

“A JUST RECOVERY IN ONTARIO”

October 2020

Canadians are reeling from the news of COVID’s second wave spreading across communities and generations. As schools re-open in this province without adequate staffing, physical distancing or protective measures, parents are scrambling to place their children in a safe environment – or keep their kids home for months at the expense of working parents. In workplaces where many “essential workers” were rewarded with a \$2 raise in the spring, wages have fallen back to the previous poverty levels. Long-term care employers are getting more government money and extra publicly-funded staff without changing their business model or cutting into their profits.

On Labour Day, the Canadian Labour Congress launched its major campaign for just recovery entitled Forward Together – A Canadian Plan. The CLC efforts, combined with community and labour mobilization for key demands, have resulted in the minority Liberal government promising a permanent expansion of new national programs. Pharmacare, childcare, green jobs and a re-structured Employment Insurance program are all outlined in the Throne speech. Intense bargaining by the federal NDP has won the promise of paid sick days across the country. But many observers note that the Liberals have made these promises before, and programs will only become real once the budget confirms actual investment with strong rules applied to how they are implemented.

How do we make sure these aspirational goals are realized? There are major obstacles in front of us, not the least of which is the challenge of securing hundreds of billions in long-term funding. So far, there has been a broad consensus about using public spending to address this crisis. But conservative voices are warning about future debt, and we know how the deficit mantra has been used in the past to gut social programs and usher in austerity. In Alberta, Jason Kenney is rolling out the traditional right-wing agenda of austerity, corporate tax cuts and attacks on workers’ rights. And here in Ontario, the Ford regime is doing everything possible to block concrete steps needed for recovery.

While the demand increases to take profit out of long-term care, Ford is determined to grow the private footprint in this sector, mirroring his predecessor Conservative Mike Harris. So far, instead of supporting the long-term care coming under the Canada Health Act, Conservatives have called for no-strings federal health funding. The Ontario government has opposed a nation-wide pharmacare program in the name of “provincial rights”. He has used the same argument in the legal challenge against carbon pricing, which gave Ontario funding to fight climate change. And he refuses to legislate paid sick days for Ontario workers, despite calling many “essential”.

The outbreak of COVID in many workplaces is a reminder that too many companies are still allowed to exploit temp agency workers and newcomers who lack the ability to speak up for their own safety. Ford’s Bill 47 stripped away many crucial rights needed to address the fissured workplace that is the new norm in today’s economy. It has been one year since Enrico Miranda was killed by Fiera Foods’ business model that sacrifices workers for profits. And Ford has refused to address the impact of systemic racism in entire sectors dominated by poverty wages.

Nowhere is the Conservative approach more exposed at this moment than their failure to ensure a #SafeSeptember. Parents’ frustration grows, and students and teachers’ safety are put at risk. Instead of investing the money needed to upgrade school facilities and ensure adequate staffing, Ford and Education Minister Lecce have spent their time picking fights with the unions of teachers and education workers, and belittling the efforts of School Boards to address the logistical problems of a system in distress. Only months ago our affiliates were taking job action and forfeiting pay to try to protect class sizes and the integrity of publicly funded education. The hypocrisy of Lecce and Ford on this issue is stunning.

So far Doug Ford is still enjoying a certain esteem from his initial response to the pandemic. But he is using that reputation to mask the ongoing agenda that is driving more inequality, undermining public services and driving down wages. Environmental standards are being shredded, and measures for affordable housing are being rolled back. For Canadians to win new national programs, greater economic justice and real climate action, the people of

Ontario will have to expose and block the Ford Conservatives attempts to sabotage these progressive efforts.

We can come out of this crisis with systems in place to build a much better Canada. It will take all our hard work and determination – political bargaining is what we need to focus on in the coming months to ensure a Just Recovery for All.

On October 1 2020, the Labour Council resolves to:

- Support and publicize the CLC “Forward Together – A Canadian Plan” and ask every affiliate to fully engage in this campaign.
- Support education affiliates and parent groups in the fight against Ford’s Conservatives to ensure that schools have the resources to ensure a #SafeOctober and beyond, including for Black, Indigenous and other students of colour.
- Urge every affiliate to support the campaign to get profit out of long-term care.
- Lobby to ensure that funding for municipal, public health and transit services, and climate priorities, is provided by senior levels of government.
- Continue campaigning to restore and expand workers’ rights – employment standards, labour rights, and worker health and safety – in every sector of the economy in Ontario