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# Regime Change from Below - Toppling the Doug Ford Regime

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In the coming weeks, Doug Ford will assume the office of Ontario premier, as predicted by the polls, at the helm of a Conservative majority government. Comprised of hardened reactionaries, inspired by Trump's formula of repackaging conventional neoliberal austerity with racist 'wedge' politics and fake-populist rhetoric, the Ford regime will move quickly to signal its determination to empower big business, weaken labour and social movements, and embolden its most militant core of support on the grassroots Far Right. We can expect the regime to launch a series of rapidfire attacks on the living standards of workers, the Treaty and inherent rights of Indigenous people, and the social and civil rights of women, racialized people, and others.

In the wake of such a disheartening election outcome, and faced with the looming prospect of intense attacks on vital public services and important social rights, it is understandable that many of us will react initially with a sense of dismay, bordering on despair. However, as soon as we can muster the energy, we really do need to engage in difficult but important strategic discussions about how to stop Ford from implementing his agenda, post-election.

Getting a quick start on this strategic discussion is important for at least two reasons. First, there are many people on the broad left who for years have been hoping, and in some cases, more recently, even expecting that a “centre-left” New Democratic Party government would win the election. The thousands of left-leaning activists who worked tirelessly on NDP campaigns can be a vital resource for the broad-based resistance movement we need to build. But they will likely succumb to chronic demoralization in the absence of some realistic prospect of a post-election path to victory against the Ford regime. A lively discussion about strategic options and opportunities can only help in this context.

Second, it is important that we begin immediately to ramp up the resistance, in order to hit the ground running with campaigns to de-legitimize the regime and to construct movements with the kind of *relentless persistence*, *escalating trajectory*, and *broadening base of participation* that will be needed to threaten the government with real, practical defeats and to achieve substantive victories for the democratic and egalitarian forces that will have to lead the resistance.

### **The Objective: Toppling the Regime**

When thinking about how best to attack the regime, the first step is to set our sights on victory. We have to aim at toppling the new government. The fact that it is a majority government will no doubt make this more difficult. But even a majority government can be toppled. It can lose its legitimacy and be thrown into crisis, forcing resignations and early elections. That should be the primary objective of a post-election “movement of movements” to defeat Ford’s government. We have to aim to achieve through grassroots intervention by the broad public what could not be achieved by the political parties who comprise the “opposition” in the official political process.

This means that it won’t be enough to mount solitary campaigns on particular issues or around specific “sectoral” demands. I don’t mean that such demands or campaigns should be shelved, or set to one side. Far from it. But what I do mean is that the anti-Ford forces will have to consciously embrace the shared and cross-movement political project of toppling the regime, and this will have to be a political priority for all social movement organizations, and where possible integrated with sectoral demands and campaigns.

The most politically active and far-sighted layer of workers in the social and labour movements in the province already share a common understanding that the Ford regime is illegitimate, for multiple reasons: first, Ford has made it clear that he wants to fast track extraction projects in Northern Ontario with or without free, prior and informed consent of impacted Indigenous communities; second, he plans to redistribute income from the lowest paid workers (whose anticipated \$15 minimum wage will be cancelled) to the wealthiest investors in the form of tax giveaways to parasitic investors and corporations; third, he plans to balance the budget while reducing revenues by cutting taxes on the super-rich and big business, and this can only be done by draconian cuts to public services, for which he has no mandate whatsoever; fourth, his tacit alliance with the extremist Far Right will embolden white supremacists and the misogynistic ‘men’s rights’ activists (MRAs) across the province to organize more openly and in many cases violently, as they continually seek to gain a foothold in ‘mainstream’ society. One could go on. But the upshot of all this is clear: the government has no legitimacy, regardless of its electoral victory with the approval of just 40% of actual voters and 23% of eligible voters.

Even so, however, we must not underestimate what we’re up against. Ford has real power behind him. He controls the government, obviously. But, just as important, he can count on

resolute support from all the most powerful institutions in our society, including corporations, the news media, the courts, and police forces. By contrast, the forces lined up against the regime certainly have justice and democratic legitimacy on our side, but we lack the brute power and boundless resources of the province's Establishment for which Ford is the current figurehead and policy champion. If he finds himself threatened with defeat from a social protest movement, we should never doubt that these Establishment institutions will rush to his defence and try to discredit, demoralize, and if possible destroy the grassroots opposition.

It follows from this that defeating Ford in the streets and in workplaces will be difficult, but we cannot use that as an excuse for not resisting. There is too much at stake. Ford has to be defeated. The government will have to be toppled. And we don't have the luxury of months or years to talk things through at a leisurely pace. We have to begin the protests immediately after this election (starting with the **16 June Rally for Decent Work** at the Ministry of Labour in Toronto organized by the OFL and \$15 & Fairness), before despair and disorientation set in. And we have to work toward escalating levels of disruption, with the aim of creating a crisis.

But how?

### **Size Matters: The Importance of Scale in Anti-Ford Resistance**

How can we, in the emerging anti-Ford movement in Ontario, develop the levels of social power needed to produce the sort of large-scale, sustained disruption that could topple the regime, defeat its agenda, and force early elections?

It's worth noting that we haven't seen disruption on this scale in Ontario since the mid-1990s, during the "Ontario Days of Action" (DoA) campaign. The DoA campaign was a series of single-city, two-day protests, in which the first day (a Friday) would see a general strike by unionized workers, and the second day (a Saturday) would see a mass demonstration, in which unions would be joined by community organizations, including feminist, anti-racist, Indigenous rights, disability rights, environmental and anti-poverty organizations that shared organized labour's interest in resisting and reversing the profits-first, anti-justice policy agenda of the then Mike Harris (Conservative) government in Ontario.

In the years since the end of the DoA campaign, the disruptions we have seen by protesters in Ontario have paled in comparison, with the exception of some impressive outbreaks of Indigenous protest and disruption (a point to which I return below) and the large 2009 traffic disruptions by the Tamil community in Toronto. Otherwise, however, post-DoA disruptive protests in Ontario have typically involved a few dozen people, sometimes fewer, blocking traffic or occupying a construction site or a government office, etc. In rare cases, the numbers participating in disruptions have numbered in the hundreds. But during the DoA, disruption operated on a vastly more potent and threatening scale. Several thousands, sometimes tens of thousands of workers participated in *political* strike action. During each of the eleven Day of Action strikes in 1995-98, workers brought public transportation systems grinding to a complete stop for the day. They shut down Public and Catholic school systems. Federal, provincial and municipal government offices were in most cases completely closed. Hundreds of private sector employers were shut down by striking workers. Universities and Colleges were shut down in each DoA city, with students joining campus workers to picket the campuses. It was a dramatic — and now, nearly forgotten — demonstration of just how disruptive protesters can be, if the necessary scale, organizational capacity, and determination can be mustered.

Don't get me wrong. It is genuinely important and valuable today when a few dozen or a few hundred people are able to block traffic or stage other disruptive protests. These actions will have to feed into and set an example for the emerging anti-Ford movement. But to throw the Ford regime into crisis, scale will certainly matter. The anti-Ford movement simply *must* break out of activist enclaves and draw in the kind of mass social power that the DoA movement was able to generate and deploy.

### **Why the Days of Action Campaign Failed to Defeat Harris in the mid-90s**

Of course, in the end, most of that disruptive power was squandered, when the divided and irresolute Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) leadership decided to cut the movement short, refusing to escalate, as most movement activists had advocated (and as had been voted upon in OFL conventions), to a 1-day or 2-day province-wide general strike, and ultimately to an unlimited province-wide general strike. When the movement was demobilized, the Harris government had weathered the storm, and regained its footing, with most of its agenda still in place.

We should learn from that disappointing outcome. The next time we pursue a DoA strategy, grassroots activists should work hard to build autonomous structures of popular deliberation and decision-making from below — a system of assemblies or councils — as a counterweight to the formal structures (and the “backroom” informal decision-making) that dominate the institutional level of the labour movement. This would allow grassroots organizers in the unions and community organizations to play a key role in trying to shape the strategic direction of the movement, and to ensure that the rightward pressures on the OFL from the most conservative union officials are countered by the leftward pressures of an activated, organized, emboldened grassroots.

However sobering the outcome of the 1990s DoA campaign was, it seems clear that a revival of something resembling the DoA strategic framework is the best hope for the emerging anti-Ford movement in Ontario. The disruptiveness we need can never be generated from within marginal activist enclaves, mobilizing a few dozen people here, a few hundred there. No, we need tens of thousands, indeed hundreds of thousands of people, coordinated across the public and private sectors, drawing in unionized and non-unionized workers, taking inspiration and in many cases leadership from Indigenous communities, and committing to serious, large-scale economic disruption: shutting down highways, schools, universities, public transportation systems, private and public sector workplaces, and inflicting real costs on the employer class and its underlings (regardless of party affiliation) in government.

### **Ramping Up: Putting in Place the Conditions for Resurgent Mass Fightback**

Such a campaign seems a long way off. It's unlikely to emerge directly from the OFL, certainly. But it is worth remembering how it became possible the last time. After all, initially, the response of union officials to the Harris government's election was passive and ineffectual. Leah Casselman, for instance, the then president of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU), said that she would try to “work with” the Harris government “to improve services.” She refused to endorse a June 26 anti-Harris demonstration (see Paul Kellogg, “Workers Versus Austerity: The Origins of Ontario's 1995-1998 Days of Action,” p. 127). Even the most left-wing high-level union official in the province at the time, Sid Ryan of CUPE Ontario Division, said that “to be going into an all-out war now with a government that clearly has a mandate, before they even take office, I think is the wrong strategy for labour.” These comments were

made only a few months before the Days of Action, with their one-day general strikes and mass protests, began. Obviously, some sort of sea-change had occurred in the interim.

How did the movement change course so rapidly? This is exactly the kind of shift that today's anti-Ford movement needs to replicate.

Clearly, the OFL was not the initial springboard. Instead, grassroots activists launched campaigns from below: the "Embarrass Harris" campaign, for instance, which was initiated by a small group of anti-racist feminists within the National Action Committee (NAC), and organized mostly out of mass meetings held at the 519 community centre in Toronto. They launched a "June 26 demonstration against the Conservatives' swearing-in," which drew 2,500 protesters (Kellogg, p. 126), setting an important precedent of determined opposition. A few weeks later, in July, they "rallied several hundred people outside government offices in downtown Toronto to denounce the attacks on the poor and on social programs" (Kellogg, p. 125). At the same time, a series of potent and inspiring mass marches and disruptive protests were held by the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP), including the first March on Rosedale, on August 22, 1995. "The message, from the left-wing OCAP, couldn't have been clearer: Harris was ruling for the rich, and [attacking] the poor" (Kellogg, p. 126).

These grassroots initiatives had the effect of stimulating a demand from within the unions for a more robust response from organized labour, and eventually the OFL found itself pressured to seriously step up its response, especially after it became clear that the future of collective bargaining hung in the balance.

### **The Ipperwash Example: Disruption on Display**

Above all, however, the DoA disruption campaign received a massive jolt of inspiration when an Anishinaabe community in Southwestern Ontario, at the Chippewas of Kettle and Stony Point (Aazhoodena) First Nation, launched a bold and determined reclamation of stolen land at Ipperwash "Provincial Park," at the beginning of September 1995, i.e., two months before the first Day of Action was announced and three months before it took place. Tragically, one of the land defenders, Dudley George, was shot to death by the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP). A judge later found the shooter guilty of criminal negligence causing death, and pointed out that "the accused [OPP officer] Kenneth Deane knew that...Dudley George did not have any firearms on his person when he shot him," and "concocted" a false story about a rifle "in an ill-fated attempt to disguise the fact that an unarmed man had been shot" by police. Beyond the tragedy of Dudley George's killing, however, the land reclamation set a powerful example of the power of disruption and determined defiance, even by poor and socially marginalized people, to throw the Harris government into crisis and panic. Crucially, the vulnerability of Harris to resistance in the form of organized disruption was splashed across the front pages of newspapers in every city and town in Ontario. It was the first sign of chinks in the government's armour.

The social costs imposed by the Ipperwash protesters on business and governments was very, very real. According to the Report of the Ipperwash Inquiry, "the Municipality of Lambton Shores" reported that "the occupation of the park had a 'devastating' financial impact. The municipality cited loss of property values, loss of business revenues (including tourism), loss of municipal tax revenues, loss of...jobs, and difficulties for residents in obtaining mortgages and property insurance" (Report of the Ipperwash Inquiry, Volume 2, p. 36). One of the main findings of the Ipperwash Inquiry, in fact, was that "occupations and protests and/or the continuing

uncertainty over land, treaty claims, and burial sites have a considerable economic effect. Occupations, protests, and continuing uncertainty over the ownership, control, or use of land and other resources have delayed or impaired economic opportunities in resource development, land development, fishing, forestry, and tourism” (Report, p. 37). The capacity of determined protesters to disrupt ‘business as usual’ and impose serious costs on their adversaries did not go unnoticed by union and social justice activists in the province that fall. Within three months, tens of thousands of unionized workers and other social justice activists had begun to follow suit.

### **Bringing Organized Labour on Board**

In fact, it was only about three weeks after the Indigenous disruptive protest at Ipperwash that the labour movement first began to join the anti-Harris fight with disruptive workplace walkouts, initially at the local level, in Toronto. When the legislature reconvened on 27 September, Embarrass Harris, Toronto’s Labour Council, the Building Trades Council, OCAP, the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS), three buses put on by the Guelph and District Labour Council, and other labour and community groups converged on Queen’s Park for a mass demonstration with between seven and ten thousand people. As Kellogg pointed out (p. 129), “it was the biggest protest yet against the Harris cuts, the first where the majority were organized workers, and the first which gave a sign of the mass movement which was building in the province.” According to one participant and organizer, “workers streamed out of the hospitals on University Avenue, they came by the thousands out of government offices at Queen’s Park, clerical and administrative workers crossed the road from the University....The result...put a lie to earlier pronouncements by union leaders who declared that demonstrations were premature and wouldn’t work” (Carolyn Egan, quoted in Kellogg, p. 129).

Remarkably, the 27 September demonstration at Queen’s Park had not been endorsed by the OFL (see Kellogg, p. 129). It was not until a full two months later, during the late November 1995 OFL Convention that finally the OFL got fully (although not without divisions) on board, and — to make a long story short (for details, see Kellogg, pp. 130-134) — the Days of Action campaign was launched, with the first 2-day protest to be held on 11-12 December in London, Ontario.

The inspiration of the Ipperwash protest, which illustrated the power of economic disruption, and the energy and determination of anti-austerity protest organizers in the feminist and anti-poverty movements, as well as in local unions, were able to spark a movement that no one saw coming a few months earlier. And that movement showed how potent and threatening a campaign of broad-based, escalating disruption, supported by cross-sectoral mass mobilizations could be.

How can we replicate this achievement? Needless to say, there is no magical formula. But it is possible to sketch a realistic scenario of how we might be able to move, in stages, in that direction.

### **A Five-Step Escalation Scenario**

Basing ourselves on some of the effective anti-austerity and pro-democracy movement-building that is being done already in the province, like the campaign against hydro privatization, the struggle against the Line 9 pipeline, the migrant workers’ rights organizing, the \$15 and Fairness campaign, and the Black Lives Matter mobilizations, but aspiring to massively ramp up

the levels of solidarity and the scale of popular mobilization and community and workplace organization, we could work toward a five-stage escalation process, along the lines of the scenario outlined below.

**STEP ONE: Establish a Grassroots Coordinating Network.** Establish a province-wide grassroots Coordinated Resistance Network (with majority-voting assemblies in cities and towns sending delegates to the provincial body) that can set dates and themes for large-scale mobilizations, at either the single-city, regional, or province-wide level.

**STEP TWO: Launch a Series of Single-Issue Days of Resistance.** Hold a series of rolling single-city themed days of solidarity and resistance, starting with an Indigenous Solidarity Day of Resistance in the summer of 2018, followed by Days of Resistance on other themes, like fair wages, accessible education, and so on. Use these to build up two kinds of pressure: first, within the labour movement, build pressure initially at the labour council level and then at the OFL level, to put more energy and resources into escalating and broadening the anti-Ford fights that will by then already be underway both inside and outside of the labour movement, both to defend collective bargaining and union jobs, and to defend the wider working class, especially poor, unemployed, and Indigenous people, who experience the most brutal impacts of the regime's anti-social agenda; second, within the wider social movements, build pressure on organizations to commit to a strategic alliance with organized labour in order to escalate toward broad-based, large-scale, escalating economic disruption, which would be near impossible to mount without a strategic alliance with unions.

**STEP THREE: Winning a Commitment from Labour to Friday Work-Stoppages.** Campaign within union locals, labour councils, provincial divisions and the OFL itself for resolutions committing the unions to active participation and real monetary/organizing support for the grassroots Days of Resistance, and — crucially — for single-day work stoppages on the Friday before each Day of Resistance.

**STEP FOUR: Launch a Series of 2-Day, Multi-Issue Days of Resistance.** Following the basic model of the anti-Harris days of action in the 1990s, but now empowering the assembly-based grassroots coordinating network to shape the strategy, hold a series of single-city, two-day Days of Resistance protests, with Friday general strikes followed by Saturday cross-sectoral (not single-themed) mobilizations, all the while drawing in more people into their local assemblies. Mobilize on the basis of widely accepted, broad movement demands, like honour the treaties, people before profits, and human need, not corporate greed, but encouraging unions and community groups to advance more specific and locally resonating demands on their own.

**STEP FIVE: Escalate Toward Province-Wide, and Eventually Unlimited Work-Stoppages, with Nocturnal Marches.** After several single-city Days, escalate first to a province-wide Day of Resistance, and then to a week-long, and ultimately to an unlimited province-wide general strike, with broad, multi-issue 'nocturnal marches' in several major cities every evening on the model of the Quebec student strike.

## Conclusion

Is this realistic? If a process of this general type — moving from relatively small-scale attempts to kick-start a movement and ramping up in stages toward a coordinated, province-wide campaign of economic disruption through mass mobilization — could be successfully carried



out, would it really hold out the prospect of toppling the Ford government? I would say this: nothing less than something like this could possibly work. So, it seems like a sound starting point for the project of defeating the Ford agenda and putting in place a people before profits alternative trajectory of social development, ultimately challenging the systems in the service of which regime's "right populist" political project works: capitalism, colonialism, racism and sexism.

An anti-systemic politics of this kind won't emerge out of the gradual expansion of activist enclaves, recruiting like-minded individuals to their ranks in "ones and twos." It can only emerge from the dynamism and energy of broad popular struggles, where hundreds of thousands of people fill the streets, in relentless and broad-based campaigns of escalating resistance, of the sort proposed here.

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