

**12TH OFL BIENNIAL CONVENTION
NOVEMBER 25-29, 2013
TORONTO, ON**

RISING TOGETHER ACTION PLAN

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make it fair - for everyo

RISING 
TOGETHER



ONTARIO FEDERATION OF LABOUR

RISING TOGETHER ACTION PLAN



**Rising Together: 2013 OFL Action Plan
November 25, 2013 • Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL)**

The Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) represents 54 unions and one million workers.
It is Canada's largest provincial labour federation.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

RISING TOGETHER

“Severe austerity measures, weak policies and a dearth of jobs were constraining efforts to reduce poverty and to trigger real recovery from economic crisis.”
– United Nations, March 2012

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Two years ago, the OFL forecasted the failure of the austerity agenda and the membership set out to mobilize province-wide labour and community opposition to neoliberalism. In words that today have been vindicated by history, the 2011 OFL Convention Action Plan declared that:

“If left unchecked, the austerity juggernaut threatens to wipe out the social and economic gains made by previous generations. There is no doubt that resisting austerity in all its forms is the most important obligation our generation has toward the next generation. Indeed, the health and well-being of our children and the planet are depending on us.”

Two years later, those prophetic words have been receiving validation from unexpected places, including the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, while the foundational philosophy that underpinned the austerity agenda was publicly discredited by the research of a University of Massachusetts at Amherst graduate student. Unfortunately, hawkish pro-austerity politicians in Canada and around the world are steadfastly sticking to their aggressive social and economic restructuring and the consequences have been disastrous. Part and parcel of this neoliberal agenda is a growing threat to union security. Ontario’s Liberal government opened up a new attack on workers’ rights by introducing Bill 115, which was given the Orwellian name “*Putting Students First Act*,” in an attempt to strip the Charter rights of educational workers. Harper and Hudak have revealed plans to go much further in adopting anti-union laws that are designed to dismantle union protections and drive down wages for all workers.

Following the 2011 Convention, the OFL reached out to more than 100 community groups and labour unions to create the province’s largest labour-community alliance since the Mike Harris era – the Ontario Common Front. Since then, the Ontario Common Front and the OFL have launched major mobilizations against austerity cuts and Bill 115, released groundbreaking research on inequality, conducted People’s Budget consultations that reshaped the province’s budget priorities and tipped the scales in various by-elections across the province.

This year, the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) launched its national member-to-member engagement initiative, *Together FAIRNESS WORKS*, to activate union members across the country and to spark conversations about the role unions play in establishing fair wages, good pensions and safe workplaces for all workers. This kind of member engagement must become the new normal for unions – not just for how we communicate with our members in the workplace, but also for how we connect with family, friends and supporters in our communities.



While the strength of the conservative movement in Canada is money, labour and social justice activists have a much more powerful resource: people.

We must advance our own vision that captures the public imagination and shifts what is possible.

Together, these initiatives represent a necessary shift away from two decades of defensive opposition to the threat of global capital, the erosion of historic workplace gains and declining union density.

It is time for organized labour to learn from those leading the attack on union security and integrate our tactics and resources into a bold and confident movement that proposes concrete solutions to neoliberalism, puts pressure on policy makers and makes what seems *radical* today, *reality* tomorrow.

Working together, the OFL and affiliates will reject austerity and neoliberalism and commit to *inspire*, *unite* and *activate* our movement for progressive change.

For far too long, labour and community activists have dismissed our opponents and reacted defensively to the threats they presented, while neoliberalism has taken root through attrition. By simply defending what we have rather than demanding what we deserve, we have let our opponents set the agenda.

Decades ago, the conservative movement began putting forward radical ideas like the privatization of public services, dismantling the social safety net and tax cuts for wealthy corporations and the rich. These ideas that were once unthinkable have now become routine public policy. To their credit, conservative ideologues long ago developed long-term plans for how they wanted to remodel society and the economy to maximize corporate profit. They then set about establishing, funding and supporting a host of think tanks, lobby groups, media outlets and other organizations that helped coordinate their messages, build their capacity and reshape public discourse. Through these efforts, a marginal and anti-social corporate agenda became accepted as inevitable and mainstream. It is time we started to learn from these successes.

While the strength of the conservative movement in Canada is money, labour and social justice activists have a much more powerful resource: people. Mobilizing a movement of people that can reverse the trend towards neoliberalism will require *inspiration*, *unity* and *action*.

It is time for progressives to put forward big, bold ideas about the kind of society we want to live in. We cannot be constrained by goals that today seem distant – like free tuition, a living wage, a green economy or universal pharmacare – because these are the very ideas that are capable of inspiring and motivating communities into action. We cannot let our opponents determine the impossible. We must advance our own vision that captures the public imagination and shifts what is possible. Together, the OFL and affiliates will work with our community allies to chart a *People's Agenda* – a shared vision for a progressive society – that will serve as a guidepost and a reminder that *a better world is possible*.

Now it is time for unions and the community to rise together to inspire, unite and activate a movement for change.

Neoliberalism (def.):
(nee-oh-lib-er-uh-liz-uhm)
A political philosophy promoting the restructuring of the economy and society in the interest of corporate profit.

Advancing a *People's Agenda* will inspire the people of Ontario, shift the public conversation, forge bonds between people and communities, and force a change in public policy.

It is time for labour and community activists to build a strong, viable and coordinated progressive infrastructure in Canada. We can no longer allow our political party, our think tanks, our unions, our organizations and our organizers to work in isolation or at cross-purposes. We must unite our movement, from research and analysis to organizing and action. In doing so, we will build trust and confidence, carry a common message, advance our goals together and shift the public and political discourse.

It is time for the OFL and affiliates to build on the success of the Ontario Common Front to grow our grassroots and expand our base of support through neighbourhood outreach in every city, every town and every community in the province. We must transform the Ontario Common Front from a network of activists into a nexus of action.

Throughout history, unions have won victories at the bargaining table and expanded those achievements to the entire population through legislative change. In so many ways, from abolishing child labour to establishing a minimum wage, to winning parental rights and same-sex benefits, the profound words of Martin Luther King Jr. have rung true: the rising of the unions has been the rising of us all. Now it is time for unions and the community to *rise together* to *inspire, unite* and *activate* a movement that will transform our province and our country into a society that is founded on a true, collective and inclusive *People's Agenda*.

2013 OFL ACTION PLAN

THE OFL AND AFFILIATES WILL ...

INSPIRE

- Move from defensive to visionary by putting forward big, bold ideas about the kind of society we want to live in. Together, we will work with community allies to chart a shared long-term vision – a *People's Agenda* – that will capture the public imagination and inspire Ontarians to believe that *a better world is possible*.
- Launch and support campaigns and direct action that force progressive ideas into the public conversation and onto the political agenda. This will include continued support for the *Raise the Rates* campaign, the *Campaign to Raise the Minimum Wage* and campaigns for protections for migrant workers, as well as other campaigns and direct actions that advance the *People's Agenda*.
- Coordinate and develop a resourced strategy for electing progressive candidates in upcoming elections in Ontario at all levels of government. Every election is an opportunity to put forward a *People's Agenda* and shift the political climate, while supporting candidates that will carry these progressive policy ideas forward once in office.

UNITE

- Build on the success of the Ontario Common Front, which in just two years has grown into an alliance of over 90 community and labour organizations from across the province. Drawing inspiration from other labour-community coalitions that have strengthened social movements and mobilizations, such as the Québec student strike and the Occupy Movement, we will work to bring the Ontario Common Front to every corner of the province in order to forge the bonds between people and communities needed to effectively harness our people power.
- Support and strengthen an infrastructure of progressive organizations, including think tanks, foundations, media outlets and training and education across the province that will help coordinate our messages and build our capacity.
- Foster strong relationships with Aboriginals, Québec and allies throughout Canada by supporting the People's Social Forum, which will take place in Ottawa in August 2014. The Forum aims to transform the political, economic and social paradigm by inspiring creative resistance and providing alternatives to neoliberalism.

ACTIVATE

- Invigorate union organizing efforts by improving labour laws in Ontario. This will involve undertaking a strategy for implementing card check certification and successor rights so that workers only have to vote once on whether or not to join a union and are not forced to re-organize when collective agreements are lost during the bidding process in the contract sector.
- Support and amplify affiliate and labour council campaigns to aggressively take on the anti-worker agenda. By making union security and workers' rights a key focus in the coming months, we can ensure that Hudak's anti-worker agenda is defeated in the lead up to the next provincial election.
- Build on the CLC *Together FAIRNESS WORKS* campaign by making member-to-member engagement part of our regular day-to-day work, not just in the workplace but also in our communities. Continuously reaching out to new supporters will ensure that our base is always growing.



“History is a great teacher. Now everyone knows that the labor movement did not diminish the strength of the nation but enlarged it. By raising the living standards of millions [of people], labor miraculously created a market for industry and lifted the whole nation to undreamed of levels of production. Those who attack labor forget these simple truths, but history remembers them.”

- Martin Luther King Jr.

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PART 1 WHAT WE'RE UP AGAINST

These words have never rung more true than today. In 2013, the OFL produced an important historical analysis of the contributions that the labour movement has made to our society – ending child labour, establishing a 40-hour work week, introducing a minimum wage, instituting employment standards and health and safety legislation and the list goes on. “The Rising of Us All” is a powerful reminder of the strength of the labour movement and the responsibility we carry to defend and expand the rights of all workers.⁴

Today, organized labour is up against a corporate and political elite set on dismantling the social safety net and intensifying inequality as they advance a neoliberal agenda through austerity. Building on the lessons of solidarity from our history, we must meet these challenges together. Our hope and desire for a better world is shared by a diversity of dynamic individuals and organizations with a common vision. As a united movement, we will reject austerity and neoliberalism and replace it with progressive policies for a just and equal society. It is time to rise together and show that another world is possible.



AUSTERITY UNRAVELLING

“Systematic unaccountability has turned our leaders into a reckless class of gamblers. They take unimaginable risks with our collective future, because they believe if things crumble, they’ll be standing on the sidelines watching from a safe distance.”

***– Sean Devlin,
ShitHarperDid.ca***

Two years after the OFL committed to building a Common Front against austerity – an agenda that was accelerating neoliberalism and bringing untold hardship to working people around the world – the austerity agenda is unravelling. Deep spending cuts have been prescribed to countries in every corner of the globe to cure growing deficits, but instead they have led to higher unemployment and reduced private consumption, often resulting in increasing deficits – the very opposite of the stated goal. At the same time, public services and social programs have been dismantled, removing social and economic supports for the most vulnerable just when they are needed most.

Even the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has been backing away from austerity, a policy approach it recommended for years in countries around the world. In January 2013, the IMF publicly admitted that it had misjudged the true devastation that austerity would cause and that in some cases the negative impact of deep spending cuts on economic growth were more than three times greater than previous calculations had estimated.⁶ All this because they had failed to fully consider the impact austerity would have on increasing unemployment and reducing private consumption, realities that progressive economists have been cautioning against for years.

In the spring of 2013, the seminal paper that had been used by governments the world over to rationalize austerity was also knocked down by a graduate student who found mistakes in the calculations. Rogoff and Reinhart’s 2010 paper had suggested that once debt reaches more than about 90 percent of the GDP the risks of a large negative impact on long-term growth become highly significant, and it had been widely cited as justification for austerity measures.⁷ A graduate student at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst revealed that this claim was based on a faulty data set and discredited the study.⁸ This represents a seismic shift in the economic foundations for austerity.

While the evidence for austerity completely crumbles, manufactured fear about growing deficits continues to be used by right-wing governments to push through deep cuts and sweeping neoliberal reforms that are restructuring our society and economy around corporate profit. This includes economic policies, such as new free trade agreements and dismantling workers’ rights; social policies, such as privatizing healthcare and cuts to social assistance; and environmental policies, such as removing barriers to resource extraction.

This radical agenda is vast with deep consequences, including growing inequality, persisting poverty, worsening health, precarious work, high unemployment and environmental destruction. Working people are bearing the brunt of these failed policies, while power and wealth continues to be concentrated among a small corporate elite that controls the economic system and reaps the benefits.



DEFICIT HYSTERIA COMES TO ONTARIO

“Ontarians have been treated to a carefully orchestrated exercise aimed at foreclosing public debate about the future of public services.”

**– Hugh MacKenzie,
Economist at CCPA
Ontario**

As the basis for austerity completely unravelled over the last few years, political leaders in Ontario continue to cling to it as a means for advancing neoliberal policies and dismantling the social safety net.

In the lead up to the 2012 Ontario Budget, the Liberal government set Ontario on course for austerity when they hired former TD Bank Economist Don Drummond to advise the province on how to handle the deficit. The fix was in from the start, as Drummond was not allowed to look at revenue generating tools and did not consider the value of public services. As expected, his report designed a road map for cutting public spending and made wildly overblown deficit projections to fuel misplaced anxiety among Ontarians about the need for spending cuts. Despite the fact that Ontario was already spending less per capita on public services and social programs than any other province, the Liberal government used the Drummond Report to close off public debate about budget measures and then introduced an austerity budget that fast-tracked a dismantling of public services and social programs through drastic cuts of \$17.7 billion over three years.^{10,11}

To justify these deep spending cuts, public sector workers became scapegoats for growing deficits. The Liberals passed Bill 115, which gave unilateral powers to cabinet to legislate away workers’ rights if negotiations with public sector unions did not produce the desired results and left teachers and educational workers to bear the brunt of austerity measures.¹² The Bill was repealed in January 2013, but it was too late. The Minister of Education had already imposed collective agreements on tens of thousands of teachers and education workers, stripping them of their right to collective bargaining.¹³

The Liberal plan backfired. Angered and betrayed by Bill 115 and austerity, 30,000 Ontarians protested outside the Liberal convention in January 2013, showing that people were no longer willing to accept a government that prioritizes corporate interests over the public good.

When Kathleen Wynne took over as leader of the Ontario Liberals she tried to fashion herself as the “social justice premier.”¹⁴ However, achieving social justice would require a sharp turn away from the austerity agenda that her predecessors had set in motion. Wynne’s Liberal government has shown no willingness to change direction. While they have set about putting a kinder spin on McGuinty’s devastating policies in order to quell public outrage, it is clear that the core tenets of austerity are not up for negotiation.

Despite some gains in the 2013 Budget, which included modest reforms to social assistance, a youth jobs strategy, and investment in infrastructure and homecare, austerity continued. The Liberal budget held the line on a one percent cap on growth in program spending (which will result in actual cuts) and contained no substantial measures to generate revenue through fair taxation.¹⁵ Consequently, any promised deficit reduction continues to occur on the backs of working people through spending



CORPORATE CANADA'S LOW-WAGE STRATEGY

The labour market shift towards the exploitation of migrant workers has been propelled by employers eager to spend less on wages, training and benefits.

cuts, lowering the quality of services available to Ontarians. Liberal policies throughout 2013 represent missed opportunities to alleviate poverty, address inequality, and spur economic growth. Deficit reduction measures continue to act as a cover for the full-scale dismantling of Ontario's social safety net.

In Canada, the newest face of the neoliberal agenda is a broad and severe low-wage strategy that benefits corporations while putting pressure on Canadians to work for less.

EXPLOITATION OF MIGRANT WORKERS

A pillar of the federal government's low-wage strategy is the expansion of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP), which has doubled in size since 2006.¹⁶ While this expansion has been justified as a necessary response to so-called skills and labour shortages, no evidence exists to support this position in Ontario.^{17,18} In reality, the TFWP has led to the exploitation of migrant workers who are vulnerable for many reasons, including language barriers, work permits tied to one employer, fear of reprisal and being sent home and barriers from accessing supports and government services. This labour market shift towards the exploitation of migrant workers has been propelled by employers eager to spend less on wages, training and benefits. The TFWP is driving down wages and working conditions and contributing to an erosion of human rights and labour rights for all workers.¹⁹

CUTS TO EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

The ongoing cuts to Employment Insurance (E.I.) are another component of the federal government's low-wage strategy. Recent changes to E.I. promote a quick return to low-wage work in place of training and support to get workers back on their feet. The new rules mean that workers are expected to take work that pays less and involves a longer commute.²⁰ Today, less than 40 percent of unemployed Canadians receive E.I. benefits.²¹ Cutting E.I. benefits further is hurting workers who have paid into the program their whole lives and deserve support.

LEAVING BEHIND VULNERABLE WORKERS

Making matters worse, in the 2013 federal budget, the Harper government announced that it would be diverting \$300 million in funding away from existing Labour Market Agreements towards a new Canada Job Grant.²² This is a shift away from supporting workers who do not qualify for E.I. – such as women, immigrants, and older workers who need literacy training and upgrading support – towards an employer-driven short-term skills training program. This is a significant change in priorities that threatens to leave behind vulnerable workers.



STRIPPING AWAY WORKERS' COLLECTIVE RIGHTS

Hudak aims to reduce collective bargaining power and force workers to compete with each other for lower wages.

Unions are a strong voice for working people and the best mechanism for workers to demand their fair share of economic wealth. To the corporate elite who are advancing an economic agenda that concentrates wealth at the top, unions and workers' rights are seen as a barrier to rolling out their low-wage agenda. Across the country conservatives are threatening to re-write labour laws in their favour and undermine the union security arrangements that have brought a certain degree of stability to labour relations in Ontario and Canada for decades.

Today, labour laws ensure that all workers who benefit from collective agreements contribute to the costs of maintaining that agreement through their union dues. This means that once certified through a decision made by a majority of members, unions have the financial resources needed to adequately represent workers. At the core of these arrangements in Canada is the Rand Formula, which states that if a dues check-off clause is requested by the bargaining unit, it must be included in the collective agreement.

These union security arrangements have recently come under attack and the ability of unions to continue doing their work is being threatened. At the federal level, the attack on unions has been embodied most clearly by Bill C-377, Bill C-525 and back-to-work legislation. Meanwhile, in Ontario, workers' rights have become a clear target of the Progressive Conservative opposition.

HUDAK'S ANTI-WORKER PLATFORM

A key component of Hudak's Progressive Conservative platform has been an attack on unions and working people. In June 2012, the Progressive Conservatives released a White Paper recommending the repeal of the Rand Formula along with a host of other reforms to weaken unions and workers' collective voice, including banning mandatory membership clauses, making union leaders collect dues instead of employers, imposing onerous financial reporting requirements on unions, and placing limits on union-funded political action.²³ Coming out of the Progressive Conservative Policy Conference in September 2013, Hudak once again reaffirmed his party's commitment to anti-union legislation that would set off a race to the bottom.²⁴

The Progressive Conservatives have tried to frame these anti-worker laws as "worker choice" reforms, overlooking the fact that unions are already democratic organizations. Evidence shows that despite the guise of "worker choice" these types of laws only leave workers with one choice: to work for less. Hudak's White Paper reveals the true intent of these laws when it states that corporations are no longer willing to "pay a significant premium to employ Ontario workers."²⁵ These reforms are aimed at reducing the collective bargaining power of workers and forcing them to compete with each other for lower wages.



By weakening unions and undermining their financial viability, these laws also lessen the collective voice of workers. Unions have been a strong voice for public services, good jobs, the environment and many other priorities that are in the public interest. Weakening this progressive force is yet another way that conservatives are trying to silence opposition to their low-wage agenda.

THE STAKES ARE HIGH

Increasing corporate tax rates and income tax rates for the super-rich will help fund affordable education, public transit and childcare for working families.

The case is growing that Ontario needs to chart a new path that rejects austerity and turns its back on a low-wage strategy. Austerity has not led to the promised economic outcomes and has had devastating social, political and environmental consequences. The stakes are high and our actions today will determine how our generation will be remembered for years to come.

CLOSING THE GROWING GAP

Ontarians want to live in a fair, just and equal society, but austerity is driving our province in the opposite direction towards growing inequality and persistent poverty. As the austerity agenda deepens, it is becoming clear that growing wealth is not trickling down and lifting all Ontarians up. Even the World Economic Forum suggests that the global risk most likely to manifest over the next ten years is severe income disparity, ahead of government deficits.²⁶

In 2012, the OFL and Ontario Common Front made national news headlines with the release of the Falling Behind report, which outlined that from 1981 to 2010, Ontario experienced the largest change in income equality of anywhere in Canada.²⁷ Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) research shows that the richest one percent in Ontario now have incomes 16 times larger than those in the bottom 90 percent. Three decades ago, it was only ten times more.²⁸ The Occupy movement shed light on this issue through its slogan “we are the 99 percent,” highlighting that power and wealth have become concentrated among the one percent – a small, corporate elite.

Trends towards increasing inequality have also been accompanied by persistent poverty. The overall poverty rate for Ontarians has remained largely unchanged in recent years, hovering just above 12 percent.²⁹ Meanwhile, support for vulnerable Ontarians has declined. Social assistance has eroded to the point that rates would have to be increased by over 50 percent in order to return to 1993 rates.³⁰ The minimum wage has been frozen since 2010, resulting in minimum wage earners watching their purchasing power decline year after year due to inflation.³¹ Changing our economic system to redistribute wealth more evenly should lift up low-income earners and eradicate poverty.



Clearly, growing inequality is a moral issue about fairness and justice that must be addressed. Although our governments have not yet taken up the challenge, Canadians do not need to be convinced. According to a Broadbent Institute study, 71 percent of Canadians believe a widening income gap undermines Canadian values.³²

The policy ideas for closing the growing income gap are out there, ready for politicians to pick up and run with. Raising the wage floor by increasing the minimum wage and indexing it to the cost of living would lift low-income earners up and ensure no working person lives in poverty. Making it easier to unionize will extend union representation, shift the balance of power between workers and employers and help rebuild the middle class. Implementing progressive taxes, including increasing corporate tax rates and income tax rates for the super-rich, will help fund affordable education, public transit and childcare for working families. We cannot wait any longer to put these solutions into action – it is simply too costly.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH

People in Ontario want the next generation to have a bright future. This means upholding and expanding the economic and social supports that baby boomers relied on to achieve their successes. By advancing austerity, politicians are turning their backs on the future and concern is growing that it will lead to a “lost generation.”

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Young people have been among the hardest hit by austerity and are facing bleak employment prospects, with unemployment rates more than double that of the general population.³³ In 2013, youth unemployment in Ontario was sitting between 16 and 17 percent, worse than any other province outside of Atlantic Canada and in line with Rust Belt states south of the border.³⁴ Not only are young people having difficulty finding work, but those who do are often forced to work multiple part-time jobs and are stuck in jobs for which they are over-qualified. Meanwhile, the cost of tuition at Ontario universities is among the highest in Canada and record high levels of student debt are weighing recent graduates down as they enter the labour market.³⁵

If across-the-board spending cuts continue – or as CCPA economist Armine Yalnizyan puts it, if baby boomers stay on course with “scorched earth public policy for the next generation”³⁶ – young people will be left working for less with less support. In many ways, the struggle young people face today foretells the low-wage future most Canadians will experience if we do not change course.

This makes youth resistance against austerity crucial in pushing for a public conversation about the kind of society we want to leave for the next generation. Public services and social programs must be rebuilt and investments made in job creation – to create jobs that provide security and dignity. Young people are also demanding that tuition fees be dropped to make education accessible for all and that exploitative unpaid internships are eliminated to make way for meaningful education, training and work experience. A better future for the next generation is within our reach.

To address precarious work, opportunities for collective representation through a union must be expanded to all workers.

Marginalized communities are disproportionately affected by climate change.

GOOD JOBS FOR ALL

Every person in Ontario deserves access to a good job with decent wages and benefits, but the growth of precarious work is pushing our province in the wrong direction.

Characterized primarily by job insecurity and lack of benefits, precarious work is on the rise. In Ontario, 33 percent of workers are in precarious jobs.^{37*} In the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area precarious work has increased by 50 percent over the last 20 years and barely half of those working in the region are in permanent, full-time positions that provide benefits and employment security.³⁸ Precarity has far-reaching impacts on workers by making it difficult to save for the future, thus having a cumulative impact on workers as they age. It also limits opportunities for engagement in their communities and restricts the time and money available to invest in education and training.³⁹

The growth of precarious work and its damaging impacts strengthens the case for expanding enforcement of employment standards and supporting low-income earners through measures such as raising the minimum wage. The impact of precarity, however, are also felt across income groups, as many middle-income workers are self-employed or work on temporary contracts with no benefits or job security.⁴⁰ To address the full scope of precarious work, new ways to provide benefits for these workers should be explored, a strong system to insure workers against unemployment must be put in place and supported, and opportunities for collective representation through a union must be expanded to all workers.

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Most Ontarians care deeply about the environment – the land, air and water that is central to all of our lives. An economic model that prioritizes environmental protection and people's well-being over resource extraction and profit would help build strong, healthy communities for generations to come.

By promoting growth at any cost, neoliberalism and austerity are locking our country and province into destructive cycles. This was illustrated when recent positive environmental policies at the provincial level, including a moratorium on fracking in Québec and the buy local provision in the *Ontario Green Energy Act*, were challenged under the North American Free Trade Agreement and at the World Trade Organization respectively.^{41,42}

Forcing deficit reduction and spending cuts to the top of the political agenda also provides a cover for political leaders as they fail to address the climate crisis. Canadian companies, with government support, are accelerating resource extraction through mining for minerals, fracking for unconventional gas and drilling for bitumen in the tar sands. Bay Street in Toronto is ground zero for mining operations whose impact on human rights and the environment has provoked protests around the world.⁴³ Fracking

* When it is measured as workers who experience three of these four indicators: no pension plan, small-sized employer, no union coverage and low income.



**The need to
address climate
change is a
“civilizational
wake up call.”
– Naomi Klein,
Author**

has become the subject of heated debate about high water use and dangers to drinking water supplies in Ontario and throughout Canada.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, the tar sands in Alberta are growing out of control and contaminating the nearby water, wildlife and communities – primarily small, rural Aboriginal communities.

Climate change is not only about the Earth – it’s about people too. The impact of climate change, however, is not being felt equally as Aboriginal people, low-income earners and people of colour tend to be disproportionately affected by the health outcomes and financial burdens that it creates. It is those on the frontlines that must lead the way forward as we push back against the relentless destruction being waged by the extractive industries. This will mean supporting Aboriginal groups when they invoke their treaty rights and demand that the duty to consult with Aboriginal communities be upheld and getting behind young people when they call on political leaders to stop climate change so that they can have their future back.

The need to address climate and environmental issues is, as Naomi Klein says, “not just another issue to add to the list of things to worry about. It is a civilizational wake up call.”⁴⁵ We must take bold steps to revitalize the Ontario economy through renewable energy and green jobs and shift our economic system to one that values workers’ rights, human rights and the environment rather than simply seeing them as barriers to extraction and profit-making.

“Another world is possible”

- Slogan of the World Social Forum



“Our power comes from our numbers, and building a mass movement requires focus, selflessness alongside mutual support, and unity amongst movements. People, working together, can achieve incredible things. Never underestimate your own power. Together, we can block austerity.”

- Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois, Spokesperson for the 2012 Québec Student Strike

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PART 2 HOW WE CAN WIN

The labour movement in Ontario, with its allies, has exposed the flawed economic logic behind austerity and its destructive impacts. Now it's time to step it up and move from exposing and challenging to also envisioning and building an alternative. The stakes are high and the labour movement must show that we are up to the task. It is time to inspire the people of Ontario to take action by confidently charting a long-term vision for a progressive society. We need to unite our movement by forging bonds between people and communities and to activate our supporters through relentless growth and engagement.

Motivated by a sense of possibility and hope for a better world, the labour movement must reach out to our partners and put a collective vision forward. This vision is not only a vehicle for protecting our past achievements from the anti-worker agenda, it will also rejuvenate the labour movement and generate broad-based consensus for a socially just Ontario – one that pundits and policy-makers cannot ignore.

CHARTING A PEOPLE'S AGENDA

**We need
visionary
ideas rooted
in progressive
values in order
to capture the
public imagination
... and move
people to
take action.**

The OFL and affiliates will put forward big, bold ideas about the kind of society we want to live in by charting a *People's Agenda*. We cannot shy away from ideas that today seem distant. Otherwise, those with an anti-worker agenda will continue to set the parameters of what is possible.

It is time to advance a vision, even if it seems radical, that will command public attention and spark new conversations about the future of our province by proposing solutions to our collective economic, environmental, social and political crises. We need visionary ideas rooted in progressive values in order to capture the public imagination, shift what is deemed acceptable and move people to take action.

We will reach out to our allies and our communities and together we will pursue actions rooted in our shared values, such as:

- **Abolish tuition fees** – fully fund educational opportunities for students from every income.
- **Adopt a Migrant Workers' Bill of Rights** – end the exploitation of migrant workers and ensure they have equal rights.
- **Eliminate working poverty in Ontario** – increase the minimum wage to 10 percent above the poverty line and raise social assistance rates by 55 percent.
- **Put labour at the table with government and business** – establish a Labour Market Partners Forum for multi-stakeholder consultation about job creation and training.
- **Build a green economy** – revitalize the Ontario economy through green energy and green jobs.
- **Secure union rights for every worker** – make it easier to join a union and keep a union, and extend these rights to migrant and agricultural workers.
- **Introduce universal pharmacare and dentacare for all** – entrench full funding for quality public healthcare and extend OHIP to all aspects of health.
- **Guarantee public childcare for every family in Ontario** – invest in a childcare system that provides good jobs and affordable, quality childcare.
- **Create an Ontario jobs strategy for marginalized communities** – restore employment equity and pay equity as provincial priorities.

This is *just the beginning*. The OFL will act as a conduit for a province-wide engagement campaign to chart a *People's Agenda* that we can all get behind. It will reshape the public discourse, redefine what is possible and drive our movement forward.



New ideas can become policy if they are consistently promoted and pushed into the media and public domain.

It is time to advance our own big, bold ideas.

FROM RADICAL TO REALITY

The success of the conservative movement in Canada in recent decades shows that pushing ideas into the public debate is important. In the 1960s and 1970s, conservatives began challenging what was considered acceptable public policy by advancing radical ideas, such as free trade, privatization and tax cuts for corporations and the rich. Decades later, many of these ideas have become policy. At the same time, the ideological landscape has shifted from one that supported a social welfare state towards neoliberalism. Neoliberal values, such as individualism, greed and free markets, now govern our society and often overshadow progressive values, such as social justice, equality and collective well-being.

One way to understand how radical ideas eventually become policy comes from the “Overton Window” theory. This theory was developed by Joseph P. Overton, vice-president of a right-wing think tank in the United States, to explain how new ideas become mainstream. The window refers to the existing range of policies that are deemed acceptable by the public in the current political moment. The evolution of public acceptance is understood in degrees from unthinkable to radical to acceptable to sensible to popular and, finally, to policy. According to Overton, new ideas can become policy if they are consistently promoted and pushed into the media and public domain.⁴⁷

As progressives, we have spent much of the last several decades defending past achievements, rather than advancing new ideas. The result has been that conservative ideas have come to dominate the public debate and what the public deems acceptable is shifting in their favour. We need only look to the recent set of 16 policy papers that the Progressive Conservatives have released to see this strategy is alive and well in Ontario today.⁴⁸

It is time to advance our own big, bold ideas. While continuing to defend historic victories, we must also call for the implementation of visionary progressive policies. For example, we need to demand a universal pharmacare and dentacare program when defending healthcare, and demand free post-secondary education when defending public education. It is these ideas that are capable of inspiring and motivating people to take action.

Over the years, by promoting neoliberal values and projects, the conservative movement has dismantled much of the social infrastructure that looked after the welfare of Canadians. Now, neoliberals are looking at dismantling unions. Within the last decade, they have renewed their attack on workers’ rights and unions in Ontario and Canada. Policy ideas, such as limiting unions’ ability to participate in political action and eliminating the Rand Formula, have been pushed into the public debate. The labour movement must push back and defeat these proposals, not only by defending our past achievements, but also by articulating the important role unions will play in our communities and our provinces into the future.

“It is time to change the conversation about Ontario’s future.”
– **People’s Budget White Paper**
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Raising the minimum wage to \$14 an hour is a big idea.

Advancing a *People’s Agenda* will revive conversations about the kind of society we want to live in and unleash ideas that are hopeful and visionary. By working together with our allies, the OFL and affiliates can reshape the public discourse and replace austerity and neoliberalism with public policy that puts people first.

BUILDING ON THE PEOPLE’S BUDGET

The *People’s Budget* exemplified this strategy. It shifted the debate about the 2013 provincial budget by putting progressive ideas on the agenda. Rather than taking the traditional approach of developing a pre-budget policy paper in isolation, the *People’s Budget* process included a consultative White Paper and town hall meetings in nine cities across Ontario. The submissions were compiled into a *People’s Budget* and a buzz was created about it through both traditional and social media.⁵⁰ This made it difficult for Queen’s Park pundits to ignore the recommendations.

Although the province held the line on austerity and much work remains to be done, two of the three priority recommendations – increase the minimum wage, establish an infrastructure fund and implement fair taxation – found their way into the 2013 Ontario Budget in some form. The *People’s Budget* also provided a benchmark for evaluating the budget, revealing that it came up short on many fronts and calling on the government to create more good jobs, do more to alleviate poverty, implement progressive taxes and better support young people and precarious workers. The strength of the *People’s Budget* is that it forced progressive ideas into the conversation.

DIRECT ACTION

Another way to force our ideas into the conversation is through direct action. Many current campaigns, such as the *Campaign to Raise the Minimum Wage, Raise the Rates* and campaigns to protect migrant workers, are embracing direct action to get their ideas out into the public realm.

MINIMUM WAGE CAMPAIGN

With support from the OFL, labour councils and other Ontario Common Front partners, a coalition of labour and community organizations is working hard to drive a province-wide campaign to increase the minimum wage to \$14 per hour. This would allow a single worker working a 35-hour week to live 10 percent above the poverty line. Increasing the minimum wage would also raise the wage floor for all Ontarians and help address inequality.⁵¹

Raising the minimum wage to \$14 an hour is a big idea. The campaign has refused to settle for a minimum wage benchmarked at or below the poverty line or for indexation of the current minimum wage, which would trap minimum wage earners in poverty. Instead, they are putting forward a bold demand for an increase to \$14. It’s this kind of visionary approach that is needed to command attention and shift public acceptance of progressive policy ideas.

“The more I feel the pinch of poverty, the more it drives me to fight for the moderate and low-income people.”

– ACORN Canada member
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These elections will have added urgency for a labour movement facing an unprecedented anti-worker agenda.

On the 14th day of every month, the campaign has been taking direct action to keep their idea on the minds of the public and decision-makers. This puts added pressure on the government and the Minimum Wage Advisory Panel to consider their demands.

RAISE THE RATES

A growing coalition in Ontario is demanding that cuts to supports for low-income earners are reversed and that rates be increased in order to better support people living in poverty. This includes raising social assistance rates and restoring the community start-up and maintenance benefit and special diet allowance. Refusing to settle for incremental increases to social assistance, the OFL has joined their call for a much-needed 55 percent increase in social assistance rates.⁵³

The campaign has taken to the streets on many occasions to make their demands known, most recently in a province-wide week of action in October 2013 to fight the attack on the Ontario Disability Support Program and to demand a living income for all.⁵⁴

MIGRANT WORKERS’ RIGHTS

Unions and community groups in Ontario have been working hard for many years to put the exploitation faced by migrant workers on the agenda. Recently the OFL has released a Migrant Workers’ Bill of Rights that calls for an end to the exploitation of migrant workers. Every worker in Ontario deserves citizenship rights, the right to organize in a union, full benefits and healthcare, freedom from recruitment fees, housing rights, mobility rights and freedom from discrimination.⁵⁵

The Migrant Worker Alliance for Change has launched a campaign demanding protections for migrant workers in Ontario, such as being paid minimum wage, housing regulations, protection from recruiters, and access to health and safety and employment standards.⁵⁶ The OFL will join the call to Ontario’s political leaders to “Make it Right” and ensure migrant workers have equal rights.

UPCOMING ELECTIONS

Every election is an opportunity to put forward a *People’s Agenda* and shift the political climate. A provincial election could happen at any time and elections are expected at every other level of government in Ontario by 2015. These elections will have added urgency for a labour movement facing an unprecedented anti-worker agenda. We need to be ready to seize the opportunity that elections present to put progressive ideas on the agenda and support candidates that will advance these policies once elected.

The OFL and affiliates will coordinate and develop a resourced strategy for electing progressive candidates and defeating the attack on workers’ rights in upcoming elections. Recent by-elections in Ontario demonstrate that when labour and community work together they can put progressive issues on the agenda and build the people power needed to win key elections.

UNITING OUR MOVEMENT

Progressives have begun to amass our own infrastructure of organizations that, if supported and strengthened, will help unite our movement.

While conservatives across the country have more corporate support and financial resources, progressives have people power on our side. To make our voice louder, make our actions more effective and ultimately turn our *People's Agenda* into reality, people power must be harnessed more effectively.

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

The growth and successes of the conservative movement has relied on a strong infrastructure that was built step by step over several decades. This infrastructure includes foundations, think tanks, media outlets, and education and training centres, such as the Fraser Institute, National Citizens Coalition, Canadian Taxpayers Federation, Canadian Foundation of Independent Businesses, Sun News and the Manning Centre. These lobby groups and organizations all share a long-term vision for Canada and together they have built the capacity of the conservative movement and allowed them to coordinate their message across the country.⁵⁷

In response, progressives have begun to amass our own infrastructure of organizations that, if supported and strengthened, will help unite our movement. It is time for progressives to intensify coordination and collaboration efforts to clarify a shared vision and maximize our effectiveness. We need to build on the incredible work of some of the best think tanks in the country, such as the CCPA, Wellesley Institute and Broadbent Institute; media outlets, such as Rabble; organizing powerhouses, such as ACORN Canada and Workers' Action Centres; and foundations, such as the Metcalf Foundation and Maytree Foundation. Facilitating communication and building trust throughout this web of progressive organizations will lay the groundwork for achieving progressive social change.

The OFL and affiliates must work together to establish and support the infrastructure necessary to build and leverage our people power and to coordinate our message across the province. We will be strongest when our movement is united.

ROLE OF UNIONS

Unions have a special role to play in building people power through coalitions, campaigns and initiatives that are promoting alternatives to the corporate agenda. Unions have the scale and resources necessary to bring about this change through movement-building, organizing, education and action. As Naomi Klein says, unions can be a consistent and unwavering force "so that [social movements] don't keep rising up and floating away."⁵⁸ In other words, unions have some of the infrastructure necessary for sustaining this coalition and movement-building process over the long-term.



**“The Ontario
Common Front
will bring
together groups,
organizations
and individuals
across Ontario
that are working
to expose growing
inequality and
propose workable
solutions to fix it.”**

**– Ontario Common
Front Mission
Statement**
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EXPANDING THE COMMON FRONT

At the 2011 OFL convention, the action plan passed on the floor called for the formation of an Ontario Common Front to help defeat austerity in Ontario. The Common Front now stands as a coalition of over 90 community and labour organizations, which supports local campaigns with research, provincial coordination and training. In just two years, the Common Front brought national media attention to growing inequality and the negative impacts of cuts to social programs and public services through its *Falling Behind* report, while tipping the scales in various by-elections across the province. Working closely with labour councils and community organizations it has also inspired and supported local labour-community alliances across the province in Cornwall, Thunder Bay, Windsor, Durham, Niagara, Hamilton, Brampton-Mississauga, Ottawa, Kitchener-Waterloo and Toronto.

Building on the success of the Ontario Common Front, community-labour alliances must be strengthened and expanded. Together we must bring the Common Front to every corner of the province. These relationships will build the strong foundation needed for progressives across Ontario as we aim to implement the *People’s Agenda*.

We can be inspired by recent mobilizations against austerity and neoliberalism, including the Occupy movement, the Québec student strike and Idle No More. Behind the strength of these movements are coalitions of community and labour organizations, such as the Red Hand Coalition in Québec, a community-labour response to an austerity budget that threatened the future of public services through cuts and privatization. This coalition played an important coordination role as social movements organized and built their capacity in the lead up to the student strikes and mass mobilizations in 2012.

In the coming months, the OFL will host a series of meetings with affiliates to discuss how to best strengthen the Ontario Common Front. It is only with the support of a province-wide coalition that people from labour and communities across Ontario can be mobilized to their fullest potential. In order to defeat austerity and neoliberalism, provincial collaboration and coordination to build our people power will be essential.

PEOPLE’S SOCIAL FORUM

By building ties with Aboriginal communities and Québec, the OFL and affiliates can also become part of an unstoppable cross-country progressive force. The People’s Social Forum, which is coming to Ontario in August 2014, will help us to advance these relationships.

In August 2014, thousands of progressive organizations and activists from across Canada, Québec and Aboriginal communities will converge in Ottawa. The process of the social forum is built on the plurality and diversity of progressive organizations and social movements. The short-term goal is to build on existing movements and their recent successes to develop a united and cohesive front against neoliberalism and

austerity. In the long-term, the People's Social Forum aims to help transform the political, economic and social paradigm by inspiring creative resistance, providing alternatives to neoliberalism and promoting the notion that "another world is possible."⁶⁰

The Second General Assembly of the People's Social Forum was held in Edmonton in July 2013. A labour caucus was created at that Assembly that includes representatives from unions across the country. The labour caucus is tasked with identifying labour's priorities and maximizing the participation of unions in the People's Social Forum.

The historic convergence of progressives from Québec, Canada and Aboriginal communities in August 2014 will help harness people power on a scale capable of changing the economic and political direction of federal and provincial governments across the country.

ACTIVATING OUR MOVEMENT

Unions are one of the best pathways out of poverty and will help curb the rise of inequality.

As we strengthen existing alliances and coalitions, we must also engage the disengaged through organizing. By organizing new members and supporters in our communities, we will grow and activate our movement. The challenge is to go beyond our current leadership and active members and to start new conversations.

Many unions are currently undertaking major membership engagement campaigns, triggered by the attack on workers' rights, in order to awaken our dormant people power. This has been driven by the CLC's *Together FAIRNESS WORKS* campaign.⁶¹ It is necessary that the member-to-member engagement at the heart of this campaign becomes an integral part of not only how we build our own unions, but also how we connect with our families, friends and communities that surround our workplaces, so that our base of supporters is always growing.

ORGANIZING RIGHTS

One way to strengthen our movement is to grow union membership. Workers need to build collective power in the workplace to demand better working conditions and wages. Making it easier for workers to join a union is one of the best pathways out of poverty and will help curb the rise of inequality.

Improving labour laws in this province will help affiliates organize new members. Today, even workers who know that they will benefit from unionization are forced to go up against employer-driven campaigns that incite fear and intimidate workers during organizing drives. These anti-union campaigns are propped up by labour laws that favour employers. Contrary to claims that current labour laws promote democracy and choice, the mandatory ballot process actually alerts employers that an organizing drive is taking place and gives them extra time to coerce and dissuade workers out of joining a union. Consequently, card check certification must remain a key focus for labour law reform.



The same is true for successor rights in the contract sector. Without them, unions are forced to re-organize workers when collective agreements are lost during the bidding process. Other reforms, including early disclosure of employee lists, reinstatement during organizing campaigns, neutral and off-site voting, reemployment after strike and posting employee bill of rights posters in workplaces would also go a long way to support organizing efforts and help ensure every worker in Ontario has the right to join a union.

COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

In order to reach our full potential, we must find ways to engage not only with union members, but also with community members and the public at large. Some of our strongest allies are among those who do not work in unionized workplaces, but this does not mean we cannot engage these people today. There are many models the OFL can learn from in pursuing this goal, including the work of Working America.

Working America aims to organize non-union members and support bottom-up organizing by taking on issues that members identify as important.

Working America

Founded by the AFL-CIO in 2003, Working America aims to organize non-union members and support bottom-up organizing by taking on issues that members identify as important. It is a community affiliate with a seat on the AFL-CIO council, but is independently incorporated with its own governance board. With three million members and growing, it is the fastest growing non-governmental organization in the United States, which makes it a powerful base for political and social change. Twice a year, each member is surveyed and priority campaign issues, which could be local, regional, or national, are chosen based on what people are saying is important. Members are then encouraged to get involved in rallies and lobbying and to reach out to their friends, family and neighbours.

Working America started small with just four organizers, but nine years later is three million members strong. In 2008 leading up to Obama's election victory, Working America knocked on more than three million doors and spoke to 1.8 million people, producing incredible results for the Democratic Party among their members. However, electoral politics only captures one aspect of their work. Between elections, members are provided with the tools and support needed to make their voice heard through collective action, including letter writing campaigns, rallies, petitions and other actions.⁶²

Organizers around the world are taking cues from Working America's success. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions, New Zealand Council of Trade Unions and the Australian Council of Trade Unions are all looking at the model, but building an organization like Working America takes time, resources and commitment.⁶³

THE TIME IS NOW

“To reinforce union power in this challenging context requires that the labour movement utilize innovative organizing and campaigning methods.”

– Unifor
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We Are Oshawa

Building on the great success of the community-labour organizing in Kitchener-Waterloo leading up to Catherine Fife’s recent by-election victory, a pilot project to explore similar organizing methods began in Oshawa this year. The project is a partnership between ACORN Canada and the Ontario Common Front aimed at reaching new supporters and expanding the progressive base in that community. With upcoming elections in mind, the “We Are Oshawa” project is taking to the streets of Oshawa to knock on doors and start conversations in order to identify new supporters and build their capacity to effect political and social change.

To grow our movement, the OFL and affiliates must deepen and expand our community organizing efforts. In many ways the labour movement has recognized that now is the time to reach out to new supporters and we have already begun this work.

As Unifor demonstrated with their renewed commitment to organizing and community chapters, it is time to think outside the box in order to expand our strength, power and influence. Community chapters will give those who have generally been excluded from union membership a collective voice.⁶⁵

Other unions have also been key partners in bringing together labour and social movements through coalitions such as Common Causes, which is an assembly of social movements “dedicated to defending democracy, the environment and human rights.” Together Common Causes aims to coordinate actions across Canada that strengthen our position against the Harper government and put forward alternatives.⁶⁶

Other union members and leaders have also actively contributed to the Port Elgin Group’s proposal for building power and social change in Canada. This process has been supported by frank and honest discussion about the strengths and weaknesses of progressive organizations and the resulting proposal lays out a plan for building and supporting a network of grassroots organizations and activists who share a common vision for progressive change in Canada.⁶⁷

In Ontario, the OFL and affiliates will work together with the Ontario Common Front to support these and other similar efforts to ensure they reach their maximum potential. We must be coordinated and united to move our vision forward and activate a movement so big and so strong that it will overwhelm corporate power and transform our society.

The time for engaging new supporters through organizing is *now*. With people power as the base of our movement, we will continue to grow because *together* we are *stronger*.

***Rising together
isn't just a
call to action –
it is our mandate,
it is our method
and it is the
essence of our
movement.***

Lessons of recent decades have been hard learned. As our society has been restructured around corporate profit and the social safety net dismantled piece by piece, the conservative movement has capitalized on the vacuum of good ideas and has entrenched their values and ideals in the public consciousness.

As progressives, we are partly to blame for allowing these ideas and policies to flourish because we have not always provided an alternative way forward. Focusing too much on the crises at hand has helped to reinforce a fear of the future that conservative ideologues have manipulated to advance their anti-social agenda.

But we are still part of this struggle because we know that it doesn't have to be this way. The labour movement is about hope – expanding opportunities, creating possibilities and reshaping the future around equity and empowerment.

Building on this sense of possibility, we are taking on bold new initiatives to turn the tide on neoliberalism and austerity. Working to build the deepest and most expansive community and labour alliances this province has ever seen and sparking conversations with our members and supporters in every town, city and community about their priorities and aspirations – we are *inspiring, uniting* and *activating* a movement set on building a truly inclusive society.

Rising together isn't just a call to action – it is our mandate, it is our method and it is the essence of our movement.



“ To create and maintain this electric sense of possibility, [we] must constantly help the members generate new actions. ”

– Andrew Levison, U.S. Political Commentator and Author

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