



## **145 YEARS OF WORKING TOGETHER FOR JUSTICE**

One hundred and forty five years ago a small group of workmen came together to give life to an idea – the creation of a collective voice for working people in Toronto. On April 12<sup>th</sup>, 1871 the Toronto Trades and Labour Assembly was founded by representatives of the emerging economy – barrel-makers, shoemakers, printers, bakers, cigar-makers and metalworkers. They were soon joined by other occupations. It was a time of rising for workers across the world, from the nine-hour day movement to the Paris Commune.

Within a year the fledging labour movement in Toronto would be tested. Printers at the Globe newspaper went on strike and were jailed for criminal sedition. Ten thousand people took to the streets demanding the printers’ freedom and labour rights. The call for justice echoed throughout the country and the federal government passed the first Trade Union act.

From the early foundation of skilled trades labour grew with the garment industry, metal and packinghouse workers, brewers and transit workers. In the 1940’s mass industrial organizing spread to Toronto’s electrical, rubber, appliance, chemical and paper plants as well as hotels and restaurants. In the 1960’s public sector workers gained the right to bargain and strike, followed by teachers and other professionals.

Since the first nations gave us the name Toronto – a “gathering place” – this region has been built by waves of immigrants and refugees. Each new group discovered that in order to have a fair share of Canada’s prosperity they needed collective representation. In the workplace that was a union. From the very beginning our unions adopted the principle that “What we wish for ourselves, we wish for all”. We defined ourselves as a movement of social unionism embracing broad goals of economic justice.

In the early decades the Labour Council built campaigns for employment standards, sanitary conditions, limitation of working hours; and prohibiting child labour. It also called for equal pay for women, one of the first advocates for equality in Canada. There was a sweeping program for municipal ownership of the street railway system, telephone services, power, gas and the fire brigade. It lobbied for better public health measures, and a quality education system including technical training. Workers Compensation and a Fair Wage policy were early victories.

In the early 1900’s there were passionate debates about socialism, war and peace, and a massive upsurge of militancy in the post-WW1 period. Labour started to elect candidates to school boards and city council, including Jimmy Simpson who eventually became the first labour Mayor of Toronto. The creation of the Toronto Hydro Electric System was championed by William Hubbard, the first African-Canadian City Councillor. Labour led a plebiscite to create the publicly owned Toronto Transit Commission. These crucial achievements reflected the determination of labour to engage in “political bargaining” to win social gains.

Women were part of the labour movement from the earliest years and in dramatic moments in Toronto labour history such as the 1907 Bell telephone strike and the 1912 Eaton workers strike. The number of women in the workplace changed significantly during World War I and II when women were the majority of the workforce in Toronto munitions' factories.

After the Great Depression the Second World War spurred the economy and created a new upsurge of organizing. Tens of thousands joined unions in Toronto and struggled for collective agreements. At the war's end there was again a massive strike wave to secure union rights as well as better wages and working conditions. The lessons of the fight against fascism were deeply felt, and in 1947 the Toronto Joint Labour Committee for Human Rights was formed. It led a relentless campaign against racist practices by employers, landlords and businesses. This legacy is honoured through the Bromley Armstrong Award.

The long post-war economic boom led to an unprecedented level of prosperity for working families, the spread of the suburbs and expansion of unionization. But it also saw the cold war impact on the labour movement in a fierce struggle over politics. With the creation of the New Democratic Party, labour formally adopted a social democratic orientation. Across the country, it continued "political bargaining" to expand workplace gains like healthcare and pensions into universal social programs. The Labour Council was a founding partner of the United Way, and unions widely supported charitable work.

But the booming economy also had a darker side. Unsafe work conditions plagued the factories and construction sites. New immigrants suffered exploitation and discrimination. In 1960 the Hogg's Hollow tragedy sparked an uprising by the Italian community demanding a new deal in their adopted homeland. New safety and labour laws were won, and mass organizing swept across construction sites and industry. Discrimination was challenged in schools and institutions, including immigration policies. Little by little, a "new deal" was shaped for immigrants, and the demographics of Toronto changed. But racism continued to shape the reality of many Torontonians.

The turbulent 60's and 70's saw the rise of anti-racism struggles, health and safety activism, and a women's movement that was deeply grounded in labour. The Labour Council Development Foundation was formed to create co-operative housing projects, and the partnership with United Way led to the creation of Labour Community Services. The Labour Education Centre started to offer extensive training on union issues as well as workplace adjustment. Teachers won bargaining rights, public sector workers won the right to strike, and in 1976 the country-wide Day of Protest hit against wage controls.

By the 1980's the labour movement in Toronto was changing as industry shed jobs and public sector unionization increased. Women were moving into leadership of unions, workers of colour were organizing to challenge barriers, and the emerging gay rights movement found growing support. Global solidarity became part of the culture of Toronto labour. But business was transforming as well, and the signing of the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement marked a decisive

change. A third of all industrial jobs in greater Toronto were lost through plant closures, and employers went on the offensive demanding cuts and concessions.

The anger of working people set the stage for the historic election of the Ontario New Democratic Party in 1990. Its five year term was marked by important achievements and heart-breaking disappointments including the Social Contract legislation. It broke ground with new labour law, Employment Equity and environmental policies, although those were repealed by the Harris Conservatives. The Harris “common sense revolution” attacked workers rights and ushered in tax cuts and privatization. The labour movement mobilized, building alliances and a powerful resistance movement that featured Toronto’s first general strike in October 1996.

By the end of the decade the Conservatives forced a merger of six municipalities into a Toronto mega-city; merged the school boards; and downloaded massive costs. In York Region, the first major privatized transit service was established, setting the stage for future transit schemes across Ontario. In response unions committed themselves to a higher level of political action, defeating the Conservatives in every Toronto seat in 2003 as well as electing David Miller as Mayor.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has posed many challenges to the labour movement. Governments have embraced austerity, employers are imposing two-tier wages, and tough strikes or lock-outs are more frequent. Precarious work seems to be the norm for the next generation.

But unions in Toronto and York Region are responding. There are new approaches to organizing and a focus on bringing a labour message to newcomer communities. Union structures are more reflective of the diversity of the overall population. The urgency of climate change is being incorporated into labour’s analysis, along with an equity lens. And despite the hostility of employers, people seek out and form unions in every sector of the economy.

Labour has been deeply involved in the struggles for community safety, for racial equality, for public services and for an education system that gives every student what they need to succeed. We have laid out a vision for an economy that is both sustainable and offers good jobs for all. And we are training a new generation of activists who will continue to lead these efforts in the decades to come.

Today the Labour Council represents over 200,000 women and men who work in every sector of the economy. Over the years Labour Council has broken ground on key issues, sometimes developing positions that were clearly ahead of the national labour movement. In the sweep of history working people in Toronto have been on a remarkable journey since 1871. There is a First Nations saying that when making a decision you should consider its impact seven generations away. Those who started 145 years ago – the equivalent of seven generations – laid a solid foundation for justice in Canada’s largest urban centre. We honour their foresight and pledge to continue that legacy.

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