

## Street-Level Advocates Developmental Service Workers Confront Austerity in Ontario

Joseph Courtney et Robert Hickey

Volume 77, 2016

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1036394ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Courtney, J. & Hickey, R. (2016). Street-Level Advocates: Developmental Service Workers Confront Austerity in Ontario. *Labour / Le Travail*, 77, 73–92.

## ARTICLE

# Street-Level Advocates: Developmental Service Workers Confront Austerity in Ontario

**Joseph Courtney and Robert Hickey**

### Introduction

MOST PORTRAYALS OF WORKER RESISTANCE to government austerity involve large scale street demonstrations,<sup>1</sup> new forms of political activism,<sup>2</sup> or models of social unionism organized to present a broad front of resistance through progressive coalitions.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, studies of government austerity often tend to focus on the macroeconomic policies of fiscal restraints,<sup>4</sup> the

1. Thomas Collombat, "Labor and Austerity in Québec: Lessons from the Maple Spring," *Labor Studies Journal* 39, 2 (2014): 140–159, doi: 10.1177/0160449x14531680.

2. Larry Savage and Charles Smith, "Public Sector Unions and Electoral Politics in Canada," in Stephanie Ross and Larry Savage, eds., *Public Sector Unions in the Age of Austerity* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2013), 46–56.

3. Stephanie Ross, "Social Unionism and Union Power in Public Sector Unions," in Ross and Savage, eds., *Public Sector Unions in the Age of Austerity*, 57–68; Amanda Tattersall, *Power in Coalition: Strategies for Strong Unions and Social Change* (Ithaca: ILR Press/Cornell University Press, 2010); Steven Tufts and Mark P. Thomas, "Populist Unionism Confronts Austerity in Canada," *Labor Studies Journal* 39, 1 (2014): 60–82, doi: 10.1177/0160449x14530705.

4. B. Dunn, "Making Sense of Austerity: The Rationality in an Irrational System," *Economic and Labour Relations Review* 25, 3 (2014): 417–434, doi: 10.1177/1035304614547308; J. Peters, "Neoliberal Convergence in North America and Western Europe: Fiscal Austerity, Privatization, and Public Sector Reform," *Review of International Political Economy* 19, 2 (2012): 208–235, doi: 10.1080/09692290.2011.552783; M. Powell, "Making Markets in the English National Health Service," *Social Policy & Administration* 49, 1 (2015): 109–127, doi: 10.1111/spol.12080.

legal erosion of worker rights,<sup>5</sup> and attacks on public sector unions.<sup>6</sup> While these studies provide critical insights into the broader social forces contesting austerity, there has been less scholarly attention to the street-level effects of government austerity on workers, especially workers delivering the very public services most affected by government constraints. The current study builds on the small but important body of literature which examines the specific impacts of government austerity on the quality of public services<sup>7</sup> and on workers and working conditions.<sup>8</sup>

Studying the impacts of government austerity at the level of service delivery also builds on the scholarship which has critically examined the translation of government policies into public services.<sup>9</sup> To fully understand the impacts of government austerity and efforts by workers and service recipients to resist such cuts, it is important to go beyond the macroeconomic debates and study the lived experiences of front line workers. This research study sought to understand the impact of government austerity from the perspective of workers directly involved in the provision of social services. Specifically, this project explored the impact of government austerity in Ontario's developmental services sector on work and working conditions, on the relationships between workers and the people they support, and on union-management relations.

We begin by setting this study of developmental services workers in the context of previous research into theories of street-level bureaucracy<sup>10</sup> and the dynamics of unions in non-profit, social service agencies.<sup>11</sup> Next, we briefly

5. E. Cantin, "The Politics of Austerity and the Conservative Offensive against US Public Sector Unions, 2008–2012," *Relations Industrielles-Industrial Relations* 67, 4 (2012).

6. Savage and Smith, "Public Sector Unions and Electoral Politics in Canada."

7. A. Power, "Personalisation and Austerity in the Crosshairs: Government Perspectives on the Remaking of Adult Social Care," *Journal of Social Policy* 43, 4 (2014): 829–846, doi: 10.1017/S0047279414000373; Ricardo Rodrigues and Caroline Glendinning, "Choice, Competition and Care – Developments in English Social Care and the Impacts on Providers and Older Users of Home Care Services," *Social Policy & Administration* 49, 5 (2014): 649–664, doi: 10.1111/spol.12099.

8. Ian Cunningham, Donna Baines, and Sara Charlesworth, "Government Funding, Employment Conditions, and Work Organization in Non-Profit Services: A Comparative Study," *Public Administration* 92, 3 (2014): 582–598, doi: 10.1111/padm.12060.

9. Michael Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*, (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1980); Cunningham, Baines, and Charlesworth, "Government Funding, Employment Conditions, and Work Organization in Non-Profit Services"; Stuart Cumella, "New Public Management and Public Services for People with an Intellectual Disability: A Review of the Implementation of *Valuing People* in England," *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities* 5, 3 (2008).

10. Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy*.

11. Donna Baines, "In a Different Way: Social Unionism in the Nonprofit Social Services – An Australian/Canadian Comparison," *Labor Studies Journal* 35, 4 (2010): 480–502, doi: 10.1177/0160449x10365543.

describe the developmental services sector in Ontario. In the main analytical section, we explore the key themes expressed by front line workers regarding how they experience the impacts of government austerity on their jobs and on their relationships with the citizens receiving publicly funded social services. We conclude with a brief discussion of the contributions this study makes to the study of labour in a time of government austerity.

### **Austerity, Managerialism, and Street-Level Bureaucracy**

THE STUDY OF WORKERS at non-profit social service agencies facing the constraints of government austerity brings together three distinct streams of scholarship. First, the seminal work by Michael Lipsky on street-level bureaucrats and the more recent critiques and expansion of this theory serve as a critical point of reference for the current study. At the level of service delivery, workers contend with a variety of pressures which may run counter to prescribed policy objectives and preclude avenues for advocacy. Second, government austerity measures following the 2008 global financial crisis have taken place in the context of increasing managerialism among organizations in the broader public sector<sup>12</sup> and broader debates over New Public Management.<sup>13</sup> For front line workers, the ascendancy of managerialism promotes a distinct institutional logic which reinforces the primacy of organizational priorities over the needs of people supported. These managerial changes may present a greater challenge to the discretionary authority of direct support workers than the typical features of street-level bureaucracy.<sup>14</sup> Third, this research connects theories of street-level bureaucracy and government restructuring with the study of workers experiencing government austerity.<sup>15</sup> Bringing these distinct streams of scholarship together can make a significant contribution to the

12. Raewyn Connell, Barbara Fawcett, and Gabrielle Meagher, "Neoliberalism, New Public Management and the Human Service Professions," *Journal of Sociology* 45, 4 (2009): 331–338, doi: 10.1177/1440783309346472; Cunningham, Baines, and Charlesworth, "Government Funding, Employment Conditions, and Work Organization in Non-Profit Services."

13. David Osborne and Ted Gaebler, *Reinventing Government: How the Entrepreneurial Spirit Is Transforming the Public Sector* (New York: Plume, 1992); Janet Vinzant Denhardt and Robert B. Denhardt, *The New Public Service: Serving, Not Steering* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2003).

14. Tony Evans, "Professionals, Managers and Discretion: Critiquing Street-Level Bureaucracy," *British Journal of Social Work* 41, 2 (2011): 368–386, doi: 10.1093/bjsw/bcq074; Tony Evans and John Harris, "Street-Level Bureaucracy, Social Work and the (Exaggerated) Death of Discretion," *British Journal of Social Work* 34, 6 (2004): 871–895, doi: 10.1093/bjsw/bch106.

15. Donna Baines, Sara Charlesworth, and Ian Cunningham, "Fragmented Outcomes: International Comparisons of Gender, Managerialism and Union Strategies in the Nonprofit Sector," *Journal of Industrial Relations* 56, 1 (2014): 24–42, doi: 10.1177/0022185613498664; Tim Fowler, ed., *From Crisis to Austerity: Neoliberalism, Organized Labour, and the Canadian State* (Ottawa: Red Quill Books, 2013).

literature and our understanding of the work experiences of community and social service workers and the various manifestations of worker resistance in the age of austerity.

Lipsky argued that to truly understand public policy, and by extension the real impacts of government programs and services, one needs to study direct service workers and their interactions with citizens. The transmission of government policies into public services often requires face-to-face contact and involves some degree of co-production.<sup>16</sup> Lipsky examined why, despite the development of well-intentioned public policies, institutionalized forms of racism and bias persisted, especially in police and welfare services. He found that social workers and others providing direct services experience a range of organizational and work-related pressures which significantly impact service provision.

Critically, Lipsky found that while workers may enter the field of human services with the best intentions to help others, the ability of front line social service workers to advocate on behalf of clients is undermined by work practices and organizational barriers. First, working conditions, especially in chronically underfunded and understaffed programs, lead to occupational stress and coping strategies that distance direct service providers from recipients of public aid. For example, Lipsky found that direct service workers in the field of social welfare had caseloads which made advocacy unmanageable, and fostered a work culture of an organization under siege. This led front line workers to develop coping strategies which buffered them from the demands of clients. Ultimately, prejudicial behaviours ascribing deservedness among client populations developed into occupational norms.<sup>17</sup>

Second, this body of research has found that organizational priorities and goals may directly conflict with person-centred policy goals and support worker advocacy, especially in the context of government austerity.<sup>18</sup> As Lipsky observes, “the organization hoards resources; the advocate seeks their dispersal to clients.”<sup>19</sup> While resource allocation is a central component of this tension, conflicting organizational goals extend to changing work processes which prioritize paperwork and regulatory compliance over quality outcomes. In this way, organizational practices to constrain resources exacerbate

16. Victor Pestoff, “Towards a Paradigm of Democratic Participation: Citizen Participation and Co-Production of Personal Social Services in Sweden,” *Annals of Public and Cooperative Economics* 80, 2 (2009): 197–224, doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8292.2009.00384.x.

17. Johanna Kallio and Antti Kouvo, “Street-Level Bureaucrats’ and the General Public’s Deservingness Perceptions of Social Assistance Recipients in Finland,” *Social Policy & Administration* 9, 3 (2014): 316–334, doi: 10.1111/spol.12094.

18. Deborah Rice, “Street-Level Bureaucrats and the Welfare State: Toward a Micro-Institutionalist Theory of Policy Implementation,” *Administration & Society* 45, 9 (2013): 1038–1062, doi: 10.1177/0095399712451895.

19. Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy*, 73.

occupational stress through understaffing and service cuts, but such practices also change the nature and purpose of the work. Workers who may have been motivated by a sense of prosocial mission have been forced to adopt resource management objectives to ration services and control clients. This pressure to control clients and thereby limit resource demands on the organization is incompatible with advocacy on behalf of clients.

Finally, the individualized nature of most direct support work in community and social services leaves workers without the power resources necessary to resist managerial pressure and advocate for themselves or their clients. While Lipsky found that civil service rules and similar employment policies gave social workers a limited degree of independent discretion, worker voice and the ability to advocate on behalf of clients was significantly limited by the individualization and isolation of front line workers.

The framework of street-level bureaucrats has made significant contributions to our understanding of the challenges faced by workers on the front lines of delivering public services. However, both contemporary and more recent studies of front line workers have challenged the structural determinism of this framework. The constellation of work-induced stress and organizational priorities in Lipsky's framework would seem to create an insurmountable barrier to workers seeking to make a prosocial impact on the recipients of social services. Much like Robert Michels' theory of the "iron law of oligarchy" which predicted the inevitable drift of leaders in progressive organizations towards self-interest and away from original ideals,<sup>20</sup> Lipsky's framework would seem to create the "iron law of street-level bureaucrats." Workers who enter the human services field based on prosocial motivations, will find those motivations to help displaced by defensive reactions from work-related stress and broader organizational constraints. Just as scholars have shown the malleability of Michels' iron law of oligarchy in labour unions,<sup>21</sup> the deterministic nature of street-level bureaucracy has also been challenged. Critically, Lipsky did not consider collective action by street-level bureaucrats to address organizational constraints and work-related stress.<sup>22</sup>

Scholars have also challenged the degree to which bureaucratic organizations constrain individual worker discretion.<sup>23</sup> Bureaucratic rules may be less of a factor than changes in government funding and managerial practices which assert greater control and scrutiny over the work process. In Margaret

20. Robert Michels, *Political Parties; a Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy* (New York: Collier Books, 1962).

21. Kim Voss and Rachel Sherman, "Breaking the Iron Law of Oligarchy: Union Revitalization in the American Labor Movement," in *American Journal of Sociology* 106, 2 (2000): 303–349.

22. Margaret Levi, *Bureaucratic Insurgency: The Case of Police Unions* (New York: Lexington Books, 1977).

23. Evans, "Professionals, Managers and Discretion"; Evans and Harris, "Street-Level Bureaucracy."

Levi's studies of insurgent bureaucrats, she found that the degradation of work, including the loss of status and discretion on the job, led workers who had previously been considered unlikely to unionize to become militant activists.<sup>24</sup>

More recent studies of the trends towards the adoption of managerialism in social services under the framework of New Public Management have further enhanced the power of organizational priorities over individual worker motivations.<sup>25</sup> The ascension of the New Public Management ideology among advocates for government reform has led to widespread practices of outsourcing public services, competitive bidding, and the adoption of private sector business models among public managers.<sup>26</sup> These managerial practices have been transferred from government funders to third party providers of public services.<sup>27</sup> These changes have had significant impacts on the organizational environment, managerial strategies, and working conditions.

In a comparative study of the impact of New Public Management practices and funding models on non-profit organizations in the UK and Australia, Ian Cunningham and colleagues found significant convergence towards low pay and decreased job security. The emphasis on competition under the New Public Management framework, the constraints on funding, and the adoption of private sector business practices among non-profit managers combined to drive the casualization of work and the degradation of working conditions. The authors also found that the effects of the recession following the global financial crisis and the related government austerity measures served to increase these effects which were already taking place. For front line workers in non-profit social service organizations, managerialism had already been driving the intensification and bureaucratization of work.<sup>28</sup>

For developmental services workers drawn to the field of community services with the best intentions for making a prosocial impact, the ascendancy

24. Levi, *Bureaucratic Insurgency*, 11.

25. Cunningham, Baines, and Charlesworth, "Government Funding, Employment Conditions, and Work Organization in Non-Profit Services."

26. R. Hebdon and P. Jalette, "The Restructuring of Municipal Services: A Canada-United States Comparison," *Environment and Planning C-Government and Policy* 26, 1 (2008); Elliott Sclar, *You Don't Always Get What You Pay For: The Economics of Privatization* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000); M. Warner and A. Hefetz, "Applying Market Solutions to Public Services: An Assessment of Efficiency, Equity, and Voice," *Urban Affairs Review* 38, 1 (2002): 70-89, doi: 10.1177/107808702401097808.

27. Ian Cunningham, "Reshaping Employment Relations in the UK Voluntary Sector: An Exploratory Study into the Impact of Best Value," *Local Government Studies* 34, 3 (2008); Cumella, "New Public Management and Public Services"; David M. Van Slyke, "The Mythology of Privatization in Contracting for Social Services," *Public Administration Review* 63, 3 (2003): 296-315, doi: 10.1111/1540-6210.00291.

28. Donna Baines, "Pro-Market, Non-Market: The Dual Nature of Organizational Change in Social Services Delivery," *Critical Social Policy* 24, 1 (2004): 5-29, doi: 10.1177/0261018304039679.

of managerialism and the barriers to advocacy would seemingly contribute to the “iron law of street level bureaucracy.”<sup>29</sup> The barriers identified by Lipsky expanded and grew under the regime of New Public Management. For individual social service workers, there would seemingly be little capacity or power for advocacy. However, research by Donna Baines and others<sup>30</sup> has identified social unionism as a possible mechanism for overcoming bureaucratic barriers to advocacy. Her research found that human service workers made a direct link between the quality of care and workplace concerns. For these workers, the union was more than just a collective agreement. Value-based union activism led to coalitions with other progressive organizations which enabled workers to successfully advocate on behalf of the citizens they served.<sup>31</sup>

While much of the literature on union resistance to government austerity have focused on macro-economic policies and large scale union mobilizations,<sup>32</sup> the current study seeks to build on the literature in the field of care worker resistance.<sup>33</sup> Central to the resistance to austerity in this perspective is the personal attachment between the care provider and recipient. Care workers mobilize resistance when government austerity results in damages to the bond in caregiving work.<sup>34</sup> In this form of social unionism, protecting clients against the negative effects of government austerity and improving the provision of care are central to worker activism.<sup>35</sup> This experience of solidarity and resistance presents seeming contradictions which this study seeks to examine. For example, in the care-work literature, self-sacrificing behaviour is seemingly consistent with workers’ efforts to resist government austerity. Likewise, studies of union activism by care workers have found examples of union-management coalitions to resist government austerity and the pernicious impacts of New Public Management on vulnerable people.<sup>36</sup>

29. Michels, *Political Parties*.

30. Baines, “In a Different Way”; Paul Johnston, *Success While Others Fail: Social Movement Unionism and the Public Workplace* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 1994).

31. Baines, “In a Different Way”; Donna Baines, Ian Cunningham, and H. Fraser, “Constrained by Managerialism: Caring as Participation in the Voluntary Social Services,” *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 32, 2 (2011): 329–352.

32. Fowler, *From Crisis to Austerity*.

33. Jerry Patrick White, *Hospital Strike: Women, Unions, and Public Sector Conflict* (Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing, 1990).

34. White, *Hospital Strike*, 51.

35. Donna Baines, “Neoliberal Restructuring, Activism/Participation, and Social Unionism in the Nonprofit Social Services,” *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 39, 1 (2010): 10–28.

36. Baines, “Neoliberal Restructuring,” 23.



## Methods

THE OBJECTIVE OF THIS RESEARCH project was to explore the ways in which government austerity has impacted developmental services workers and their ability to provide quality services to supported individuals. The researchers framed austerity as an explicit and sustained policy of government financial constraint following the global financial crisis. Developmental services workers were familiar with government austerity, noting that the sector had experienced chronic and long-term underfunding. Research participants were also familiar with government austerity practices through their union involvement and activism, from union literature on the issues (e.g. research papers, fact sheets, and bulletins), through public campaigns, lobbying of employers and provincial politicians, and collective bargaining.

The researchers provided a letter of information to individual participants that provided details of the study and the research objective. Participation in the research project was voluntary; participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time and have any information removed from the study. Participants were asked to sign a consent form acknowledging that they had read the letter of information and understood the research objective. Signed consent forms also granted the researchers the permission to audio record all six focus group interviews.

Previous quantitative studies conducted by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and Ontario Agencies Supporting Individuals with Special Needs (OASIS), an umbrella organization of developmental services employers, has revealed the human costs of austerity for workers and supported individuals alike.<sup>37</sup> These previous studies had revealed that government underfunding had resulted in cuts in services such as reduced hours of care, eliminated staffing positions, less individualized care, elimination of recreational activities and other community outings and longer wait lists for services and supports. However, largely missing from these data sets are workers' daily, personal experiences with the people whom they support. Through the focus group method the researchers sought to better understand the challenges experienced by developmental services workers in their daily interactions with supported individuals in a climate of government austerity.

Researchers conducted six focus group interviews of developmental services workers in Ontario. Focus groups provided an ideal format for data collection in the study of street-level bureaucracy given the pressures to conform through social interactions. Experiences of government austerity, decisions to resist and advocate are a product of the environment and the interactions of workers on the front line of service provision. The study sites were selected

37. Ontario Agencies Supporting Individuals with Special Needs (hereafter OASIS), "Oasis Operating Pressures Survey Results," (Ottawa: OASIS, 2013). Canadian Union of Public Employees (hereafter CUPE), "Submission to the Select Committee on Developmental Services in Ontario," (Ontario: CUPE, 2014).

to ensure regional representation across Ontario and include urban, rural and Northern communities. The participants recruited by the researchers for the focus groups were local union activists employed at developmental services agencies. The researchers' objective was to select participants who were knowledgeable of the impacts of austerity on the provision of developmental services. Therefore, focus group participants were selected with the assistance of elected union executive members and union staff. The focus group meetings were conducted using a consistent interview guide and the discussions lasted between two and three hours.

A total of 32 developmental services workers participated in the focus group interviews. Each focus group was comprised of not more than eight individual participants. The level of participation ranged between five and eight individuals for the majority of the focus groups; however, for one focus group only two individuals participated. All of the focus groups were held at local union offices during participants' non-work hours.

CUPE National reimbursed participants for expenses for family and/or child care, and transportation costs to attend focus group meetings. The union also gave each participant an honorarium as an expression of thanks for participating in the focus group research.

Focus group participants were neither randomly selected, nor were they representative of the workforce as a whole. However, the participants did reflect the demographic profile of the workforce. As local union activists, the participants included elected officers of local union executive boards and bargaining committee members. All participants worked in direct support positions along with other rank-and-file union members. From these multiple perspectives, participants contributed extensive expertise and a broad understanding of the impacts of government austerity on workers and working conditions in the sector.

Consistent with previous research of this sector, a majority of the participants (N=23 or 72 per cent) were women.<sup>38</sup> However, in contrast to that previous research which found that some 50 per cent of the workforce was part-time, a majority of the focus group participants were full-time workers (N=24 or 75 per cent). The interview guide questions focused on the impacts of the lack of government funding on working conditions, work experiences, and the relationships with people supported. Researchers recorded and transcribed the interviews. Queen's University's General Research Ethics board reviewed and approved the research protocols and the focus group interview guide.

38. Robert Hickey, "Prosocial Motivation, Stress and Burnout among Direct Support Workers," *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities* 27, 2 (2013): 134–144, doi: 10.1111/jar.12058.

The analytical strategies for the study involved two researchers conducting independent, data-driven, thematic analyses of the transcribed data.<sup>39</sup> The researchers discussed the identified themes, examining commonalities and working out differences in thematic interpretations. A comparison of the independent analyses led to the core themes examined in this paper. The researchers presented the initial findings of the study to a union conference of some 100 local leaders and activists in the developmental services sector. The key themes were presented and comments and feedback were solicited to both validate and expand the researchers' understanding of the lived experiences of workers in the sector. Informal, yet more specific conversations were held with six of the key participants to further enrich our understanding from the focus group meetings and validate the thematic analyses.<sup>40</sup>

The professional and personal backgrounds of the researchers were also important considerations in our analytical strategies and overall methodological considerations. Both researchers have a history of union activism and research in the developmental services sector. One member of the team works for CUPE, conducting research, coordinating bargaining strategy, and developing union policy positions in the community and social services sector. The other member of the team has been engaged in participatory research in the sector for nearly a decade. In addition, this researcher has also been heavily involved in the disability rights movement and has served as board president for a local community living association. While the previous experiences and current occupations of the researchers influenced the program of research and analysis of the data, we worked to ensure that the voices of the direct support workers clearly supported the research findings. By presenting and discussing our results with the participants and presenting the original qualitative data from the focus groups, we feel that we have mitigated potential sources of bias while leveraging the researchers' knowledge of the sector.

## Chronic Austerity in Developmental Services

IN ONTARIO, THE MINISTRY of Community and Social Services (MCSS) funds and regulates the provision of developmental services in Ontario. In 2013, the government budget for developmental services was \$1.7 billion.<sup>41</sup> These services include residential and community participation supports for

39. Richard E. Boyatzis, *Transforming Qualitative Information: Thematic Analysis and Code Development* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1998).

40. Carol Grbich, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Introduction* (London: SAGE Publications, 2007).

41. Ministry of Community and Social Services (hereafter MCSS), "Enhancing Support for Adults with a Developmental Disability: Ontario Government Reducing Waitlist Pressures, Improving Services for Those at High Risk," news release, 30 July 2013, <http://news.ontario.ca/mcss/en/2013/07/enhancing-support-for-adults-with-a-developmental-disability.html>.

adults with developmental and intellectual disabilities. The Ontario government no longer provides direct services, having closed the last provincially run institution in 2009. During the 2013–2014 fiscal year, MCSS contracted service delivery through a network of more than 370 not-for-profit community agencies in the sector. The government funded agencies provide residential supports to some 18,000 people with developmental disabilities, yet there were still an estimated 12,000 people on the waitlist for residential supports.<sup>42</sup>

Developmental service workers provide a variety of social services for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, ranging from direct care, to facilitating social inclusion, to supporting employment and other activities of daily living. Most developmental service workers work for community-based, non-profit, charitable agencies. While private, for-profit entities exist in the sector, their footprint remains limited. For-profit operators, commonly referred to as Outside Paid Resources, have tended to be limited to sub-contracted arrangements in which the funds flow through community non-profit agencies. In this way, the for-profit entities typically do not contract directly with government for the provision of services.

Austerity has been a chronic condition in the developmental services sector in Ontario.<sup>43</sup> While the closure of provincially-run institutions resulted in significant cost savings on a per capita basis, the transformation has occurred in the context of strict fiscal constraints across successive governments.<sup>44</sup> The long term effects of the lack of government funding have resulted in low wages for workers and significant recruitment and retention problems for employers in the sector.<sup>45</sup> For workers, the lack of government funding has driven the growth of part-time, casual work, and other contingent employment arrangements.<sup>46</sup>

Government austerity measures have pressured Ontario's non-profit organizations towards managerialism and to adopt budgeting priorities over other service objectives such as greater social inclusion for people supported. For example, community organizations have insisted that an available bedroom in a group living situation be treated as a personal home environment for the people living there, requiring careful selection and matching of compatible roommates. In contrast, government auditors viewed the process more bureaucratically, arguing for a resource-centred vacancy management

42. Select Committee on Developmental Services, "Interim Report," (Government of Ontario, 2014).

43. CUPE, "Submission to the Select Committee on Developmental Services in Ontario."

44. CUPE, "Submission to the Select Committee on Developmental Services in Ontario."

45. KPMG, "Compensation Survey of Selected Positions on Behalf of OARTY, OCCODHA, CMHO, OACOR, OntChild, OACL," (Toronto 2000).

46. CUPE, "Submission to the Select Committee on Developmental Services in Ontario."

procedure rather than person-centred choices in living arrangements.<sup>47</sup> Agencies, attempting to respond to community need in the context of chronic underfunding have been forced to restructure services in ways that result in more congregate settings.<sup>48</sup> As individuals, developmental service workers have had little opportunity and insufficient power to advocate on behalf of the people they support. However, compared to other jurisdictions in the US, UK, and Australia, there is a relatively high unionization rate among developmental services workers in Ontario.

In the past ten years, there have been two important disruptions to this chronic regime of institutionalized austerity in Ontario's developmental services sector. In 2007, a concerted political action campaign, combined with a series of high profile strikes in the sector, compelled the government to bargain directly with unions and to agree to substantial funding increases directed at improving the wages of direct support workers. For two years, agencies received base budget increases and workers received more than just nominal wage increases. However, the global financial crisis and related fiscal pressures led government to return to a state of austerity. While the settlement to the 2007 labour unrest promised three years of government funding increases, the Ontario government refused to fund the final year of promised wage increases stemming from that settlement.

While the increased funding in 2007 provided much needed wage increases, the history of chronic underfunding had led to growing wait lists for services which resulted in increasing numbers of families reaching crisis points. Families with aging parents, who were unable to support their sons or daughters due to their own health concerns, could not find appropriate supports. Other families were experiencing the sudden termination of services as their sons or daughters transitioned from school-based services to adult services funded by MCSS.<sup>49</sup> Desperate for services but facing the prospect of being permanently stuck on government waitlists, there were an increasing number of high-profile cases of parents leaving their adult son or daughter at government offices.<sup>50</sup> These events triggered the Ontario Ombudsman to launch an investigation into the developmental services sector in 2012. Those same political pressures led to the formation of the Select Committee on Developmental Services, an all-party investigative commission which conducted hearings in 2013 and issued a final report in 2014. The political pressures from the stories of families in crisis resulted in a 2014 budget announcement that the

47. Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, "2014 Annual Report of the Office of the Auditor General of Ontario," (Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2014).

48. OASIS, "Oasis Operating Pressures Survey Results."

49. Select Committee on Developmental Services, "Interim Report," 2014.

50. Lisa Preist, "For Those with Intellectual Disabilities, a Decades-Long Wait for a Home and Care," *The Globe and Mail*, 10 April 2012.

government would dedicate \$810 million in new funding for developmental services, including \$200 million for wage increases.<sup>51</sup>

## **Worker Experiences of Government Austerity**

FRONT LINE WORKERS in the developmental services sector have experienced the direct effects of government austerity. The lack of government funding has had extremely personal effects on the experience of work and relationships with people supported. At the same time, from the perspective of the direct support workforce, the larger scale effects have resulted in the degradation of services more generally in the sector. Through a series of focus group discussions, the current project explored the lived experiences of direct support workers. While the conversations touched on many issues, four consistent themes emerged across all six focus groups: workload intensification, re-institutionalization, austerity and labour relations, and solidarity and commitment.

### *Workload intensification*

The experience of workload intensification was a theme common to all six focus group discussions. Several factors contributed to workload intensification including understaffing, increased regulatory compliance, and self-sacrificing behaviours to buffer clients from the negative impacts of service reduction. Chronic understaffing and new cuts in front line staffing from current austerity measures were broadly prevalent among focus group participants. As one focus group participant explained, “Bare bone staffing is the way I look at it. You’re not providing quality of care. You’re providing the basic necessities at some point.” Importantly, as reflected in this brief quote, most focus group participants framed workload intensification as the degradation of the quality of services for the people they support rather than emphasizing increased work demands on staff.

In order to avoid program cuts or cuts in direct service hours, austerity pressures have forced many organizations to reduce supervisors and mid-level managers.<sup>52</sup> These staffing cuts at the managerial level also resulted in workload intensification as supervisory duties were downloaded onto front line staff.

I enter payroll. I have two hours to enter two houses of payroll ... So it takes me now six hours of my eight hour shift to enter payroll where I think managers have an assistant for their five house and that’s what they do, scheduling and payroll.

51. A. Gordon and L. Monsebraaten, “Province Urged to End Wait Lists for the Disabled; Recommendation among 46 Made by All-Party Committee to Overhaul System,” *The Toronto Star*, 12 April 2014.

52. OASIS, “Oasis 2014 Operating Costs Pressures Survey Report Summary,” (Ottawa: OASIS, 2014).

Focus group participants reported that the increased reporting requirements under new government regulations and the associated growth in paperwork developmental service workers are required to complete was another factor contributing to workload intensification.

The amount of paperwork they're throwing on you now. To me, they're concentrating more on the documentation and paperwork than they are on the care of individuals.

Yeah, I mean it happens in education, it happens in health, it happens in social services. You have to justify your existence by spending all of your time doing paperwork. And then you gotta deal with the stupid ministry regulations....

Respondents' comments suggested that in some cases paperwork was given precedence over direct client care.

They want the consistency in their paperwork but our services are inconsistent. Where before, for example, if a report wasn't done on time because you were providing service to a client, that was completely understood. That is not understood anymore. That paperwork is to be done.

Similarly, workers experienced the ascendancy of managerial accountability as directly impacting the quality of services.

The clients are sitting there left to their own devices basically. It's red tape that's getting done to demonstrate to the government that things are being done, but it's being done at the expense of programming. So it's taking away from programming for the clients.

Following legislative changes to the sector in 2008, the Ontario government introduced a broad set of regulations referred to as Quality Assurance Measures. These new regulations, which took effect in 2011, were designed to ensure that agencies provide high quality services through compliance with set standards. In the context of government austerity, policies and procedures designed to ensure high quality standards were experienced by direct support workers as another pressure reducing the amount of quality time they were able to spend with the people they support.

### ***Re-institutionalization***

Disability rights advocates have been successful in efforts to change public policies which have historically segregated and isolated people with disabilities into large scale institutions. The "deinstitutionalization" movement by Community Living associations and other advocacy groups succeeded in closing the last large scale institution in Ontario on March 31, 2009.<sup>53</sup> Such changes to close institutions and to support people with disabilities to live in and be an active part of their communities were reported by focus group participants as a major source of motivation and pride in their work.

53. Andre Picard, "Disabilities Not a Reason to Send a Person to 'Jail'" *The Globe and Mail*, 2 April 2009.

I'm talking back 30 years ago when we were not accepted and we had to make the path. And we had to smooth the edges to bring folks out into the community and have that embracing so that they could then ... do the things they wanted to do. It was tough. It was a tough go. It's better now. It's progressed in a lot of ways. And I truly believe that's why I've stayed. The advocacy piece is huge.

However, another dominant theme among focus groups participants was the experience of re-institutionalization resulting from the pressures from government austerity. Participants noted that chronic government underfunding resulting in staffing shortages, increased documentation and paperwork expectations, and increased workloads has compromised their ability to provide individualized levels of care to the people they support. Changes in the ways in which services could be delivered were once again isolating and segregating people with disabilities. As one respondent put it, supported individuals are "house-bound" due to a lack of resources: "There's a lot of locations where people just sit at home. You'd be surprised how many people sit at home because they don't have the staffing." Another participant observed that it has become increasingly difficult for supported individuals to participate in community life due to a lack of staff:

I have individuals that complain to me ... or complain to my supervisor that they can't get out and they can't do things. I had an individual that was like, begging me to take him for a walk the other day. Like, how sad is that? One of us just can't leave unless we take four people with us, or we just take that one individual, or we all go out at once, which, you know, that takes some planning. You just don't have the time to spend with them and even sometimes have a conversation about how their day was.

Yet another respondent stated that the role of developmental service workers has shifted from providing individualized supports to one of "caretaker."

While the transformation of developmental services from large institutions to community-based agencies has been the explicit goal of government policy for over a decade,<sup>54</sup> front line workers experience the impacts of austerity as pressures driving the re-institutionalization of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The impact of austerity highlights the internal conflicts in the logic of government reform and specifically the transformation of developmental services.

The shift from government-run institutions to community-based services reflects at least two distinct forces driving transformation of the developmental services sector. On the one hand, disability rights advocates, including persons with disabilities, parents, and support workers, have advocated for the closure of large institutions and an end to public policies which segregate and isolate people with disabilities. At the same time, government reformers following the logic of New Public Management found common cause with the de-institutionalization movement as an opportunity to shift the provision

54. mcSS, *Opportunities and Action: Transforming Supports in Ontario for People Who Have a Developmental Disability*, (Toronto: Government of Ontario, 2006).



of publicly funded services to non-profit agencies.<sup>55</sup> This shift from state-run institutions to community-based agencies resulted in significant cuts to the wages of workers in the sector.<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, developmental service workers recruited by the community-based service providers were attracted by the mission and values of the non-profit agencies which emphasize community living and social inclusion for people with developmental disabilities.

The continued focus of government reformers on cost containment and related austerity measures as the priority in the continued transformation of the sector has resulted in increasing conflicts with the community living values of the disability rights movement. Developmental service workers, collectively empowered by value-based unionism,<sup>57</sup> voiced concerns that government austerity was leading to the re-institutionalization of people with intellectual and development disabilities. Such experiences were reflected in the following exchange among focus group participants:

Q: What kind of impact has the lack of government funding increases had on your workload?

“Well, we don’t support people anymore.”

“Or not as much as we should be.”

“Yeah.”

“Basically we’ve built mini-institutions.”

“Which goes against what the original founding principles were.”

“I always say, but I wish I could do more. I wish I could do more for her.”

“And we could do more.”

A similar conversation occurred at another focus group location.

“Basically, they’re cutting away all the extras. They’re leaving us enough time to feed, shower, clean, you know the basic necessities, but all the extra stuff like going to hockey games, all the stuff that makes our guys part of a community is being taken away slowly until they’re gonna be housebound.”

“It’s mini-warehousing.”

“Yeah!”

“It’s no different than the institutions, but on a smaller scale.”

Central to the experience of government austerity for developmental service workers was concern over the impact it was having on the people they support.

55. Baines, “Pro-Market, Non-Market”; Cunningham, Baines, and Charlesworth, “Government Funding, Employment Conditions, and Work Organization in Non-Profit Services”; Osborne and Gaebler, *Reinventing Government*.

56. David L. Braddock and Dale Mitchell, *Residential Services and Developmental Disabilities in the United States: A National Survey of Staff Compensation, Turnover, and Related Issues* (Washington, DC: American Association on Mental Retardation, 1992).

57. Baines, “In a Different Way.”

Specifically, government austerity was driving the re-institutionalization of people with disabilities and turning community-based supports into assembly-line style custodial care.

### ***Austerity and labour relations***

For human service workers providing direct supports at non-profit organizations, the impact of austerity has resulted in complex and strained labour relations practices. Union activists described difficult local negotiations with employers financially constrained by government austerity. Most local agencies receive the overwhelming majority of operating funds as part of government service contracts. Between 2009 and 2014, not only did the government refuse to allocate increases to base budgets, but the Ontario government also established policy directives for broader public sector employers to negotiate wage freezes or “net zero” changes in compensation. Union leaders recognized that managers at the non-profit agencies were not to blame and responsibility lay squarely with the government funder.

I'm going to say we have a pretty decent relationship with upper management. I feel we have a great relationship with the (executive director) but it's been tough because the employer is cutting and demanding more because they don't have the funding, then we have to step in and say wait a minute....

Unlike typical labour relations in the for-profit sector, the ghost employer role of government as the funder ultimately responsible for working conditions has created a coalition between union workers and local managers. “We're kind of in it together. And it was indicative to me at our last round of negotiations. The executive director is the first to say he understands that we are underpaid.” This dynamic of labour and management uniting against government austerity mitigates the organizational barriers to street-level advocacy. The mission, vision and values of the local non-profit agencies are not eclipsed by the financial constraints imposed by government. Such experiences and the awareness of the distinction between government imposed austerity and non-profit managerial practice creates opportunities for union-management collaboration in lobbying even while the parties may experience collective bargaining conflicts. For front line workers, union activism seeks to re-affirm the prosocial mission of the organization and thus mitigate the “iron law of street-level bureaucracy.”

Without increased government transfers, the only way to achieve even modest wage increases involved reduction in staff, thereby exacerbating the problems with workload and further contributing to the degradation of service quality. “The last seven layoffs were due strictly to (wage increases), because there was no increase in the base budgets. They (management) did not have the money to give us the raises.” In this way, direct support workers experienced government austerity as the impossible choice between living wages on the one hand, and increasing workloads and deteriorating service quality on the other.

*Commitment and solidarity*

In addition to finding that resistance to government austerity created complex dynamics in union-management conflict and cooperation, direct support workers also expressed distinct notions of solidarity and commitment. Solidarity in the workplace was not limited to collective action focused on economic issues, but for direct support workers, the quality of life for the people they support was directly linked to their own interests as workers. In contrast to historical characterizations of conflict with management and employee voice on the job<sup>58</sup> as limited to worker self-interest in working conditions and control of the work process, direct support workers describe voice as advocating for people with disabilities. In this way, the study has affirmed the central importance described in the care worker literature of the social bond between a worker and client.<sup>59</sup>

The biggest challenge I have right now is that when people at head office ... decide where people are going to live or where they're going to be supported and they say okay you're moving in 10 days, here's your new staff info. So for me, because we don't have a voice to help them because we're employees and they don't have a voice, you just feel helpless. I feel very helpless all the time when it comes to supporting somebody and granting their wishes.

From the perspective of developmental services workers, economic concerns on the job are inseparable from concerns over the quality of supports and services. Concern over the quality of life for people supported is a primary motivation, not a secondary outcome of union activism.<sup>60</sup>

For me the most challenging is the fact that we can't sustain our lives with (the) money (we earn). And the second part to that, the most challenging is the game and battle you have to play with the management all the time in order to – and I don't mean specific people, I just mean the management in general – about supporting your people.

For social service workers in the current study, notions of solidarity on the job were very distinct from traditional models of occupational or industrial solidarity. As jokingly expressed by one focus group participant, “I enjoy the people I work with. I'm not referring to the staff, [laughter].” While notions of union solidarity certainly included organized collective action with co-workers, a central feature in the identities of direct support workers was the daily experiences of solidarity with the people they support. This relationship of solidarity with the people supported was another key factor in overcoming the barriers to advocacy stemming from the work-related stress of client interactions identified by Lipsky.<sup>61</sup> For the police officers, school teachers and social workers described in those studies, occupational stress and the individualization of

58. Richard B. Freeman and James L. Medoff, *What Do Unions Do?* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

59. Baines, “Neoliberal Restructuring”; White, *Hospital Strike*.

60. Baines, “Neoliberal Restructuring.”

61. Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy*.

the workforce lead to depersonalization of the clients and an organizational culture focused on defending staff from client demands. In contrast, all of the focus groups in the current study expressed this multi-faceted view of solidarity as an essential component of their union activism.

## Discussion and Conclusion

FOR MOST OF THESE FOCUS GROUP participants working at the front lines of the delivery of public services, concerns over government austerity were not framed as contested macroeconomic models<sup>62</sup> rather, austerity was framed by its impacts on service recipients. A consistent theme in the experience of austerity by developmental services workers was that austerity was typically framed and understood by its impacts on people supported. These workers were keenly sensitive to how the lack of government funding has led to the degradation in the quality of services and the lives of the people they supported. Even the direct impacts of austerity on wages and working conditions were inextricably linked to the quality of services in the minds of front line staff. Workers readily identified the contradictions between public policy goals and the financial impacts of government austerity measures.

Union activism among developmental services workers blended traditional forms of workplace solidarity with value-based unionism and solidarity with people supported.<sup>63</sup> Workers described their resistance to government austerity through lobbying, protests, and other forms of union activism as a form of advocacy for the people they support. From this perspective, unionization in the sector not only generates bargaining power but also the ability to more effectively advocate on behalf of the people supported.

There was also significant evidence of the power of austerity to pressure individual workers to engage in self-sacrificing behaviour in order to buffer the people they support from the negative effects of government austerity.<sup>64</sup> While union activists publicly criticized self-sacrificing behaviour such as completing paperwork at home, they acknowledged that some members felt obliged to work off-the-clock to protect the people they support. Indeed, some of the union activists participating in the study admitted to taking paperwork home with them or engaging in other off-the-clock work. On the one hand, workers saw these practices as explicitly exploitative, forced on them by the lack of sufficient funding by government and by the workload intensification by local management. At the same time, workers described these practices as a form of resistance to austerity and an effort to buffer the people they support from the

62. Daniel Yergin and Joseph Stanislaw, *The Commanding Heights: The Battle for the World Economy*, rev. ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002).

63. Baines, "In a Different Way."

64. Donna Baines, "Caring for Nothing: Work Organization and Unwaged Labour in Social Services," *Work Employment Society* 18, 2 (2004): 267–295, doi: 10.1177/09500172004042770.

increasingly negative impacts of government practices.<sup>65</sup> In addition, for developmental services workers, such sacrifices protect the personal bond they have with people that goes beyond their role as paid employees. “We’re paid to do the work. We’re not paid to care about them. That just happens over time in getting to know the person. We’re not paid to care.”

The continued existence of long wait lists for developmental services in Ontario ensures that the supply of services will never adequately meet demand, at least in the short term. Progressive ideals and a desire to have a prosocial impact on others can wither in the face of high levels of occupational stress and intense workloads. Previous research of developmental services workers in Ontario found nearly eighteen per cent of the workforce reported experiencing high levels of emotional exhaustion.<sup>66</sup>

The case of Ontario’s developmental services sector demonstrates how union activism serves as a critical mechanism to overcome the barriers to advocacy. Instead of turning into street-level bureaucrats, these developmental services workers in Ontario were able to overcome the organizational barriers and individual pressures towards bureaucracy and ensure their role as street-level advocates in the community. An important contribution of this study builds on the vital role of social bonds in the care-worker literature. Specifically, the case demonstrates a critical distinction between forms of union solidarity which are limited to co-workers and the type of solidarity experienced by the workers in this study. Client-centred solidarity, in which the social bonds of care work form part of the very fabric of the union, reflects a distinct form of social unionism. In contrast, unions based on bureaucratic forms of solidarity limited to co-workers and working conditions, could insulate workers from the demands of both management and clients. Instead, expressions of solidarity reflected an inseparable link between the working conditions and treatment of developmental services workers on the one hand, and respect and social inclusion of people supported on the other. This additional element of solidarity, connecting the working conditions of the service providers with the quality of services for people supported, was necessary to overcome bureaucracy and engage in street-level advocacy

65. Baines, “Caring for Nothing.”

66. Hickey, “Prosocial Motivation.”