against it, even though it's probably the right thing to do.

Probably the right thing? Worker takeovers are long overdue. The disparity of income between rich and poor is obscene. There are thousands of people looking for work and only a few crummy jobs. Elite decision-makers who know nothing about how economies work are behaving recklessly, and the government is like putty in their hands. There is no one left to fight for us, so we have to fight for ourselves. Not with guns or other weapons. With our hands and our wits. We are the multitude.

You are asking a lot from us. I'm not sure we can do it.

When did you ever do something brave?

(Laurel Thompson is a retired college and elementary teacher and union organizer for the American Federation of Teachers.)



Call for Contributions to the July Bulletin

The GTWA's *Discussion Bulletin* is an open forum for members of the Workers' Assembly to discuss the Assembly and pressing practical questions facing radical activists in the Toronto area today. You may also be interesting in replying to the submissions circulated in this month's Bulletin, and respectful dialogue over political disagreements are also welcome in the Bulletin.

In fact, submissions are encouraged on any topic bearing on the Greater Toronto Workers' Assembly and the activism of its members.

Submissions to the Bulletin should meet the following criteria:

- Fewer than 2000 words
- Written in language that is accessible to non-academic audiences
- Pertaining to a topic or issue relevant to the Assembly
- Contains no inflammatory or libelous statements against Assembly members or constituent organizations
- Adheres to the Assembly's Policy on Harassment and Discrimination

The deadline for the next Bulletin is 20 July 2011 and submissions should be sent to assembly.bulletin@gmail.com. (The deadline for all issues of the Bulletin is the 20th of the month. Submissions received by the 20th will appear in the Bulletin published at the end of each month.)

If you would like feedback on a first draft, or help with proofreading, etc., editorial volunteers are happy to provide such assistance and/or feedback, when time permits. (We would also welcome volunteers to help out with this.)

- ★ What is the significance for labour and social movement activists of the NDP 'successes' during the recent Federal election and the new majority for the Harper regime?
- ★ Can we draw any conclusions about the state of the Assembly from reflecting on the strengths and weaknesses of its campaigns?
- ★ How best can we fight back against Rob Ford's agenda in Toronto?
- ★ Are there are lessons to be learned from the strengths and weaknesses of the early mobilizing against Mike Harris?
- ★ Are there aspects of the Assembly project that you feel need further clarification or practical development?
- ★ Are there lessons that need to be learned about how best to respond, or how not to respond, to state repression against activists, in light of the G20 crackdown?

These are just a few of the questions that we need to take up and discuss. If you have any thoughts to share on these or other questions facing activists today, please consider jotting down your thoughts and sending them in to our email address: assembly.bulletin@gmail.com