
RESISTING PRECARIETY IN TORONTO'S MUNICIPAL SECTOR: THE JUSTICE AND DIGNITY FOR CLEANERS CAMPAIGN¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines a relative rarity in recent Canadian labour-state relations: the successful resistance by public sector workers and their allies to government-driven employment precarity. At stake was Toronto mayor Rob Ford's determination to contract out a thousand jobs held by city cleaners. In response, the cleaners and the city's labour movement launched a Justice and Dignity for Cleaners campaign to preserve these jobs as living wage employment. Effective coalition building behind a morally compelling campaign, together with some fortuitous political alignments, has forestalled city efforts to privatize a significant yet undervalued segment of the workforce. Our examination of the Justice and Dignity for Cleaners campaign reveals that resistance to precarity is not futile, notwithstanding some attendant ambiguity of what constitutes a labour victory.

INTRODUCTION

On Sept. 27, 2011, a dozen City of Toronto cleaners descended on City Hall decked out in goggles and hazmat suits. The protective gear highlighted the cleaners' difficult and often dangerous working conditions, but the immediate threat prompting their appearance was neither chemical nor environmental – but rather political. The cleaners took centre stage at a rally to oppose the City of Toronto's recently announced intention to contract out a thousand municipal cleaning jobs. The 'astronaut resembling' cleaners worked at Toronto police stations, and were the first group targeted for

outsourcing by the newly elected Toronto Mayor Rob Ford. Flanked by allies and supporters from their union CUPE Local 79, the workers spoke of cleaning jail cells full of scabies and bed bugs and of being exposed to HIV blood and dangerous chemicals (Good Jobs for All Coalition 2011a; Anonymous Interview #1 2013).³ While such conditions had long existed, as unionized workers city cleaners enjoyed access to health and safety training courses, protective gear and they earned living wages.

In 2011 all of this was about to change. Committed to reducing city spending generally and labour costs in particular, Mayor Ford identified the cleaners as an early target of privatization. Well aware of the abysmal conditions in the private cleaning sector, the city workers in turn understood the Mayor's plan as a threat to both their jobs and to the city's best interests. Police station cleaner Trish O'Brien explained to the crowd gathered outside City Hall that the elimination of decent-paying municipal cleaning jobs would add to the rapid growth in income inequality and precarious work in Canada's largest city (Good Jobs for All Coalition 2011b). The cleaners, their union and allies were signaling there would be resistance to this latest push to precarity.

In the current neoliberal moment, public sector workers and unions have faced relentless attacks from their government employers. As Stephanie Ross and Larry Savage have written, "Like their counterparts around the globe, Canada's public sector unions have been struggling against austerity, privatization, marketization, public-private partnerships, 'taxpayer' backlashes and restrictions on union rights and freedoms" (Ross and Savage 2013: 9). Nor have most of these confrontations ended well for workers and the labour movement. As Sam Gindin has observed: "limited in their vision and fragmented in their structures, unions have been no match for the offensive of employers, and above all, those of the state" (Gindin 2012: 28-29).

In the context of labour's current struggles, city cleaners looked to be an easy target for privatization while also providing Ford with an opportunity to cut down to size Canada's largest municipal workers' union: the 20,000-member CUPE Local 79 which included the cleaners in its ranks. Yet this was not to be. In what we argue is one of the few recent labour movement victories, Toronto city cleaners and their allies have thus far been able to forestall an outsourcing push from an aggressive and powerful employer. An examination of the Justice and Dignity for Cleaners campaign reveals both the challenges of launching campaigns against precarity, and the ambiguity of what constitutes 'success' in such campaigns. Most important perhaps for an embattled Canadian labour movement, it demonstrates that resistance is not futile. Effective coalition building behind a morally compelling campaign, together with some fortuitous political alignments have to date fended off a determined civic administration's intent to transform public sector jobs into precarious, low-wage private sector work. This is the terrain explored in this article.

TORONTO AS A NEOLIBERAL PROJECT

Toronto was (re)created as a neoliberal project in 1998, when Ontario's Mike Harris Conservative government imposed a municipal amalgamation of the former, smaller central City of Toronto and five surrounding suburbs. To be sure, neoliberal dynamics of privatization and contracting out had threatened and undermined municipal sector employment for some years previously (Miranda 2009). However the Harris government ranks among the most ideological governments in Canadian history, and Toronto's municipal merger was a means to purity of purpose: slashing state spending and promoting unfettered market forces. Harris won the 1995 Ontario election promising to cut taxes by 30 percent while still balancing the budget. Achieving this required \$6 billion in spending cuts from a provincial budget of \$56 billion (Boudreau et al. 2009). Off-loading costs to municipalities quickly emerged as a major provincial budget strategy. In Toronto's case however, only the central city had a large enough tax base to absorb the planned download. Through amalgamation, central city Toronto's tax base would be forced to cover the offload to suburban Scarborough, Etobicoke and North York. The amalgamated Toronto came into being in 2008 – one of the world's few major cities created by and for neoliberal purposes.

Predictably, Toronto has perennially struggled with the fiscal dilemma of insufficient revenues to meet spending requirements. At various times over the past decade, Toronto mayors have projected annual budget shortfalls ranging from \$500 million to well over \$700 million. With salaries accounting for close to half of all municipal spending, since 1998 successive civic administrations have targeted reduced labour costs as a key priority to budget stability. Employer take-back demands had prompted three strikes by CUPE civic workers (2000, 2002 and 2009) under the first two post-amalgamation Mayors: Mel Lastman and David Miller. While CUPE succeeded in fending off severe concessions each time, the strike of 2009 in particular generated widespread public resentment against municipal workers and CUPE. Suspended garbage collection became the flashpoint over the 2009 39-day summer strike, widely portrayed by the media and local authorities as an irresponsible stand by labour to defend unjustified wages and benefits (Barnett and Fanelli 2009; Glassbeek 2009). When the strike's settlement did not strip civic workers of their perceived remunerative excesses, conditions were ripe for the election of a new mayor who promised to carry and wield a big stick against labour.

Rob Ford was elected Mayor of Toronto in 2010 on a single note campaign of cutting city spending and 'respecting the taxpayer', halting what he characterized as the 'gravy train' of runaway municipal spending. Leaving no ambiguity of where he would look for savings, Mayor Ford insisted Toronto had a spending – not revenue – problem, and declared: "The gravy is in the number of employees we have at City Hall" (Dale 2011).

During his first year in office, Mayor Ford built considerable momentum for his cost-cutting agenda. Assorted taxes were frozen or eliminated, service cuts (described by the mayor as ‘efficiencies’) were made in a host of areas, and significantly on the labour front Mayor Ford delivered on two campaign promises: eliminating transit workers’ right to strike, and contracting out half the city’s garbage collection (O’Toole 2011; Howlett 2011; Rider and Moloney 2011). Indeed, Mayor Ford appeared invincible through much of his first year in office, prompting Prime Minister Stephen Harper to lavish praise on Toronto’s new mayor, and to associate himself with the ‘Ford Nation’ political brand (Wallace 2011).

Significantly, however, Mayor Ford experienced a major setback early in 2012. After widespread public opposition, city council rejected additional service cuts proposed by the Mayor (Dale and Moloney 2012). The ripples onto the labour front were significant. Unable to achieve budget cuts with further service cuts, Mayor Ford now pursued labour cost savings even more aggressively. For their part, labour and their allies had learned from their success in defeating further service cuts that a well-organized public campaign could reverse or at least stall parts of Mayor Ford’s neoliberal agenda.

CLEANERS UNDER ATTACK

When Mayor Ford took office in 2010, the City of Toronto directly employed approximately 1,000 cleaners in a variety of locations, including municipal buildings, police stations, daycares, social housing and long-term care facilities (Monsebraaten 2012). To the civic administration, cleaners looked like low-hanging fruit in the push to cut costs; an obvious first “punching bag” in the words of cleaners campaign organizer Preethy Sivakumar (Sivakumar 2013). Cleaners were vulnerable because their wages as unionized civic workers were much higher than the prevailing rates in the non-union private sector. A cleaner employed by the City of Toronto earned on average \$22.00 an hour with benefits; cleaners in the largely non-unionized private sector typically earned minimum wages and received few or no benefits. The industry’s highly competitive nature, in which large numbers of cleaning companies bid against one another to win contracts, exerts a powerful downward pressure on wages. Nor is it uncommon for the winning bidder to then subcontract out part of their work, unleashing another round of wage-race to the bottom (Dryden and Stanford 2012; Monsebraaten 2012). John Cartwright, President of the Toronto and York Region Labour Council, describes cleaning as a “dog eat dog sector” (Cartwright 2013a).

Cleaners also were targeted because of who they are and because of the kind of work they do. As a job with heavily domestic and female-gendered connotations, cleaning has long been constructed as low-status, low-skilled work with little social value (Jones 1998). It is also largely invisible work. A cleaner who has worked in both the private and public sector aptly describes cleaners as

an “invisible army” that mobilizes at night out of sight of the public (Anonymous Interview #2 2013). As a group, cleaners are vulnerable because many of them are newcomers to Canada, including large numbers of racialized and older women who are already disadvantaged in the labour market (Dryden and Stanford 2012). For all these reasons, city cleaners were seen as a quick and easy target of Mayor Ford’s cost saving plans.

However, 2011 was not the first time city cleaners had faced privatization pressure. A decade earlier the Police Services Board had proposed contracting out cleaning jobs in Toronto police stations. Significantly, a show of solidarity by police officers in 2003 saved the cleaners’ jobs. After officers signed a petition opposing privatization, the city backed off its plan to outsource the work. Paramount for police officers was recognition that cleaners are privy to confidential information, and could even impact the security of officers in some circumstances. Police officers saw a stable, long-term cleaning staff as closely aligned with their own interests (Cartwright 2013a).

But 2011 was different. In that year’s budget planning, Mayor Ford declared the police too would have to rein in spending. Forced to make budget cuts, Chief of Police Bill Blair recommended that the city contract out custodial and maintenance services in all police facilities. Blair estimated the outsourcing of 110 cleaning jobs would yield cost savings of \$1 million annually, representing a 47 percent saving in cleaning costs as a result of lower labour costs in the private sector (City of Toronto 2011a; City of Toronto 2011b). City council accepted Chief Blair’s report, and in June of 2011 informed CUPE Local 79 of the city’s plan to begin contracting out custodial services in Toronto police stations (CUPE Local 79 2011a). More concerned with fending off cuts to their own budget, this time police officers did not voice support for the cleaners, reflecting the difficulties of maintaining solidarity across occupations and bargaining units, when the employer has the cutting knives out. Further, city leaders made it clear the police stations were only the first front in a larger privatization offensive. Deputy Mayor Doug Holyday described the police move as a “good first step”, noting that if contracting out proved successful in the police stations there would be “no reason not to look at all city facilities” (Levy 2011).

JUSTICE AND DIGNITY FOR CLEANERS

With so much at stake, in September of 2011 the Good Jobs for All Coalition launched the Justice and Dignity for Cleaners campaign (Good Jobs for All Coalition 2011b). Founded in 2008 under the auspices of the Toronto and York Region Labour Council, Goods Jobs for All is a coalition of community, labour, social justice, youth and environmental organizations committed to improving living and working conditions in Toronto. More specifically, the Coalition defended public sector employment as a prime component of its full and equitable employment philosophy (Coulter 2012). It was fortuitous for city

cleaners that this robust network of ‘Good Jobs’ advocates was already in place when Mayor Ford’s administration set their sights on slashing cleaning costs. Recognizing that cleaners were now on the front lines of Toronto’s privatization battle, the Coalition initiated the Justice and Dignity for Cleaners campaign in their support.

The campaign had both specific immediate goals and broader long-term goals. First and most obviously, it sought to stop the outsourcing of cleaning jobs in Toronto police stations and across other city buildings. Second, and more broadly, the campaign wanted to start a dialogue about what kind of employer the City of Toronto should be; whether the city should operate by paying some of its employees poverty wages (Cartwright 2013a; Ng 2013). Third, the campaign sought to preserve a living wage scale in the municipal sector and, in the words of Labour Council President John Cartwright, “leverage the righteousness of this narrative into a strategy that would help raise the floor of wages in contract cleaning” (Cartwright 2013a). The shared interest of unionized municipal cleaners and unorganized private sector cleaners was emphasized in an interview we conducted with a former private sector cleaner now enjoying far better employment terms in the municipal sector. Much was at stake he stated in the bid to contract out municipal cleaners’ jobs: “if you cannot keep them [city cleaners] with a job, a fair job, how we can bring the others up?” A win for public sector cleaners would pave the way for better private sector conditions he urged the campaign (Anonymous Interview #2). Fourth and finally, the campaign was framed as a fight for democracy. Who should make decisions regarding contracting out: elected municipal council or appointed senior management? The practice at city hall allowed senior management to make such decisions on contracts valued under \$20 million. Justice and Dignity for Cleaners made the case that a decision of this significance should be made in a fully transparent and public debate by elected council, rather than by unelected staff (Sivakumar 2013).

Perhaps most effectively, Justice and Dignity mounted a campaign that was “morally compelling” (Sivakumar 2103). Police station cleaner Trish O’Brien emphasized the injustice of paying someone \$10.25 an hour to clean HIV blood and feces off of walls and jail cells full of bed bugs and scabies (CUPE Local 79 2011b). Cleaner Nezrene Edwards told city councillors that “just because we pick up dirt doesn’t mean we should be treated like dirt” (Justice and Dignity for Cleaners 2012). Workers’ voices were crucial in gaining the moral high ground for the cleaners. Worker testimonies and deputations at city council prompted sympathetic coverage of the campaign in the media, particularly in Canada’s largest circulation newspaper the *Toronto Star*. A single parent whose hopes of permanent employment with the city were dashed by contracting out told the *Star*: “I needed that job for my children and for my financial security. Now I have nothing” (Monsebraaten 2012).

By this time too, a number of studies and reports raised general concern about Toronto becoming an increasingly polarized and unequal society due to

rising precarity and the prevalence of poverty wages in the labour market (PEPSO 2013; Hulchansky 2010; Metcalf Foundation 2012). The prospect of contracted out cleaning jobs now intersected with mounting concerns over inequality in Toronto. City councillor Janet Davis for instance explained her opposition to outsourcing in terms of concern that Toronto was becoming “a segmented city of inequality.” Davis insisted that “the City of Toronto should not be contributing to the problem of creating more precarious low wage work” (Davis 2013).

Critical to the success of the campaign was the support of a wide range of progressive allies. Academics produced studies and open letters against contracting out. Beyond the harm to cleaners, academics identified the negative effects on the city economy and public health, and exposed the hidden costs of outsourcing (Dryden and Stanford 2012). These academic interventions raised public awareness of the issue and challenged the logic of outsourcing. Further, the academic perspective enabled the cleaners to place their battle within the context of larger debates about the racialization of poverty, the growth of income inequality, and the decline in social cohesion that accompanies these trends. For their part, faith communities lobbied their city councillors and gave deputations framing the issue as one of ethics and social justice (Hyman 2012; Schmidt 2012). The breadth of support for the cleaners proved influential. City councillor James Pasternak, a centrist not ideologically opposed to contracting out explained his ultimate voting support for the cleaners by noting that a visit on the issue from a Rabbi and professor “had an enormous impact” (Pasternak 2013: 2).

Overall, the Justice and Dignity for Cleaners campaign was successful at forging a broad coalition with sympathetic allies, but some tensions between coalition partners emerged. Early in the campaign, the Good Jobs for All Coalition printed a flyer denouncing councillor Frances Nunziata, a member of the Toronto Police Service Board, for supporting the move to eliminate living wage jobs. Good Jobs for All did not consult with their community partners before circulating the flyer. Nunziata retaliated by threatening to cut city funding to the community groups supporting the cleaners. In response, nearly all of the ten community groups involved in the campaign withdrew. Labour rights activist and scholar Winnie Ng who was then the co-chair of the Good Jobs for All Coalition, described the incident as a “crisis” that saw the campaign deprived of critical support at a key moment (Ng 2013). For his part, Cartwright of the Labour Council described the failure to get community group sign off on the flyer as “probably one of the most stickiest mistakes” of his lengthy years of coalition-based organizing (Cartwright 2013a). In terms of potential long-term consequences, the flyer likely sowed the seeds for mistrust between the community groups and the labour movement. This conflict speaks to the importance of ensuring that all coalition members are equally involved in decision making and is a reminder of community allies’ particular vulnerabilities

because of their funding structure and/or requirements of political impartiality (Blackwell and Rose 1999).

INSIDE CITY HALL

Like many battles, the Justice and Dignity campaign was fought on multiple fronts. Ultimately, however, the issue would be decided by Toronto's 45-member elected city council and would be informed by both the distinctly politicized labour relations dynamic in the municipal public sector, and by how individual council members perceived the debate. A fortuitous advantage for the campaign was that one of Toronto's councillors, Ana Bailao, had as a teenager and then-recent immigrant from Portugal worked alongside her mother as a private sector cleaner in Toronto (Rider 2012). In the 1970s and 1980s when Bailao and her mother worked in the industry, Portuguese women and their allies, launched several strikes and lobbying campaigns to improve labour conditions (Aguar 2000, Miranda 2009). To this day Portuguese women continue to work in the industry, and were now among councillor Bailao's constituents. Further advantageously, Bailao was aligned with neither the right nor left on the highly polarized Toronto council—but was part of the centre group—and thus could have significant influence over her fellow councillors.

Councillor Bailao's advocacy role in Justice and Dignity serves as a compelling example of the potential importance of identity politics. Toronto ranks among the world's most diverse, multi-racial and multi-ethnic cities, with half its population foreign-born, and almost half non-white. Yet the composition of its municipal council has long featured under-representation of women, visible minorities and ethnic minorities—precisely the predominant profile of workers in cleaning jobs (Siemiatycki 2011). The role played by Councillor Bailao is a reminder that the gender, race, ethnic and class profile of elected officials can influence the decisions governments make.

In 2011, Bailao called for city staff to conduct a study on 'the social and economic impact of contracting out cleaning work', believing it would further exacerbate income inequality in the city and impede immigrant economic advancement out of poverty (Bailao 2011). Interestingly, Bailao's concern was not over contracting out per se. She made clear the issue at hand for her was job quality, not who the employer was (Bailao 2013). De-coupling the issue from ideology would allow her to win support from some on the right wing of council.

In December of 2011, city staff produced a report entitled "The Social Impact of Lower Wage Jobs." The report chronicled the demise of well-paying manufacturing jobs in Toronto since the 1980s, and the subsequent growth of a bifurcated service economy with those at the bottom precariously employed in poverty wage jobs. The report predicted that displaced city cleaners would be unlikely to secure similar employment with living wages and benefits and

further identified the negative impact of low income and precarious employment on workers, their communities and the broader economy (City of Toronto 2011c). A final round of public deputations on the issue in March 2012 heard cleaners, academics, community and religious leaders once again voice opposition to the erosion of stable, decent-paying cleaning jobs.

In April 2012 Toronto council voted by a large margin of 29-12 to reject immediate contracting out of cleaners' jobs. Instead, council adopted a motion establishing four important criteria before a final decision would be made. First, staff was to develop a 'Toronto self-sufficiency' standard as a benchmark to assure that any contracted out jobs would meet certain standards in terms of wages, benefits and working conditions. Second, in the event that contracting out was permitted, any further subcontracting would be prohibited (except in extenuating emergency circumstances such as a flood). This was a major victory given that many of the worst abuses in the industry took place under subcontracting schemes. Third, in the event of any multi-year contracting out, city staff would conduct annual evaluations of the impact on job conditions. And finally, any contracting out decision, regardless of amount, would be made by the elected council not staff (City of Toronto 2012a). Given Justice and Dignity's emphasis on democratic and transparent decision making, the final condition represented a major victory for the campaign. Yet even more was to come.

In July 2013, city council made two further decisions related to the outsourcing of cleaning work. By a 28-3 vote, councillors called on city staff to develop a job quality assessment tool against which contracted out jobs will be measured. As well as including wage levels, this tool will consider other criteria that determine job quality, including worker health and safety, skills and training opportunities and working conditions. Any further decisions on contracting out have been put on hold until city staff reports back to Council on the job quality assessment tool, unlikely before 2015 (City of Toronto 2013).

City council's debate over contracting out led to a second important victory for cleaners, and indeed, for all city workers. In July 2013, city council agreed to update Toronto's Fair Wage Policy. The policy, which dates back to the late 19th century, requires contractors and suppliers for the city to pay their workers at least the prevailing market wages and benefits in their field of employment or, for unionized fields, union rates. However, since the policy's wage rates had not been updated since 2003, in the case of cleaners the 'fair wage' had actually fallen below the provincial minimum wage! The updating of the policy saw cleaners' fair wage rate raised to \$12.43 an hour, an amount reflecting that private sector cleaning wages are closer to Ontario's minimum wage of \$11 per hour, than to the estimated Toronto living wage of \$17.87 an hour (City of Toronto 2013; Brennan 2012). Finally, because the debate over fair employment for cleaners prompted an updating and raising of all occupational fair wage scales, the cleaners' campaign thus had beneficial ripple effects for other job categories. A

campaign in support of one occupational group thus also yielded what could be called a ‘solidarity dividend’ to workers in other occupations.

TAKING STOCK: ANALYZING THE JUSTICE AND DIGNITY FOR CLEANERS CAMPAIGN

While the fate of city cleaners has not yet been definitively determined, its leadership cadre generally regards the campaign to save their jobs as a success. Campaign Coordinator Preethy Sivakumar describes Justice and Dignity as a “real victory for collective action.” Beyond the particular impact on cleaners, she believes the campaign’s most significant achievement has been to challenge the logic of outsourcing, to elevate concerns over growing income inequality, to valorize service sector workers, and to “make people in power” consider what it means to be a cleaner and what constitutes a living wage (Sivakumar 2013). This impact was well articulated by centrist councillor James Pasternak who stated in an interview that the significance of the cleaners’ debate, and his own vote against outsourcing, represented “one of the first opportunities where we could flex our muscle when it came to work dignity...a first opportunity to make a statement on the dignity of work” (Pasternak 2013). The campaign raised awareness of the value of cleaning work and cleaning workers.

In this regard, a significant achievement of the cleaners’ campaign was the ‘politicization of precarity’ to modify a phrase from Linda Briskin (Briskin 2013: 91). Public sector labour struggles, Briskin notes, have a capacity to alter popular discourse and understanding of workers’ issues in a progressive direction. Parallel to her assessment that recent strikes by nurses in Canada have stimulated the ‘politicization of caring’ to valorize nurses’ work, the campaign to preserve unionized municipal employment for cleaners in Toronto re-framed fundamental questions about fair employment and the public interest.

For over two years now, the campaign has stymied a determined Mayor’s bid to contract out close to a thousand more cleaning jobs, in addition to those outsourced at city police stations. CUPE Local 79 President Tim Maguire believes the campaign has “stemmed the tide of Ford’s headlong rush to privatize and contract out everything that’s not nailed down” (CUPE Local 79 2012). Similarly, a cleaner we interviewed believes the campaign “really helped, helped slow things down, really gave a broader view, or an honest view” (Anonymous Interview #1 2013). Additionally, CUPE has argued that the requirement to assess any proposed privatization against a job quality assessment tool is to labour’s advantage. The more standards that are put in place, the union believes, “the more we can support arguments to keep it in-house”.

Somewhat more reservedly, Labour Council President John Cartwright describes the campaign as “a qualified success”, since it was not able to derail outsourcing of police station cleaners’ jobs, and the ultimate resolution of the issue remains in the future. Yet Cartwright notes that the privatization agenda of

neoliberalism “depends on a veil of secrecy around numbers” (Cartwright 2013a). By restoring such decisions to elected council based on clear job quality criteria, the cleaners’ campaign has brought greater transparency to the processes surrounding contracting out.

For their part too, city councillors who opposed privatization also regard the cleaners’ campaign as a success. Councillor Ana Bailao believes the decisions made to date by council mean it will not support privatization that drives cleaners’ wages below a living wage. Since cost savings in the cleaning sector rely largely on lowering wages, she expects the cleaners to remain employed by the city (Bailao 2013). Fellow centrist councillor James Pasternak believes that as a result of the cleaners’ debate and lopsided votes against privatizing, “there doesn’t seem to be the political appetite to go down an aggressive road of contracting out in this council term” (Pasternak 2013). The cleaners’ campaign it would appear forestalled privatization not only for one job category, but deflated any appetite for seeking new targets.

At least one city councillor with considerable labour movement experience is not as optimistic about the long-term success of the campaign. Janet Davis, who was a CUPE representative before sitting on council for the past decade, worries that the updating of the Fair Wage Policy could ultimately be an enabler of privatization. Davis fears that some city councillors will be able to justify contracting out by claiming that private contractors will be required to pay their workers the city’s prevailing fair wage approved by council, which she notes is barely higher than the minimum wage (Davis 2013).

Our own assessment is that the campaign has yielded significant and unexpected results for cleaners and for labour more generally. The campaign has so far stymied Mayor Rob Ford’s attack on his target of choice—the labour movement. The cleaners’ battle has been among Ford’s more lopsided losses in council votes, and played out to considerable public sympathy for a group of city workers. Close to a thousand city cleaners continue to have stable, living wage jobs several years after they were targeted for precarity and poverty. Evidence from another jurisdiction illustrates just how severe the consequences of contracting out would have been for Toronto cleaners. As Marcy Cohen notes, when British Columbia privatized hospital housekeeping services in 2003-4, “[t]he impact on wages and working conditions was immediate and stunning: wages for privatized housekeepers were cut almost in half, benefits were eliminated or drastically reduced, and union protections abolished” (Cohen 2006: 195).

While the matter is not yet resolved, council has also undertaken several promising initiatives for the cleaners. First, any future decision will be made not by hired staff, but rather by elected council, meaning the decision-making process will be open and transparent. Second, by calling for development of a Job Quality benchmark instrument to assess any future outsourcing, council is likely to develop wage and working condition criteria incompatible with current

labour exploitation conditions in the private cleaning industry. Simply stated, private operators will not profit from the wages, benefits, and work conditions likely to be required by the city as condition for outsourcing. Nor are private contractors likely to want to pursue a ‘business unfriendly two-tier wage system’, whereby cleaners they assign to city sites are significantly better paid than cleaners assigned to private sector sites.

More broadly, the campaign has raised important issues regarding collective responses to precarity. Significantly, *Justice and Dignity for Cleaners* reveals the value of labour-community coalitions. Academic research and advocacy played a significant role in this campaign, as did the support of progressive allies from the faith community. Also critical was the workers’ ability to make a strong moral claim that they deserved fair treatment and decent wages, a factor which led to the favourable media coverage and wins inside city council. And of course having an insider to champion the issue, Ana Bailao, was crucial to moving this debate forward inside City Hall. The key to the campaign’s success then was its ability to fulfill the formula Marcy Cohen identifies as critical to resisting contracting out in the public sector: “action that goes well beyond the workers and the union itself” (Cohen 2006, 210).

LIMITATIONS OF THE CAMPAIGN

Justice and Dignity also reveals the challenges inherent in launching coalition-based campaigns against precarity. We explore two in closing: the issues of rank-and-file mobilization, and sustaining a coalition’s momentum beyond an immediate defensive struggle.

While workers’ voices were significant at various stages of the campaign, very few cleaners actually participated in the mobilization. Cartwright attributes this absence to worker fears of being victimized for speaking out (Cartwright 2013b). Conversely, an activist cleaner we interviewed attributes the non-involvement of most cleaners to

[...] a culture of complacency,” especially among workers with significant job seniority. Expressing frustration with his co-workers, he declared: “It’s so complacent there, ‘just go do my little thing and not worry about this guy or that guy’. But I say it’s gonna roll. And when it starts to roll you gotta slow that down or it will steamroll everybody” (Anonymous Interview #1 and #2 2013).

Winnie Ng, former campaign leader also noted the limited participation of cleaners in the campaign: “I don’t think it got filtered down to that group of 1000 cleaners. So we end up having the same one or two spokespersons all the time” (Ng 2013). The low level of worker engagement highlights the challenges of mobilizing a rank and file that paradoxically may be too fearful of job loss to

publicly support the union or too complacent in their positions to recognize the need to guard against the erosion of workplace rights.

Additionally the very logic of coalition, lobbying style campaigning also can serve to demobilize union and worker activism. At several junctures, the Justice and Dignity campaign made the tactical calculation that union leaders and rank and file should not be the lead voices, for fear of alienating some city councillors whose support was critical to opposing outsourcing (Cartwright 2013b; Davis 2013). Instead, allied academics, community and faith leaders spoke on behalf of the cleaners. The lack—and downplaying—of worker participation is concerning for labour activists and scholars who regard rank-and-file mobilization as both the means and ends of working class struggle; as both the greatest predictor of immediate success as well as long-term class capacity building (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1998). Low levels of worker engagement also leave the campaign dangerously dependent on external support in the form of sympathetic politicians and allies. All of this raises issues regarding the need for a broader transformative labour movement vision and practice; all the while reflecting tensions between the labour movement's emphasis on service or mobilization (Rubin and Rubin 2001). At the same time, the cleaners' campaign illustrates that a coalition rather than class struggle orientation can achieve tangible success. For public sector workers so widely under attack, a win by any means necessarily remains a win.

However, building ongoing capacity from this win has proven problematic. The minimal rank-and-file involvement complicated the ability to develop an ongoing organizational structure for coalition building and solidarity. Following the April 2012 vote by council, the cleaners' campaign began to demobilize. Ng explains that

[...] we had the momentum, we won. And then the energy gets dissipated...This is for all organizations not just this particular campaign. We haven't been good in harnessing the energy and the mobilizing to make sure it continues...That sense of empowerment, it was there but we didn't keep building on it. (Ng 2013)

Ng believes the most important question raised by the campaign is

[...] how can we use these organizing moments to build a movement of resistance. I think threading it with a notion of building the membership was, in retrospect, absent. So we end up building a few key workers' leaders without building the base. (Ng 2013).

The challenge of this is born in part from the fact that workers and their allies are often operating in a defensive modality, moving from crisis to crisis without necessarily maintaining the momentum built from the last struggle. As Cartwright put it, as soon as the union puts out one threat, "there are ten other

alligators waiting to chew in another place” (Cartwright 2013a). Labour ally city councillor Janet Davis sees alligators in her midst, believing other councillors will again push for outsourcing in the future. “It’s always just a ground war”, she describes the push to cut labour costs at the city (Davis 2013).

Indeed, Mayor Rob Ford has signalled that fully contracting out garbage collection will be a centre-piece of his 2014 re-election campaign. Smarting still from public displeasure over the 2009 strike, city garbage crews enjoy little public sympathy. The divergent public responses to garbage collectors and cleaners reveals that public’s estimation of labour’s ‘moral claim’ can and does vary by occupation. In the period ahead Toronto will determine whether averting labour precarity is for all workers, or only for ‘the deserving’ workers.

NOTES

- ¹ This paper was made possible by the support of funds from the United Way Toronto-McMaster University SSHRC CURA project on Poverty and Employment Precarity in Southern Ontario. Additional funding support was provided by the Ryerson Centre for Labour Management Relations.
- ² The authors would like to thank Ms. Supriya Latchman, a Master’s student in Ryerson’s Immigration and Settlement Studies program, for her superb research assistance, as well as the workers, organizers and Toronto city councillors who generously shared their insights on the campaign. We benefitted from feedback by Wayne Lewchuk and two anonymous journal reviewers. The authors alone are responsible for any shortcomings.
- ³ To protect the identities of the cleaners, we have anonymized all worker interviews.

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