

Ontario: Austerity, Resistance and the Poor

By [John Clarke](#)

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On April 1, the [Dalton McGuinty](#) government, will introduce a new version of the Special Diet benefit for those on [Social Assistance](#). This vital benefit, which provides up to \$250 a month in additional income to people on assistance, has been accessed by tens of thousands of people over the last five years and has been the only means to alleviate the extreme poverty and ill health caused by grossly inadequate social assistance rates. The new system will be much more restrictive than the present one, with enhanced mechanisms of scrutiny and enforcement. All who presently receive the Special Diet will have to re-apply under the new set up. In a situation where access to medical providers is a huge problem for many poor people, this forced mass re-application under more stringent rules is a deliberate mechanism to deny the benefit to tens of thousands of people. The gutting of the Special Diet is taking place the same week that the government tabled a budget that provided an increase in social assistance rates below the rate of inflation and shortly after their previous decision to freeze the minimum wage this year. These attacks on the poor must be viewed as part of an intensifying agenda of austerity that seeks to decimate public services and impose a decisive defeat on the workers who deliver them.

At noon on April 1, the [Ontario Coalition Against Poverty \(OCAP\) and its supporters will be rallying](#) in Toronto City Hall Square and marching on the provincial government - Queen's Park. We will be confronting a social cutback of massive dimensions. Welfare and disability rates in Ontario have lost 55 per cent of their spending power since 1994. They are already far lower under the present Liberal Regime than they were after former Tory Premier [Mike Harris](#) cut the rates by 21.6 per cent and, if you factor in the massive reduction in the Special Diet, a benefit that was being accessed by one person on assistance in five last year, McGuinty's contribution to intensifying poverty in Ontario is readily apparent. This week, his government has ensured vast numbers of people will lose their housing, have their health compromised and their lives shortened.

Poverty and Austerity

As wages in the private sector continue to be driven lower and, as public sector unions face a massive assault on past gains, this extreme growth in poverty and desperation becomes an important weapon in the hands of employers. In fact, the Liberals' attack on income support systems has been one of the key ways in which they have consolidated the agenda of their Tory forerunners. The inability of those on welfare to pay their rent and feed themselves has made possible the vast expansion of the 'Wal Mart economy' low wage sector in Ontario.

This war on the poor occurs within a broader austerity agenda that is confronting the broader working-class and its unions. That agenda, international in scope, is far more

extreme than the neoliberal measures of past decades. An attack is opening up on public services and the workers who deliver them that, if successful, will push unions and the capacity for working-class resistance back to a critical degree. OCAP's [Raise the Rates Campaign](#), which is now winning the support of important sections of the labour movement, pushes back on one of the fronts on which this battle will be taken up.

The Raise the Rates Campaign has now been endorsed by CUPE Ontario, the Ontario Nurses Association and a number of labour councils and union locals. When we address trade union audiences, we bring them the message that the poor need solidarity and not charity. We stress that the mounting attacks on their unions' past gains are built on welfare cuts, brutal immigration enforcement, attacks on non-status people and other efforts to create a desperate and compliant section of the working-class.

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Winning Demands

A slogan that OCAP has often used in its campaigns is 'Fight to Win.' It expresses our strong sense that a mobilization of the poor has to be conducted around strategies and tactics that can provide such a movement with some power to win demands and objectives. In recent years in Ontario an ongoing lobby has emerged on poverty issues that has based itself on a strategy known as 'constructive engagement.' The social agencies that have dominated this initiative have assumed fundamental good faith on the part of the Liberal Government and have considered it their role to educate political decision makers on the scale and nature of poverty in Ontario so as to create the political will for 'poverty reduction.' The staying power of this effort, in the face of the clearest evidence that the Liberals have no intention of alleviating poverty, has been quite remarkable and a huge impediment to effective action.

OCAP has a completely different view when it comes to what can win concessions from a government, particularly in a period of austerity and social regression like the present one. We don't think the McGuinty Government is ready to implement 'poverty reduction' but that it is following a dominant political course that the most powerful institutions of capitalism are advancing internationally. This includes using unemployment, attacks on non-status people, and poverty as weapons to attack workers and their unions.

If the poor are to win resources from an unwilling source, in this case the provincial government, the means at their disposal to apply effective pressure is not that hard to discern. If those denied wages are to be effectively utilized as a means of undermining the bargaining power of those with jobs, it is important that they suffer in a state of relative passivity. If the poor become significantly restive and troublesome, they cease to be a useful means of undermining employed workers and become, instead, a problematic (and potentially infectious) source of discontent. A serious mobilization of the poor, then, should

be based on disruptive collective action.

As we challenge the cut to the Special Diet and the appalling reduction of real income for the poor, we look to the great example of the movements of social resistance that were built by the unemployed workers during the 1930s. These mobilizations were carried out relentlessly and massively during those years and, under conditions of harsh state repression, were able to win ground and force concessions from those in power. In 1935, they were actually fighting in Toronto to restore a relief provision called the 'Special Diet' and, in April of that year, unemployed associations marched on the provincial government carrying a banner that read "United We Eat - Divided We Starve!" On April 1, we'll be marching behind a banner with that same slogan on it. It will mark our determination to build a mass movement of the poor that merges with a common front of working-class resistance to austerity that must be built now if we are to avoid catastrophic defeats in the period ahead. •

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