

“Class War Conservatism” and Resistance to the Doug Ford Tories in Ontario

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The Fordist Conservative government in Ontario presents a pressing challenge to politics as usual and raises the stakes for working class resistance. Almost immediately upon taking office Doug Ford and his Tory regime have gone on an offensive targeting diverse segments of the working class. In their aggressive actions they have shown themselves to be unabashed proponents of a class war conservatism in the mold of Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, and Mike Harris, if in a particularly crass version.

Well, sometimes you get the counsel you need, when you need it. So it is that I found myself reading Ralph Miliband’s old article “[Class War Conservatism](#)” right as Doug Ford was elected in Ontario. I lived for years in a Toronto riding bordering his brother Rob’s and have followed (and opposed) the Ford’s for awhile. Recognizing again the character of and threat posed by a boldfaced class war conservative regime makes us reconsider our whole approach to opposition, to the political conventions that while familiar will fail us against this enemy. (And make no mistake they view us as enemies and make no apologies for it.)

It is crucial to quickly get the full measure of the challenge the Doug Ford government presents, as Miliband said of Thatcher. And to meet that challenge with the fullness (of anger, boldness, creativity, militancy, and solidarity) it deserves.

Class War Offensives

Economic indices, the staple of the neoliberal reduction of politics to management, are not the ones by which Ford and his cronies will measure the progress they make. Rather, like Thatcher, Reagan, and Ontario’s Mike Harris before them, they are involved in a longer term project on whose success they see the conditions for greater economic gain and more. This project is, once again, the erosion of resistance of the working class in its multiplicity and its collective, organized strength.



This is, as was true of Harris and his heroes, a counter-revolution in the life and politics of the province. It is what Ford is engaged in. Nothing less than open class war. We can see it in targets of Ford's early decisions.

Black Lives Matter. Ford announced his intention not to follow through on proposed police oversight measures. He has reinforced support for street checks or "carding."

Indigenous communities. Ford cut truth and reconciliation materials from school curricula.

LGBTQ2S. Again targeting education and school curriculum Ford announces the return to an earlier sex education curriculum, one that ignores gender identity discussions and broad aspects of sexuality.

Unions. Back to work legislation against striking CUPE 3903 workers. The creation of a snitch line for people to turn in teachers who actually teach sex education. The omnibus "Open for Business" legislation repealing Bill 148 and its basic labour protections and planned minimum wage increase.

Racialized minorities. Students. The imposition of "free speech" legislation covering post-secondary education and designed to provide safe space on campus for white supremacists and circulation of racist, far Right propaganda.

Poor people. The abrupt ending of the basic income pilot project, leaving many poor people in immediate financial peril. Reductions in social assistance increases (already for too little).

And of course these all intersect in various ways.

The shrinking of Toronto City Hall is itself a strike for conservative centralization and control but also a symbolic (and material) strike against mythical "Downtown Progressives" – the perceived foil to the suburban, white conservative, ring. It will have as one effect a reduction in representation from minority and marginalized candidates. It is with cause that Miliband referred to Thatcherism (in its first year no less) as the wisdom of outer suburbia (281). And this is really another expression of the class war conservatives' long held commitment to centralization and managerialism against even representative forms of democratic involvement.

Cuts to welfare and the end of the basic income experiment in Ontario are designed to harm the most marginalized sectors of the working class, but also split working class movements

through familiar poor bashing and stigmatization, playing upon fear of more stable members of the working class that in the current context they might not be so stable after all (certainly not enough to work to provide income for their poorer neighbors).

The back to work legislation against my old local [CUPE 3903](#) is a latter day echo of Reagan's targeting of [PATCO](#) (the air traffic controllers union) and Thatcher's attacks of the miners. That class war attack should have been met by broad resistance. It is clearly a signal of the assault on labour to come and a test of how much fightback might be expected.

Ford's *Making Ontario Open for Business Act* omnibus bill of October 23 repeals changes to the Labour Relations Act that made it easier for workers in various sectors to join a union. It cancels the two paid sick days and 10 personal emergency leave days and replaces the latter with up to three days for personal illness, two for bereavement, and three for family responsibilities. These are all to be unpaid. The bill also eliminates pay-equity for part-time and casual workers.

The Ford government has already made clear it will not go ahead with the scheduled increase in the minimum wage to [\\$15 an hour](#) on January 1, 2019. The wage will be frozen at \$14. The omnibus bill announced that the government will freeze the minimum wage until October 2020. Future increases will be tied to inflation.

While Ford might cover his actions in a phony appeal to a good society "for the people," Miliband concluded that the "good society" that the class war conservatives believe in is "a class society in which the subordination of the many to the few, on the basis of property and privilege, is the dominant principle" (285). The plan to cut the Toronto city council and invocation of the notwithstanding clause to override the Constitution can be understood in this light. In fact, all of Ford's acts so far can be understood through this lens.

Conservative Social Strategy

While the focus has so often been on neoliberal economics, the economic policies have typically been more ideology or dogma than anything. "Trickle down," "voodoo economics." Even George Bush I could see through it.

As Miliband pointed out, and has been too often overlooked since, what the class war conservatives do have is a coherent *social* strategy. That is geared to produce and maintain a social environment most favorable to exploitation. The twin goals, both in the name of incentives, are that life should be made much better for people who already have and enjoy financial privilege. And, that it should be made tougher for those who do not. Incentives after all.

This is what handouts for the rich have been about, but also cuts to social resources needed by the working class. And we have long known that it is not about what we can afford. Doug Ford has already pledged massive increases (as all class war conservatives do) for the cops. Yet small amounts are cut from programs to help disadvantaged, and racialized, youth.

We know about cuts and the use of cuts to reduce social programs that make people less dependent on wage labour. We can understand too Ford's early decision to end the basic income pilot project. Whatever concerns people might have about basic income in a neoliberal framework (and the organization I was active in for a decade, the [Ontario Coalition Against Poverty](#) has offered an analytical critique) it is certain that Ford did not

want any evidence to come out suggesting even the possibility that basic income could offer some autonomy for working class people.

Miliband reminds us that cuts are, right from the start, accompanied by an array of snoops and snitches. So, of course, Ford has implemented a snitch line targeting teachers (and their unions).

Thatcher and Reagan launched counter-revolutions to weaken union power and the strength of poor peoples movements – the organized working class more broadly. This provided an environment for retrenchment, social restraints, and cuts to social programs.

Neoliberalism innovated against the welfare state model of concessions. It withdrew or withheld them even as economic growth made them painless for governments. In fact event cuts became possible during growth for neoliberals, which would have been viewed as unacceptable under the welfare state.

Of course, Thatcher, Reagan, and Harris, and now Ford, approached this work, not reluctantly but with a relish and enthusiasm for confronting and breaking working class power and possibilities for militancy.

The goal of the Fordists remains, as it has always been for the class war conservatives, to shift the balance of force as far as possible to favor managerial power. This is crucial for contextualizing the cuts to Toronto City Hall, which might otherwise seem perplexing or a bit of an obscure obsession for Ford. It is not only about a petty get back at former council rivals as some would have it.

And to be clear, there is no real distinction between the Fordists and other conservatives in the Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario. They are together in desiring a social order in which there are great distinctions between classes in all aspects of social life (and egregious differences between the poles). Thus there should be no surprise, or reason for disappointment, at Attorney General Caroline Mulroney's defense of using the notwithstanding clause against the Charter of Human Rights. The only real distinction remains on how class conflict is best to be managed – a ruthless, open, mocking class war (à la Ford) or a respectable, even, “compassionate” class war. But do not forget that Ford's main opponents in the leadership race were Christine Elliot, a partner to Harris's hatchet man Jim Flaherty, and the aforementioned Mulroney (daughter of first wave Thatcherite, Brian Mulroney).

The Fordists have no interest in compromise, concession, or decorum – let alone compassion (of which they know nothing). And absent a proper resistance that recognizes the class war stakes, they have no reason for any of these.

They seek to maintain a system of privilege and inequality through open class war offensives. No hesitation, no shame, no regrets.

Angry Resistance

The lessons from earlier class war conservatives are clear. It is necessary to fight back hard, aggressively, and to fight back *now*. It is necessary to move to an offensive, to take the fight to the class war conservatives and their corporate backers. Resistance, including labour, must develop “the capacity to project a radically different view” (285). Until it does, it will be fighting on Ford's ground, not its own. And we should not shy away from our anger, tone it

down, or apologize for it.

Opposition must quickly grasp that the Ford government does not seek or want cooperation with them. It wants and seeks submission. Resistance has too long been conditioned to play by the rules (symbolic actions, protests, legal challenges, public shaming, etc.) in hopes that better judgement will prevail.

The class war conservatives know exactly what they are doing and why they are doing it. They cannot be shamed because they have no shame (insulting Ford only charges him up). They do not like us and do not care how much they hurt us or how much pain we feel. Might we return the favor?

We have seen glimpses of resistance that could challenge the class war conservatives. In the last year of the Mike Harris Conservative Party premiership a [Common Front](#) formed in Ontario to carry out acts of economic disruption to impose a real cost on the government and its policies. In cities, towns, and reserves across the province Ontario Common Front groups organized and developed tactics that made sense in their specific location. These included railway blockades, business shutdowns, business disrupting snake marches, etc.

During the Ontario Common Front, rank and file workers in my home town Windsor (and my family's historic local UAW/CAW/Unifor 444) were actively planning a shut down of the NAFTA Superhighway over the Ambassador Bridge with Detroit, before union officials got anxious and shut them down. But that is the sort of bold tactic that will be necessary to stop today's class war conservatives.

We must make no mistake in being tempted to believe for a second that the class war conservatives feel anything but contempt and disdain for us – for any of the exploited and oppressed, the poor, the dispossessed. Theirs is a hatred born of class privilege and a pinched resentment of anything we might enjoy – a sense that it is rightfully theirs. But deep down too they fear that we might one day come for it all – take it back from them. They hate too in sensing, if imperfectly, that *their* having rests on *our* not having.

The Fordist class war conservatives must be confronted openly on the same hostile and aggressive terms. Resistance must occupy the ground of class war. That is the terrain on which the Fordists are fighting. There is no hope for concessions, conciliation, compassion. There will be no reward in waiting it out, in pursuing a cautious, deliberative, approach. We know this enemy – we have seen it before. We must meet its aggression in kind.

Where Opposition is Weak, The Class War Conservatives Press On

The first generation Thatcherites worried the unions might fight back if things were made too difficult for organized labour. Their test cases gave them confidence. Almost four decades of neoliberal offensive and the example of Ontario itself under Mike Harris (where resistance boasted but fizzled in the spectacles of [Days of Action](#)) have shown the Fordists that they might have little to fear and in this regard can act with impunity.

Thatcher expected more of a fight from the unions and was emboldened by their confused response. In a span of two short months she went from saying it would not be possible to legislate a reduction in the benefits paid to strikers families to actually introducing the legislation at a higher cut than initially hinted at. As Miliband said at the time:

“It is a small point but a significant one: where the opposition is weak, the government is encouraged to press on. The unions are still very reluctant to accept the idea – and to base their response on the idea – that Mrs Thatcher does not actually want cooperation with them but submission.” (284)

There can be no underestimating the challenge the Ford government is posing. There is no good in waiting around for the inevitable coercive assaults on the right to organize and strike. Restraints on “industrial action” are no doubt on the way (even as back to work legislation has already been imposed). And the Fordist nod to the cops will also be a nod to stricter (and arbitrary) enforcement of law against striking workers, protesters, etc. The *Making Ontario Open for Business Act* is only a glimpse of a start for the Fordists.

They will roll out state shrinking libertarian rhetoric while building up state power and the containment state against the exploited and oppressed. Resources will always be made available for more and tougher policing.

Conclusion: Class War Needs Two Sides

During the Ontario Common Front Mohawks at Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory blockaded the rail line across the territory. In Toronto a snake march shut down Bay Street and made sure it was not business as usual – on the day Mike Harris stepped down. These and other actions could be done, on various scales – targeting businesses that support the Tories and their agenda. We can think about the effective targeting of Tim Hortons following their obnoxious attacks on low wage workers.

In 2001 I was arrested in an action that literally evicted Finance Minister Jim Flaherty’s constituency office in Whitby. Any and all Tories should face literal evictions.

These are not times of, or for, politics as usual. And there needs to be a reforming of political action itself. The message must be sent that class war has two sides.

Already we can see some promising examples of a rising on a different level against Ford’s class war conservatism. The mass walkout of students from schools across Ontario, thousands of students and some schools largely shut down, on September 21 are inspirational (and aspirational). We might well imagine what such mass walkouts in other contexts might look like. These are suggestive of a general strike in motion.

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