

## Organized Labour and Local Politics Ontario's 2006 Municipal Elections

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## PRESENTATION / PRÉSENTATION

# Organized Labour and Local Politics: Ontario's 2006 Municipal Elections

**Larry Savage**

ON 13 NOVEMBER 2006, a record number of labour-endorsed candidates were elected to municipal councils and local school boards in Ontario's municipal elections. Although the labour movement's foray into municipal politics was not altogether new,<sup>1</sup> the 2006 elections in Ontario represented a strategic shift in the political priorities of organized labour. For years, unions in English Canada had placed the bulk of their political resources squarely behind the electoral efforts of the New Democratic Party (NDP) at both the federal and provincial levels. However, campaign finance reform at the federal level, combined with unprecedented municipal downloading, and neoliberal economic restructuring, have forced the labour movement to rethink its approach to electoral politics. In short, the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), Canada's largest labour central, has identified municipal politics as an area worthy of unprecedented attention and resources.

Although a focus on municipal politics may offer the labour movement new opportunities to promote its agenda more effectively, the structure and political culture of local government also present tremendous obstacles for advancing the goals of organized labour. This article begins with a description

1. Prior to World War II, the labour movement showed active and sustained involvement in municipal politics in several urban centres, most notably in Winnipeg, Edmonton, and Vancouver. Although some of this intense involvement continued into the post-war period, the English-Canadian labour movement's role in municipal politics has been decidedly uneven and in decline for many decades. See for example, James Lightbody, "Electoral Reform in Local Government: The Case of Winnipeg," *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 11 (June 1978), 307–332; Eugene W. Plawiuk, "Labor Omni Vacant; The Edmonton Labour Council in Municipal Politics 1903–1960," Presentation for Edmonton's Bicentennial: Historical Reflections Symposium, 1995, <<http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/5202/CITYHALL1.htm>> (28 February 2008).

of recent changes in the relationship between municipalities and the provincial government with a view to explaining why local government has garnered greater attention and significance in recent years. Next, the article examines the reasons behind the CLC's new focus on local politics and documents the labour central's involvement in the 2006 Ontario municipal elections. Lastly, the article explores the CLC's new strategic approach, focusing on both the opportunities and obstacles facing the labour movement in local politics.

Local governments are increasingly shaped and influenced by the political and economic effects of neoliberal globalization. Neoliberalism is an ideological political project which promotes the use of right-wing economic policies to advance the goal of capital accumulation. At the municipal level, neoliberal policies tend to encourage competition by local government, resulting in an economic race to the bottom. This particular function of neoliberalism, which remains one of its most coercive characteristics, has created an elevated level of uncertainty in municipal government and, in turn, has promoted the adoption of right-wing economic policies in an effort to attract jobs and investment.<sup>2</sup> This short-term economic strategy, which relies heavily on an agenda of outsourcing, deregulation, privatization, and tax reduction, is embedded within a larger neoliberal policy framework at both the national and subnational levels. Although local governments have long been constrained from acting independently by the nature of provincial authority over municipal affairs, the entrenchment of neoliberalism in Canada has imposed powerful new fiscal constraints upon municipalities that have led to massive budgetary shortfalls, particularly in social policy areas downloaded to local government. That said, municipalities are not merely passive victims of neoliberal restructuring at the subnational level. Rather, local government has become increasingly central to the political project of neoliberalism.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, municipal privatizations, which normally take the form of lease-back agreements or public-private partnerships in infrastructure building, are a good example of the neoliberal public policy experiments being carried out by local governments. As such, municipal governments have become agents of neoliberal globalization. The entrenchment of neoliberalism at the local level has not gone uncontested. Labour organizations, community groups, and social movements have been mobilizing against neoliberal public policy initiatives at the local level, but the results of these mobilizations have been uneven. Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell are pessimistic about the ability of social movements to successfully combat urban-based forms of neoliberal restructuring in isolation from the larger

2. See for example Byron Miller, "Modes of Governance, Modes of Resistance: Contesting Neoliberalism in Calgary," in Helga Leitner, Jamie Peck and Eric S. Sheppard, eds., *Contesting Neoliberalism: Urban Frontiers* (New York 2007), 235; Helga Leitner and Eric Sheppard, "Economic Uncertainty, Interurban Competition and the Efficacy of Entrepreneurialism," in T. Hall and P. Hubbard, eds., *The Entrepreneurial City* (Chichester 1998), 285–308.

3. See, for example, Miller, "Modes of Governance," 236; Neil Brenner and Nik Theodore, "Cities and the geographies of 'actually existing neoliberalism,'" *Antipode*, 34 (June 2002), 368.

political structures that sustain them.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward have argued that strategic alliances of unions, consumer groups, and community organizations do have the potential to challenge the logic of neoliberalism at the local level, but only by overcoming historic divisions between organized and unorganized workers.<sup>5</sup> In the North American context, the province of Ontario offers us an interesting case study of this dynamic given its comparatively high levels of union density and the amount of provincial-municipal restructuring that has taken place in the province over the course of the last fifteen years.

In the late 1990s, as part of an aggressive cost-cutting agenda, the Progressive Conservative government of Mike Harris oversaw a major restructuring of municipal government in Ontario, which included forced amalgamations and considerable downloading of responsibilities, including social services, to the municipal level.<sup>6</sup> Most significantly, provincial downloading shifted greater responsibility for social assistance and social housing to municipalities while reducing municipal reliance on provincial transfer payments.

Several years later, the provincial government followed up with the *Municipal Act*, 2001, which came into force in 2003. The new law consolidated dozens of municipal governance statutes and replaced the Act's longstanding prescriptive approach to municipal government with a more "permissive approach" that allowed municipalities to administer and organize their affairs and deliver services more autonomously.<sup>7</sup> Of particular interest to public sector municipal employees' unions were the kinds of public-private partnerships that could be developed under this new, more permissive, policy framework.

In 2006, the McGuinty government passed the *City of Toronto Act*, 2006, a separate municipal statute for Toronto that gave the city greater decision-making power in relation to issues of spending, taxation, and governance structure. The Act also gave Toronto the power to pass bylaws in areas traditionally outside the scope of municipalities, such as public safety and the environment.<sup>8</sup> Also in 2006, the provincial government passed the *Municipal Statute Law Amendment Act*, 2006, which extended some of the powers granted to the City of Toronto to other municipalities in Ontario.

Municipalities in Ontario have almost universally complained about the

4. Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell, "Neoliberalizing space," *Antipode*, 34 (June 2002), 380–404.

5. Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, "Power Repertoires and Globalization," *Politics & Society*, 28 (September 2000), 413–430.

6. Andrew Sancton, "Amalgamations, service realignment, and property taxes: did the Harris government have a plan for Ontario's municipalities?" *Canadian Journal of Regional Sciences*, 23 (Spring 2000), 135–156.

7. Joseph Garcea, "Modern Municipal Statutory Frameworks in Canada," *Journal of Governance: International Review* 3, 2 (2002), 1–14.

8. Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, "A New Era Begins For Toronto," 12 June 2006 press release, <<http://www.mah.gov.on.ca/Page543.aspx>> (1 December 2007).

impact of provincial downloading on local government budgets. In particular, new costs in the areas of social housing, public health, emergency medical services, social assistance, and local transit have made it difficult for cities and towns to provide an adequate level of service to local taxpayers. Provincial uploading has been promoted as a way of alleviating some of the financial pressures facing cash-strapped municipalities. Specifically, municipalities have been lobbying the provincial Liberal government of Dalton McGuinty to upload responsibility for social housing and disability support, which are currently funded through municipal property taxes.<sup>9</sup> Although municipal governments continue to express strong reservations about the effects of provincial downloading, there is no question that local government has grown in both stature and importance as a result. As such, municipal politics has garnered greater attention from political actors like the labour movement.

In the months preceding the 13 November 2006 municipal elections, the CLC, through its 50 Ontario-based labour councils, held a series of strategy sessions, campaign manager and candidate schools, public speaking and media courses, and political organizer training sessions in 21 cities across the province. Labour councils, which generally consist of locals of CLC-affiliated unions in a particular geographic area, also interviewed prospective municipal candidates and issued questionnaires in an effort to identify politicians worthy of labour's support. This unprecedented political mobilization at the local level produced a slate of 438 endorsed candidates in 60 different municipalities. On election day, 217 labour-endorsed candidates were either elected or acclaimed to local councils or school boards in Ontario.

In Guelph, a labour-endorsed mayor and eight labour-endorsed ward councillors were elected, representing a majority of council. In that community, organized labour had successfully joined forces with the left-leaning Guelph Civic League in what turned out to be the Ontario labour movement's most impressive victory on election night. In Kingston, the CLC helped to elect 7 labour-endorsed councillors, representing a majority of council. The labour-endorsed mayoral candidate in Kingston finished a close second. In Sudbury, the CLC helped former NDP MP John Rodriguez win an upset mayoral victory with the expectation that he could lead the city council in a more labour-friendly direction. In Toronto, the CLC helped to re-elect Mayor David Miller and 13 city councillors committed to pursuing a progressive agenda at city hall.

The CLC's municipal campaign, which had received test runs in Ontario in 2003 and British Columbia in 2005, was rolled out in four phases: (1) visioning, (2) training and endorsement, (3) mobilization and get out the vote, and (4) accountability. In the first phase, labour councils hosted a series of community "visioning" meetings in early 2006. Participants talked about the state of their communities and discussed ways of improving them. The meetings included

9. *Toronto Star*, 21 August 2007.

TABLE I

Candidate	Endorsed	Elected
Mayor	37	20
Deputy Mayor	4	3
Regional Council	18	5
Board of Control	1	1
Councillor / Alderman	256	125
School Trustee	122	63
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>438</b>	<b>217</b>

Data compiled using aggregate figures from CUPE Ontario and the CLC, unpublished.

union members, but also brought together environmentalists, anti-poverty activists, municipal reformers, and interested citizens. The discussions produced a road map for the CLC's next campaign phase.

The second phase, which involved training rank-and-file activists to work in election campaigns, and endorsing candidates for the municipal elections, took place in the months running up to the November 2006 election. The CLC disseminated training manuals on campaign organizing, campaign management, and candidates' guides in conjunction with municipal training sessions held in various communities across the province. Campaign schools were held in Ottawa, Toronto, London, Timmins, Sudbury, Hamilton, and Port Elgin in the summer of 2006. Labour councils simultaneously began a process of candidate endorsement, which relied on either questionnaires or face-to-face interviews with labour-friendly candidates. A typical interview would involve quizzing candidates about their positions on a number of contentious issues, including municipal procurement, privatization, contracting out, and commitment to public transit. Most candidates were also asked if they had ever, or would ever, cross a picket line. Labour councils were not simply looking to endorse candidates who answered all the questions correctly. Rather, in addition to being satisfied that a candidate was committed to a labour-friendly platform, labour councils were interested in a candidate's overall credibility. After all, if a candidate had no hope of winning, an endorsement from a labour council might have had an adverse effect on the credibility of the CLC's municipal campaign overall. After labour councils interviewed prospective candidates and handed out endorsements accordingly, the CLC dispatched trained union members to carry labour's message to CLC-affiliated locals in various targeted communities.

As part of its campaign, the CLC developed bookmark-sized campaign brochures listing the names of endorsed candidates in every labour council jurisdiction in the province. These brochures were distributed in workplaces,

at union meetings and, in some rare cases, door-to-door. In most cases, CLC trained organizers entered into a campaign finance grey area<sup>10</sup> by working closely with individual municipal campaigns by organizing support for them amongst CLC-affiliated unions. This organizing led to the mobilization and get-out-the-vote phase of the CLC's campaign, which involved delivering union members and their allies to polling stations in support of labour-endorsed candidates on election day. This phase was concerned with ensuring that union members who had indicated support for CLC-endorsed candidates followed through with their votes. In most cases, the CLC was unable to pull off a comprehensive voter identification campaign; therefore, get-out-the-vote efforts were largely coordinated with the campaigns of individual labour-endorsed candidates.

Finally, the campaign's last stage, the accountability phase, has taken the form of an ongoing dialogue between the CLC and the candidates it helped propel into office. As part of the accountability phase, the Congress reaches out to elected labour-friendly candidates through the Columbia Institute. The Columbia Institute is a charitable organization and think-tank established by the labour movement under the auspices of Working Enterprises, a Vancouver-based holding company. CLC President Ken Georgetti is also president of the Columbia Institute, and the Institute's board of directors is made up almost exclusively of British Columbia-based union leaders. In June 2007, the Institute hosted a conference on environmentally sustainable communities in Collingwood, Ontario, which brought together many of the CLC's allies in municipal government to strategize around developing green, union-friendly, municipal policy proposals. The CLC has also begun to make inroads with the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM), a national lobby group for municipal governments, by attending FCM conventions in an effort to network with left-leaning municipal politicians and bring them together to work on common issues. Lastly, the CLC has begun developing issue briefings on a series of topics, including transportation and infrastructure, fair taxation, procurement policies, and fair wages to help foster closer relations with labour-friendly municipal politicians and provide them with the basic research required to advance specific proposals.

The CLC's new focus on municipal politics can be explained through a combination of crisis and opportunity. Although the heightened importance of municipal government, due to downloading and neoliberal restructuring, has earned local politics greater attention, a crisis in party-union relations at the federal and provincial levels is what really motivated organized labour to seek alternative methods of participating in electoral politics.

Although the formation of the NDP was designed to strengthen the electoral

10. The *Municipal Elections Act* compels individual candidates to declare all contributions of goods and services to their respective campaigns. However, it appears that neither the CLC nor individual labour-endorsed candidates considered the CLC's organizational support to be a contribution under the provisions of the Act.

link between organized labour and a left-wing political party,<sup>11</sup> union affiliation to the NDP reached its peak shortly after the party's founding convention in 1961 and has been in decline ever since.<sup>12</sup> In addition, the labour leadership has failed to deliver the votes of rank-and-file union members to the NDP in any significant way. As such, the party-union relationship has been disappointing in a historical sense.<sup>13</sup> In recent years, the combined forces of neoliberal economic restructuring and globalization have posed even greater challenges to social democratic party-union relationships in Canada and elsewhere.

The fiscal problems faced by provincial NDP governments in the 1990s highlighted the crisis of social democracy and the unraveling of the traditional party-union relationship. In Ontario, a severe economic recession exacerbated by the effects of continental integration, high interest rates, and cuts in federal transfer payments prompted Bob Rae's NDP government to implement an austerity program which included a unilateral rollback of wages in the public sector. Although it is widely accepted that economic conditions narrowed the NDP's room to maneuver politically,<sup>14</sup> the NDP government's decision to implement its now infamous *Social Contract Act* was pursued without considering more progressive alternatives. For example, the government flatly rejected the option of raising corporate income taxes in order to make up for the budgetary shortfalls.<sup>15</sup> The *Social Contract Act* also had a destructive effect on party-union relations and resulted in the Ontario Federation of Labour's decision not to endorse the party's re-election bid.<sup>16</sup> The departure of Rae as party leader in 1996 and his defection to the Liberal Party in 2006 has done little to repair party-union relations. In the 1999 provincial election, the building trades' unions, teachers' unions and the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) openly advocated strategic voting for Liberal candidates in ridings where the NDP was not competitive. Whereas previous Liberal governments had received very little support from organized labour, McGuinty's government has won the backing of several key unions and was the major beneficiary of third-party advertising blitzes launched by the union-backed Working Families Coalition<sup>17</sup> in both

11. Organized labour is integrated into the party organizationally with representation on all NDP decision-making bodies, including having an associate president position reserved for a CLC Officer. The CLC's national political action director also attends federal NDP caucus meetings.

12. Keith Archer, *Political Choices and Electoral Consequences: A Study of Organized Labour and the New Democratic Party* (Kingston 1990), 37.

13. Gad Horowitz, *Canadian Labour in Politics* (Toronto 1968); Dan Azoulay, *Keeping the Dream Alive: the Survival of the Ontario CCF/NDP, 1951-1963* (Montreal 1997).

14. William K. Carroll and R.S. Ratner, *Challenges and Perils: Social Democracy in Neoliberal Times* (Halifax 2006), 128.

15. Thomas Walkom, *Rae Days: The Rise and Follies of the NDP* (Toronto 1994), 139-140.

16. Walkom, *Rae Days*, 121.

17. The Working Families Coalition is backed by the Ontario English Catholic Teachers



the 2003 and 2007 provincial elections. For a brief period, from 2000–2003, union donations to the Ontario Liberal party surpassed union donations to the Ontario NDP;<sup>18</sup> however, the unions involved in the Working Families Coalition have since redirected their financial resources to the Coalition rather than funnel money directly to the Liberals.

In 2006, the NDP unceremoniously booted CAW President Buzz Hargrove from the party for his continued promotion of strategic voting in the 2006 federal campaign and his apparent endorsement of Liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin. Later that year, the CAW officially cut its ties to the NDP.<sup>19</sup> The split was significant because the autoworkers union, the largest private sector union in Canada, had been a key player in the creation and development of the NDP and was an important source of funding for the party.

In Saskatchewan and Manitoba, provinces where the NDP remains competitive, the party governs from the centre and keeps organized labour at arm's length in terms of policy-setting. Anti-scab legislation, for example, has never been passed in either province despite strong lobbying by provincial federations of labour. In Manitoba, the NDP government passed an election finance bill banning corporate and union donations to political parties – thus severing an important link between the party and the union movement. The Ontario NDP recently adopted a similar policy position in conjunction with the Ontario Federation of Labour.<sup>20</sup> While some unions, primarily those associated with the Working Families Coalition, have turned to the Liberals, most CLC affiliates have clung to the NDP without a clear direction of where the party is headed.

Although the ties between organized labour and the NDP have been weakening for some time amidst the backdrop of neoliberal economic restructuring, campaign finance changes at the federal level represented the major catalyst in terms of searching for alternative electoral avenues. In 2003, Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chrétien pushed through amendments to the *Canada Elections Act* that severely restricted corporate and union donations to federal political parties and introduced a more comprehensive system of state funding for parties.<sup>21</sup> Under Bill C-24, unions and businesses were restricted from donating

Association, Canadian Auto Workers, Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, International Brotherhood of Boilermakers Local 128, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, Millwrights, International Union Of Operating Engineers Local 793, Ontario Provincial Council of Painters and Allied Trades, Ontario Pipe Trades Council, and Ironworkers Local 721, <<http://www.workingfamilies.ca>> (1 December, 2007).

18. Elections Ontario, Financial Statements, Ontario Liberal Party 2000–2003, Ontario New Democratic Party 2000–2003, <<http://www.elections.on.ca/en-CA/Tools/FinancialStatementsandContributions/FinancialStatements.htm>> (1 December 2007).

19. *Globe & Mail*, 17 August 2006.

20. *Toronto Star*, 14 June 2003.

21. Under the new system, parties are rebated half of their election expenses and awarded

more than \$1,000 annually to any one candidate or constituency association. In 2006, the Conservative government of Stephen Harper went a step further by implementing a complete ban on corporate and union donations as part of the *Federal Accountability Act*. These laws have effectively shut out business and labour from the direct financing of federal political parties. The new campaign finance regime has had a significant impact on organized labour's relationship with the NDP.

Before the campaign finance changes in 2003, the Congress played a key role in bankrolling NDP election campaigns. Between 1975 and 2002, labour unions contributed an average of 1.9 million dollars annually to the NDP, representing 18.4 percent of the party's revenues. In election years, that average increased significantly to \$3.7 million, or 28.1 percent of overall party revenue.<sup>22</sup> In addition to direct financial contributions, unions affiliated with the NDP would routinely book off staff members or rank-and-file workers to assist as campaign managers or canvass organizers in local riding campaigns.<sup>23</sup> This type of in-kind contribution is expressly forbidden under the new campaign finance regime.

Even though campaign finance reform promised to seriously restructure the institutional link between organized labour and the NDP, both the union movement and the party supported the reforms because they believed a revamped *Canada Elections Act* would help curb the influence of big business on federal politics. Because corporations donated significantly more to parties than did the labour movement, the reforms were seen as an opportunity to level the playing field.<sup>24</sup> That said, leveling the playing field meant a restructuring of the party-union relationship. With direct contributions and contributions in-kind eliminated, the labour movement's ability to support the NDP explicitly is limited.<sup>25</sup>

\$1.75 per vote on an annual basis based on the results of the previous election.

22. Harold Jansen and Lisa Young, "Solidarity Forever? The NDP, Organized Labour, and the Changing Face of Party Finance in Canada," unpublished paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association (2005), 9.

23. Jansen and Young, "Solidarity Forever?," 19.

24. Although unions affiliated with the NDP saw this as a necessary evil in achieving a level playing field in terms of campaign finance, it should be noted that the changed regulatory environment was seen in several quarters of the labour movement as having a positive impact on labour politics. In particular, unions that had long favoured a break in the party-union relationship were pleased that the Congress would not be able to directly focus its political agenda specifically around the electoral fortunes of the NDP. It was also welcome news to unions in Québec, who had abandoned the NDP as a political vehicle long ago in favour of sovereignist parties at both the federal and provincial levels.

25. In the 2004 federal election campaign, the CLC ran a comprehensive third-party, issue-based campaign called "Better Choice." As part of the campaign, the Congress ran radio ads in key markets in the months prior to the election campaign. The ads highlighted the importance of fighting for public health care, pensions and workers' rights, but stopped short of endors-

In a document entitled “Labour’s Political Activism Post C-24” circulated and approved at the CLC’s Executive Council meeting in November 2003, the Congress officially shifted gears in terms of political strategy. The document laid out the challenges posed by campaign finance reform and weakened party-union relations, and attempted to develop an alternate political strategy for labour.

In assessing the impact of campaign finance reform on the party-union relationship, the document read:

The reality of Bill C-24 is that the trade union movement cannot write cheques to our political party, we cannot provide ‘releases’ to work on election campaigns of candidates and we cannot cover expenses for delegates to attend conventions. Our present activities in partisan politics will fundamentally change and this will change both our relationship with the NDP and how we will be able to participate as unions in the political process.<sup>26</sup>

The CLC boldly proclaimed that “the post C-24 era of doing politics will require a complete shift in our thinking and approach.” Unions, particularly municipal employees’ unions like the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), had long been active participants in local politics in Ontario. They understood that their working conditions and wages were directly related to local politics and sought to influence municipal elections accordingly. However, most unions showed little interest in municipal government in the post war-period, largely due to the inability of city governments to effect the larger economic and policy changes sought by the labour movement. The growing popularity of public-private partnerships at the municipal level, the Harris government’s massive restructuring of municipal government and school boards, and the heightened importance of local government as a policy-maker has made municipal politics an attractive target for a labour movement in search of an electoral cause. However, there is little evidence that the CLC’s general approach to electoral politics has undergone a “complete shift”. The CLC’s politics is very much confined by the limits of social democratic electoralism. By pursuing electoral opportunities at the local level, the Congress has developed creative methods to maintain the party-union relationship while respecting new and emerging regulatory frameworks governing campaign finance in provincial and federal politics. In a sense, the CLC has simply downloaded responsibility for maintaining the party-union relationship to the arena of municipal politics. In a pamphlet to labour council activists, the CLC was explicit in this regard:

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ing a political party. The snap election in 2006 prevented the Congress from relaunching the campaign in 2006.

26. CLC, “Labour’s Political Activism Post C-24,” CLC Political Action Department, 5.

Civic involvement develops our activists' political skills and, by extension, our movement's electoral capabilities... And, equally important, our work in municipal politics can build our base of support for political activities at the provincial, territorial and federal levels.<sup>27</sup>

By the CLC's own admission, "the challenge is not how the labour movement is going to build an independent political force. The challenge is how we are going to build political momentum so a party on the left can use our campaigns to propel themselves to higher support."<sup>28</sup> The CLC also views local politics as a strategic, long-term training ground for future NDP candidates at both the federal and provincial levels. For years, the NDP has had difficulty attracting top tier candidates to run for the party. Faced with the prospect of almost certain defeat outside a small number of ridings, credible candidates have been loathe to offer themselves up as sacrificial lambs.<sup>29</sup> Both the Congress and the NDP would benefit from long-established political relationships between organized labour and future candidates with municipal experience. However, this desired strategic outcome, in many ways, clashes with the political culture of municipal government.

Municipal politicians and bureaucrats have traditionally viewed themselves as creatures of the provincial government, designed solely to deliver local services while struggling to keep a lid on taxes. As such, policy innovation has not been a priority in local government.<sup>30</sup> The labour movement's focus on municipal government may help breathe new life into local politics by promoting a more proactive, socially progressive policy role for municipal councils. Such an agenda can be pursued more aggressively with the help of the new powers available to municipalities through the *Municipal Act*. However, to date, it appears that local politicians of all political stripes have taken the position that by granting municipalities more financial powers, the provincial government was actually extending to them more rope with which to hang themselves politically. Such opinions will make it harder for municipalities to reach their progressive potential.

A second problem for the CLC is the independent, non-partisan nature of local politics in Ontario and the effect this political reality will have on

27. CLC, "Capacity Building for Change," CLC Political Action Department, <[http://canadianlabour.ca/index.php/Capacity\\_Building\\_fo](http://canadianlabour.ca/index.php/Capacity_Building_fo)> (1 December 2007).

28. CLC, "Labour's Political Activism Post C-24," 5.

29. In 1990, the year the NDP unexpectedly swept to power in Ontario, party insiders privately confessed that many of the political novices who won upset victories on election day were seriously underprepared to become MPPs, let alone cabinet ministers.

30. See, for example, David Siegel, "Recent Changes in Provincial-Municipal Relations in Ontario: A New Era or a Missed Opportunity?" in Robert Young and Christian Leuprecht, eds., *Municipal-Federal-Provincial Relations in Canada* (Montreal 2006), 181-97; David Siegel and Richard Tindal, "Changing the Municipal Culture: From Comfortable Subordination to Assertive Maturity—Part I," *Municipal World* (March 2006), 37-40; David Siegel and Richard Tindal "Changing the Municipal Culture: From Comfortable Subordination to Assertive Maturity—Part II," *Municipal World* (April 2006), 13-17.

the relationship between individual politicians and local unions. The lack of parties at the municipal level in Ontario will make it even more difficult for organized labour to keep its political allies accountable, especially since local politicians operate in such a conservative political culture. That said, several important progressive political openings exist for organized labour in municipal politics.

For example, a large number of American municipalities have, with pressure from the labour movement, adopted living wage ordinances requiring private businesses that do work for, or have a relationship with, the municipality to pay their employees a living wage.<sup>31</sup> A living wage, which is translated roughly into the equivalent to the poverty line for a family of four, is calculated differently depending on the municipality, but almost always outpaces the minimum wage by several dollars. It has been promoted as a way of ensuring that public money is not spent subsidizing sub-standard employment opportunities. Living wage ordinances are just one example of how labour-friendly municipal politicians can leverage public money for the public good.

Card check neutrality agreements are another example of how municipalities can extract pro-labour concessions from developers and other private businesses with whom they interact. Card check neutrality agreements compel both employers and unions to replace the traditional secret ballot election to determine union certification with a process wherein the employer agrees to adopt a neutral position with regard to union certification and voluntarily agrees to recognize the union as the official bargaining agent for its employees if the union is able to demonstrate that it enjoys majority support. Majority support is determined through a process called card check, wherein workers sign union cards as indication of their support for unionization. When the union obtains a majority of the cards from the workers, a neutral third party verifies the result and the employer is then compelled to negotiate the terms of employment with the union. Although this mechanism for achieving union certification is nontraditional, employers in all Canadian jurisdictions can voluntarily recognize a trade union as the official bargaining agent for their employees. To be sure, it would not be in the interest of many employers to agree to such a process given that it is likely to facilitate the process of unionization. Normally, employers who sign card check neutrality agreements have done so in response to political pressure in the form of so-called corporate campaigns. Unions like the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees, Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (UNITE HERE) and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), in association with community groups and other progressive allies, have been at the forefront of building successful corporate campaigns against large multinational corporations.<sup>32</sup> Card

31. David Reynolds, "Living Wage Campaigns as Social Movements: Experiences from Nine Cities," *Labor Studies Journal*, 26 (2001), 31–64.

32. Dorothee Benz, "Labor's ace in the hole: casino organizing in Las Vegas," *New Political*

check neutrality agreements mitigate against the inherent coercive power that employers hold over workers by circumventing the mandatory vote process to obtain union certification. Municipal councils can help the labour movement pressure employers to enter into card-check neutrality agreements for new business developments, like hotels or office buildings, by setting up roadblocks in the approval process for the proposed developments. If the developer agrees to the card-check neutrality agreement, the council can facilitate or even expedite the approval process, thereby acting as a powerful ally to organized labour in its quest to organize new members.

Although municipal politics has long been dominated by business and the development industry,<sup>33</sup> organized labour does have a hypothetical advantage in terms of municipal campaign finance. Although the *Municipal Elections Act* allows both corporate and union donations, it prohibits multiple donations exceeding \$750 from associated corporations while treating individual union locals as separate entities. A union with 100 different locals in the province could therefore legally contribute up to \$75,000 to a single municipal election campaign, provided the contributions came directly from the locals. Although unions have failed to capitalize on this perceived loophole in any significant way, it could certainly help make a labour-endorsed candidate competitive in a future election campaign. However, the CLC's encouraging showing in 2006 will likely have the effect of drawing out the business community under the auspices of Chambers of Commerce. As was previously noted, business and the development industry have, to a certain extent, long dominated city politics. However, a more coordinated effort by such organizations to counteract a labour-driven campaign is a real possibility, in particular if unions look to be winning the battle.

Unions, like businesses, encounter their own internal struggles when developing political positions. Indeed, coordination among unions or even within a union can be difficult to achieve. Despite the unprecedented level of coordination exhibited by the CLC and its affiliates in the 2006 municipal elections, in some communities, unions did not act in a unified fashion and sometimes campaigned at cross-purposes. For example, in both London and the Niagara Region, large CAW locals circulated lists of endorsed candidates that were different from the list of endorsed candidates distributed by the respective labour councils in each area. In Hamilton, unions were divided over which

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*Science*, 26 (December 2004), 525–550.

33. See, for example, Robert MacDermid, "Funding Municipal Elections in the Toronto Region," unpublished paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association (2006); Timothy B. Krebs, "Urban Interest and Campaign Contributions: Evidence from Los Angeles," *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 27, 2 (2005), 165–76; Anthony Gierzynski, Paul Kleppner and James Lewis, "Money or the Machine: Money and Votes in Chicago Aldermanic Elections," *American Politics Quarterly*, 26, 2 (1998), 160–73; Arnold Fleishmann and Lana Stein, "Campaign Contributions in Local Elections," *Political Research Quarterly*, 51 (1998), 673–89.

candidate to back in the mayoral race and ultimately decided to remain neutral. Individual union members running as candidates for municipal office tended to win the support of their locals regardless of whether not they won the endorsement of the CLC. These contradictory approaches speak directly to the relative weakness of the CLC's local labour councils in comparison with larger union locals like CUPE or the CAW, who command greater political capacity in the community.

For some other unions, especially those most loyal to the NDP, active participation in municipal politics was about finding alternate ways to funnel money indirectly to the party. As such, local politics was viewed as a training ground for future provincial and federal NDP candidates. As was previously noted, the Congress made no secret of this secondary agenda when it told affiliates that its aim was to "ensure that labour is part of a broader community presence politically" in order to create a base "for labour's political work provincially and federally."<sup>34</sup> Such a strategy is limited, however, because it fails to recognize or address the fact that the NDP's relationship to labour has traditionally left out the growing number of marginalized non-unionized workers who dominate the service sector economy.

The CLC's new focus on municipal politics was motivated by a crisis in party-union relations. The new campaign finance regulatory regime at the federal level has had a profound impact on the relationship between the NDP and organized labour. Without the ability to bankroll NDP campaigns, pay for union releases, or mount effective parallel campaigns, organized labour has decided to shift the focus of its political electoral strategy. Rather than spend significant resources on extra parliamentary political activities or the development of a more radical independent labour politics, the CLC has turned its attention to municipal politics in an unprecedented way. In many ways, the CLC's new focus on municipal politics is a reflection of its narrow electoral political mentality. This stems from the CLC's unwillingness to challenge the underlying logic of neoliberal economic restructuring, which has both shaped and been shaped by recent provincial-municipal restructuring. Instead, the CLC is attempting to draw municipal politicians into a progressive policy sphere through the combined use of advocacy (during election campaigns) and education (via the Columbia Institute) in an effort to curb the worst excesses of neoliberalism. It remains to be seen whether the CLC's strategic political shift towards municipal government will provide openings for resistance, let alone enduring alternatives, to neoliberalism, or whether, by contrast, the labour movement's modest quest for more progressive policy outputs at the local level will simply be overwhelmed by the conservative political culture and neoliberal framework under which municipal governments currently operate.

34. CLC, "Labour's Political Activism Post C-24," 3.