

Lessons from Ontario's city-wide, political strikes of the late 1990s

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In 1995-1998, unions in Ontario embarked on a series of eleven one-day citywide strikes against the policies of the Conservative provincial government. This article details the labor-community coalitions they put together ; the cross-picketing they did of each other's workplaces ; and a deal of practical advice for mounting huge strikes and demonstrations.

Unlike most strikes, political strikes are aimed not at management but at the government. A political strike is an attempt to force the government to change some policy, or even part of a broader attempt to change the government itself. In the United States, political strikes have been rare, usually against one city government. For example, after police attacked workers during a post-World War II organizing drive among retail clerks in Oakland, 142 AFL unions and 100,000 workers declared a « work holiday, » walked off their jobs, and shut the city down. After a compromise settlement, the unions ran a political campaign and in the next election won office for four out of five of their city council candidates.

Sometimes the scope is wider than a single city. In the 1960s, West Virginia coal miners struck to pressure the government to pass legislation dealing with black lung. From the 1950s through the 1970s, public employees and teachers in many states called illegal strikes to win collective bargaining laws for public employees. The United Farm Workers used strikes to pressure the state of California to pass a collective bargaining law for agricultural workers.

In countries with more militant labor traditions, political strikes have occurred more often. During the 1970s and 1980s, Brazilian workers used political strikes to help overthrow a military dictatorship. South African workers used political strikes to fight the apartheid government. During the 1990s and early 2000s, Latin American unions in over a dozen countries engaged in national general strikes against privatization, free trade agreements, and the effects of globalization. Political strikes are often met with government repression. When Polish workers' national strikes threatened to overthrow the Communist government there in 1980, the Polish military suppressed the movement. Political strikes can clearly be powerful weapons, but when they become national movements in which workers challenge the government, the stakes are high on both sides.

DAYS OF ACTION IN ONTARIO

Between late 1995 and 1998, Ontario unions called eleven « Days of Action » that were, in effect, political strikes against the provincial Conservative government of Mike Harris. The Days of Action were a series of rolling, one-day general strikes in different towns and cities, involving not only unions but also many social movements and community organizations.

Eventually Ontario's unions called hundreds of thousands of workers into the streets, shutting down many private businesses and public agencies, while also holding mass demonstrations and rallies

throughout the province. While they did not succeed in bringing down the Conservative government, the strikes did challenge the Conservatives' anti-worker onslaught, and they helped develop a new group of labor and community activists.

THE CONSERVATIVE POLITICAL ATTACK

The Days of Action were the unions' response to a government assault on workers and the poor. Mike Harris was elected on June 8, 1995 on a platform he called « the Common Sense Revolution, » inspired by Ronald Reagan's conservative policies. As the Canadian Broadcasting Company reported, Harris « ...cut taxes, reduced the size of government in the province, cracked down on welfare, encouraged work-for-welfare programs, merged school boards.... » He became notorious for his tough talk and attacks on the poor ; for example, his government eliminated a \$37-a-month benefit for pregnant welfare recipients, « with Harris explaining he wanted to make sure 'those dollars don't go to beer.' » [1]

Rick Witherspoon, now a Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) official, was president of the London and District Labour Council at the time. « Harris first attacked the poor by rolling back social assistance, » says Witherspoon. « Then he turned his attention to workers and put in place some of the most regressive labor legislation we had seen in decades. He repealed anti-scab legislation, froze the minimum wage, amended health and safety legislation, and made it harder for injured workers to get workers' compensation. Then he turned his sights on public sector workers by challenging their ability to bargain collective agreements. It was very clear that his agenda was to support big business and attack the rights of workers. »

René Fortin, assistant to the regional director of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), remembers « Bill 136, which removed anti-scab laws that had been introduced by the New Democratic Party [the labor-backed party]. They were proposing a whole slew of issues dealing with employment standards, things like the legal hours of work per week. » They were making proposals about privatization. They were talking about removing the right to strike in some areas. Or in areas where we did not have the right to strike (such as hospitals) but had arbitration, they were talking about getting rid of mutually agreed-upon arbitrators and having government-appointed arbitrators."

DIFFERENCES AMONG UNIONS

The Canadian labor movement was not united as it began to develop a response to the Harris government. When the previous, labor-backed New Democratic Party (NDP) government had cut budgets for social programs and attacked the bargaining rights of provincial public sector workers, unions were divided on how to respond. The public employee unions—including CUPE, Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW), and Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF)—had wanted to fight back, and, along with the CAW, Hotel Employees (HERE), and UNITE, they began to question their relationship with the NDP.

However, most of the industrial unions wanted to maintain unquestioning support for the party. At a meeting of union leaders, a group of unions (principally the United Food and Commercial Workers, Communications, Energy and Paperworkers, Service Employees, Machinists, National Union of Public and General Employees, Steelworkers, and Teamsters) issued a statement—printed on pink paper—that called for renewed support to the NDP. The so-called « pink paper unions » also made a veiled critique of the role of the public sector unions, and threatened to split the Ontario Federation of Labor. The « pink paper » divisions still existed when Harris came to power.

Nevertheless, Canadian unions found enough unity to launch the Days of Action, but with different emphases. For example, while the general slogan of the province-wide Toronto Days of Action was

« Organize, Educate, and Resist, » the slogan of the Canadian section of the Steelworkers was « Organize, Educate, Legislate » (though in the city of Toronto, the Steelworkers aligned themselves with the more militant public employee unions).

We look here at the Days of Action in two Ontario cities : first, the conservative, medium-sized city of London ; second, Toronto, Canada's largest and most diverse city.

ORGANIZING FOR A GENERAL STRIKE

Despite the differences among Ontario's unions, all had a strong reaction against the Harris government. Virtually all began to lobby against the Harris government's program and to educate their members about it. They lobbied municipal councils and got many of them to pass resolutions opposing the federal government's budget cuts, which would have a disastrous effect on many city services and programs.

CUPE's leadership called for meetings with local union leaders to discuss the political situation and to raise the idea of a general strike. « At that time, CUPE represented about 200,000 members in Ontario, organized in 800 locals with 2,000 collective bargaining agreements, » explains René Fortin. "We held a series of consultations with the local leadership, which culminated in massive conferences throughout Ontario in which direction was given by the local leadership. In every community or concentration of membership, we called leadership meetings and then membership meetings. We went around obtaining strike votes aimed at a general strike for the withdrawal of all public services in the provinces.

'We had to do that,« Fortin continues, »because we have local autonomy. We're not centralized by any sense of the imagination, and in terms of going on strike, those decisions are made by vote.

« We reached out to other labor groups, both those in the Canadian Labour Congress and those outside the CLC. We also attempted to bring into the fold the industrial unions, which were hesitant. CAW was up front with us, but the Steelworkers and other industrial unions were reticent, and we were trying to win them over. »

EDUCATING THE RANK AND FILE

Union officials and activists realized that the first group they had to reach was their own membership. Herman Rosenfeld, a national representative in the CAW Education Department, says, « A lot of auto workers and other workers had voted for Harris. Even many public sector workers had voted for him. One of the key thrusts was to change people's opinion. We had to convince people that they should oppose Harris, strike their employers, and participate in the Days of Action. »

So the CAW and a number of other unions mobilized to talk to the members. Rosenfeld remembers, « We took a group of political activists from the unions—some lower-level elected officials and other rank and filers—and paid them to work as organizers. We set up meetings in union halls, or informally in bars and donut shops. We produced leaflets and materials specifically targeted to the workers in the workplaces in the community, zeroing in on issues that we knew would touch a chord with them. They were handed out in union meetings, informal meetings, and inside workplaces. We encouraged activists and local union officials inside workplaces to talk to co-workers, and suggested tactics for them to do this. This was a planned component of building the Days of Action in each of the target cities. While most of the meetings were with small numbers of people, they eventually involved thousands of workers. »Many of the workers had supported Harris because he talked about cutting taxes. We challenged them on this issue. We argued that most of the tax cuts would go to his rich friends. We pointed out that he was cutting the number of health and safety inspectors in the

workplace, and cutting workers' compensation. We told them, ultimately you will pay for this in terms of your own health.

« We pointed out that the cuts to social assistance were so vicious—along with the end of funding to social housing—that people were being forced into hostels and motels. The government was threatening to bring in workfare, which would force social service recipients—workers who had exhausted their unemployment insurance benefits—to work for their benefits. The government had threatened to use them as low-wage replacements for jobs being cut from government agencies, and even as potential scabs. »London was the model, but we did this in several cities. We had a pretty intense period of talking to people about these things. Where we did this we had the best results.

« We didn't know if we could pull this off, but we did, and it worked brilliantly. Not everyone was convinced, but we convinced many. Other workers often supported it even if they were not convinced, because they were loyal to the union. »

The goal was to mobilize members against their employers, to pressure Harris to withdraw his policies. The challenge of bringing down the Conservative government and forcing a parliamentary election for a new provincial premier and cabinet would be a long shot—and could occur only if the strategy of one-day general strikes could breach the divide between unions. Certainly, the most militant groups of worker activists sought to build towards a more massive movement to get rid of Harris's government, but that presupposed a number of other things happening. The goals from the point of view of the overall union movement were to change workers' and community members' opinions, to mobilize them against employers and the government, and to pressure the government to withdraw its policies.

REACHING OUT TO THE COMMUNITIES

However, union leaders were clear from the beginning that a general strike could not be organized by the union movement alone. It would also need allies among the social movements and community organizations. « Because the legislation also meant cutbacks in services, it was a frontal attack on the working poor, and those on welfare, » Fortin explains. The next step was bringing the unions and community groups together.

« We called for meetings with community groups in each area. We were reaching out to church groups, anti-poverty groups, organizations dealing with social services and their recipients. »

The next step was to set up coalitions in every city and town. « The Ontario Federation of Labor was coordinating the Days of Action and they began to focus on different towns, » says Fortin. « In each town where the Days of Action were to take place, there was a community co-chair and a labor co-chair. That was the structure, and there had to be complete buy-in from all parties in terms of roles and direction. »

Working with the community groups wasn't always easy for union activists. « Those that hadn't worked previously with community groups found it difficult to work with them because of the organizational approach, » says Fortin. « The labor movement style is, 'let's have a vote and deal with it, let's have a vote and go.' The community groups had a different style based on consensus ; they don't always take votes. They say, 'this is the approach we would like to take.' Our members wanted to say, 'let's cut the debate and take a vote,' so the debates took longer. We had to find a common solution, and then take a vote. »Another issue is that there was a degree of suspicion as to the motives of the union,« Fortin adds. »The typical question was, 'Where are you going to be after this ?' For years, community groups had come to the labor movement and sometimes they had had a solid reception and in other cases not. For some union members it was just bizarre dealing with

other organizations that weren't part of the union movement. Certainly there were hiccups on occasion, but we dealt with them."

The process—labor leadership meetings, rank-and-file member meetings, meetings between union activists and community activists—was repeated in one town after another. Out of these came the common understanding that made possible cooperation in common actions.

THE FIRST DAY OF ACTION—LONDON

The Ontario Federation of Labor decided that the first Day of Action should occur in the conservative city of London. Rick Witherspoon explains, « To take this challenge to the streets, they didn't really want to go to a town like Windsor or Oshawa, which are real union towns. The union leadership felt that if they focused on a conservative (small 'c') town, the impact would be greater. »Nothing like this had ever happened on this scale in Ontario. It was a formidable task to ramp it up. As it did throughout Ontario, the labour council decided to create two co-chairs, one from the private sector unions and one from the public sector.« Witherspoon was president of a CAW Ford local and represented the private sector. »We believed that if we wanted to challenge the business community that supported the administration's agenda, then we had to get to their wallets. Shutting down as many businesses as possible would get their attention,« says Witherspoon. »To solicit support, we held membership meetings for almost every union affiliated with the labour council in London. We also involved many of our London community partners, social action groups, church groups. It became very clear this wasn't just about the labor movement ; it was about the kinds of communities we wanted to live in and the impact the conservative agenda was having on our communities.« Because the government viewed the Days of Action as illegal, and because workers would shut down their workplaces, union officials were initially worried about repercussions. In both the public and private sectors, contracts contained no-strike clauses. »Partly for this reason, we didn't call it a strike, we called it a Day of Action,« says Witherspoon. »Many employers threatened their workers that they could face discipline up to and including dismissal." But the unions decided to go ahead.

In London, the unions took their fight into the public arena. Although they didn't always win, it was a useful educational and organizing process. « When we approached the London City Council and asked them to adopt a resolution supporting the Day of Action, they rejected it, » Witherspoon says. « The Council said that that they expected all municipal employees to report for work. We brought many employees to the city council meeting, and it was an interesting debate. It was interesting partly because the Day of Action was planned for December 11, 1995, and a council meeting was scheduled for that day. In their wisdom, the council changed their next meeting date to avoid being confronted by picketers. »

At the same time, Witherspoon says it was clear to the organizers that « there was good support both within the unions and the community, and the Day of Action started to take on a life of its own. » Unions from other parts of the province pledged to supply support—workers to make phone calls and work on schedules for picketing. The unions recruited marshals and organized buses to bring people to London.

« To protect workers who would not be reporting to work but to keep them involved in the action, » says Witherspoon, « we developed a strategy called 'cross-picketing.' Rather than put a Ford worker at risk picketing his own plant, we would have workers from other plants picket the Ford plant and have Ford workers picket other plants. » Thus, any worker who did try to go to work on the Day of Action would be confronted with a picket line, but management would not see its own employees in front of the plant. Social movements were equally crucial, as they appealed to their members and the wider communities to help cross-picket various workplaces.

DEALING WITH THE POLICE

When organizers met with the London police, for the most part they were cooperative. « However, » Witherspoon remembers, « one day when we met with the police, it had been announced that for all demonstrators in the march the CAW would supply balaclavas, which are knitted masks, usually used by skiers, that cover the lower part of the face. This was a problem from the police point of view because people couldn't be identified, and they went a little ballistic in the meeting. We assured them they were just toques (simple knitted caps) and not balaclavas. In fact, they were balaclavas, though we didn't know that at the time. Still, it was good to have the balaclavas, because December 11 was one of the coldest days on record that winter. »

In meetings, the organizers explained what would happen, emphasizing that they were planning a peaceful day of picketing and a rally. « We impressed on everybody that this was intended to be peaceful, and that's how we were able to sell it to the police. We created hundreds of marshals, and got the police to agree that before they reacted to a situation they would ask a marshal to handle the problem. » On the Day of Action, two parades started in different locations, one in the center and one in the east end. The police closed off all the streets, and the two parades converged in the downtown area for the rally," says Witherspoon.

MIDNIGHT PICKETING

« On December 11, we began picketing at midnight to make sure that people who would have gone in for the midnight shift would face pickets, so they could either go home or join the protest, » Witherspoon remembers. « There were also pickets at all locations at 6:30 in the morning and then again in the afternoon. » There was picketing at hundreds of locations : at manufacturing plants, office buildings, municipal offices, and the airport. The locations that we focused on were shut down. At the Ford and GM plants, which together employed between 7,000 and 8,000 people, there was no production for 24 hours. The Labatt's brewery shut down and didn't make any beer that day. The Kellogg plant didn't make any cereal. The buses in the city didn't move that day. Before the day many of the schools and government offices had agreed to close down, knowing that it wasn't going to be business as usual. « Although they shut down the city, the unions made sure that essential services were provided. » We didn't put people's health at risk," says Witherspoon. The teachers' unions put on educational events for the students and parents, and parents and children supported the picketing at the schools.

The London Day of Action proved a tremendous success. « We probably had 20,000 people on the streets in London that day, the largest demonstration and rally that had ever taken place in that community, » says Witherspoon. « We succeeded in closing down the workplaces we had targeted. We had more media than this city had ever seen for any event. It was truly national coverage, even international. There were letters of support from people from Canada and the United States, as well as outside North America. »

Witherspoon doesn't hesitate when asked to name the most important part of the Days of Action : « That we took the opportunity to educate our leadership, our members, and the community about the reasons for this action. If we had not taken time to educate everybody, it would not have been as successful as it was. » What led to our success was the fact that we involved as many unions as we could and included our community partners, so it wasn't just the labor movement challenging the government. It was the community challenging the government. The coalitions formed then still exist today. There was a new respect among groups in the community. People who didn't understand each other before now had a better understanding. We learned that being inclusive was one of the keys to success. When we put together committees, we made sure they were as inclusive as possible, that people really did have a sense of ownership in the actions we were taking."

PROVINCE-WIDE ACTIONS AND RESULTS

The city of Hamilton followed with the next Day of Action in February 1996, with the participation of 120,000 people. In April 1996, about 30,000 participated in the three neighboring cities of Cambridge, Kitchener, and Waterloo. In June 1996, in a somewhat smaller city, Peterborough, some 10,000 participated. In Toronto, in October 1996, the Day of Action mobilized what is said to have been the biggest demonstration in Ontario's history, with at least 250,000 people.

TORONTO : GENERAL STRIKE IN A LARGE CITY

Organizing a general strike in Toronto was an enormous undertaking. In 1996 Toronto had a population of about 2.5 million in the municipality and 4.2 million in the total metropolitan area. While Ottawa is Canada's political capital, Toronto is the country's corporate and financial capital, filled with corporate headquarters.

We look at the Days of Action in Toronto from two perspectives. Helen Kennedy was involved in organizing a labor-community coalition in a local community, while René Fortin had responsibility in the organization of the citywide strike. As these accounts make clear, things can look quite different from different locations in the same movement.

ORGANIZING IN A COMMUNITY : NORTH YORK

Helen Kennedy works in a subsidized-housing community center for the Toronto Parks and Recreation Department, where she is a coordinator of the At Risk Rescue program. She works with poor families, and particularly with youth of color from the Caribbean and East Africa. She belongs to CUPE Local 79, which represents Toronto city workers, serves on the executive of the Toronto and York Region Labour Council, and is also secretary of CUPE's Toronto District Council.

« During the Toronto Day of Action, » says Kennedy, « I was very involved in my own district, North York. Just after Mike Harris was elected, we created a grassroots organization that brought together both community and labor organizations, the North York Fight Back coalition. We didn't have funding from anybody. We went to community organization meetings where we explained what was happening to the budget and funding for social programs. And we organized our own information meetings where we explained the 22 percent cut to welfare. We grew to become a much larger organization reaching across the whole community. » The big difference between what we did and what René Fortin did was that they had tons of money, and they had 75 activists that were paid for organizing. In North York we weren't getting paid, and the people from the unions who were involved were known as community activists.

« The day of the work stoppage, we connected with the larger groups and arranged cross-picketing. We had busloads of community people coming in to picket as well. One of my most favorite memories was seeing two busloads of seniors from the Lawrence Heights community. It was amazing to see all these community members coming in to join the picket lines. » There were a lot of teachers involved as well—from primary and secondary—and students, and we ended up having 5,000 people out in the Valley of North York, a suburb of the north end of Toronto, which was the largest rally in North York's history."

BUILDING A LOCAL LABOR COMMUNITY COALITION

Helen Kennedy offers these suggestions for building a labor-community coalition :

Go slow : Understand that it takes a lot of time to build coalitions ; it cannot be done too quickly. Don't go faster than the group is going. It has always been one of my personal problems, I know where I want to go and I want people to go with me. The group has to move all at the same time.

Stick to the common goal : One of the problems is that you get sidetracked into other issues, which may be very key issues, but that could put you in danger of not bringing the coalition forward. You have to decide what issues can be dealt with in terms of a consensus. A coalition does not have to take a position on every issue.

Reflect the diversity of your community : We did a lot of work in the poorer neighborhoods to get the people that were most affected by the cuts. In a city like Toronto with large immigrant populations, you have many different languages such as Farsi, Tigrina, Amharic, Chinese, Vietnamese. You have to be able to communicate with people. Providing meals may be important, or providing childcare. We also worked to bring in women through the North York Women's Center.

Create balance in the coalition : There are totally different ways of organizing. How you organize in the union may not be how you organize in the community. When you get both groups together there has to be balance. It's not just having co-chairs that's important, it's having co-power. Labor came in with the financial power, they had all the money, and they had the staff, organizers.

ORGANIZING CITYWIDE

« In Toronto we put together a group of rank and filers on a coordinating committee, » says Fortin, « and I was the staff person in charge of coordination. We had about a dozen members from all sectors and it was a diverse group in every way. »

CUPE's plan was to shut down about 100 different institutions and facilities, everything but hospitals, for which special arrangements were made. Before the Days of Action began, Fortin and other union leaders met with management to negotiate no-reprisal agreements to protect striking workers.

Fortin remembers, « We said to them, 'We're shutting down your place.' They said, 'That's illegal.' We said, 'Well, we feel it's legal.' » We negotiated 'no reprisal, no disciplinary action' agreements with most of the employers." Those agreements were possible because the funding cuts were affecting the agency managers too.

Organizing any strike, but particularly a general strike of an entire metropolitan area, requires detailed planning of every aspect of the event.

« We had our map, » says Fortin, « and we had located all the facilities, but we had to make sure there were people able to be on all those picket lines for the day. We had to insure that—where there were multiple entrances—they had all entrances covered. We wanted to make sure nobody would go in to work. So we had to have training for picket captains, and a communication system to communicate directly about hot spots. » We developed a protocol for picket captains, so that people would know their rights, and to insure the people on the line were orderly. You have to understand that we had people who were quite aggressive, and that not everybody was sympathetic to us. So we had to have contacts for the picket captains, for when problems occurred. We had to have people with experience in the neighborhood to assist them," says Fortin.

In addition to meeting with the employers, the union leaders also met with the police in advance of the demonstrations. « We had a series of meetings with the police, giving them a heads-up as to our intentions. We established members to be in charge of contacts with the police. »

WORK WITH COMMUNITY GROUPS

« This was a hand-in-hand situation with the community groups, » says Fortin. « We had co-chairs, and we were joined at the hip. So all of our actions were joint actions. The community groups appreciated the unions' organization, and they had a sense of empowerment collectively. Community groups don't have a centralized organization like the labor movement does, and they don't have the funds, and they appreciated the power, and economic base. »

Communications with union members, the communities, the public, and the press was an important job. « We had three staff people assigned to press, communications, publications, translation of documents, » says Fortin. « Since the city is highly multicultural, we produced literature in 18 different languages, which is only some of the 146 different languages spoken in Toronto. We dealt with the major ones, French, Cantonese, and sixteen others. »

Press coverage came almost automatically because of the significance of such a shutdown. « We were in the press everyday. The Day of Action became the issue. We were in all forms of media. »

BUILDING UP TO THE EVENT

The event had to be built in various ways. « We planned for particular activities for the different sectors, » says Fortin. « A demonstration to protest the impact on education, another to protest the impact on social services. So there was a special day for each group, with massive demonstrations leading up to the Day of Action. So it was not only a one-day event. » At the same time that we were mobilizing Toronto, we were also mobilizing the rest of the province for people to come to Toronto. So we needed a whole transportation network to insure that others could get to Toronto on that day, and mobilization in every other community.

« The respective unions also had their own events. CUPE has about 145,000 members in Toronto alone. We decided, 'Here's 100 or 111 places we want to shut down.' Then we began to plan for the day itself : what do you do with thousands of people in a particular area ? Community groups and unions formed committees, such as an entertainment committee or a transportation group. » We had a plan to shut down major highways on that day, in and around Toronto, a city of about two million. Our plan was to stretch cars across the freeways and just drive at a slow rate, causing traffic congestion. So we had people get up at 5 o'clock in the morning to set up those barriers. But on that day, everybody decided to stay home, because the subway was going to close down, and people presumed there would be major havoc on the roads, so when we got there in the morning the highways were deserted. Our cars traveling at a slow speed got pulled over by the police. Toronto was a ghost town, nobody came that day.

« On October 25, Toronto's Day of Action, we began to close things down at 5 o'clock in the morning. We set up our picket lines. Our people shut down the landfill sites, social services, City Hall, the Hydroelectric Commission (power facilities), and school boards. We didn't picket the schools, but rather the administration, though there was no school on that day. Effectively everything was shut tight. There was some administration staff that got in, but as far as business as usual—nothing. »

Did the strike remain peaceful ? « There were minor incidents, » says Fortin. « Minor violence on the subway spots. At landfill sites. Some of our people were becoming quite aggressive. Such minor events were to be expected, but there was nothing of a major consequence. Was there intimidation ?

Sure. When you see a policeman on a mounted horse, that itself was intimidating. But there were no police incidents. »We made it clear our intention was not to rip down buildings, we wanted to express our opinion. We had marshals for the parades, and all those advance things. We were prepared for anything.

« So on that day, all these buses came rolling into Toronto to get ready for the parade at exhibition grounds on the lakeshore, which was the congregating point. Then we marched up to the legislature. Along the route we had entertainment and speakers. At the parade people had their colors representing their unions and community groups. Community groups put on theatrical skits. We went along this massive five-kilometer route. Tens of thousands of people, with a sea of flags. It's great fun to be in that type of a crowd. Top-name artists playing, speakers from the labor and community groups and opposition political parties. »We calculated 250,000 people at the parade on the Day of Action. It reminded me of the '60s. It was great. And it was the result of all the legwork, the union and community meetings, and the acquiescence in terms of employer retribution.« »Toronto is mostly a financial and service place, and most of the strikers were public sector workers,« says Herman Rosenfeld. »Many activists were recruited to picket transit maintenance yards and entrances, and the financial district. There was little work on the inside in these workplaces. There weren't huge numbers of private sector workplaces left to close down."

ORGANIZING A GENERAL STRIKE

The organization of the Days of Action shut down one city after another in Ontario in 1996, 1997, and 1998. What does it take to organize such a massive movement ?

Clearly, a citywide general strike requires hundreds of people prepared to take responsibility for organizing thousands of others to carry out the strike and the related marches and demonstrations. Almost nothing in such an undertaking can be left to chance. The list below barely begins to convey the many varied elements involved in such a strike :

- **A sense of crisis and urgency** : The Days of Action were precipitated by a political crisis, a frontal attack on unions and the poor by a Conservative government. It was important that unions and many social movements and community organizations perceived that they were under an unusually fierce attack that required an extraordinary response.
- **The support of official labor bodies** : The Ontario Federation of Labour, representing most of the province's unions, passed a resolution to support the Days of Action. While some unions gave only nominal support, the resolution was important in authorizing the strike, making it « official. »
- **The endorsement and support of local labor leaders and rank-and-file members** : The strike could only be successful with their commitment to making it happen.
- **A core of dedicated activists** : These people brought the message to co-workers, within and across unions and, if necessary, past leaders who were opposed or ambivalent.
- **An alliance between labor, social movements, and community groups** : These alliances gave the movement a greater social base and greater mobilizing power. As one official said, « We were joined at the hip, » throughout the Days of Action.
- **The creation of a « general staff » for organizing and running the strike** : The general staff must be large enough to reflect the leadership of the organizations involved, and small enough to effectively engage in rapid discussion and decision-making when necessary. The general staff has to be responsible to the unions that have authorized the strike, to the rank and file involved, and also to

the communities that will be affected. The general staff must plan and oversee the strike, handle negotiations with authorities, and respond to emergencies.

- **A detailed plan** : The plan of action should include : a) a list of all the workplaces to be closed ; b) a list, for each location, of all entrances and exits to be covered ; c) a general map of all the facilities to be closed, and specific maps for each location ; d) a timeline for the closing of workplaces, with plans to mobilize pickets for each hour and each day ; e) listings of picket captains and their contact information.

- **The assignment and training of picket captains and pickets** : Picket captains need to be trusted, reliable, capable people who will take responsibility for closing down locations, dealing with authorities at the local level, maintaining discipline of the picketers, and enforcing the strike on those who attempt to violate it. Picket captains need to understand the strike's « rules of engagement. » The strike may be peaceful, involve the use of civil disobedience, involve the use of force, or involve seizure of property. In the case of the Days of Action, the rules were to maintain peaceful picket lines and enforce the strike. But in other situations, different rules may apply.

- **The training of pickets** : Picketers need to know exactly what they are supposed to do, where and for how long, and to whom they are to turn over responsibility when their shift ends. Typically, strike rules include : assigned hours of duty, assigned equipment (bullhorns, picket signs, armbands, ropes or tape to indicate off-limits areas), rules of behavior (no drinking, no drugs, no swearing or abusive language), rules of engagement with those who attempt to violate the picket line (shouted slogans, locked arms, physical isolation and removal, use of limited force, etc.).

- **Media team** : Media spokespeople have a sensitive job, since their statements establish in the mind of the public—including the employers and the government—the reason for the strike, its character, its objectives, and its methods.

- **Internal communications team** : In the lead-up to the strike and on the days of the strike, the team needs to constantly produce information for strike captains, picketers, union and community organization members, and the general public, possibly in several languages.

- **Emergency medical services** : In any large gathering of people, there will almost always be health problems, and doctors, nurses, and other health professionals strike should be organized into teams identifiable to the public and the police, and linked to picket captains.

- **Transportation or logistics team** : In a strike like the Toronto Day of Action that brought thousands of other Ontario residents into the city, a committee must arrange transportation, overnight shelter, and food (whether through prepared meals or simply directing people to restaurants).

- **Liaison with employers** : The general staff needs to negotiate with employers over maintenance of essential services, such as emergency rooms, ongoing patient care, and hazardous operations such as chemical and nuclear plants. Leaders should also try to negotiate no-retribution agreements.

- **Liaison with police** : The general staff needs to inform the police of plans, to avoid unnecessary conflict and confrontation. Strike leaders may also want to meet with leaders of the police union. The general staff should be able to communicate instantly with police commanders during the strike, to deal with emergencies and, if possible, ward off repression.

- **Strike day operations team** : This team oversees picket captains, picket lines, and related activities to make sure that they happen as planned, and to deal with contingencies and

emergencies.

- **March or rally team** : The march route needs to be carefully examined and worked out in detail with the police and other authorities. Entertainment needs to be organized, and making the speakers list will likely be a politically sensitive task.

- **Negotiation committee** : If the strike has a particular political objective, and will continue until there is some sort of resolution of the issue, a negotiation team will have to deal with the relevant authorities. It should be made up of the central leaders of the bodies that authorized the strike. The negotiators will coordinate with the general staff and the media and communications teams to keep the picket captains and picketers informed of developments.

by Dan La Botz

P.-S.

* From The Troublemakers Handbook :

<http://www.troublemakershandbook.org/Text/Strikes/La%20Botz%20Days%20of%20Action.htm>

Notes

[1] Martin O'Malley, « Common Sense Mike steps aside, » CBC News Online, March 21.