The Greater Toronto Workers Assembly: A Hopeful Experiment

written by Herman Rosenfeld | June 30, 2011

IT IS A SAD IRONY, that in the midst of the deepest economic slump since the Depression, it is working class and socialist political institutions that have been in crisis. Even with the inspiring new movements in a number of U.S. states, the Mideast and some European countries coming up on the political horizon, the larger union movement here has remained mired in a sluggish defensiveness. As well, there are no class-based political parties or movements that can articulate and organize for an alternative to a political and economic system based on private capital accumulation.

With an initial discrediting of neoliberalism that followed in the wake of the near financial meltdown, it now seems to be consolidating itself, as governments and mainstream political parties define their exit strategies of austerity. The recent and inspiring events in Madison, Wisconsin show that there remains a potential and necessity to respond, both in terms of an immediate fight back, but in a deeper, wider, and more political way. But we are living in a kind of transitional era, where the old forms of working class organization and politics are sorely in need of a replacement, and the theoretical and practical bases of those replacements are still in the process of being born. The Greater Toronto Workers Assembly is one attempt to create a working class institution that tries to address this crisis within the class and on the left on the level of a city, in this case, Toronto, in the province of Ontario, Canada.[1]

The Assembly seeks to do a number of things at the same time:

- Create and maintain an organization based on the common class interests of unionized workers, the unorganized, the unemployed, people in temporary and part-time jobs and other forms of precariousness, the poor and student and community activists;
- Develop a common basis for socialist, anarchist and other groups and individuals and others on the anti-capitalist left, to work together in struggles, to contribute to building a common anti-capitalist political movement;
- Create a centre of discussion, analysis and struggle, helping to build resistance to the crisis measures, and contributing to moving it to a higher level.

The Assembly was created in October 2009 and so far has had mixed results. Inspired by American political activist Bill Fletcher, Jr, and others, it is an exciting and creative way of trying to address some of the chronic weaknesses of the left and working class movements. It has brought together socialists and other radicals from across very different movements in a unique common project. It has provided a new space and reference point for public (and to a limited extent) private sector union struggles and transformation efforts. And it has started a number of campaigns and political initiatives.

It remains an experimental project, subject to important weaknesses and pressures, which makes it tentative with no guarantee of survival in the longer term. The lack of working class and, in particular trade union militancy, and the general political environment of neoliberal hegemony provide a larger political backdrop that is not conducive to building a collective socialist or anti-capitalist project, based on the working class. Different political traditions and views, lack of collective experience working together, different priorities, alternative visions of what the assembly is and should be, as well as the contradictory nature and divisions within the working class base we

are trying to reach, all act as centrifugal or divisive forces making the process difficult to sustain. Nonetheless, the Assembly has taken some important beginning steps.

Why an Assembly?

THE PROPOSAL FOR THE WORKERS ASSEMBLY was raised by the Labour Committee of the Socialist Project, a small group of left activists and intellectuals, which saw itself as contributing towards the creation of a larger, socialist political movement. It was based on a number of concerns:

- The segmentation of the working class: The deep divisions in the working class created by 30 years of neoliberalism — rooted in dramatic labor market transformations — have contributed to huge differentials in collective experiences and living and working situations, resulting in a politically divided class. Indeed, the very notion of working class is seen as strange and contested by many and needs to be rebuilt through collective experiences of solidarity and struggle, along with political education and organization;
- Decline and conservatism of the union movement: Unions deal with the specific needs of their members in particular sectors. The neoliberal period has reinforced this, leading them to ignore the needs of the rest of the working class, the unemployed, those in communities (even trade union members in communities), and those most oppressed by capital. (For example, the otherwise exemplary struggle in Toronto, led by the local labor council to raise the minimum wage, ignored demands of anti-poverty movements to raise social service rates.). During this prolonged period for the most part, they have refused to challenge their dependence on employers through raising independent political demands and struggles. Without a conscious political and organizational transformation, unions can be defensive, isolated, and an easy target for employers.
- Social movements based in communities tend to be isolated from the rest of the class: Social movements of the poor, unemployed, and other segments of the working class tend to narrow their work to their own particular issues and can begin to see their struggles as being apart from the larger class, and in opposition to unionized workers. Many become dependent on the state for provision of services. They are also prone to a politics and ideology of a kind of semi-anarchism.[2] Both social movements and trade unions are locked into a practice characterized by a series of demonstrations and protests. Real change must go beyond this towards a larger political project that aims to bring the class together and challenge the system as a whole.
- Divisions between groups and individuals in the socialist and anti-capitalist left and their lack of a real presence in the political life of working class people: There have been few spaces for the radical left to work together on a common project of building a socialist or anti-capitalist political movement larger than themselves and engage in the necessary common experiences and theoretical work. A key element of this is working to root their politics in the struggles of working people.

The need for a different kind of working class organization was made apparent in the wake of a series of public sector strikes that occurred in southern Ontario in the summer of 2009.[3] In Toronto, the "third way" city administration demanded a series of contract concessions from the municipal unions, regarding sick days and retirement benefits. Using the same false arguments made against autoworkers in imposing concessionary demands in the bankruptcy reorganization of the U.S.-based auto companies (e.g. "autoworkers make $70 per hour"), they demonized public sector workers. The municipal unions and the local labor council did not educate and mobilize their members and did almost no education with the public. The strikers were politically isolated and, even though they fought off many of the concession demands, suffered a political defeat — which left a feeling amongst many working people in the city, that somehow, they were "privileged."

What contributed to the problem was the fact that much of organized labor in Toronto had been politically tied to the Mayor and the left-center group of city counselors that remained silent throughout the struggle. The latter's politics were based on an alliance with a group of business interests that fancied itself as "progressive," even though it was based in finance and real estate interests. The "neoliberal urbanism"[4] of the administration and the alliance with the formal labor movement contributed to the isolation and political defeat of the unions.

In the municipal elections that took place in the fall of 2011, the administration and its allies suffered a stunning defeat at the hands of a right-wing populist mayoralty candidate, with ties to Canada's major right-wing political establishment. The political isolation of the union movement from the working class population of the city, the lack of a left alternative to the social democratic/neoliberal alliance with the official labor institutions and the demobilization and defensiveness of the left in the face of the resurgent right, demonstrated the need for a left/anti-capitalist political voice in the city and, in particular, the labor movement.

Creating the Assembly

THE SOCIALIST PROJECT sent out invitations to activists engaged in working class communities, left trade union activists and colleagues on the anti-capitalist left. It called for a meeting to propose the idea of an Assembly to them. This allowed a committed core of people — beyond the SP — to build towards the new project. From that core, the organizers put together a series of consultations, given the name of "consultas."[5] The idea was to consult with trade unionists, the radical left and community-based workers' movements, both to test the ideas underlying the Assembly, but also to enrich and transform the project.

There were three consultas. The first brought together workers organizing inside unionized auto plants and anti-poverty organizers. It explored the similarities, differences, and experiences of building resistance and doing political education. Participants learned that political organizing, mutual solidarity — and even building a common class identity — require different kinds of approaches, depending on the spaces in which we work.

The second brought together a group of left trade unionists to discuss how to relate to the activist and progressive Toronto labor council. Participants asked, "What can we provide that the labor council can't?" and, "How can we build a solidaristic relationship with the Labour Council and its campaigns, while maintaining our political and organizational independence?" It was a difficult but rewarding discussion that explored the limits of the mainstream labor movement, and talked about the need to provide a class-struggle approach to employers and governments, and an anti-capitalist orientation to political campaigns. It also emphasized the need to define the overall labor movement in a broad and inclusive manner, which must include and organize the unemployed, precarious workers and the poor.

The third brought together a small number of activists to discuss the relationship between class and other forms of social identity under capitalism.

Launch of the Assembly

THE FIRST ASSEMBLY WAS HELD over the first weekend of October 2009 and had mixed results. About 100 people attended from across the left and key activist communities (anti-poverty, immigrant rights, left rank-and-file members of the public sector labor movement, student groups, environmentalists, etc.). But it was weak on private-sector unionists, communities of color, indigenous groups and feminists. Although the Assembly has come far since then, these components still remain weak areas for the project.

The first few Assemblies — held approximately 3 months apart — dealt with a series of questions that would set the project on its feet: the nature of the organization, financing, the geographical space, the vision statement, the form of internal organization, coordination of leadership and Assembly campaigns.

There were differences over whether the Assembly would be a coalition of existing organizations. This question was central to the entire conception of the Assembly — and it has been a bone of contention throughout the life of the organization. If it were to be a coalition, it could never be more than a coordinating center for existing political projects, some single-issue community movements, and other political organizations of the left. The organizers had a different conception, which was formally endorsed in the first two Assemblies: that the organization would be made up of individual members, working to build a different kind of politico/organizational form. While it was formally endorsed and resolved, the nature of the organization and its relationship to other ongoing political and organizational projects in working class communities of Toronto still remains, at least in practice, an issue.

The Assembly easily agreed that Toronto would be the central focus of its activities, but it remained open to the formation of sister projects in other cities. By the end of 2010, there were fledgling efforts to create Assemblies in the Ontario cities of Kingston and Ottawa.

The organization adopted a vision statement that provided a flavor of the kind of project that the GTWA would hopefully become. (The statement is available at: http://www.workersassembly.ca/vision)

A number of working committees were established that have continued to operate: Internal Education (which has organized a series of "Coffee House" discussions on critical political issues for members and supporters); Membership and Finance; a Labor Caucus, a Culture Committee, and a Campaign Committee. The role of the latter was to debate and discuss both criteria and suggestions for campaigns that would become the central activity of the Assembly.

Over a series of months and through three Assemblies, the committee organized a series of collective discussions that resulted in the selection of a Free and Accessible Transit campaign. It was ratified in a heated debate at the Assembly. The campaign was developed in the spirit of the Right to the City campaigns being organized in some U.S. cities. The idea is that public transit — central to the needs of working people across the city, and a key strategic element in creating good jobs, dealing with climate change, and structuring life in the city — should be free of fares and treated as a non-commodified right for all people. This is a highly charged and controversial demand, but forces the Assembly to confront some of the key elements of neoliberal urbanism, and engage in the process of political education and mobilization of working class people of all strata.

Another theme of the campaign was accessibility — the availability of transit to all communities in the city, especially the poor and people in communities of color in outer and inner suburban areas and people with disabilities.

The controversy stemmed from the reluctance of the defensive and traditionally business-oriented transit union in the city of Toronto and the reticence of the mainstream labor movement in Toronto to go beyond the traditional corporatist approach of that union. This became less of a factor as the neoliberal attacks on the labor movement and the public sector started increasing in the ensuing months.

Over time, the transit campaign organized meetings in the downtown and inner suburban areas, wrote and distributed educational materials, co-organized a protest over accessibility and a street

rally. It has begun to participate in community activities and is co-sponsoring a summer protest demanding free transit during smog and weather emergency days.

The Labor Caucus initially organized itself as a kind of caucus for union members, mostly based in the city's public sector unions. But it also included social activists close to working class communities in the city and union activists whose main center of work was not in their unions, but in social movements in communities, such as anti-poverty, migrant workers, and non-status people. Initially, this enriched the political orientation of the caucus and militated against a narrower concern with the economic interests of individual union contract battles. The labor caucus chose to focus on a campaign in defense of the public sector unions and public services. This was also ratified by the entire Assembly.

The Assembly Labor Caucus organized a number of forums on the need to defend public sector unions, the rights of public sector workers, public services and the importance of building alliances between public sector unions and social service recipients. We held a labor conference in February and agreed to organize a series of educationals on the relationship of capitalism to challenges being faced by public sector unionists, a flying squad, and a larger series of forums.

The Assembly also set up a committee to work on plans for doing education during the G-20 protests in the summer of 2010. Later in the history of the Assembly, a committee was set up to work on International Solidarity issues and another called the Feminist Action Committee was in the process of getting itself organized as I wrote this article.

The first few Assemblies experimented with an Interim Coordinating Committee framework, where the Visions Statement and basic organizational format was worked out. Later it became an elected coordinating body, but it included most of the same folks that had volunteered previously.

Assembly Challenges

THE ASSEMBLY IS VERY MUCH A WORK in progress and faces a number of key challenges which will determine its success of failure.

They include:

- Learning to grow together through political differences: A big challenge for the Assembly is to create an environment where those of us from different political experiences and ideological spaces can develop common understandings and perspectives, while honestly airing our differences. This can really happen only while we engage in ongoing struggles and processes, and debate and summarize our experiences.
- One such experience was the protests against the G-20 meetings, held last summer in the city. While we collectively participated in educational activities, we had major differences over strategy and tactics of the actual street protests, and in particular, how to relate to those associated with trashing stores and mild forms of property violence. The debates were extremely difficult and taught us a number of important lessons in moving forward. It clarified and highlighted important differences — and helped us develop key methods of maintaining dialogue and debate. Many of us made mistakes in relating to those with whom we differed during this experience, and not all of the political differences would be resolvable (or even could be accommodated within the Assembly project). We did end up working together to oppose the massive police violence and state repression that continues against political activists and protesters.
- Within some of the committees of the Assembly, we have had political debates that need to be resolved. For example, in the Labour Caucus, there are differences regarding the level of

emphasis we want to place on working to transform the existing union movement, or working with workers outside of organized unions.

- Responding to political openings and contexts: The election of a right-wing populist mayor in Toronto and the likelihood of governments of similar political orientations coming to power at the provincial and federal levels place enormous pressures on working people in the city. Like many U.S. locations, an era of austerity is beginning to unfold, with attacks against public programs, the poor and unions a key feature. Inspired by the Madison uprising, it seems that resistance is also beginning to build in the labor movement in Toronto and among community social activists.[6] What role does a project like the Assembly have at a moment like this? Should we concentrate on building the resistance movement? What kind of educational role should we provide and how do we find space to organize and deliver it? How do we balance working with unions such as the public sector workers locals that are organizing their own educational and mobilizational campaigns, and the need to build left and class-oriented movements within unions? What can we do to create new relationships between social movements in communities and unions, and how can we bring an anti-capitalist or socialist orientation to them? How can we build our own movement through these experiences and challenges? These are all critical questions we need to answer as we look to operate in this new context.
- Different movements — different approaches and emphases: There are a series of left and activist movements that operate outside the Assembly — each of which have different kinds and levels of relation to the Assembly. As other activists become more and more disenchanted with the accommodation of social democracy with capital, some of them — who have been traditionally part of the Canadian social democratic party, the NDP – have been organizing left critiques of social democratic political practice, but remain within the political orbit of the party. There are socialist political groups who work within a seventies-type Marxist-Leninist discourse, but do solid work with disadvantaged youth and produce newspapers and leaflets. Finally, there are social movement organizations that work within specific segments of the working class, such as the poor, non-status people and precarious workers. Each of these has its unique perspectives on how to build towards more radical outcomes: advocates for the explicitly political projects have attended Assembly events and even General Assemblies, but have not figured out how best to relate to the project. The Assembly, for its part, has welcomed many of those from these movements — but it isn't clear how the Assembly project can accommodate their participation. The social movement groups tend to be preoccupied with their (important and socially progressive) struggles, and tend to see the Assembly as a base of support for them, but have not necessarily bought into the idea of building a larger, class-based project. Those groups that are rooted in particular forms of semi-anarchist world-views, reject some of the premises of the Assembly, yet wish to maintain relations and forms of participation and mutual support. These issues need to be worked out over time.
- Differences over the nature of the Assembly: This question contributes to a number of differences within the Assembly over the nature of the project itself. While formally an individual membership based organization, many activists from already-existing social movements still see the Assembly as a kind of a coalition, and argue that it should be more of a resource for them and a collective colleague of their movements. This difference remains apparent in the continuing debate over dues.
- Gender and Race issues: Like much of the far left in the city, there is a low level of participation from people of color. Feminists within the Assembly have worked to increase the role and number of women activists and have organized women to chair most of the General Assembly activities. There is also a new Feminist Action Committee. The Assembly is working hard to create a space where people of color and socialist feminists are comfortable. As the Assembly expands its base outside of the activist and academic left, it will increase the number of people of color. An increasing percentage of unionized workers in Toronto are people of

color and women and the right-wing agenda of the new city administration will hit immigrant communities hard. Some of the campaigns — such as Transit — have already organized activities in these communities.

Growth and Survival at the Dawn of the Age of Austerity

THE PRINCIPAL CHALLENGE for this experiment to work in the longer run, aside from the points raised above, is its ability to build a beachhead for a class-based, anti-capitalist or socialist orientation within the broader working class of Toronto. In an environment of growing resistance which seems to be building as employers and governments re-launch their neoliberal restructuring project, it means creating a pole of reference that offers the potential of an anti-capitalist politics, that can address the actual concerns of unionists looking to transform their unions; people in working class neighborhoods looking for decent paying and secure jobs and some democratic input in transforming their communities, and working class people who want to go beyond simply protesting. No such political option exists today in Toronto, let alone Canada. Our ability to move in this direction will be the real test of this experiment.

Footnotes

1. Some of the points raised here were previously included in, "A New Type of Political Organization? The Greater Toronto Workers Assembly" by Herman Rosenfeld and Carlo Fanelli, the Socialist Project Bullet, August 6, 2010, and "Toronto Assembly Ties Together Everyone Hammered by Recession," Herman Rosenfeld, *Labor Notes*, November 20, 2010.
2. There are different forms of anarchism involved in the movement in Toronto: some closely identify with the working class and work in the Assembly, others reject such identification.
3. "Lessons Learned: Assessing the 2009 City of Toronto Strike," Julia Barnett & Carlo Fanelli, *Socialist Project Bullet,* January 19, 2010, and "Toronto City Workers on Strike: Battling Neoliberal Urbanism," Greg Albo and Herman Rosenfeld, *Socialist Project Bullet,* July 2009.
4. The application of neoliberal principles and practices to the operation of the state at the city level. In this instance, there is a pretense of "progressive" politics, but it remains rooted in the dominance of private capital accumulation and elites rooted in the financial and real estate development sectors, and looks to reorganize city governing institutions to enhance the profit-making capacity of these elites. It also looks to reorganize communities and labor markets in order to accommodate these goals.
5. The term "consulta," originally described the large public consultations organized by the Zapatista movement in Mexico. A local Canadian reform project used the term to refer to their consultative processes, via the Canadian activist and author Judy Rebick. The SP appropriated it from them.
6. One of the principal municipal unions in Toronto has indeed learned many lessons from its political defeat in 2009 and has developed an educational and mobilizational campaign against privatization and in defence of public services. The Toronto Labour Council has also begun to organize against the right-wing agenda.