



Walking on Sunshine

Honouring the 1996 Metro Days of Action

October 25th is the 25th anniversary of the most remarkable political mobilization in Toronto's history. Workplaces across the entire city were shut down as people of every background walked out to protest; community mobilization and direct political action ushered in new forms of solidarity; and over 200,000 joined the demonstration stretching for miles up to Queen's Park.

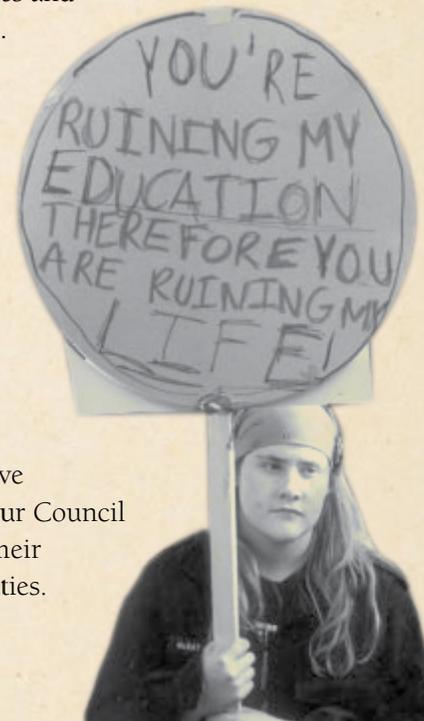
How did people find the courage and determination to make that happen? What lessons can we draw for the struggles ahead? Here are excerpts from Labour Council President Linda Torney's book *Walking on Sunshine*. You can download the book and watch the exciting music video *Resistance in Concert* at www.labour150.ca

The Beginnings

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

Spending and program cuts came with unprecedented speed and no consultation. The introduction of workfare, slashing of welfare rates by 22% and reduction in the minimum wage marked the beginning of a spiral into poverty for many Ontario residents. The Labour Council was one of the first organizations to begin a 'fight back' campaign, as wave after wave of Tory pronouncements signalled the destruction of social programs and labour rights. At the opening of legislature on September 27th 8,000 people showed up to voice their disapproval of the Harris agenda.

The province's labour movement decided to resist the Harris agenda through strikes and protests across the province. London was chosen as the first city and despite barely 3 weeks of organizing time, the protest drew participation from over 30 community groups and thousands of participants. In February 1996, the Ontario Public Service Employees Union struck for the first time in their history. For the next five weeks, every available Labour Council member devoted much of their time to strike support activities.





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



Days of Protests were held in Hamilton, Waterloo Region and Peterborough, and then Toronto was named for October 25th and 26th. The Toronto Days of Action were about to become a reality, and 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 Labour Council's community partner, the Metro Network for Social Justice, had been eagerly awaiting the news. Labour Council President Linda Torney and Metro Network Chair Margaret Hancock were named as co-chairs of the Metro Days of Action. On Labour Day the largest ever parade marched with the slogan "Organize, Educate, Resist".

The Coordinating Committee met weekly and managed to stay just ahead of the vast array of decisions which needed to be made for the staff team of 70 that had been assembled. Behind the closed doors of the Cross Picketing office, the lists on the wall were filling up, and marshal training was occurring every evening.

Tuesday, October 22nd, the first 'official' day of the Metro Days of Action kept the organizing team busy from before dawn until late in the evening. In the morning, Harrisville materialized in Queens Park North. The tent city, complete with literature and food tables, would be occupied by volunteers from Housing and Anti-Poverty organizations 24 hours a day until the Saturday rally. First Nations activists signalled their participation and demanded justice for murdered Indigenous activist Dudley George on the steps of Queens Park.

The corner of Bay and Wellesley was closed to traffic as the Health Coalition noon rally drew thousands of participants.

"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



The largest event of the day, it gave the MDA organization a chance to test its marshalling capacity. Over the next two days, other sectors launched their participation in the MDA. Performing artists sponsored theatrical events and travelled by sound truck from picket line to picket line. Interfaith Witness for Social Justice held a vigil, and the Jewish Campaign for Social and Economic Justice staged a celebration of Jewish music and activism. The Building Trades, the Council of Canadians, environmentalist and women's groups all sponsored forums. Anti-Racist Action sponsored a "Rock Against Harris".

Amid the flurry of activity and planning for Friday and Saturday's big events, another drama was unfolding in the legal arena. Corporate interests and media fear mongers had by this time created near hysteria around Friday's impending closures, and five applications for injunctions against the Days of Action organizers were filed in the courts. MDA Co chairs 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." And in the end, that's how it went.

Shut Down!

Finally the cross picketing team emerged from their office with the long-awaited list of closure locations. The list included construction sites, government buildings, postal stations, transit, and private sector plants and offices. The police had the campaign's assurances that MDA marshals were trained to ensure there was no trouble.

At 5am on Friday, as the Co-chairs 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 mid-day 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, community 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, and the York coalition marched with municipal workers to their city hall. The Canadian Federation of Students rally on Bay Street drew students, teachers, education workers, and parents to protest the Tory governments cuts to education funding.

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.

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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 on the Lakeshore for the grand finale. In Nathan Phillips Square, thousands more gathered. MDA coordinators staffing the command post were treated to a thrilling sight, as thousands passed their windows, led by First Nations elders. Bill Howes, who was linked by radio to all rally sites and the main marshals, reported that the lead section reached Queen's Park one half hour before the end of the march left Coronation Park.

When the Co-chairs reached Queens Park, they, too, had their thrilling moment as they stood for the first time on the main stage and saw exuberant crowds, over 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. 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. 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!

"We created a new mass political culture. We got a taste of our own power."

Janet Conway, MNSJ

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.

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 was 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.

The spirit of resistance from the Days of Action helped form a number of new coalitions that were successful in challenging the Harris agenda; the Ontario Electricity Coalition stopped the sell-off of Ontario Hydro; Waterwatch stopped the privatization of Toronto's water; and the Campaign for Public Education built a massive resistance to education cuts. And unions mobilized to derail the government's attempt to eviscerate labour rights in the public sector. The lessons of solidarity and building alliances are just as important today.

