

Private-Sector and Public-Sector Workers are in this Together

Priority #5: Rebuild Active Solidarity Within the Labour Movement

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The success of this campaign put a little more money in low-waged workers' pockets. Perhaps more importantly in the long-run, for many the campaign provided a rare experience of speaking out and being heard. Organized labour positioned itself as taking up the issues of predominantly non-unionized workers, their families, and communities. Community-based activists learned the potential of coordinating their activist efforts with the interventions of supportive politicians. For the Labour Council and its many allies and partners, these accomplishments heightened optimism, confidence, and solidarity. And that laid the foundation for our future work together in the movement for economic and social justice.

Private-Sector and Public-Sector Workers are in this Together

Priority #5: Rebuild Active Solidarity Within the Labour Movement

Gil Levine

IN SOME WAYS, PRIVATE-SECTOR and public-sector union members almost seem to inhabit two different worlds. Unionization in the public sector is close to 80 per cent, and has held steady over the last two decades. In the private sector, unionization has been eroding, and is now below 20 per cent. The battles fought by public sector workers are just as tough as those in the private sector, to be sure – as demonstrated by the vicious attacks on public sector workers that have recently been unleashed. But so far the brunt of the economic crisis has hit private-sector unionists first, especially in hard-hit sectors like manufacturing and forestry: hundreds of thousands of jobs have been lost, and private-sector unions face incredible pressure for concessions.

So in the wake of the current economic crisis and the intensification of attacks on unions from both employers and governments, it seems obvious that public-sector and private-sector workers are ultimately in the same boat – and they badly need each other, if they are to keep that boat afloat. There is a glaring need to rebuild active solidarity between public and private sector unions, as the labour movement confronts the effects of the crisis, fights to preserve past gains, and strives to shore up its organizational and political power.

All Canadian workers, both public and private, are being hammered by the economic crisis. Public sector workers may have been somewhat shielded from the first effects of the recession. This is certainly true in terms of employment (which has continued to expand in the public sector, in contrast to massive job losses in private businesses), pensions (where most public sector workers still enjoy defined benefit plans, a benefit which is under siege in the private sector),

and a few other areas. But this will change, and soon. Public sector employers will inevitably use looming deficits as the excuse to attack collective agreements and dismantle workers' rights that have taken decades to establish. The anti-concessions struggles by civic workers in Windsor and Toronto are clearly just the beginning of more vicious fights to come, as deficits swell and opportunistic politicians try to turn public frustration against public sector unions.

Fewer good jobs in the private sector (in manufacturing and other higher-wage sectors) mean fewer tax dollars. That puts increased pressure on the job security of public sector workers and the quality of the services that they are able to provide. So public sector workers have a direct interest in the preservation of well-paying industries in the private sector. In other words, public sector workers will not be able to remain in a protected zone. In their own interests, they will have to engage directly in the economic struggles of their brothers and sisters in the private sector.

This need for all unions to work together was well put by Paul Moist, National President of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, when he told a recent CAW conference that "the labour movement cannot be split; no Canadian Labour Congress affiliate can afford to isolate itself from the rest of the movement. Your support for Medicare and other public services is critical. Our support for good manufacturing jobs is also critical."

As the economic crisis unfolded and trade unionists recognized the severity of the economic and political threats facing our movement, there have been positive signs of improved cooperation between public and private sector union leaders. Paul Moist has spoken to conventions of the CAW, the Communications, Energy, and Paperworkers Union (CEP) and others. In turn, Ken Lewenza, CAW president, has spoken at the CUPE Ontario convention and is slated in the fall of 2009 to speak to the CUPE National Convention. In this modest way, each union becomes more aware of the issues facing other unions. While this is a healthy development at the leadership level, much more emphasis needs to be placed on building solidarity, shared activity, and exchange at the local level. This solidarity needs to encompass union-specific collective bargaining and strike struggles, as well as broader social and political campaigns.

For example, there have been some encouraging examples of public and private sector unions sharing facilities in political election campaigns. Recent municipal election campaigns in Vancouver, Ottawa, Toronto, and elsewhere highlighted the common interest between public sector and private sector unions in electing more progressive candidates. Labour councils in these cities shared facilities and mobilized members to elect progressives, both for the obvious benefit of the municipal employees in each city, but also for the well-being of the community at large.

Another timely issue to stimulate closer cooperation between public and private sector unions is the matter of public procurement, and efforts to ensure that major government purchases are directed to made-in-Canada, preferably

unionized suppliers. For example, Canada Post plans to further motorize its letter carrier operations. There would seem to be a perfect match between the needs of this Crown Corporation (which plans to purchase approximately 5,000 new light vehicles in coming years) and the needs of Canadian auto workers (who are being laid off because of weak vehicle sales).

Given Canada Post's and the federal government's record, these new vehicles might well be imported from outside Canada. Accordingly, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers and the CAW issued a joint statement in the spring of 2009 calling on Canada Post to ensure that the new trucks be made by unionized Canadian workers. The joint statement made the more general point that the loss of good-paying manufacturing jobs has a ripple effect on other sectors of the economy – including the public sector through the loss of tax revenues from the auto and related industries.

The logic of mutual benefit in this issue is obvious and compelling: auto-workers see a public institution actively supporting the hard-pressed Canadian manufacturing base, while postal workers fight for their employer to put something back into the communities they serve. Most important of all, both unions get to know each other better, fight for common goals, and build solidarity in action. We need more examples of this common cause in practice.

Other efforts at cooperation are being made at the local level. A major and lengthy strike by CUPE members against the City of Windsor, which demanded huge concessions from its civic workers, received strong support from the Windsor Labour Council and the CAW. Meanwhile, joint public and private sector rallies have been held in St. Catharines, Kitchener, Belleville, Oshawa, Moncton and other cities. A rally for laid-off Stelco workers in Hamilton drew 2,000 people, including many public employees. Similarly, a CEP rally of several thousand on Parliament Hill in support of forestry jobs, pensions, and better EI drew support from across the board. In another recent strike by CUPE school board workers in London, Ontario, retirees from both the Steelworkers and the CAW joined CUPE members on the picket line. With the ranks of retirees growing faster than the regular work force, organizing and mobilizing retirees will play an increasingly important role in our political and economic battles.

To its credit, the Canadian Labour Congress has tried to become significantly more active in mobilizing members of affiliated unions in joint campaigns around political and economic issues. This marks a hopeful change from the inactivity and divisiveness of recent years, when the movement's leaders seemed more concerned with inter-union rivalries than with building the potential of the working class movement to fight for change. But the structure of the CLC (constrained by the need for virtual unanimity from affiliated leaderships, before being able to undertake meaningful mobilizations) and its limited resources still restrict the effectiveness of its campaigns.

In any economic crisis, workers and their unions have a fundamental choice: to cave in to inaction, or to fight back. Labour history has shown that labour unions can be most capable of fighting for workers' rights when the

going gets toughest. Even in the midst of the Great Depression of the 1930s, when both unemployment and political repression were more severe, workers organized and made wage gains. Successful past struggles (such as the Days of Action campaign against the Mike Harris government in Ontario in the 1990s) showed that mobilizing public sector and private sector workers, arm in arm, is not only possible – it is essential.

So this recession, with all of its negative impact on workers, provides new opportunities. Workers may be more receptive to come together and fight back. But no single local or union can do it by itself. To be successful, a fight-back campaign will require strong coalitions between private and public sector unions, together with our community allies and social partners.

Workers Need their own Story Line

Priority #6: Political-Economy Training for Labour Leaders and Activists

Bill Saunders

CAPITALISM HAS DISCREDITED itself and by any measure should be on the defensive today. Its proponents made many promises that now seem very hollow if not totally false. They claimed that if the private sector took over almost every aspect of our economic life and ran it according to the logic of profit, then efficiency would improve and living standards would rise. Supposedly we would all be better off. Finance, housing, transportation, manufacturing: all parts of our economy were subjected to this “private-sector-is-better” recipe.

How have they done? Not well at all, as is obvious from the state of the world around us. Clearly, other alternatives need to be developed and proposed.

Thus the current crisis presents an opportunity for labour, as well as a challenge. But to make the most of this opportunity (and to make sure it is the system on the defensive – not us), we need to educate ourselves, our leaders, and our activists. The labour movement needs to focus on economic alternatives that work for the average working Canadian. We need to bring this discussion about alternatives into the rank and file membership of our unions and into our communities. And in order to do that we will have to increase our level of economic literacy, so that we are confident proposing alternatives and are not fooled by the false solutions that will be offered up in the coming debate.

In short, workers need their own story line. We need our own story to tell about what caused this crisis and about its likely effects and consequences. We need to be able to reject the claims that workers somehow are responsible (through our wages or our pensions), or that governments somehow caused it (through taxes and publicly run programs). We need to defend ourselves