

TAKING ON BIG FIGHTS IN 2019

The Stewards Assembly on March 25th showed a hunger for action by leaders and activists across our movement. As the Ford Conservatives roll out their agenda of cuts to education, restructuring healthcare and distorting public policies, unions are gearing up for tough fights. With a majority government determined to impose its will on the people of Ontario, these struggles will require an intense level of strategic organizing applied with focus and discipline. But we know that we have taken on majority governments in the past, and winning small fights sets the stage for bigger victories.

Our movement undertakes two kinds of bargaining – collective bargaining to determine terms and conditions in the workplace; and political bargaining to determine the conditions of life both inside and outside the workplace. That has allowed us to win breakthroughs on public education, universal healthcare, public pensions, unemployment insurance, public transit, affordable housing and wide variety of social services. Those gains have been achieved through a combination of building mass popular campaigns and formal political action.

At our most effective, we have networks on the ground working with allies and progressive politicians, focusing on specific goals and strategies. Even when the campaign is national or provincial, it is the local reality that shapes how politicians react – for them the ground will always be local.

We know that workplace power starts with members engaged, educated, and playing a pro-active role in their union's relationships with the employer. Labour's political power comes from the ability to harness the strength of union members in a focused effort to change political decisions. Here and across the country, the role of a Labour Council is to bring together local unions to work collectively on key fights, forcing local politicians to respond.

In nearly every issue-based campaign, it is the pressure on politicians from their own constituents that has made a difference. Sometimes it has been the members themselves, other times it is their knowledge of who has influence with the politician that provides the breakthrough. When governments have absolute majorities, finding the weak links in their chain of command is essential to impacting on their decision-making.

Success comes from having a strategic plan, membership engagement and solid allies. Tools such as Labour Council's 5 Step Guide help implement best practices for planning and engaging members. But most unions need to learn how to develop a consistent alliance policy, which means building real and lasting relationships with others in our movement or outside. Sometime we initiate coalitions, other times civil society groups

come to us for support and finances. Whether these become powerful is often determined by the degree to which unions commit necessary resources necessary and members get involved.

Building community power taps into the strength of our membership in their neighbourhoods and through the other links that they share. Those links can take the form of particular interests as parents, social justice advocates, transit riders, equity activists, environmentalists or other interests. In a place as diverse as greater Toronto, many people identify in both geographic communities and in ethnic or ethno-racial communities. Bringing members together across unions helps dramatically leverage our strength.

The Toronto & York Region Labour Council was formed nearly a century and a half ago to harness labour's collective power. We have been at the centre of struggles for social and economic justice ever since, and must continue to respond to new challenges. We do that best by looking to our roots – the patient, tough, sustained work that was done by those who first built our unions and our labour movement. Real commitment to such collective efforts will be the key to our success in the 21st century.

The Executive Recommends that:

- Every union in Toronto and York Region should move into full campaign mode to help defeat the destructive policies of the Ford Conservatives.
- Every union should undertake strategic planning to anticipate the challenges of the next three years, and develop a culture of deep membership engagement and building strong alliances. The 5 Step Guide is an essential tool for this work
- Every union that is not part of Labour Council should affiliate as soon as possible, and current affiliates should pay on full membership to provide the financial resources needed for effective collective action;
- Every union should identify key activists who can devote time and energy to making Labour's collective campaigns successful