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*SPECIAL ISSUE ON ORGANIZING FOR AUSTERITY: THE NEOLIBERAL STATE, REGULATING LABOUR AND WORKING CLASS RESISTANCE*

## **Introduction: Organizing for Austerity**

The Neoliberal State, Regulating Labour, and Working Class Resistance<sup>1</sup>

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This special issue of *Socialist Studies/Etudes Socialistes*, describing and analyzing austerity politics and working class resistance, is timely and relevant. The eleven articles presented here broaden our understanding of austerity as a strategic instrument in processes of neoliberalization, alongside other forms of coercive intervention. The current episode of “new” austerity ensures that the observations, analyses and lessons expressed here are of particular and immediate value. However, as several contributions demonstrate, the austerity politics now being aggressively pursued in Canada, the United States, and the European Union have their origins in the historical ascent of neoliberalism in the 1980s and 1990s. The rapidity of the current turn from rescue to exit strategies, as governments cease countercyclical spending policies that were employed in the early years of the worldwide economic crisis that began in 2007, and the commensurate shifting of blame and cost to the public sector, and public sector workers in particular, has been nothing less than astonishing.

Appropriately, this issue is introduced by McBride and Whiteside, who ask the fundamental question: austerity for whom? They empirically unpack the effect of protracted economic austerity on expanding inequality in Canada. The failures of both the labour market to generate quality employment and of neoliberal state policies that reinforce this reality are exposed for what they are: a deliberate assault on working class living standards.

Broad’s contribution follows with a searing critique of the “productivity mantra” that has once again become a common feature in the pages of the business press and media. The historical scope of Broad’s analysis situates the contemporary “productivity trap” discourse as an integral and core component of the neoliberal project. Both public and private sector workers are to accept concessions in the workplace, in

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incomes, and with respect to the social wage, as the only means to mitigate and reverse falling productivity. Hence, the ideological and political value of the productivity discourse. But Broad asks: why is there an incessant demand to increase productivity when the evidence says we produce and consume more than is socially and environmentally sustainable? This is the insanity of capitalism.

The recent Great Recession has transformed what began as a crisis in the United States' subprime financial market into a crisis of the public sector. Public sector workers now find themselves characterized as greedy, overpaid gravy train riders. The publicly borne costs of saving capitalism from itself are now to be repaid at the expense of the jobs of public sector workers and the services they provide to the society and economy. Camfield's essay offers a tour de force review and analysis of strategies of resistance employed by Canadian public sector unions. He critiques unions' current political and mobilization practices, leading to the conclusion that a broad-based turn to a more militant and activist social unionism will be capable of resisting austerity.

We then turn to Ontario with three articles covering different time periods and with somewhat different empirical emphasis, although each stress the continuities of neoliberal policies today with those in the recent past. The first is Kellogg's historical analysis of the Days of Action movement that began in 1995 and ended in 1998. In this earlier era of austerity, eleven mass strikes and enormous demonstrations swept through the major cities of the province. Kellogg not only provides us with an understanding of the political and social climate that preceded the current era of austerity in Ontario, he also details the innovations and obstacles of social movement and trade union organizers in this earlier period – with clear implications for austerity struggles today.

Two additional contributions examine more recent events in Ontario, where the McGuinty Liberals have been adept at presenting a pragmatic, centrist, and, where necessary, a moderately progressive face. Yet, both Fanelli and Thomas, as well as Evans, understand this government as simply a more rational and perhaps more cynical attempt to embed neoliberalism into the Ontario state, compared with previous efforts. Fanelli and Thomas explore this 'norming' process and argue that the Third Way-ish Liberals are an expression of neoliberal continuity in the province, stretching back to the Bob Rae-led New Democratic Party government of 1990 to 1995 and continuing through to the Harris Conservative governments of 1995 to 2002. The Liberals' moderate-progressive rhetoric masks the reactionary content of the Liberal

programme, known as the 'Open Ontario Plan'. Far from being a middle of the road, socially-conscious programme, the Open Ontario Plan shares core features with the Harris' government's aggressively neoliberal 'Common Sense Revolution'.

Continuing with the Ontario focus, Evans analyses the McGuinty government's high profile attempt to negotiate a two-year wage freeze with 750 000 unionized public sector workers. Some see this as a second Social Contract, in reference to Premier Bob Rae's successful imposition of public sector wage restraint some seventeen years earlier. Evans rejects this comparison and instead contends that McGuinty's efforts represent a strategic attempt to create the political space for more aggressive interventions in the future. The inability of the Ontario public sector unions to unite in a common front to oppose McGuinty's neoliberal politics is of particular cause for concern, given the likelihood of strong austerity measures in the aftermath of the 2011 federal elections and the consolidation, at the federal level, of a Conservative majority determined to implement a right-wing populist programme nation-wide.

Moving west from Ontario, Enoch unpacks the right-wing populism expressed through the "New Saskatchewan" discourse of the Saskatchewan Party's conservative provincial government, elected in 2007 under Premier Brad Wall. Saskatchewan is an interesting case, since a conservative government has had to creatively deconstruct the historic legacy of decades of social democratic government, governments that had put in place an economic development model that relied significantly on the leadership of the provincial state. The "New Saskatchewan" discourse characterizes the years of CCF-NDP government as backward and outmoded, contrasting with the new, future-oriented image of the "New Saskatchewan". In this way, the Saskatchewan Party presents markets and market logic as the modern, dynamic counter-point to the 'old' regime of crown corporations benefiting bureaucratic elites.

While Saskatchewan is a contemporary example of right-wing populism in Canada's West, Richmond and Shields take a retrospective turn with an examination of Canada's first extensive neoliberal "revolution" launched by British Columbia's Socred government in 1983. The authors review the extra-parliamentary resistance that emerged under the banner of Solidarity, a coalition of trade unions and community-based social movements. In particular, they dissect the schisms that opened up between these two wings of the opposition. The difficult lessons learned from this experience are of enduring value, as heterogeneous, popular

forces continue to mobilize to resist the massive efforts by the state and capital to rollback working class gains.

The next two articles provide an international dimension to this special issue by delving into the experiences of resistance in Mexico and in Argentina. Roman and Arregui's argue that the hegemony of Mexico's arriviste market-based bourgeoisie is fragile. The political impasse in Mexico, they explain, is founded upon the inability of this essentially neoliberal economic elite to consolidate their victory over the old party-state elites who have dominated political and economic life since the 1920s. At the same time, the capacity of the Mexican working class to resist neoliberalization is at a historic low. This is not to say that the country's popular revolutionary traditions, traditions that run deep, cannot be revived. On the contrary, the authors' note that the ongoing state repression of independent trade unions, Indigenous peoples and the peasantry are likely to stimulate such a revival.

With respect to Argentina, Felder and Patroni document and assess the important struggles that took place in that country through the 1990s and into the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They trace Argentina's sharp turn to austerity and neoliberal policies to the crisis of the late 1980s when the political leadership prescribed a program of deregulation, privatization and the liberalization of trade and financial markets as the solution to the economic ills befalling the country. The result of this "shock doctrine" was a significant economic and social dislocation of the working and middle classes. Initially the Peronist unions, whose government was pursuing this agenda, fell in line and scarcely offered token opposition, but soon they found their trade union confederation split as public sector unions mobilized to resist these measures and make common cause with other forces in civil society.

The issue is aptly concluded with Hussey and LeClerc's original analysis of the G20 protests that took place in Toronto in late June 2010. Their contribution shrinks both historic time and geographic space into a specific case. The unprecedented and excessive repression experienced on Toronto's downtown streets that weekend was and remains shocking. The dramatic and inflated deployment of the state's coercive resources is ample demonstration of the limits to dissent that will be imposed even where the threat to security is of minimal -- and manufactured -- scope. Hussey and LeClerc do a service in drawing together the observations and experiences of those who were there. Moreover, their analysis of the Black Bloc and the police response to these tactics is both original and clarifying.

In sum, this special issue offers several historical and contemporary examples of neoliberal political and economic policies and discourses, as well as potential strategies and avenues for organizing dissent. The contributors to this volume present important, and perhaps contentious analyses of resistance to austerity. The strategies of working class resistance discussed in this special issue vary by time and place and have been met with uneven outcomes. Yet, there are immediate lessons here that we hope will inform ongoing struggles.