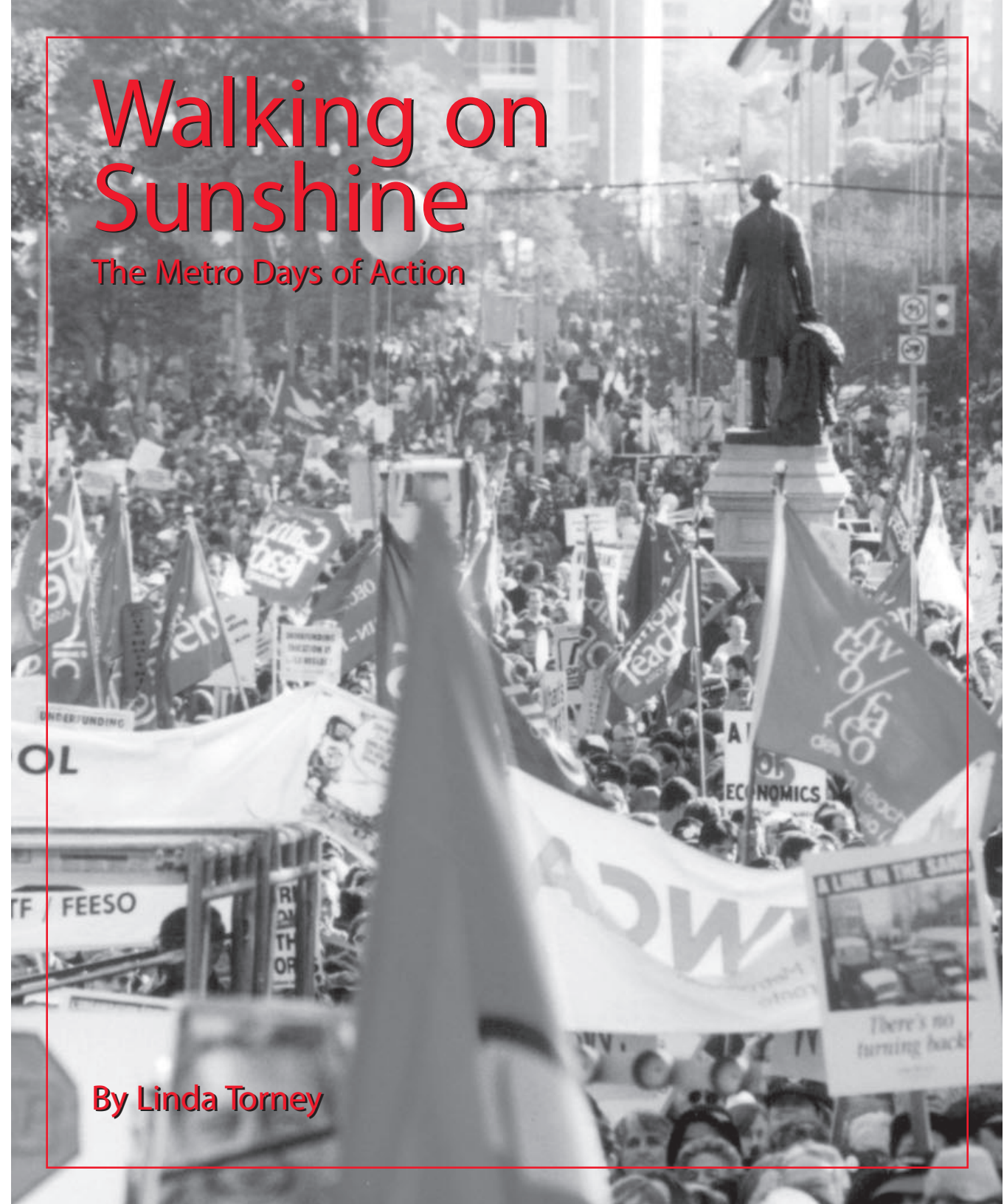


# Walking on Sunshine

The Metro Days of Action

By Linda Torney



# Walking on Sunshine

## The Metro Days of Action...

By Linda Torney



*“I think it’s true what people are saying: Toronto will never be the same again. The streets may look the same. It will still snow in the winter. But the days of action have changed the chemistry of many of our lives. We are stronger than we were before. We no longer feel the rule of greed is an inevitable fate. We feel engaged again. We feel there is hope. And hey! If we can stop a city like Toronto, what can’t we stop? No one can take these days away from us. They are ours.”*

Lorraine Endicott, *Our Times Magazine*  
Nov./Dec. 1996

In October of 1996, an unprecedented event took place in Toronto. The Metro Days of Action, fifth in a series of provincial protests against the Ontario Tory Government, took over the city in the largest mass action demonstration ever held in Canada. This is the story of how it all happened.



# The Beginnings

*“The Metro Days of Action campaign was one of the most exhilarating, energizing, and hope creating organizing experiences of my thirty years as an activist.”*

Bill Howes, Days of Action Coordinator

AS 1995 BEGAN, THE TORONTO AND YORK REGION LABOUR COUNCIL WAS preparing for its 125th anniversary the following year. The oldest central labour body in Canada, the Labour Council wanted 1996 to be a year long celebration of Toronto’s labour history. Included in the plans were an historical exhibit at Toronto City Hall, a newly commissioned play, and a gala event in April to mark the actual date of the founding of the Council. Organizers for the anniversary celebrations had not yet selected an event to wrap up the year and were looking for a way to demonstrate union solidarity. Events were about to unfold in the Province which would provide the perfect vehicle.

On June 8, 1995, the Progressive Conservatives, under the leadership of Mike Harris, were elected in Ontario. Even before the new government was seated in the Legislature, the so-called ‘common sense revolution’ began to radically change the province.

Spending and program cuts were introduced with unprecedented speed and no consultation. Welfare recipients and low wage workers were the first victims in the Tories’ tax cutting agenda. The introduction of workfare, slashing of welfare rates and reduction in the minimum wage marked the beginning of a spiral into poverty for many Ontario residents. Recognizing the need for an immediate response, the Labour Council was one of the first organizations to begin a ‘fight back’ campaign. On June 26th, the day the new government was sworn in, they joined with others in a successful “Embarrass Harris” demonstration at Queen’s Park. Although there



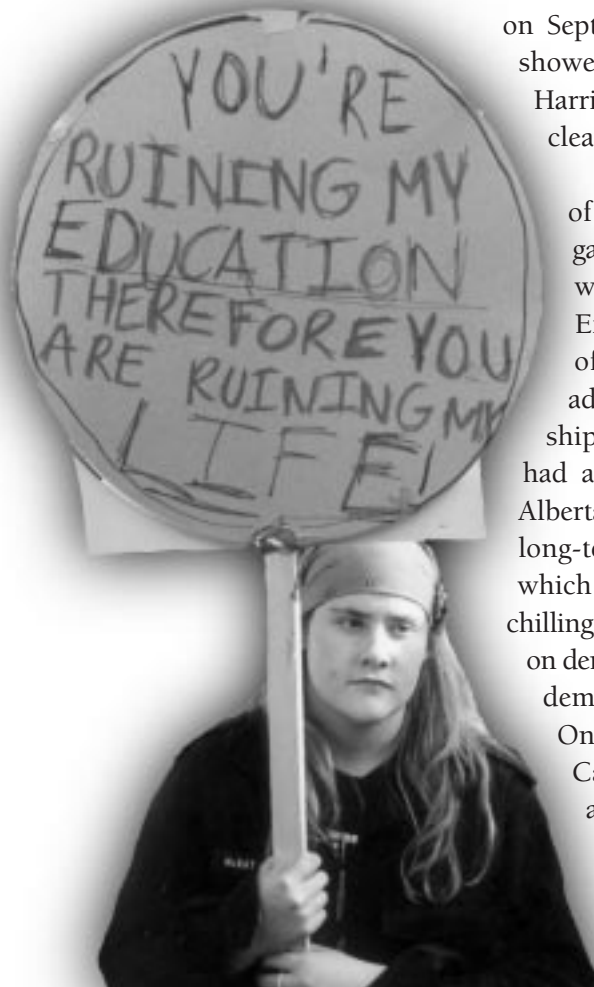
had been only three weeks of organizing time, the demonstration drew a remarkable 1500 people. On the heels of the Queen's Park action, the Council passed a resolution in July calling for delegates and unions to assemble resources, both human and financial "to build the strongest resistance movement the province had ever seen".

By September, the Labour Council was spending almost all its time in 'fight back' activities, as wave after wave of Tory pronouncements signalled the destruction of social programs for which workers had lobbied and which they had defended since the earliest days of the trade union movement. The Labour Council, the Embarrass Harris Campaign and the Metro Network for Social Justice planned a second Queen's

Park demonstration for the opening of legislature on September 27th. This time, 8000 people showed up to voice their disapproval of the Harris agenda. Opposition to the Tories was clearly increasing.

Harris was universally seen as a clone of Alberta Premier Klein. Wishing to gain as much knowledge as possible about what to expect, the Labour Council Executive invited Sean Gillen, President of the Calgary Labour Council, to address the October general membership meeting. Brother Gillen's remarks had a familiar ring, with reference to the Alberta premier's slogan, "short-term pain for long-term gain" and the devastating cuts which Klein had implemented. Perhaps most chilling was his warning to watch for an assault on democratic process. Most delegates believed democracy to be so firmly entrenched in Ontario that nothing could shake it. The Calgary Labour Council President's address strengthened the resolve of the Toronto Council's Executive to build an effective fight back campaign.

During the last three months of 1995,



the Toronto and York Region Labour Council undertook an ambitious program to institute the support mechanisms and build the skills necessary for a successful resistance movement. Culling from the experience of the United Farmworkers, they ran marshalling training for labour and community activists. With the assistance of the Law Union of Ontario, a 'survival seminar for activists' was held, and over 300 crowded in to learn about their legal right to protest. Fact sheets were produced or collected from others and distributed widely. Resources were found to increase the capacity of FAXLEFT, which was soon providing overnight fax bulletins on upcoming events and rallies to thousands of Toronto activists.

Aware that it could not launch an effective resistance solely within its own ranks, the Labour Council submitted a resolution to the upcoming Ontario Federation of Labour convention, calling for "mass action across the province designed to bring about an end to corporate rule in Ontario and the downfall of the Harris government". Dozens of delegates lined up at the convention microphones in support of numerous resolutions calling for province wide action. Overwhelmingly endorsed by the convention and with the cheers of the rank and file trade unionists



at the convention, the Days of Protest in Ontario were born. The City of London was chosen as the first city to hold a protest day, on December 11, 1995.

On that bitterly cold day, and with the organizing assistance of the Toronto Labour Council, 38 buses filled with labour and community activists headed out in the early morning, to participate in the march and demonstration. Despite barely 3 weeks of organizing time, the London Day of Protest drew participation from over 30 community groups and thousands of participants, and was judged to be an enormous success. It was followed by Days of Protest in Hamilton in February of 1996 and in Cambridge/Kitchener/Waterloo in April. All drew high participation from Toronto area activists.

In the meantime, the Toronto and York Region Labour Council was continuing to develop a solid base for resistance. They called a special meeting of Toronto area delegates at the Ontario Federation of Labour convention, which gave birth to the Council's Solidarity Committee. It met regularly to plan 'fight back' events, generate new ideas for building the movement, and organize support for the Days of Protest activities in London and Hamilton. The Solidarity Committee also organized

support for strikes and lockouts within the Council's geographic area.

The Labour Council was now in its 125th anniversary year, and busier than it had been at any time in its recent history. The Harris Government was busy too, cutting a wide swath through Ontario's social infrastructure. In one breathtaking piece of legislation, Omnibus Bill 26, they proposed the introduction of three new Acts, the repeal of two Acts, and amendments to 44 others. Bill 26 was the Tory Government's first major attack on democratic process. The Labour Council was engaged in the call for public hearings, and preparing for a weekend seminar for trade unionists. Despite everyone's crowded calendars, 'From Reaction to Action' drew over 200 participants who devoted their Saturday to analyzing the Harris agenda and planning strategy.

On February 26th, the Ontario Public Service Employees Union, who had the misfortune to be employees of the Harris Government, struck for the first time in their history. For the next five weeks, the Labour Council organized rallies and supported dozens of picket lines in Toronto. Every available Labour Council member devoted much of their time to strike support activities. By the time Kitchener/Waterloo/Cambridge held its Days of Protest in April, the Province had thousands of new activists who had cut their teeth in the OPSEU strike.

By March of 1996, the Labour Council had been effectively building resistance for over 6 months. With the overwhelming endorsement of the Executive and General Membership, Labour Council President Linda Torney approached OFL President Gord Wilson with the request that the next days of action be hosted in Toronto on June 8th and 9th, the first anniversary of Harris' election. Because the first three protests had been held in Southwestern Ontario, however, the OFL Executive heeded the organizers' recommendation that the next one be held in either the East or the North. They selected Peterborough as the site of the fourth protest, to be held June 24th. Toronto was to be the fifth, on October 25th and 26th. The Toronto Days of Action were about to become a reality. Toronto and York Region Labour Council members were delighted. A labour body born in 1871 out of the Printers strike and the fight for the nine-hour day was about to host the largest demonstration in the history of the labour movement. The Council would celebrate the end of its 125th anniversary year in the same way it came into existence, in the struggle for justice.





# Getting Ready

*“The Metro Days helped us come together and build our organization and move the issue of health forward”.*

Lynn Simmonds, Ontario Health Coalition

THE LABOUR COUNCIL'S COMMUNITY PARTNER, THE METRO NETWORK for Social Justice, had been eagerly awaiting news of Toronto's selection as a host city. Labour Council President Linda Torney and Metro Network Chair Margaret Hancock had been discussing co-sponsorship for months. Following the OFL's announcement, both organizations whole-heartedly endorsed the event. It was agreed that a public announcement should not be made until after Peterborough's Day of Action on June 24th, but much work could be done prior to the official announcement, and both organizations swung into action. The nucleus of a Coordinating Committee was formed from a combination of the Executive Board of the Labour Council and the Steering Committee of the Metro Network. Hancock and Torney were named as co-chairs of the event, subject to confirmation by the Coordinating Committee when it met. The two co-chairs poured over Days of Protest critiques, determined to learn from the amassed expertise of the previous actions.

Earlier Days of Protest had demonstrated a large and growing participation by community activists, but evaluation reports consistently identified community involvement and the recognition of community presence by the media as an area in need of further work. The Co-chairs for the Metro Days of Action (MDA) wanted to put to rest once and for all the perception, fed by the media, that the days of action were primarily Labour protests. From the outset, particular attention was paid to creating an organizational framework in which community could participate as equal partners with the union movement, including the many voices making up Toronto's social justice movement. By the time summer was over, the original



group of 26 from the two organizations' governing bodies, had expanded to over 70 members, and included activists from housing, anti-poverty, seniors, women, anti-racism, environment and interfaith communities, as well as a number of others.

In July, as soon as the successful Peterborough Day was over, the co-chairs called the first meeting of the rapidly expanding Coordinating Committee. The new committee confirmed Torney and Hancock as co-chairs for the event, approved a set of goals and principles, and selected a name. In the coming months, The Metro Days of Action title and logo were to become famous.

From the outset, the goals of the coordinating committee were to increase the level of public debate around current government policies and to build a movement — concepts which the mainstream media found just as difficult to grasp as the concept of full community participation. The co-chairs were to expend considerable effort in the coming weeks to overcome the media's preconceived notion that the MDA was about 'big labour' overthrowing the provincial government.

In addition to the confirmation of the co-chairs, early summer saw the appointment of Paul Forder from the Ontario Federation of Labour and Bill Howes from the

Labour Council as coordinators for the campaign. The MDA now had the nucleus of its staff structure as well as its political structure. Hancock, Torney, Howes and Forder would meet constantly over the next 4 months, becoming known affectionately to other MDA participants as the 'Gang of Four'.

Summer of 1996 found both sponsoring organizations in a flurry of activity. Activists cancelled vacations or spent them on the end of a cell phone. Community meetings broadened the base of support for the MDA. Union locals were contacted for their endorsement and support, and Coordinating Committee members sought participation from Toronto's multicultural mosaic. As word spread among Toronto's social justice community, new coalitions sprang to life all over the City. Mike Harris became the campaign's best organizer. His 'common sense revolution' left not a sector unscathed, and the Days of Action plans breathed new life into weary activists.

Education workers, teachers, parents and students, engaged in the fight of their lives, joined forces under the Days of Action banner. Visual and performing artists formed a cross sector coalition for the first time, and began planning their involvement. Spurred by Harris' threats to local municipal autonomy, community coalitions formed in Etobicoke, York, East York, Scarborough and North York, and each took their place at the MDA Coordinating Committee table. It became clear that the Toronto community would need more than two days to accommodate all the ideas for activities, so the Days of Action were officially expanded to take place over most of a week. The official start would be Tuesday, October 22nd. Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday would be filled with community events, Friday would be the workplace shut down, and the big march and rally would be held on Saturday.

Word spread through various networks beyond Ontario's borders. Labour Councils in U.S. border towns asked if they could attend. Quebec activists enquired about where to send buses. Although the Toronto media were slow to pick up on the significance of the planned demonstration, the U.S. media were not. The Wall Street Journal speculated about general unrest in the Canadian population if 'the financial heart of Canada' was planning a shutdown.

On Labour Day, members of the Metro Network for Social Justice marched with the Labour Council in the Council's largest ever parade, under the MDA banner with its slogan "Organize, Educate, Resist". The slogan was of particular significance for the trade union participants, as its origins were to be found in the early history of Toronto's labour movement. Resurrection of the slogan was considered particularly appropriate for an organization which had been engaged in struggle for more than a century. The slogan did not carry the same significance with community members

of the committee, but over the length of the campaign its popularity increased. “It grows on you” one community member remarked. By the end of Toronto’s Days of Action, “Organize, Educate, Resist” was to have such resonance throughout the province that other protest cities incorporated it into their own Days of Action slogan.

By the end of August, office space had been located and equipped, a bank account opened, fundraising had begun and MDA buttons and t-shirts had been ordered in the campaign’s bright red, green and blue colours. The Gang of Four moved into the new campaign headquarters at Sheppard Avenue and Yonge Street immediately after Labour Day, and began to work on the Days of Action full time.

Support staff, including releases from the Labour Council and the Ontario Federation of Labour, were quickly added. Paul Forder began to assemble the team of union releases who would put in thousands of hours producing the largest demonstration ever organized in Canada. Most of the union staff had Days of Action organizing experience, having worked on London, Cambridge/Kitchener/Waterloo, Hamilton and Peterborough. They swung into action in their assigned roles with an ease which amazed the two co-chairs, for whom the organizing of such a massive event was a new experience.

First to arrive on the scene were the Equipment and Materials Coordinators, whose task included the office set up as well as events equipment.

Part of the Logistics Team, the two coordinators arranged everything from office supplies to computer and telephone hookups. Familiar with the long hours everyone would be working for the next several weeks, they even equipped the small kitchen and lunchroom with coffee supplies, juice and frozen hotdogs. The little kitchen became an oasis of sanity over the campaign period, and campaign workers took to bringing baskets of fruit, cookies or cheese and crackers to

be shared with their colleagues.

The numbers of full time workers grew quickly. The Research Team was churning out dozens of issue-based leaflets on Provincial Government cuts. A ten member team of Community Outreach Coordinators had begun the massive job of identifying and contacting agencies and community organizations to encourage participation and solicit financial contributions. Their contacts inevitably led to requests for further information, so Speakers Bureau Coordinators joined the expanding staff to coordinate requests and generate more of their own. Daily fax bulletins kept Ontario’s activist community informed on Days of Action planning. Many recipients re-issued the bulletins to their own networks, including the Labour Council, who sent it over FaxLeft. The co-chairs spent much of each day travelling from one speaking engagement to another.

The Coordinating Committee was now meeting weekly and managing to stay just ahead of the vast array of decisions which needed to be made. Leaflet content, poster design, radio ads, rally and marshalling locations, march routes and the criteria for Metro Days of Action endorsed or sponsored events were debated and approved, and the Committee turned its attention to the burgeoning array of activities scheduled for October. The Education Coalition alone had so many plans underway that one of the Community Outreach Coordinators was assigned full time to their efforts. Among the new initiatives was a proposal for a tent city in the north end of Queen’s Park. Dubbed Harrisville, the concept was developed by housing and anti-poverty activists. The Community Outreach Team took this initiative, too, under their wing.

Staff numbers were increasing daily. The Canadian Auto Workers and the Canadian Union of Public Employees teams arrived at the Sheppard Avenue headquarters and set up bases of operations to organize their members’ participation in the MDA. The Logistics Team now had people assigned to organize rally site







arrangements, cultural and entertainment events, and childcare. The Outreach Team added fundraising, volunteer and leaflet distribution coordinators. A twelve person Security and Action Team now joined the ranks and recruitment and training of marshals began. The Transportation Coordinators were coping with the complicated logistics of hundreds of demonstrator-filled buses which would converge upon the city. The three person Cross Picketing Team arrived, and was given a small office tucked away in a corner of the rented space, where their highly sensitive wall charts could be kept away from the eyes of any visiting media.

Media was indeed beginning to descend on 90 Sheppard Ave. East. The four person Communications Team had been churning out press releases and working the phones, and the press had finally discovered that a major event was about to take place in their midst. Media interviews and talk shows were added to the co-chairs' calendars, which were now being updated almost hourly.

While the media had finally figured out that something was going on, they were far from accurate as to what. Over and over, the co-chairs reiterated that the Days of Action were a joint Community-Labour event, that the Coordinating Committee was

made up of equal partners from labour and community, and that an overriding principle of the actions was non-violence. Breaking with the tradition of co-chairs appearing together for all press events, a 'community only' press conference was organized to try and overcome the 'Big Labour' label. While Torney and Hancock kept repeating the message in front of the cameras, behind the scenes the Communications Team managed the spin. The team came to be known as "the silk purse" committee by the co-chairs, who claimed the four of them could, indeed, make a silk purse out of a sow's ear.

Predictably, the media focussed on Friday, the shutdown day, with varying degrees of hysteria depending on their particular placement in the political spectrum. Business and municipal leaders joined in the fray. The pace of life for the Canadian Union of Public Employees organizing team increased dramatically, as they struggled to negotiate their members' participation in the Friday shutdown amidst the howls of the more reactionary local politicians. Municipal response varied.





Progressive Councillors at the City of Toronto crafted a motion of support for the Days of Action. The Toronto Board of Education, by unanimous decision, agreed not to discipline employees who chose to participate in the shutdown, and encouraged wide participation in the October 26th march and rally. On the other hand, Metro Toronto Council, while recognizing the right to peaceful protests, requested that the Metro Chairman meet with organizers ‘to ensure that employees who wish to work will not be prevented from doing so’, and requested advice on legal recourse from their solicitor. With increasing frequency, journalists demanded to know who would be shut down. The MDA campaign had no intention of releasing that list until the last moment. Journalists would just have to wait.

Meantime, the community was buzzing with activity. Events designed to build for the Days of Action were being held all over Metro and the ‘official’ launch of the campaign took place at the campaign headquarters on Sept. 24th, the day the Fall session of Legislature opened. In the last weeks of the campaign, MDA radio ads began on local stations, including CHIN, who translated the ad into 35 languages. Campaign leaflets were now available in 17 languages, and



throng of campaign staff and volunteers took to the streets, subways, open-air markets and shopping plazas.

At headquarters, life was a flurry of major and minute detail. Speakers lists were finalized for October 26th, and entertainers were booked for the Coronation Park rallying point and the main stage at Queen’s Park. Fearing that the crowds would be too large for a single rallying point and the march too long for some, it was decided to organize a second marshalling point at Toronto City Hall. The Logistics Team now had a third set of stages, entertainers, sound systems and portable toilets to organize. They took it in their stride.

Behind the closed doors of the Cross Picketing office, the lists on the wall were filling up. This part of the operation was still under wraps, but the co-chairs snuck into the room every once in a while to marvel at the progress. Marshalling training was occurring at headquarters every evening and the Transportation Coordinators were generating enough faxes to deplete a major forest. The final Coordinating Committee meeting and the final staff meeting were held the week of October 14th. The Metro Days of Action were about to begin.





# Courtroom

## In The Courtroom

*“No matter what you think of the Metro Days of Action organizers’ tactics, when you get this kind of street level democracy its exciting. This is exciting!”*

Toronto Sun columnist and CFRB commentator Christie Blatchford on CFRB “Free for all”, the morning of Friday, October 25.

*\*source: communications team evaluation*

A TOTAL OF FIVE APPLICATIONS FOR INJUNCTIONS AGAINST THE DAYS OF Action organizers were filed in the courts.

Three were filed for Pearson International Airport; one for terminal 3, one for terminals 1 and 2, and a third, filed by the Federal Government, covered the entire airport.

The airport legal actions had the distinction of generating the most paper, and naming the greatest number of people. In addition to Linda Torney, Margaret Hancock, Paul Forder and the Metro Days of Action Organizing Committee, injunctions were sought against the presidents of the Ontario Federation of Labour, the Canadian Auto Workers, the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 113, Ontario Public Service Employees Union and Canadian Union of Public Employees Ontario Division, and their respective organizations. The usual Jane and John Doe were thrown in to cover anyone they had missed. The notice of action, issued on October 17th, sought interim and permanent injunctions restraining the named parties from picketing at the airport, and claimed damages of a hundred million dollars, plus interest.

The accompanying motion record probably weighed in excess of 10 lbs and included sworn statements by airport officials, maps, charts, leases, copies of newspaper articles, lists of all airlines using the airport, North American charter routes, flight schedules, and various other documents.





From left to right: Linda Torney, Paul Forder, Bill Howes and Margaret Hancock

A fourth motion was filed by four City of Toronto councillors (Tom Jakobek, David Hutcheon, Chris Korwin-Kuczynski and Howard Joy) who decided to proceed on their own with a private citizens action, having failed to obtain support of Toronto City Council. They sought interim and permanent injunctions preventing picketing at a three page list of city owned properties. Naming Gord Wilson, the OFL, Sid Ryan, CUPE Ontario Division, Linda Torney, Margaret Hancock and Paul Forder, the plaintiffs claimed damages for interference with economic relations, restraint of trade, and nuisance.

The fifth injunction request was filed at the Ontario Labour Relations Board by the Toronto Transit Commission, with the support of Metro Chair Alan Tonks and members of the Metro Toronto Council, seeking to prevent picketing of TTC properties. This motion named the OFL, CUPE, the Labour Council, Gord Wilson, Sid Ryan and Linda Torney.

All five were scheduled to be heard on October 22nd, the official start of the Days of Action.

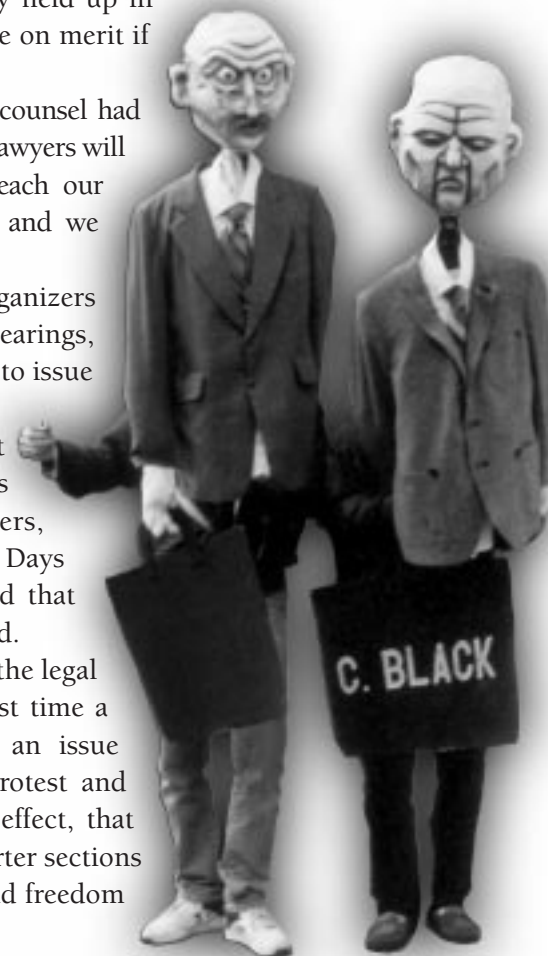
When the Metro Days of Action plans became public in early Fall, several progressive law firms contacted the campaign organizers with offers of assistance in legal matters. The firm of Cavalluzzo, Hayes, Shilton, McIntyre and Cornish were the first to phone, and the campaign accepted their offer with gratitude. The firm's lawyers would spend, collectively, hundreds of hours in their defence of the MDA team's right to protest.

While the co-chairs were busy with Tuesday's opening events and coordinators were putting the final pieces in place around Friday and Saturday's activities, the MDA's lawyers were running from courtroom to courtroom. With Paul Cavalluzzo and Ian Anderson attending at the courthouse, Jim Hayes took on the TTC at the Labour Board Hearing. Hayes argued for a postponement of the Labour Board Hearing, since co-chairs were ostensibly held up in court, but was prepared to argue the case on merit if it was not postponed.

In the meantime, Co-chairs and legal counsel had developed a simple media response: "Our lawyers will be arguing that an injunction would breach our Charter rights to freedom of expression and we believe the courts will uphold that right."

The first legal victory for MDA organizers came on Oct. 23rd, from the airport hearings, when Mr. Justice George Adams refused to issue a blanket injunction against picketing, ordering only that pickets could not interfere with essential service employees — air-traffic controllers, firefighters, electricians and electronics technicians. Days of Action organizers had already agreed that essential services would not be disrupted.

It was a precedent setting victory for the legal team. Paul Cavalluzzo said: "It's the first time a Canadian court has been faced with an issue relating to a broadly based political protest and demonstration. The court has said, in effect, that those activities are protected by the Charter sections that guarantee freedom of expression and freedom of assembly."





The second victory came with the issuance of the Ontario Labour Relations Board decision regarding the TTC injunction. The confusing nine page decision, issued late on October 24th, dismissed any actions against the Labour Council, the OFL and CUPE Ontario Division, and against co-chair Linda Torney. It held that Sid Ryan and Gord Wilson had made statements which could be construed to be counselling an illegal strike, and granted a partial injunction. The TTC had requested no pickets at subway stations between 6:30 p.m. on Thursday, the 24th of October and 6:00 a.m. on Friday, October 25th. This was a rather peculiar request given that the planned day of shutdown was October 25th. The Board granted this limited injunction, but refused to apply any distance restrictions on the pickets. It also required that Sid Ryan and Gord Wilson “advise” the Days of Action organizers of this decision. Brother Ryan complied, faxing the decision and a brief letter to the Days of Action Headquarters at 6:45 p.m. on October 24th. It was duly faxed in its entirety to the MDA Provincial Coordinators for every union in Ontario, who undoubtedly found it in their offices on Monday morning following the Days of Action.



Finally, the four City councillors had their turn in court, and like the others, lost their bid to stop the pickets. “It can’t be presumed they will engage in illegal activity”, the judge said.

On Wednesday evening, the clouds broke over Metro Toronto and the late day sun produced double rainbows which could be clearly seen from the MDA Headquarters. Even the weather was about to cooperate.





# Shut Down

*“High school students are the toughest group to reach... but I saw students out like never before.”*

Sarah Latha-Elliott — High School Student

ON OCTOBER 23RD, THE CROSS PICKETING TEAM EMERGED FROM THEIR office with the long-awaited list of closure locations. Over 300 work sites would close, the campaign announced. The list included construction sites, provincial government buildings, municipal facilities, postal stations, transit, federal buildings, and private sector plants and offices. The press hysteria rose by several decibels. ‘Brace yourself for tough tomorrow’ screamed the Toronto Star, which, along with the other dailies, predicted traffic chaos. Despite constant assurances that essential services were not targeted, some hospitals cancelled elective surgery. Some Toronto businesses opted to shut down for the day, while others put their employees up in hotels or arranged alternate transport. Metro police were more sanguine about it, advising the public to “treat the protest like they would a giant power blackout.” The police had the campaign’s assurances of a peaceful demonstration, and that MDA marshals were trained to ensure there was no trouble.

By Thursday night, as the first picket lines went up at postal facilities, every hotel room had been booked, and downtown bars were filled with financial sector employees taking the opportunity to party. “It’s one big sleep over” one was quoted.

MDA coordinators now moved their centre of operations from the Sheppard Avenue headquarters to a command post in the Ontario Public Service Employees Union’s 7th floor offices on University Avenue. The command post, linked by cell phones and two way radios to the security staff spread throughout the city, would be the heart of the campaign for the next two days.

At 5:00 a.m., as the Co-chairs and Communications Staff set out for the first of their picket line visits, there was no traffic on the streets of Toronto. When the sun







rose on a clear, warm day the streets were still empty — no clatter of street cars, no buses, and no traffic. People had stayed home in droves and the city was as empty as if it were a civic holiday, except for the picketers. Everywhere, crowds of placard bearing protesters moved from picket line to picket line, congregated for midday rallies and marches, and moved on again to other picketing locations. Community activists joined trade unionists shoulder to shoulder at subway stations, city halls and factories, learning from each other and building solidarity as they picketed together. The Artists Coalition, highly visible with its colourful banners, paraded down University Avenue on its way to join the line at the Art Gallery. Lines were jubilant but peaceful. At a number of locations, local residents showed up in support, bringing coffee and donuts to the picketers.

In North York, thousands of construction workers were joined by the North York Fights Back coalition in a rally and march to the site of the Sheppard subway construction. East York activists delivered a symbolic “East York Hung Out to Dry” clothesline of cuts to their former mayor, now a member of provincial parliament, and the York coalition marched with municipal workers to their city hall. The



Canadian Federation of Students rally at Bay and Wellesley, one of the largest of the day, drew students, teachers, education workers, and parents to protest the Tory governments cuts to education funding. At the Etobicoke-Lakeshore MPP's office, crowds of teachers and education workers also joined in the protest organized by the ‘Etobicoke Takes a Stand’ coalition. At noon, church bells rang out across the city as the interfaith community showed its support for the Days of Action.

The media focussed its attention on the noon demonstration at the Toronto Stock Exchange, where hundreds of protesters chanted and listened to speeches under the watchful eye of the riot police, who, as predicted by MDA security, were not needed. To the delight of the gathered students, union members and community activists, the protest was joined by a sizable contingent from Toronto's bicycle lobby, who greatly assisted the disruption by parking their bikes in the middle of the street.

Throughout the day, the usual downtown pedestrian bustle was replaced by wave after wave of protesters and the city hum was replaced with picketers' chants and the blaring music of the Artists sound truck. By the time pickets began to come down in the late afternoon, it was clear the day had been an unqualified success.





# Sunshine

## Walking on Sunshine

*“We created a new mass political culture. We got a taste of our own power.”*

Janet Conway, MNSJ

IF ORGANIZERS THOUGHT NOTHING COULD SURPASS FRIDAY, THEY WERE about to be proved wrong.

Saturday was another bright sunny day, and as the morning chill wore off, thousands gathered at Coronation Park for the grand finale. Union-jacketed demonstrators poured off 800 buses. The park began to fill with placards and banners as activists sought their marshalling areas. The MDA Coordinating Committee had decided that, in keeping with their principle of equal participation, community groups and labour should intermingle in the march lineup and as the crowds grew, sector and union banners stood side by side. In Nathan Phillips Square, thousands more gathered. At both locations, speakers and entertainers fired up the crowds as they waited for the march to begin.

At 11:00 a.m. both contingents moved off on their way to Queen's Park, the Coronation Park group led by First Nations and followed by the MDA banner and combined contingent of the co-sponsoring organizations, Labour Council and Metro Network for Social Justice. Along Lakeshore Boulevard, up Spadina Ave and then across Front Street to University Avenue, the streets rang with chants, whistles and drums. The demonstrators staged a brief rally in front of the Metro Convention Centre, where the Provincial Tories were holding a policy conference. Despite the exuberance of the demonstrators, the pause caused no major difficulty. Well-trained MDA marshals were there to ensure that the campaign maintained its own order, with no intervention from the hundreds of police lining the route. Groups of performing artists entertained the passing marchers at various points along their path to the main rally site, while at the Queen's Park main stage, a line-up of speakers





and performers were entertaining the crowds awaiting the arrival of the two marches.

MDA coordinators staffing the command post at the OPSEU office were treated to a thrilling site, as the ten thousand strong contingent from Nathan Phillips Square passed their windows, followed by the Coronation march, led by two trucks of First Nations elders and their ceremonial drum. Bill Howes, who was linked by radio to all rally sites and the main marshals, was to report that the lead section of the main march reached the main rally site one half hour before the end of the march had left Coronation Park.

When the Co-chairs reached Queen's Park, they, too, had their thrilling moment as they stood for the first time on the main stage and saw exuberant crowds, 200,000 strong, extending down University Avenue, stretching as far away as the eye could see. The grounds were a sea of placards and banners, and some enterprising students had even taken up positions in the trees surrounding the perimeter. Anticipating the crowds, the Logistics crew had arranged for huge sound systems and video screens to relay the main stage activities to the crowds down University Avenue.



For two hours, Queen's Park rocked to the sounds of protest, to Bass is Base, and Moxy Fruvous, Billy Bragg and Bruce Cockburn. The crowd's sense of empowerment soared when Billy Bragg's voice rang out over the crowd and down into the canyons of Bay Street — There is Power in the Union!

Campaign workers and demonstrators partied that night, in gatherings all over town, tired, happy and exhilarated by the knowledge that for two days in Canada's largest city, we had shown we could do it. We had come together, union and community, and we had taken back our town. In the early morning of Sunday, October 27th, MDA activists gathered with First Nations in High Park for a sunrise ceremony, and as the Elder spoke quiet words about strength and commitment and gave thanks for community and solidarity among peoples, it was as if a peace descended on the city, but it was the peace of justice.



# The Legacy

*“I believe that the Days of Action campaign was about discovering what unites us as a society. It revealed our hope and united longing for a strong, enduring community built on principles of economic, social and environmental justice. It demonstrated the wisdom that exists in our diverse province when members of the community and labour movement join together. It showed what we can achieve when we all stand together — and we won't forget it.”*

Margaret Hancock

THE METRO DAYS OF ACTION GENERATED HUNDREDS OF PAGES OF PRINT coverage and more TV news hits than is generated by a federal election. Over the weeks of organizing, during events across Metro Toronto, through the impacts of the Friday shutdown and the exhilaration of the massive march and rally, the MDA reached hundreds of thousands of people. In coffee shops, bars, workplaces, classrooms and living rooms, Toronto citizens debated the Days of Action and the provincial policies which gave rise to them. Through those debates the MDA overcame political inertia and convinced an entire city that democracy was more than a trip to the ballot box every four or five years. The MDA opened doors to participatory democracy and let in fresh air. In the process it set legal precedent safeguarding the right to protest, and it built a movement.

Thousands of tired activists gained hope and strength to sustain them. New activists emerged to join the ranks fighting for social justice. Coalitions formed during those days are still in existence, and skills were developed which reinforced numerous community organizations.



The Days of Action created a positive climate for street level action and positioned Toronto for the sustained fight by Citizens for Local Democracy which followed. The success of those Fall days in 1996 proved that labour and community, working together, are greater than the sum of their parts, and legitimized coalition organizing once and for all. Labour and community learned about each other during those organizing days and the lessons have endured. Union members in Toronto involve themselves in community issues, and community activists visit picket lines and strike support rallies.

With the Metro Days of Action, we proved that we had the capacity to organize on a massive scale and the courage to use that capacity if necessary. More than five years after the Days of Action in Toronto, Mike Harris is gone from Ontario politics, but the community and labour activists are still here, stronger and more numerous than before, still proudly wearing their MDA logo “Organize, Educate, Resist”. Anything that gives that much heart to a movement is worth every minute.





Note: The title 'walking on sunshine' was lifted from Lorraine Endicott's article on the Metro Days of Action in Our Times Magazine, Nov/Dec 1996. She expresses it better than I ever could.

