

## **Fighting for a City Budget that Reflects the Values of Working People**

February 2, 2023



Just after the municipal election in October 2022, Doug Ford bestowed Toronto's mayor with additional powers which diminish the democratic processes and powers of local councillors. The Toronto & York Region Labour Council has been closely monitoring and speaking out on this additional hit to local democracy. Since this directly affects the annual City budgets, we continue to press for better funding of city services in partnership with our affiliates and allies.

Until recently the City of Toronto's budget process was three months long, during which councillors and members of the public could review a budget that city staff proposed, provide input, and advocate for changes. Councillors and the Mayor each had one vote. Under the new legislation, the budget period is just five weeks long, and the mayor has authority not only to write his own budget but also to override a majority of council with just eight supporting votes out of 25 councillors.

Each year's budget is a vision document, and an implementation plan. If a strategy, program, or job is not included in the budget, nothing happens unless funding eventually gets approved. The budget choices our city government makes each year are not only a reflection of the context of our city; they actively shape our context for years to come.

In January, the Mayor asked staff to prepare a budget without recommendations. On February 1, the Mayor released his own budget, which is the version which goes to Council for input. There was little to distinguish it from the staff version, except for a \$6 million reduction in "efficiencies and re-evaluated totals." Tory asked councillors to propose what to do with the difference, which represents about 0.04% of the overall budget—leading one journalist to quip: "John Tory, not content to just be a Strong Mayor, is now the Six Million Dollar Man."

The 2023 Toronto budget was always going to be about making tough choices. Unfortunately, in the budget that Mayor Tory proposed we are getting:

- Higher taxes and fees for less service—especially on the TTC;
- Crumbling infrastructure;
- Minimal enhancements for the Poverty Reduction Strategy;
- Little attention to equity and anti-racism, after marginalized communities bore the brunt of COVID;
- Prioritization of policing;
- Low to no new commitments toward TransformTO goals, despite the massive fight ahead of us.

Pay more, get less.

In an open letter, the presidents of ATU 113 and CUPE 4948 argue that the budget needs to “Make Toronto safer for everyone with service that meets demand.” Responding to the rising incidence of violence in public spaces including the TTC and libraries, they point directly at the lack of public spaces, housing, and services available to many people, which in turn directs desperate people into spaces not intended to be their homes, their living rooms, their washrooms. These leaders said, “It’s no surprise that altercations between community members are increasing in public spaces. Our systems are strained and the public is strained.”

One reality is that city jobs are being used as a tool to balance the budget. Over 4,000 of staff jobs are still unfilled. A ten percent vacancy means a ten percent cut in service, maintenance, and program work.

TTC service is set for a nine percent reduction. That’s 457 transit operator jobs, a rush-hour crush, and off-peak delays that will push riders away from public transit in a time when ridership levels must be recovered, leaving even fewer staff than before within these public spaces..

The vacancies result from a combination of factors:

- There is always some job churn as workers retire or leave for another job, so some vacancies are always anticipated. But During David Miller’s time as Mayor, the vacancy target was a much lower three percent.
- City staff say their current vacancy target is five to eight percent. This means there is PLANNED vacancy in the city workforce, which some call “gapping”. Gapping is typically a strategy intended to save money.
- The difference between the city target (5-8%) and the city reality (10%) is likely due to the challenge in filling some positions. CUPE 79 points out that “Toronto’s slow response to ensure adequate staffing levels has increased workplace stresses, while wages have fallen behind.” The City “is no longer being seen as an employer of choice.”
- Vacancies exist in many other departments, where programs and services run short-staffed.

We’re also concerned about creeping privatization and “alternative financing” schemes that are already damaging Toronto’s commitment to being a good employer.

With these concerns in mind, during the budget process the Labour Council and our allies called for a range of improvements to the budget. Priority calls included:

- Use of more revenue tools, particularly tools that focus on the ability of the wealthy to pay, such as a commercial parking levy
- Funding for the TTC and other public services to return to providing first-rate services
- Addressing housing and homelessness, and committing to build for the long term
- Spending \$48.3 million on services people need rather than on more police
- Funding community programs
- Funding mental health service pilot projects
- Funding Toronto’s climate action plan

- Ensuring that staffing levels are maintained so that workers can do the jobs they were hired for

We want working people and their families to continue to live, work, and play, right here. For years, city budgets have been treated like a relay race with a stick of dynamite: rush to the next marker and pass that baton before you get burned. Do nothing to put out the flame or prevent impending disaster. We want Mayor Tory and the Councillors who support him to stop treating the budget like a stick of dynamite. Instead, view it as the tending of a perennial garden.

The 2023 Toronto Budget will become law on February 14th. Before then, we need to demand a better budget. The better we take care of Toronto—its hard infrastructure, its services, and ultimately, its people—the better it will take care of us.

After February 14th, we need to be vigilant and vocal because we can still force change during the year, and in future years. Together with our allies, we will continue to advocate for the city we need.

We will demand accountability and honesty from our elected representatives. Accountability because this new super mayor process is so quick and obscured. It's harder to ask questions to see what's going on. Honesty because it is so clear Tory is trying to promote his right wing agenda by going over the top on policing over the full range of services that people need, when evidence shows that policing does little under these circumstances. We need to win the communications battle!

Therefore, Labour Council Executive Board resolves that:

- Submit our priority demands to the Mayor before February 14th
- Urge all Delegates to tell the Mayor, Councillors, the media and the public that the 2023 Toronto budget must be amended to reflect the values of working people
- Urge all Affiliates and Delegates to share the Call to Action including leafleting at transit stops on Feb 13th and joining a rally outside Toronto City Hall on Feb. 14th
- Continue to demand accountability and honesty from our elected representatives after the budget passes
- Participate with progressive Councillors, allies, and affiliates in ongoing advocacy around City services and funding