

We must shift our focus from traditional collective bargaining to the defence of responsive public services and unionization-drives in the private sector. Public sector unions must take the lead in organizing the unorganized and reorganizing the organized. Ultimately, we need a revolution inside our unions. But even this is not enough. The questions that confront us now are much more profound.

There are serious electoral divisions fracturing the labour movement. While many of us can't understand why anyone but the wealthy would vote Conservative, we quibble over whether the Liberals or NDP will betray us more. Elections are important, but we must be frank about the limits of the mainstream political parties. No party, including the NDP, is committed to challenging corporate power by building the working class as a social force. This will fall to us.

Politics is not just something politicians do. Politics is also something we can and must do. We need to *get political* in new and creative ways. We need to aggressively expose real privilege in our society – the grotesque and growing income inequalities, the decline of public services, tax cuts for the rich amidst wage cuts for workers. Most of all, we need to expose the ways in which economic elites limit what elected governments can do.

This means confronting the extent to which the lack of democracy in the economy undermines political democracy. This means confronting the plausibility of equality, security, democracy, and ecological sanity *in this society*. This means confronting the inherent barriers of capitalism. This means expanding democracy into the economy. This means the ownership and control of workplaces by workers who democratically determine what is produced and how. This means socialism.

These are the goals of the Greater Toronto Workers' Assembly. Join us. We are you.

If you'd like more information about the Greater Toronto Workers' Assembly, visit our website at [www.workersassembly.ca](http://www.workersassembly.ca). If you'd like to join us in the defence of public sector unions, jobs, and services, visit [www.workersassembly.ca/join](http://www.workersassembly.ca/join) or write us at [workingclassfightback@gmail.com](mailto:workingclassfightback@gmail.com). If you'd like to see the larger pamphlet-version of this leaflet, visit: [www.workersassembly.ca/node/163](http://www.workersassembly.ca/node/163).

Greater Toronto Workers' Assembly  
[www.workersassembly.ca](http://www.workersassembly.ca)

# Under Attack: In Defence of the Public Sector

## The Greater Toronto Workers' Assembly

The Great Recession should have lit a fire under workers everywhere. It hasn't. Politicians should be on the defensive. They aren't. We are. Employers should be making concessions. They don't. We do. Their lawyers should be grovelling. Instead, our leaders are cowering. Their silk ties should feel tighter. Instead, our boots feel heavier. Their nights should be sleepless. Instead, our dreams are crushed.

We should be winning this struggle. We aren't. They are. Public sector workers and the services we provide are under attack from government, business, the news-media, and, although it is hard to admit, from other workers. Everywhere we go, all over the world, public sector workers are accused of greed, inefficiency, and incompetence. How did this happen? What can we do to change it? The reasons aren't simple. The solutions won't be easy. If you can stomach it: read on.

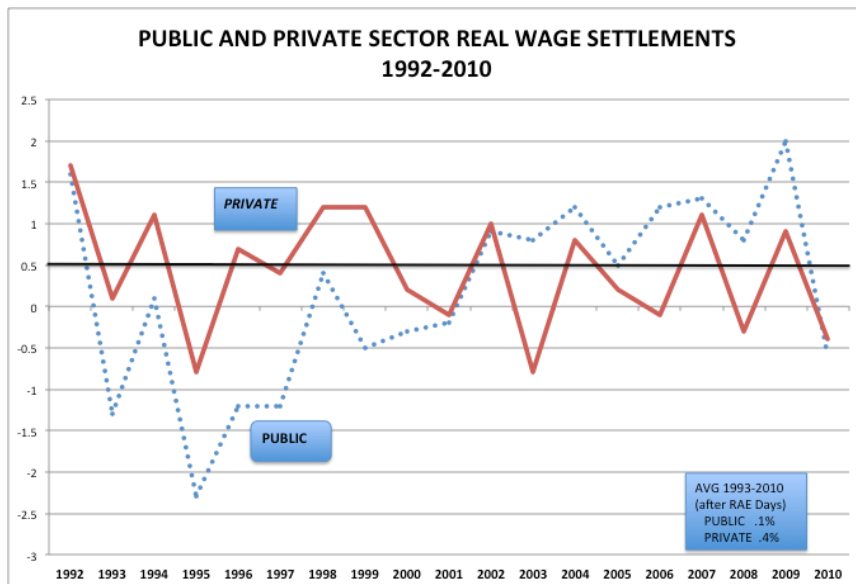
By targeting public sector unions, business and government are using economic arguments – namely, balancing budgets – to justify what is actually a *political* project. Using a divide-and-conquer strategy, elites are pitting public and private sector workers against each other.

Conservative mouth-pieces have two main talking-points. First, when compared to the private sector, public sector wages and benefits are extravagant.

Second, public sector wages and benefits are the cause of government deficits. All the mainstream political parties at the federal, provincial, and municipal levels, including the NDP, are buying into this rhetoric. But is the rhetoric true? Not even close.

Divergences between wages in the public and private sectors are largely due to, on the one hand, pay and employment equity legislation in the public sector and, on the other hand, discrimination against women and racialized workers due to market-driven pay structures in the private sector. For example, while public sector women are paid more than women in similar positions in the private sector, this higher pay is offset by lower pay for mostly male workers in managerial positions. These divergences arose because unionization is more than four times higher in the public sector and larger and stronger unions are more able to enforce the law in the defence of their members.

Deficits haven't been caused by out-of-control public spending. Since 1992, after accounting for inflation, wage agreements averaged one-half of one per cent in the private sector and one-tenth of one per cent in the public sector. Deficits have been caused by, in the long term, declining revenues, and in the short term, the economic crisis.



Ontario Public Service Employees Union, Consumer Price Index – Ontario, statistics available to May 2011: [www.opseu.org/research/cptable2.htm](http://www.opseu.org/research/cptable2.htm); Ontario Ministry of Labour, Collective Bargaining Highlights, statistics available to April 2011: [www.labour.gov.on.ca/english/lr/](http://www.labour.gov.on.ca/english/lr/)

Furthermore, conservative rhetoric has drastically inflated the deficit crisis. Although our economy is weak, our debt and deficit situation is better than most countries in the OECD. While federal and provincial budgets should prioritize creating jobs, government continues spending cuts and corporate tax cuts that will not generate employment or economic growth. While all of this seems quite irrational, it begins to make sense when we move from purely economic rationales to what is actually a comprehensive political project.

Motivating these attacks on public services is privatization. Corporations want to profit from public goods and accommodating governments are restructuring how services are organized and delivered so that they can be gradually transformed into a source of profit. After consistently underfunding public services, conservative windbags attribute poor quality to the inefficiency of ‘big government’ as a justification for privatization.

If we fail to act, this is the fate of all public services. Defending public services doesn't necessarily mean defending *the current condition* of public services, but it does mean fighting for better public services. Governments have framed this struggle as a choice between the level of worker compensation and the quality of public services. We, on the other hand, need to frame this struggle as the choice between the improvement of public sector jobs and services or their continued erosion, privatization, and, for those services that are not profitable, elimination.

But arguments are not enough. Public sector workers can only counter conservative myth-making machines by forming strategic relationships with those who depend on the services we provide. While recent door-to-door campaigning by CUPE 416 was a good first step, forging relationships between unions and communities must be long-term and go much deeper.

While the claims about public sector workers made by business and government have little factual basis, they do tap into feelings of resentment held by many workers. Although public sector workers everywhere are feeling the squeeze of austerity, non-unionized private sector workers face decreasing employment insurance and social assistance and an increase in precarious work. Many private sector workers without unions resent those public sector workers who have unions that fight for them. This is what right-wing pundits seize upon.

If public sector unions are being attacked by elites because they are the strongest section of the working class, then it is time we start acting like it. Other workers will not be won over unless they see us leading the fight for better social services for all. Our organizing, bargaining, and campaigning must demonstrate that the entire working class can look to our unions for support.