

# PMP Stands for “Politimize, Mobilize, and Power”

## Priority #8: Integrate Unemployed Workers (Union and Non-Union) into the Fightback

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in something more than just a one-day event. The outreach for the Summit involved presentations and discussions in scores of meetings, and a dozen different languages. The *Declaration on Good Jobs for All* evolved from those interactions, and went through numerous amendments.

The Summit was held on 22 November 2008. People who had never been in the same room before exchanged ideas and shared a determination to work together for a society that we could all be proud of. Presenters posed hard questions, and workshops buzzed. In the closing, Summit co-ordinator Judy Vashti Persad captured the spirit of the day with one word – magic.

The Good Jobs for All Coalition has continued to develop – planning joint campaigns and supporting each other's efforts. The Coalition is holding rallies to fight for improvements in Employment Insurance, supporting new regulations on temp agency work, demanding investment in social infrastructure, and advocating for a green economy with good local jobs. This coalition will no doubt face many challenges. But it represents an authentic expression of the changing working class in Toronto, and just may become a new model of community/labour organizing in the 21st century.

The demographic reality is that the clear majority of the future working class will come from communities of immigrants, aboriginal, and racialized workers. The labour movement must root itself, authentically and powerfully, in these communities if we are to have a base that is able to defend past gains and fight for new victories.

## **PMP Stands for “*Politicize, Mobilize, and Power*”**

Priority #8: Integrate Unemployed Workers (Union and Non-Union) into the Fightback

### **Winnie Ng**

ON JUNE 30, 2008, Progressive Moulded Products (PMP, the largest employer in Vaughan, Ont.) filed for bankruptcy protection and closed its eleven facilities. The company closed up shop owing its 2400 workers a total of over \$30 million in severance and termination pay. Ninety per cent of these non-union workers were born outside of Canada. The realization that they were used, abused, and now tossed aside like scrap metal, ironically on the Canada Day long weekend, completely shattered their notion of Canada as a society that upholds fairness and human rights. The resulting shock and sense of betrayal inspired the workers to stage a sixteen-day round-the-clock blockade to stop the company from removing heavy machinery from the main plant.

For these workers, predominantly workers of colour, turning rage into collective action and resistance was an extraordinary act of defiance. Their strength, courage, and sense of justice captured the support, respect, and

imagination of the labour movement in Toronto. Other unions organized a two-week solidarity picket involving activists from various unions marching alongside the former PMP workers; this solidarity action exemplified the essence of community and social justice unionism.

The CAW stepped forward to act as a sponsoring organization with the provincial government, in order to establish the PMP Workers' Action Centre to provide support services to the unemployed PMP workers. Fa Lim, one of leaders of the blockade and now the Centre's internal coordinator, aptly describes the CAW's action as akin to "offering us a lifeline when we were drowning."

The Action Centre has been warmly embraced by the PMP workers as their "second home". The Centre is grounded in the principle that workers who are going through job loss themselves are the most appropriate persons to provide support and assistance to their fellow workers. The Centre has become not just a source of practical assistance and support (for job search, referrals, and more). It has become, more importantly, an organizing base where victims of plant closure are transformed into social change activists. Over 60 workers have volunteered as peer helpers or committee members. From assisting their former co-workers (over 1900) to file for severance and termination pay claims, to mobilizing them to march in the leading contingent of last year's Toronto Labour Day Parade, these activists have applied the same intensity and generosity of spirit they demonstrated on the picket line to the day-to-day running of the Centre.

For many, it has been a journey of recovery and transformation. They have found their own voices, participated in rallies, and gained the confidence to speak up. As a result, more stories of past workplace discrimination have emerged. In as much as this transition has been a period of grieving over their lost jobs and their sense of workplace community, it has also been a healing process of asserting their own continuing presence as workers with rights, dignity, and voice.

This has also been a politicizing process for many of the PMP workers, as they experience the injustice of federal bankruptcy law which places them at the bottom of the list as "non-secured creditors," despite their many years of service. They are now keenly aware that they are casualties of a legalized fraud that dismisses workers as powerless, and therefore, insignificant and irrelevant.

The PMP experience demonstrates that there are many non-union workers in the community who also bear the brunt of economic restructuring (despite the focus of the media and politicians on higher-profile crises at unionized firms, like General Motors, AbitibiBowater, or Air Canada). Displaced non-union workers generally must face the stress and challenges of job loss without the support of an action centre or adjustment program (of the sort regularly negotiated in unionized plant-closure situations). In the unfamiliar and often confusing terrain of adjustment and community services, workers are reduced to being "clients" waiting to be "case-managed" by community

service providers. It is critical for the labour movement to extend a hand to these workers and provide the much-needed support and advocacy to assist them through this transition. For unions that run action centres for their laid off members, extending centre services to unemployed workers within the same geographical community would reflect more than a generosity of spirit. It would also be an act of solidarity that participating workers would remember for a long time – including the next time a union comes knocking.

In the coming months, more and more workers will exhaust their EI benefits and face the grim reality of losing their homes. Some former PMP workers have already started to borrow from their credit cards to pay their mortgages. What should the labour movement's response be to this inevitability of foreclosure within our communities? Can we afford to stand idly by and watch unemployed workers and their families being locked out from their own homes? Can we afford to see abandoned neighbourhoods, replicas of those in destroyed US cities, mushrooming within our own communities?

Therefore, in addition to pushing for EI reform and providing action centre services (including to laid-off non-union workers), we need a labour campaign aimed at government and the banks to "give unemployed workers a break". And we need to look beyond traditional mass protests and lobbying. Imagine what reactions would be sparked when (not *if*) our labour and community leaders were willing to form blockades to stop unemployed workers' homes from being foreclosed. This is a desperate time, and we must be ready with desperate measures.

Corporate and government elites will try to take advantage of the current crisis to impose a far-reaching structural adjustment on workers, communities, and public programs. Part of their strategy will be to exploit the dis-unity of the working class: pitting unionized against non-unionized workers, lower-paid against better-paid, unemployed against employed. Defining the labour movement's struggle as one for all workers, rather than as a struggle on behalf of employed union members alone, will be crucial for our movement to cement our political and moral credibility with the broader public (and with potential future union members).

It is not easy to organize workers without jobs, for many reasons. They have little direct economic power, they experience great flux and turnover in their lives, many struggle with depression. On the other hand, they have lots of time, and many are motivated by intense anger over the unfairness of their situation – both losing their jobs, and then being underserved and disrespected by the EI system and Canada's weak network of social services. Workers without jobs are a huge potential resource for the labour movement, and we must find new ways to engage and integrate them into our continuing struggles. And we cannot allow the artificial divide of unionized versus non-unionized workers stop us from re-imagining and re-building a community where no one needs to stand alone: a movement of hope, justice, and solidarity. In the PMP struggle,

the labour movement extended an umbrella to non-union workers who found themselves caught in a downpour. That gesture, small as it may be, is a symbol of the movement-building we can and must undertake – worker by worker, and community by community.

## ***That was Then, and This is Now: Socialist Reflections on Responding to Capitalist Crises***

Priority #9: Build a Socialist Left, Inside and Outside of the Unions

**Bryan D. Palmer**

SOME HAVE SUGGESTED that the present global financial meltdown and resulting worldwide recession compare with and rival in significance the economic collapse of the 1930s. It is commonplace to hear in the capitalist west that we now face the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. It is difficult to adjust the television set to CNN and not hear this. It has become part of *Obamaspeak*.

There are other analogies (more political than economic) to the 1930s that are also made, and that labour and socialist activists must consider carefully, as well. They often relate to how workers and their organizations responded to capitalist crises, past and present.

The suggestion is made that out of the last great economic crisis came considerable working-class advance. True on many levels, this claim should not, as I suggest below, be taken to imply that such advance can automatically be assumed as the outcome of the current crisis.

I will forego a serious analysis of the structural issues of political economy that necessarily frame understanding of the current context and that are obviously fundamental to labour's struggle against the consequences of capitalist crisis. It is nonetheless important to recognize a number of salient points that provide a central background to my perspective:

- 1) The current crisis is one phase, albeit advanced, of an ongoing, inexorable, and inevitable crisis of capitalism, rooted in the fundamental tendency of the rate of profit to fall, and the consequent necessity of capital to seek alleviation from pressures in various historically-situated expansions (imperialism, colonialism, technological change, war, "globalization").
- 2) Whatever the "wildness" associated with the subprime mortgage meltdown in the United States and elsewhere, the current crisis is not an aberration, nor can it be reduced to the "irresponsible" acts of certain individuals or economic sectors. The more seriously destabilizing "crisis of production," in