

# Canada: WE, the United Way, and labour's charity problem

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***"André Ouellet, Canada's [Liberal] foreign affairs minister, threw human rights out of the whole issue of trade," He [Craig Kielburger] told the delegates indignantly. "He said that Canada isn't the world's Boy Scout." (Laughter. Meaningful pause).***

***"Well, I'm a Boy Scout-" (Prolonged surge of laughter and applause). "And this just means that we children will have to work all the harder to end exploitation of Third World Children."***

These lines, reported in the Toronto Star, were delivered at the 1995 Ontario Federation of Labour convention by a 12-year-old Craig Kielburger. Kielburger is the founder of the WE charity, currently under public scrutiny for shady financial practices and political graft.

Kielburger got his big start at the 1995 Ontario Federation of Labour convention in an appeal to stop child labour. Now Kielburger is at the centre of the WE scandal because his charity was contracted by the federal Liberals to dole out grants to cash-strapped students.

The 1995 OFL convention is also significant for the mandate delivered by convention delegates to launch a province-wide general strike against Ontario Premier Mike Harris's "Common Sense Revolution".

A few months after the convention, as monster protests and strikes rocked the province, the union-aligned United Way charity began collaborating with the Harris government's workfare pilot program. The pilot program was a stepping stone to mandatory workfare. The pilot aimed to sign up 55,000 welfare recipients by September 1996. People on welfare would work 17 hours per week in non-profit social service agencies, with private employment agencies getting bonuses for every "job ready" welfare recipient finding a placement.

## **Workfare and the United Way**

Workfare was a cornerstone of the Common Sense Revolution and part of a broader attack on the poor and unemployed, whose ranks had swelled with the early 90s recession. The jobs massacre, and the decimation of Unemployment Insurance by Mulroney and Chretien, had made about 1 in 10 Ontarians reliant on social assistance. "The problem with the economy," declared Canadian Labour Congress president Bob White in 1995, "is that we don't have enough jobs."

Organized labour opposed workfare as a punitive assault on the poor and a subversive right-wing strategy of union-busting and wage suppression. People on welfare, backed up by professional researchers, pointed out that proper income supports, not workfare, was the fastest way to find a real job again. Anti-poverty activists pointed out that people on workfare were exempted from all labour standards, including the minimum wage. OFL President Gord Wilson said it was "as much a vocational dead end as an Alabama-style chain gang."

The United Way's collaboration with the Harris workfare pilot made it a target for principled trade unionists. Union activists and some union officials began talking about a UW boycott in the spring of '96. In Windsor, labour council delegates began discussing a UW boycott. Waterloo Regional Labour Council went a step further and voted for a boycott. If other labour councils and unions followed, UW would suffer a catastrophic collapse in fundraising and volunteers. For example, labour was responsible for half of the Waterloo region's UW fundraising.

"I don't know why labor is involved in the United Way in the first place," explained one of the Waterloo labour council delegates who worked in an auto parts plant. "I don't support the United Way. I know I'm quoting someone, but I think the United Way is the corporate face of charity."

### **Boycott the United Way**

In response, the Ontario Federation of Labour and most of the province's senior union brass were determined to defend UW, and discouraged local labour councils from joining the boycott. A massive battle erupted inside the Waterloo labour council and in a subsequent controversial meeting, the boycott effort was narrowly overturned. The labour council's VP complained that the Harris government was "using a charitable organization to divide us" and setting unions "at each other's throats."

The conflict escalated when CUPE delegates at their Ontario convention in May voted 95% in favour of a UW boycott. Lucy Harrison, a CUPE member from Waterloo, had brought forward the motion. CUPE-Ontario demanded UW publicly oppose workfare, and stop donating money to social service agencies that signed up with the workfare pilot.

Senior union leaders began publicly criticizing the boycott in the press. For example, Steelworker official and OFL Vice-President Ken Signorietti said CUPE-Ontario president Sid Ryan had "jumped the gun" and "should have looked into the ramifications a little more." Ryan replied to his critics: "We have now run up against a real right-wing agenda that is attacking us on all sides. It is time to knock people off the fence. If the United Way doesn't want to be our ally, the United Way should get out of the way."

UW rejected CUPE's demands, repeatedly claiming they were not a "political" organization. Meanwhile, OFL, CAW and other senior union leaders tried to broker a compromise. They developed a UW donation option to direct money away from non-workfare agencies. CUPE-Ontario would not accept the compromise.

### **Victory and defeat**

In the end, the boycott worked. One academic, Maeve Quaid, wrote a whole book in favour of workfare and blamed the union boycott for sinking mandatory workfare in Ontario. And a lot of people did get off the fence and take sides. Only 6 of the 1,700 UW-funded social agencies applied to use workfare. The government was also in disarray on this front. By September 1996, only a few hundred people had signed up to workfare, far short of the government's goal of 55,000. Even the cabinet minister responsible for the pilot, the hated David Tsubouchi, was canned in August for his failures.

However, the UW boycott severely divided labour leaders, notably senior CUPE and CAW leaders who were driving forward the Days of Action strikes against Harris. The labour movement was already profoundly divided over the strike strategy, mirroring the same divisions that emerged over allegiances to the NDP during the Rae government's suicidal Social Contract.

By November 1996, only a year after the general strike mandate and Kielburger's speech, the entire

Ontario labour movement was embroiled in open civil war. The Steelworkers publicly threatening to secede from the OFL over its desire to end the Days of Action strikes and focus on voting NDP. Gord Wilson threatened to resign his presidency. The Sudbury labour council refused to endorse their local Day of Action.

In complete disarray and unable to conduct any effective strike actions, the civil war meant labour retreated from the field of battle. Harris seized the opportunity and pressed his historic attack on hospitals and municipalities.

When the next big labour battle erupted in the fall of 1997, the absence of union solidarity proved fatal to the hugely popular province-wide political strike by teachers. Promises of CUPE and CAW sympathy strikes never materialized. Three of the five teacher unions broke ranks and declared the strike would end. The last great chance to defeat the Common Sense Revolution was lost. Another province-wide general strike mandate was passed at the OFL convention in November 1997, but in the summer of 1998, the Days of Action were shelved by senior union leaders. Resources were plowed into competing electoral strategies. None of them worked. Harris won re-election in June 1999.

Some 25 years after the 1995 OFL convention, UW continues to feed off our ailing unions like a parasite, sapping resources and energies from far more pressing needs. Meanwhile, Kielburger has been exposed for ingratiating himself with the very Liberal machine he rightly attacked in 1995. Big labour's penchant for charities was his first big stepping stone.

At its best, charity is using duct tape on a shredded social safety net. But more importantly, charity is not solidarity. In fact, it corrodes solidarity.

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**P.S.**

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