


# ‘Enabling dissent’: Contesting austerity and right populism in Toronto, Canada

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## Abstract

Following the 2008 financial crisis, austerity measures have been introduced in many national contexts to reorganise public sector work and redesign labour laws and labour policies. At the same time, right-populist discourses and movements have arisen in ways that give both legitimacy and voice to the politics of austerity. Toronto, Canada, provides a world-renowned case of populist experimentation at the metropolitan scale, as the actions of Mayor Rob Ford typified this nexus of austerity and populism. Set in the context of Ford’s term as Mayor of Toronto (2010–2014), this article asks how the combined rise of austerity and right populism creates both new challenges and new opportunities for public sector labour in urban spaces. We argue that public sector unions are central in both the making and unmaking of populist austerity and identify potential trajectories for organised labour in the face of the continuation of austerity-driven politics.

**JEL Codes:** H76; J45, J48, J51

## Keywords

Austerity, Canada, neoliberal urbanism, populism, public sector unions

## Introduction

In the years following the 2008 financial crisis, labour movements found themselves on the defensive as employers pressed for concessionary demands and governments embarked on austerity programmes to reduce expenditures. Austerity measures – founded on a framework of neoliberalism – have been undertaken in many national contexts to

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reorganise public sector work and redesign labour laws and labour policies. Taking a variety of forms and with uneven effects, the impacts of austerity have been widespread across capitalist labour markets (Peck, 2013). In this context, and reflecting growing disenchantment with political and economic elites due to the uncertainty of the times, populist discourses and movements have arisen on the right and left of the political spectrum, in some cases giving legitimacy to, while in others directly challenging, austerity (Soltz, 2013; Tufts and Thomas, 2014).

Toronto became a renowned case of populist experimentation at the metropolitan scale, as the actions of right-populist Mayor Rob Ford (2010–2014) captured global imaginations. In the context of Ford's 4-year term as Mayor of Toronto, this article explores how the combined rise of austerity and populism create both new challenges and new opportunities for labour movements in urban spaces. It begins with a brief theoretical overview of the nexus of urban austerity, right populism and labour, and then provides a contextual account of the rise and fall of Mayor Rob Ford. Next, it outlines three cases of public sector labour action under the Ford regime: the privatisation of garbage collection, the fight against subcontracting cleaning work and the 2013 library strike. In each case, it examines the role of populist discourses in shaping the city's austerity-driven privatisation agenda and the impact of right populism on the social power of labour in the public sector. We characterise resistance to the Ford regime in these three cases as forms of 'enabling dissent', a classed expression of dissent that both resists populist attacks *and* partially enables the populist austerity agenda through forms of resistance that do not directly challenge populist austerity at its core. We thereby seek to illuminate the contradictory elements of labour's responses to austerity and populism and to explore the role of labour in both the making and unmaking of populist austerity in the urban context. While Ford's term as mayor has passed, much can still be learned from this 4-year period, not least its legacy for future labour politics in the city. The article concludes with a discussion of the trajectories public sector labour may follow in the face of the continuation of austerity-driven politics.

## **Austerity, populism, labour and the city**

The surge of right populism underpinning Ford's mayoralty is set in the context of the rise of the politics of austerity – policies and practices of neoliberal governments following the 2008 financial crisis. In many national contexts, there have been measures to reduce government expenditures, reorganise public sector work and redesign labour laws and labour policies (Albo et al., 2010). While the main stated rationale has been the need for fiscal responsibility as a result of financial crisis, the reach of austerity measures has been broad and the ramifications have been widespread, as governments have seized the opportunity to restructure public sector workforces.

Like neoliberalism, its guiding force, austerity is a 'restructuring ethos' (Peck et al., 2009: 104) that is varied and uneven in form and impact across space, place and scale. Although austerity is often seen as operating at the level of the nation state, our analytical framework asserts that its multi-scalar nature must be recognised in order to fully grasp both the particularities of its impacts and the implications for resistance. In Canada, we can see varieties of austerity at federal/national, provincial/sub-national and municipal/

urban scales, with the form and impact of austerity politics contingent upon the division of governmental powers between the various levels. With respect to labour politics in Canada, this differentiation is crucial as labour and employment legislation for most employees is regulated provincially, with only a small portion of the Canadian workforce falling under the federal jurisdiction. At the federal level, both neoliberalism broadly and post-2008 austerity specifically have been characterised by work reorganisation and downsizing in federally regulated workplaces and aggressive attacks on the labour rights of unionised public sector workers in the federal jurisdiction (Ross and Savage, 2013). This latter tendency, which intensified in the years of austerity, exemplifies a long-standing pattern of federal public sector industrial relations based on frequent state intervention involving the suspension of collective bargaining and the use of back-to-work legislation in attempts to constrain the rights of public sector workers (Panitch and Swartz, 2013). In the years following the 2008 crisis, as neoliberalism intensified through austerity, unions and unionised workers in the federal public sector have been put on the defensive through the authoritarian use of these legislative measures and the federal government has aimed to legitimate their use by constructing the actions of workers as a threat to the general public. Key examples in the post-2008 era include the use of back-to-work legislation to eliminate the right to strike for workers at Canada Post in 2011 and Air Canada in 2011 and 2012. In line with its austerity agenda, in 2014, the federal government signalled its intentions to restructure the sick day entitlements of federal public servants and to drastically reduce the postal workforce and mail delivery services (Boutilier, 2014; Chopra, 2014). Showing right-populist leanings, it also introduced legislation requiring public financial disclosure for all Canadian labour organisations, including the spending of trade union dues (Government of Canada, 2013).

Austerity spread, post-2008, at the provincial level as well. As the provinces hold jurisdiction over labour and employment legislation for most employees in Canada, the provincial scale became particularly significant in terms of the labour politics of austerity. In Ontario in 2012, a government commission appointed to assess the potential for 'efficiencies' in the delivery of public services made numerous recommendations to contain and reduce government spending and reorganise service provision along neoliberal lines (Commission on the Reform of Ontario's Public Services, 2012). The recommendations followed a 2010 austerity budget and legislative measures designed to promote 'economic competitiveness' (Fanelli and Thomas, 2011). The provincial austerity programme included income freezes for non-unionised and management level workers in the public service, an attempt to secure a voluntary 2-year wage freeze with the unions representing workers in Ontario's broader public sector and a legislated wage freeze for school teachers, including elimination of the right to strike for those workers (Thomas and Tufts, 2016). Similarly, British Columbia legislated restrictions on the collective bargaining rights of both healthcare workers and teachers, leading to large-scale strikes by these workers in 2008 and 2014, respectively (Camfield, 2008; Hunter, 2014).

Coinciding with the spread of austerity, populism has arisen across North America and Europe in the context of growing unease with political and economic conditions (Tufts and Thomas, 2014). Defining populism is difficult owing to its multiplicity of forms, although key elements include broad appeals to 'the people' and a strong sense of anti-elitism (Berlet and Lyons, 2000; Bryan, 2010; Canovan, 1981). Populist forces

present the interests of ‘the people’ as being under threat from ‘dangerous others’, including elites and outsiders who may be attempting to deny ‘the people’ ‘their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice’ (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008: 3). Laclau (2005) argues that populism occurs across the political spectrum, in both right and left variants, and can be either revolutionary or reactionary. Thus, populist tendencies may take the form of social movements or political parties, including Occupy, Podemos (Spain), the Tea Party (US) and Golden Dawn (Greece). Rather than simply involving ‘fringe movements’ or nostalgic expressions of ‘discontent’, populism is viewed by some as an integral part of shifting systems of social order, especially in times of economic and political crisis (Berlet and Lyons, 2000). For example, it may contribute to the construction of popular support for statist authoritarianism, as was accomplished under the Thatcher regime in Great Britain in the 1980s (Hall, 1988). In the current context, right populism acts to legitimate and advance austerity politics. Building on Hall’s (1983: 23) discussion of the authoritarian populism of the Thatcher era, we see the intersection of right populism with austerity as a part of a reorganisation of ‘the ideological discourses which construct the crisis and represent it as it is “lived” as a practical reality’ (Thomas and Tufts, 2016), occurring in conjunction with the reorganisation of social and economic policy under the agenda of austerity. Conversely, left populism, as exhibited in the Occupy movement and as adopted by some unions, may constitute a mode of resistance to the politics of austerity (Tufts and Thomas, 2014).

Combined, these processes have exacerbated the ongoing crisis of organised labour in advanced capitalist labour markets (Camfield, 2011; MacDonald, 2014; Upchurch et al., 2009). Long-standing factors contributing to this crisis include the geographic fragmentation of production, which undercut the power of industrial unions through deindustrialisation and the relocation of manufacturing; the spread of neoliberal approaches to labour market regulation, which undermined forms of labour relations established in the post–World War II (WWII) era; and the rapid growth of service economy workplaces, which create many new challenges to labour organising and union representation. Over a period of several decades, these processes have placed unionised workers in both the private sector and public sector on the defensive, as evidenced by declining unionisation rates and the erosion of collective agreements. The crisis of labour in the private sector is also heightened through the inability of unions to effectively organise growing numbers of workers in forms of precarious work, which undermines the elements of the Standard Employment Relationship (full-time, permanent employment with a single employer) (Vosko, 2006). For public sector unions, the crisis of labour created through work intensification and downsizing via privatisation, as well as the general undermining of the right to collective bargaining, is heightened through right-populist discourses that characterise the interests of public sector workers as contrary to those of the general public. The strategic capacities of unions have been compromised, whether in contesting the politics of austerity or in advancing an alternative economic vision.

Processes of austerity and populism intersect in urban spaces, in particular with ‘populist austerity’, an emergent political force in the years following the financial crisis. The urban scale itself is highly significant in constructing the uneven geography of contemporary capitalism (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Peck et al., 2009; Sassen, 2012) through

a new 'neoliberal urbanism'. Neoliberal policies have been implemented through practices of urban governance (Keil, 2002; Peck, 2012; Smith, 2002) – including, for example, the privatisation of municipal services, the reduction in social spending by municipal governments and the promotion of urban development through gentrification. In terms of the organisation of work, urban spaces are sites of uneven development resulting from the growth of low-wage, precarious labour and the attendant social and economic polarisation. The changing urban fabric has thus produced new spaces within which capital and labour are involved in a complex contest (Merrifield, 2014).

Moreover, populism is itself produced by changing urban forms, inter-urban and intra-urban competition, urban segregation, growing economic polarisation and divides among the working-class and metropolitan elites. For example, under Rob Ford's regime in Toronto, populism played the urban against the suburban and exurban (Kipfer and Saberi, 2014). It is not that states at the national (and sub-national) level are losing influence in the contemporary political economy of neoliberalism and austerity; rather, the urban is significant due to the concentration of economic activities in major metropolitan regions, including financialisation, the adaption of neoliberal strategies by municipal governments and the rise of urban-based movements to contest localised manifestations of austerity. Without disregarding the national and sub-national scale, our urban focus recognises the uneven and variegated nature of austerity and resonances with populist politics at the urban scale. Moreover, we see these dynamics as linked to a dynamics of resistance to austerity that takes the form of both urban movements and urban policies.

What about the role of organised labour in contesting populist austerity – that intersection of austerity and right populism? The theoretical subordination of organised labour is consistent with a Gramscian perspective. Gramsci was suspicious of trade unions' capacity to do more than mechanistically increase the price of commodified labour under capitalist relations (Annunziato, 1988) and felt that other labour formations (i.e. factory councils) at the centre of production held greater revolutionary promise as counter-hegemonic forces. Yet, the trade union was a site of political possibility for Gramsci, a starting point where workers' consciousness could be developed, even while reproducing state hegemony through its civil society role. While critical of the 'top-down' bureaucratic forms of trade unionism formed by 'industrial legality', Gramsci (2000) did not completely dismiss such institutions as a starting point for social transformation.

There are thus contradictions to be considered in discussions of austerity, populism and labour from a Gramscian perspective. In the sense that trade unions are regulated by the capitalist system, they are implicated in any civil society hegemonic project. Trade unions can in fact constitute the populism that reorders urban capitalist formations. At the same time, there are *possibilities* for counter-hegemonic resistances from the very same organisations. For these reasons, organised labour must be considered as integral to such processes as it remains a primary (yet weakened) working-class formation. In other words, we see labour as very present in the making and unmaking of populist austerity in the urban context.

For this reason, the concept 'enabling dissent' becomes prescient. In the discussion below, we argue that organised labour in Toronto was not an innocent bystander in the hard-right populism that overtook Toronto's mayoral politics in 2010–2014 and that

continues to exercise its legacy. Following a Gramscian interpretation of trade union limitations, we argue that labour in Toronto is an institution of *enabling dissent*: specifically, while organised labour never endorsed Ford, and in fact many unions offered resistance to his policies during his tenure as mayor, the reactions and responses from organised labour were never sufficient to challenge the trajectory of his politics. Indeed, some of labour's strategies may have 'enabled' the regime. *First*, labour unions failed effectively to confront the racism, homophobia and anti-elitism of Ford's populism in any meaningful counter-discourse. *Second*, organised labour failed directly to address and counter Ford's full-scale demonisation of public sector workers and public sector work. Indeed, actions of bus drivers and garbage collectors may themselves have directly fed into Ford's populist anti-union rhetoric. *Third*, when labour did resist Ford through collective action, it was largely in response to his overstepping boundaries that even his supporters may have questioned. Such resistance may simply have saved Ford from himself, prolonging his populist reign. Following a discussion of three cases of resistance to Ford's programme of populist austerity, in our conclusion we turn to the possibility of transformative practices that could more effectively challenge the relations underlying austerity and populism.

### Derailing the 'gravey train'

Since the late 1990s, Toronto has been a site of neoliberal urbanism. The city has experienced a decade-and-a-half of cost cutting, driven mainly by its 1998 amalgamation with several surrounding suburbs, as well as the downloading of funding responsibilities from the province. Post-amalgamation city governments targeted the labour costs of city employees, producing strikes in 2000, 2002 and 2009 by Toronto's city workers (Fanelli, 2014). Ongoing budget pressures, combined with growing public resentment generated through a 2009 garbage strike, set the stage for the election of a Mayor seeking to contain labour costs and discipline the city's unionised workforce.

Ford was elected Mayor of Toronto in October 2010 after campaigning on the populist promise to reign in downtown 'elite' politicians and eliminate wasteful spending at city hall (the 'gravey train'). Ford's agenda combined austerity and right populism, aiming to reorganise work and labour relations in the City of Toronto, and included a pledge to privatise municipal services such as garbage collection. Keenan (2013) notes that it was the centring of the citizen as taxpayer and the cost and quality of services that differentiated Ford from outgoing Toronto Mayor David Miller. Ford used the so-called war on the car to play suburban voters against downtown public transit voters. For Toronto's Left (liberal, social democratic and anti-capitalist), Ford's election was a fundamental challenge to the understanding of Toronto as a cosmopolitan city. It replaced this myth of Toronto with another: the mythical Ford Nation. The working-class supporters of Ford, White, settler-colonial and racialised, threatened an elite cosmopolitanism to which many of Toronto's Left affiliated.

There are several elements of the social and political landscape of the urban environment of Toronto and its surrounding regions that are key to understanding labour's role in the rise of Ford, the attraction that sections of the working class felt towards Ford's campaign and the dynamics of 'enabling dissent'. Foremost is the fact that workers are

**Table 1.** Immigrant employment in the Toronto CMA, selected public service sector, January 2013.

Sector	% Immigrant
All employment	48.4
Educational services	35.7
Healthcare and social assistance	57.7
Public administration	41.7

CMA: census metropolitan area.

Source: Toronto Immigrant Labour Market Initiative (TIEDI) (2013) Labour force update.

indeed taxpayers and are themselves subjected to the contradictions of neoliberal governance. While the logic of lower taxes had broad appeal, as 50% of Toronto housing was rental, this was not the complete story. More important was the myth perpetuated by Ford that the taxes were being spent frivolously on ‘gravy’ and high public sector wages. Instead, the source of discontent may have been the inability of the private sector to match public sector wages and benefits. The divide between public and private sector was not an invention of the Ford regime. In Ontario in the early 1990s, Bob Rae’s New Democratic Party government, in the context of a major recession and in an attempt to address ballooning deficits, opened collective agreements in the public sector while making relatively minor changes in labour law to appeal to private sector unions. Labour was largely unable to overcome this divisive strategy and lasting rifts developed. Moreover, recent immigrants are less likely to be employed in the public sector in Toronto, where wages are higher (see Tables 1 and 2).

The right-populist strategy of demonising unionised public sector workers played into the resentful ‘envy’ of these workers by marginalised communities, but this was only part of the story. Other elements were the qualitative nature of the services provided and some very real questions of public sector union strategy with respect to marginalised communities. For example, in 2008 GTA (Greater Toronto Area) transit employees represented by the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 113 decided to conduct a strike at 12:01 a.m. on 26 April, stranding thousands of angry riders in the city. The legal strike action paved the way for provincial legislation pushed by Mayor Ford to deem the Toronto Transit Commission an essential service in March 2011. Local 113’s strategic choices at the very least need to be considered as playing into Ford’s anti-labour populism.

Second, public sector workers’ lack of service to racialised communities in the suburbs (e.g. public transit), while monitoring and disciplining the same communities in ways that reinforced exclusion, may have also contributed to Ford’s rise. Specifically, labour was implicated in the systematic displacement of racialised workers from the downtown re-financialised core, for example, through urban re-development. Here again, we see contradictory positions and messages from Toronto’s labour community. On one hand, Toronto’s Labour Council has been quite vocal about the demise of employment lands (i.e. industrial zones) and the shifts to residential and retail land uses. Yet, construction unions have been large promoters for residential tower development and mega-projects (e.g. Pan Am Games). Such accumulation strategies were strongly supported by Mayor Ford even if specific groups were further displaced from a professional,



**Table 2.** Private–public sector divides in the Toronto CMA, 2013.

	Private	Public
Average hourly wage (CAD)	23.11	30.11
% University degree	34.2	52.8
% Union coverage	13.4	67.8
% Female	47.8	61.7

CMA: census metropolitan area.  
Source: City of Toronto (2013).

gentrified downtown core. At a minimum, and reflective of the tendency of ‘enabling dissent’, labour as embedded and dependent in such urban capitalist exclusionary processes has not effectively opposed such gentrification.

The third aspect of labour’s contradictory relationship to Ford’s populist appeal revolves around his *anti-cosmopolitanism* and *anti-elitism*. Ford clearly embodied an aesthetic that *embodied* specific aspects of working-class culture. Bourdieu (1984) argued that the working-class aesthetic is more intimately linked with everyday materiality. Bourgeois preferences for abstract painting, classical music, fine dining and art films over socialist realism, fast food, action movies, romantic comedies, popular music and professional sports are still important cultural markers. Yet, leftist downtown elites generally distance themselves from these realities and the depiction of Ford and his supporters as both vulgar and stupid by left-leaning councillors only exacerbated these divides (see Bascaramurty, 2014). Confronted with an anti-elitism that perhaps many rank-and-file and even union leaders shared at some level, organised labour was unable to challenge Ford’s rhetoric against downtown elites. Ford appealed to the materiality of working-class home and car owners and validated working-class cultural preferences for sports and fast food that elites (including many elites on the Left) did not necessarily share.

Returning to Table 2, the connections between Ford’s populism and his austerity agenda become apparent. With hourly wages and union coverage notably higher in the public sector, Ford’s demonisation of the city’s unionised public sector workers – the ‘gravy train’ – was an attempt to reorganise work in the city. Given the higher percentage of women employed in public sector jobs, his populist-driven austerity was an attack on decent work for women workers. These patterns highlight the legacy of Ford’s regime: while his brand of populism may have dissipated, the tendencies towards (gendered) work reorganisation (via privatisation, etc.) persist. Organised labour did not effectively mount a challenge to Ford’s anti-cosmopolitanism. This situation raises questions as to how labour can in fact reinforce such rhetoric through its silences and, moreover, what alternative courses of action might be possible for unions when they find themselves in contradictory positions with hard-right populism.

### Labour contesting populism and austerity

In Canada, as elsewhere, public sector unions have been particularly challenged by austerity governments at all levels (Ross and Savage, 2013). Labour unions, at best, have been forced to retreat to defensive positions. Ford’s campaign against the ‘gravy-train’



intensified an attack on the public sector that had been ongoing since Toronto amalgamated in the late 1990s and that included, among other things, continuing efforts to open up the public sector to private accumulation (Fanelli, 2014; Peck, 2012). Support for Ford's populism can be, in part, explained through the contradictory relationship between organised labour and the communities through which Ford drew support. In many accounts of 'austerity versus labour', while labour's resistance is not discounted, it is often relegated to second or third class status, incapable within its existing structures of fighting austerity agendas, let alone those with strong hard-right populist overtones. Labour, within its current formation, is too often seen as incapable of making strategic choices to counter-agendas infused with populist austerity. Inspired by a labour geography tradition that seeks to identify the agency of workers and their institutions in the face of aggressive capital (see Herod, 2001), we outline cases where union strategy, albeit constrained, both facilitated and resisted Rob Ford's agenda.

### *Garbage collection*

Perhaps no other unionised public service in Toronto has been threatened more with contracting out than garbage collection. The roots of Ford's push for garbage service privatisation can be traced to an extremely unpopular city workers' strike in the summer of 2009 undertaken by locals of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) that represent the city's workers. The strike, under Mayor David Miller, occurred after 6 months of failed negotiations, mainly over the banking of sick days, which the city wished to remove from the collective agreement. While the strike disrupted many city services, it was the failure to pick up residential garbage that proved most distasteful to the public, especially in neighbourhoods where temporary 'drop-off' sites were located. The end result was a 'popular' backlash against city workers, specifically their 'gilded' contracts (Gillis and Lunau, 2009). As Fanelli (2014) has noted, this strategic choice was an error by union leadership, as

preventing communities which might otherwise be on the side of workers by prohibiting them from getting rid of their waste is not only a poor strategic move but reinforces the portrayal of unionised workers by the media, management and others as indifferent to the needs of the communities they serve. (p. 134)

In his 2010 campaign, Ford made the privatisation of garbage collection a major part of his platform, starting with the western half of the city. While CUPE local 416, the union local affected by the privatisation initiative, attempted to resist the contracting out and community groups raised concerns (Toronto Environmental Alliance (TEA), 2011), Ford implemented privatisation with the support of a bloc of right wing councillors on city council, as well as with widespread popular support. By 2011, the first subcontracts were in place and privatised collection began in August 2012. Ford indicated he would also privatise collection in the eastern section of the city upon re-election.

In his 2014 election campaign, Mayoral candidate John Tory also promised to subcontract out all garbage collection, although following his election he subsequently backtracked and referred the issue to the City's Public Works Committee for further study.

The union made a strong case that contracting out garbage collection does not achieve huge savings, reduces quality of service and limits the ability of the local state to enhance waste diversion efforts mandated by higher levels of government (CUPE, 2015).

A range of strategic choices is open to public sector unions in contesting such privatisation efforts, even under conditions of neoliberal austerity. These include continuing to provide services in limited instances and offering educational workshops. There is also a need for a counter-narrative to contest the ‘essential service’ discourse that is used to undermine the labour rights of broader groups of public sector workers, such as garbage collection workers. When unions fail to explore these alternatives, as evident in the case of Toronto’s experience with garbage collection privatisation, they set the stage for anti-union public sentiment.

### *Cleaning services*

Public campaigns can have positive outcomes for workers facing privatisation and can counter the trend of devaluing public sector work. In April 2012, City Council soundly voted to prevent city staff from contracting out cleaning services without prior Council approval, halting an initiative to contract out cleaning services in Toronto police stations that had begun a few months earlier (Carson, 2013). Ford’s rhetoric throughout the campaign was consistent with his vow to subcontract out everything that was not ‘nailed’ down. His supporters echoed his call to save money for the taxpayer. Deputy Mayor Doug Holyday stated that ‘[t]here is just no logical reason for us to be paying \$64,000 to people to do cleaning when out in the *real world* you could get it for less than \$50,000’ (Rider, 2012; emphasis added). He further commented,

My advice to the taxpayer would be don’t send us any more activists, don’t send us any more unionists, don’t send us any more cyclists ... Send us some people down here with *good common sense* who just want to manage the city’s affairs. That’s what’s needed. (Grant and Church, 2012; emphasis added)

Nevertheless, an effective campaign was launched against city efforts to privatise cleaning services. The Good Jobs for All Coalition, a community coalition with strong ties to Toronto’s Labour Council, created substantial resistance to Ford’s attempt to contract out 1000 cleaning jobs paying CAD22 per hour plus benefits. Carson and Siemiatycki (2014) argue that this campaign slowed the process of contracting out with real material consequences for cleaners, also raising awareness of the issue. However, they note the limitations of the campaign – it was largely an ‘inside the hall’ lobbying effort that failed to mobilise workers themselves:

At several junctures, the Justice and Dignity campaign made the tactical calculation that union leaders and rank and file should not be the lead voices, for fear of alienating some city councilors whose support was critical to opposing outsourcing. (Carson and Siemiatycki, 2014: 180)

Effective ‘top-down’ campaigns can lead to qualified success against populist narratives that devalue public sector work as not part of the ‘real world’, unaffordable and lacking ‘common sense’. There must, however, be mobilisation from the bottom-up if a

lasting counter-narrative is to be developed that is not dependent solely on progressive councillors and contingent internal power balances. In addition to its top-down nature, the campaign was flawed in that it did not lead to a lasting organisational form: the short-term nature of the coalition model provided limited capacity for building further momentum to contest Ford's populist austerity agenda.

### *Library work*

A 10-day librarians' strike in 2012 illustrates an instance where effective mobilisation of workers and community can counter populist anti-public sector narratives. As Kipfer and Saberi (2014) note, this strike provided an exceptional counter-narrative to Ford's hard-right populism. This was accomplished not so much only through lobbying but with a deeper mobilisation of workers and community.

Libraries did not escape Ford's populism. In what became a major provocation, his brother, Councillor Doug Ford, called for the closure of branches, claiming, 'we have more libraries per person than any other city in the world. I've got more libraries in my area than I have Tim Hortons' (a fast food chain) (Flack, 2011). In 2011, in a public and heated battle against local constituents and high-profile advocates wanting to protect 'Our Public Library', attempts to close branches and implement a 10% budget cut were thwarted. Commenting on this 2011 campaign, Frederiksen (2015) argues that libraries are ripe for contesting neoliberal urbanism as they are site of social reproduction:

... public libraries are diverse public spaces for social reproduction where people are formed as workers and citizens, but through which they can also contest neoliberal downloading and offloading public provisioning and social service. (p. 150)

Libraries are simultaneously socialised spaces and central to knowledge production/dissemination in an urban economy (Rao, 2012). Such a contradiction was itself perhaps enough to discipline the overreaching of Ford's populism. Clearly, the Ford brothers underestimated the ability of the librarians to build on the anti-closure campaign.

In the spring of 2012, Local 4948, representing 2300 library workers, used a similar strategy to that adopted in 2011. As Warren Kinsella observed at the time, the 'Fords [were] still smarting from having their butts kicked by Margaret Atwood a few months back. To them, she's a symbol of socialist gulags and Deepest Annex' (quoted in Doolittle, 2012). At stake was the growing precarity of librarians who largely work part time. Like other city contracts, senior workers had no provisions against lay-offs due to outsourcing or technological change. The city wanted only those workers with 15 or more years of service to be subject to the provision – a very small percentage of a relatively casualised librarian workforce. The strike was successful and significant public support forced the city to pull back several of its concessionary demands. President of Local 4948, Maureen O'Reilly, initially consulted Bill Reno, an experienced campaigner who immediately suggested that a community group 'Friends of the Toronto Public Library' be created. The union carried out significant advanced polling research of resident attitudes towards the library system, developed a community-based outreach campaign and licensed social advocacy software to manage social media and redirect over 60,000 emails to councillors based on the postal code of the petitioner (O'Reilly, 2015).

The lesson here is that establishing counter-populist narratives is research-intensive and requires a great deal of strategic thinking alongside mobilisation. There is little spontaneous about counter-populist movements even if they involve the community. However, the campaigns were highly specific to the libraries and library workers. Drawing from the success of this case, we also see the need to develop an anti-austerity strategy that extends beyond the particularities of occupation/sector in ways that unite the broader working class.

## **Discussion: Post-Ford and the legacy for labour politics in Toronto**

These brief snapshots of labour's response to hard-right populism prompt reflection about Ford's legacy for labour relations in the city. Although populism often rises and falls very quickly, there are undoubtedly prolonged implications, with three potential trajectories (perhaps overlapping) for public sector labour in Toronto.

### *Labour as 'enabling dissent'*

The first trajectory is a purely defensive and perhaps regressive response. Labour unions may simply continue to play a role as operationalising 'enabling dissent', partially contesting populist austerity, but failing to create the basis for meaningful and broad-based alternatives. Here, labour will restrict itself to lobbying strategies, slowing down work processes, limiting its role to collective bargaining and lobbying around a narrow range of workplace issues, perhaps even valorising regressive sentiments in the public. In some cases, incremental gains may be achieved or concessions prevented, but little progress will be made for public sector workers. In cases where legal strikes occur, anti-union right populism may be enabled through the limited dissent that work stoppages offer, particularly if the general public is not brought onside prior to strike action. There is little promise in this trajectory as any real material gains are limited, and if the state feels that the balance of forces are too costly in the short term, back-to-work and essential service legislation will be used.

### *Labour and new urban social coalitions*

More optimistically, public sector unions can centre the city as the site of resistance to austerity. These efforts must extend beyond the lobbying of elected city councillors to develop strong ties with community groups and include effective coalition building. Coalition-based strategies between labour and other community groups may be effective, as they bring together a variety of groups to address the intersecting nature of inequalities such as those wrought by austerity (e.g. urban poverty, racism, public transit) (see Tattersall, 2010). However, in the above example, such efforts failed to connect with the broader interests of the working class outside the unionised public sector. They reflected a long-standing disconnect between organised labour and the base of support that Ford generated in his election campaign, which included working-class voters. While these strategies offered some defence against extreme austerity measures, the gains

were incremental and did little to foster the broader basis of solidarity needed to promote systemic change.

### *Neo left-populist movements*

In addition to its centrality in the manifestation of austerity and populism, the urban scale becomes key for the organisation of resistance against neoliberalism (MacDonald, 2010; Mayer, 2013). Unions have recognised this, and there are attempts to experiment with new structures that may be able to better represent the working class beyond the workplace. While dependent on union resources and strategic capacities, living wage movements have emerged in major urban centres in the US (Luce, 2004) and are now present in Toronto with the Fight for CAD15 and Fairness campaign. These are only early experiments in how urban movements can ‘scale up’ resistance to an austerity agenda at a time when populism (perhaps even an authoritarian variety) is scaling up its presence.

Can labour afford to centre on the urban scale? Here, we can start thinking about broader labour strategies. Electoralism will remain important for workers, but is by no means the only way to scale up power to the provincial or federal level. Perhaps new urban-based extra-union formations can come together as local chapters. Our concern here is less with the exact structure that new class and anti-oppression based formations may take than with their capacity to confront austerity and right populism.

A key question in the context of populist austerity is whether or not a left populism is either desirable or viable in establishing a counter-narrative (Tufts and Thomas, 2014). D’Eramo (2013) argues that populism is not to be feared and prematurely labelled as authoritarian. The extent to which populism can remain open to left politics versus the view that it inevitably traps workers and others in anti-democratic formations is a relevant debate. Is it possible for labour to build a coherent urban left populism that constructs popular support for an anti-racist and anti-exclusionary workers’ movement with the capacity to effectively counter austerity/neoliberalism? Such strategies and their variety of possible narratives hold potential for a revitalised workers’ movement (Thomas and Tufts, 2016). Labour unions are able to confront hard-right populism, although, unevenly, dependent upon their relative positions and strategic choices. Flirtation with alternative populist narratives may also offer progressive possibilities. At the same time, we recognise the clear limits of populism, both as a political strategy (it is momentary and potentially without coherent structure) and conceptually (owing to its lack of precise content – the empty signifier – it may not reveal much about social realities).

Keeping in mind the ongoing crisis of labour, which itself is set in the context of the intersection of right populism and austerity, from this study of cases of success and limitations, we identify the need for labour (1) to develop a counter-narrative that not only contests right populism but the underpinnings of neoliberal austerity, (2) to prioritise strategies grounded in bottom-up (rather than top-down) approaches and (3) to undertake a class-based (rather than sectional) approach to organising. While these challenges are significant, they are not insurmountable. Analysis of the ways in which labour is present in the making of austerity-populism (through ‘enabling dissent’) offers hope that labour may also be instrumental in its unmaking. The emergence of urban-based strategies such as the growing number of municipal minimum wage ordinances in the US and the larger

USD/CAD15 for Fairness campaign in many North American cities confirms the city as a key site in the fight against austerity.

## Conclusion

In this current conjuncture of austerity and urban populism, there is a pressing need to study contemporary configurations of these intersecting phenomena. Populism has implications for both democratic practices within and outside labour movements, as well as for strategies for economic recovery that may emerge in response to the current crisis. Through this discussion, we have aimed to identify the multifaceted character of contemporary forms of urban populism, the ways in which public sector labour engages with populism and austerity and the implications of these processes for strategies of labour market regulation, economic recovery and the development of democratic politics in urban spaces.

There are two major theoretical issues we seek to emphasise. First, it must be recognised that labour does have some agency to respond to hard-right populism. When labour starts to respond beyond the narrow confines of bureaucratic collective bargaining, fissures and contradictions can be exploited. Second, while this article has focused on urban cases in Toronto, we must not limit ourselves to a methodological urbanism, which can be just as limiting as methodological nationalism. Populism is a social phenomenon that extends beyond the urban into multiple scales of governance and social life. Understanding how Rob Ford was a product not only of Toronto, but broader political-economic changes will be necessary in confronting his successors in the future.

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