ORGANIZED LABOUR AND
THE SHIFTING LANDSCAPE OF
LOCAL POLITICS IN ONTARIO

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Abstract
The shifting provincial-municipal landscape in Ontario, which has positioned local
government as central to the neoliberal project, has created both strategic oppor-
tunities and risks for organized labour. This article explores how the provincial state
has used downloading and neoliberal municipal restructuring to shift the balance
of class forces in local politics and provides analytical context against which to
examine organized labour’s attempts to pursue progressive policy outputs in this
new environment.

Introduction
This article is concerned with the question of union strategy
in relation to the growing neoliberal character of Ontario municipal politics.
Amendments to the province’s Municipal Act, which took effect over the
course of the last decade, have officially bolstered the autonomy and flexi-
bility of the province’s local governments by providing them with substantial
new powers and responsibilities. Despite this new level of autonomy,
however, local governments’ room to manoeuvre has paradoxically been
restrained through significant neoliberal restructuring and provincial
downloading, thus frustrating the development of a culture of progressive
policy development and implementation in municipal politics. While local
governments struggle to keep existing infrastructure in repair, hold the line
on property taxes, and balance the books, pressure mounts to develop public-
private partnerships (P3s), cut community services, and reorient local
decisionmaking around attracting capital and investment. These pressures have only intensified in the wake of the Great Recession, which has led to higher levels of unemployment, increased demand for social services, and declining property tax revenues.¹

These dynamics have important implications for urban-based labour movements and various social movements seeking progressive policy outputs from local governments in the context of growing inequality and social polarization.² Throughout the article, the term “progressive” is used to describe a municipal policy agenda characterized by a focus on the protection and expansion of public services, a greater emphasis on reducing economic and political inequalities between citizens, heightened concern for environmental sustainability, and increased opportunities for grassroots participation in municipal decisionmaking. Organized labour is but one social movement actor working to define progressive policy at the municipal level. From time to time, unions forge alliances with other social movements on specific issues—for example, green infrastructure and “Buy Local” initiatives with environmentalists; the defence of public services with antipoverty organizations; and governance reform with local democratic reform movements. For the purposes of this article, however, a specific focus on organized labour is justified on the basis of the movement’s broad province-wide scope via its local community-based labour councils and its unprecedented investment in municipal political strategies in the past decade.

The shifting provincial-municipal landscape in Ontario, which has positioned local government as central to the project of neoliberal globalization, has created both strategic opportunities and risks for organized labour. This article explores how the provincial state has used neoliberal municipal restructuring and downloading to bolster the strength of wealthy elites, developers, and financial capital at the expense of the urban working class, and provides analytical context against which to examine organized labour’s engagement with neoliberalism in local politics.

The article begins by examining how local governments have become central to the project of neoliberal globalization and then describes the interplay between provincial-municipal relations and the neoliberalization of local politics under the Harris and McGuinty governments respectively. The
Harris government is a logical starting point because that government oversaw a major restructuring of municipal government in Ontario in the late 1990s, the likes of which the province had not experienced since the creation of 10 regional local governments between 1969 and 1974. The article then goes on to explore how the shifting landscape of municipal politics in Ontario has influenced the politics of organized labour, highlighting both the opportunities and obstacles facing labour unions in Ontario's contemporary municipal political arena. The article concludes by making the case that labour movement resistance to neoliberal restructuring in local politics, to date, has tended to focus on the symptoms of neoliberalism and not its underlying logic, thus underscoring the severe limitations of electoral and regulatory strategies in the municipal political arena.

Cities as Agents of Neoliberalism Although municipalities have long been dominated by a capitalist class of developers sometimes referred to as the “property industry,” local governments are increasingly shaped and influenced by the political and economic dynamics of neoliberal globalization. As Jessop notes, neoliberalism gives cities a greater role in “managing the interface between the local economy and global flows, between the potentially conflicting demands of local sustainability and local well-being and those of international competitiveness, and between the challenges of social exclusion and global polarization.” As a central component of the urban process under capitalism, “accumulation by dispossession” (the tendency of neoliberalism to redistribute rather than to generate wealth) is structurally apparent in local governments’ pursuit of deregulation, privatization, and corporate tax reduction.

The neoliberal city 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. These constraints have led to significant budgetary shortfalls, particularly in social policy areas downloaded to local government.

Downloading was a key neoliberal administrative mechanism for both
federal and provincial governments in the 1990s. It was designed, in the words of Greg Albo, to facilitate the “move from universal non-market provision of social services, with democratic pressure to advance to higher standards, toward market provided services that are both priced and delivered at lower standards for the average user.” The downloading of additional responsibilities and costs to municipalities in Ontario created a financial crunch at the local level, leading to increased competitive pressures between municipalities to attract business and investment in order to widen the property tax base. The logic of the vicious circle of intercity competition, in turn, led to pressures to lower commercial property taxes, thus shifting an increasing portion of the tax burden onto residents as part of a neoliberal economic race to the bottom.

Although North American cities are not strangers to interurban competition, the imposition of neoliberal globalization has sharpened the need for local governments to prioritize economic growth and development, and it has severely undermined the bargaining power of municipalities vis-à-vis prospective urban developers. Indeed, while municipalities continue to hold legal authority over how and where to develop (albeit in a manner that is qualified by the Ontario Municipal Board), mobile developers are often in a position to “dictate the terms of development and force the city to rewrite its bylaws or regulations.” In many ways, proponents of neoliberalism imagine “the market as the inner regulator of the state rather than the state as the external regulator of the market” and use this logic to pressure local governments to prioritize economic growth and development over social investment and equitable wealth redistribution. As a result, decisions by local governments “are increasingly driven by cost-benefit calculations rather than missions of service, equity and social welfare.”

However, municipalities should not be misunderstood as passive victims of neoliberal restructuring at the subnational level. Rather, neoliberalism operates, and is legitimated, through the political institutions of the state, and local government has become increasingly central to the political project of neoliberalism. This is particularly evident in the way that municipal governments change designations around planning and zoning, and adjust industrial and commercial property tax rates as a way of making the city
more hospitable to neoliberal imperatives. Neoliberalism, on an ideological level, promotes an extremely limited role for governments. Paradoxically, however, in practice neoliberalism relies on governments to play an active role in social reproduction; building local labour markets; training the workforce; expanding urban infrastructure; and attracting investment. A number of municipalities faced with deindustrialization and the corresponding erosion of the property tax base have attempted to reinvent their local economies by attracting new investment and encouraging unrestrained development with the assistance of place-marketing, tax increment financing, and P3s, all at the expense of traditional municipal service delivery geared towards citizens. The fiscal benefits of such a neoliberal economic approach are ambiguous at best. Not only are the social and environmental impacts of these development proposals routinely ignored in favour of the perceived economic benefits, but city councils also tend to grossly overestimate the economic reward of unrestrained development, conveniently forgetting that although new development increases tax revenues, it also increases municipal expenditures, possibly in disproportionate ways, leading to an even greater tax burden on municipal residents over the long term.

Neoliberal Municipal Reform in Ontario In the case of Ontario, the neoliberalization of local politics began in earnest with the election of the Mike Harris Progressive Conservative government in June 1995. Inspired by municipal reforms in Alberta under the Right-wing Klein government in the early 1990s, the Harris government’s highly controversial municipal restructuring scheme included forced amalgamations and considerable downloading of responsibilities, including social services, to the municipal level. Although the Tories had not campaigned specifically on the issues of municipal amalgamation or downloading, the Harris government pursued its local government agenda in a very aggressive manner and, in the process, withstood significant opposition from municipal politicians and Left-leaning citizens’ organizations concerned about the impact on local democracy.

Provincial downloading shifted greater responsibility for social assistance, social housing, waste water treatment, park and highway maintenance, and other services to municipalities while reducing municipal access to provin-
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cial transfer payments. In total, the Harris government cut transfer payments to municipalities by $650 million. The Conservatives argued that downloading responsibilities to municipalities would be revenue neutral because the provincial government would assume the share of education costs previously covered by municipal property taxes. Once the Harris government’s reforms were fully implemented, however, it became clear that the costs downloaded to municipalities were significantly larger than the education costs assumed by the provincial government. As a result, Ontario’s cities and towns experienced a major financial squeeze, which led to cuts in municipal services and increased property taxes in most jurisdictions. The dramatic shift in the source of local government funding after the election of the Harris government in 1995 is documented in Table 1.

The economic deficits caused by neoliberal restructuring in Ontario municipal politics were matched by equally alarming democratic deficits. Rejecting the advice of appointed experts, in December 1996 the Harris government moved ahead with a plan to amalgamate the existing City of Toronto with five suburban municipalities. The new City of Toronto would

Table 1: Sources of Local Government Revenue in Ontario as of % of Total Revenue 1988–2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Property taxes</th>
<th>Transfers</th>
<th>User fees and other revenue sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
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<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>25</td>
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<td>2006</td>
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<td>45</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>20</td>
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Source: Statistics Canada Catalogue 13F-0024
have 2.4 million residents, thus giving it a population larger than most Canadian provinces. In an effort to fight the provincial government’s forced amalgamation, city leaders organized a municipal referendum in which more than 70 percent of voters rejected the proposal, thanks, in part, to a grassroots anti-amalgamation campaign led by former Toronto mayor John Sewell and the Citizens 4 Local Democracy. Undeterred, the province ignored the referendum result and moved forward with its plan to restructure Toronto’s municipal government.

The highly contested creation of the Toronto megacity foreshadowed a series of forced municipal amalgamations in Ottawa, Hamilton, Sudbury, Kingston, and several other smaller municipalities across the province. Between 1997 and 1999, the number of municipalities in Ontario shrank by 229. In total, the Harris government’s municipal amalgamations caused the number of municipal councillors to be cut from 4,586 to 2,804. The number of elected school board trustees was reduced from 1,900 to 700 as a result of the provincially mandated school board consolidations during the same period. In virtually every case, municipal councils and residents disapproved of the province’s amalgamation schemes, but lacked the constitutional authority to resist them.

Municipal amalgamation also had a direct impact on organized labour, forcing the creation of new bargaining units, which, in turn, triggered representation votes to determine which union would become the bargaining agent for city workers in each new municipality. The labour movement, while fervently opposed to the Harris government, did not put up much of a fight against the provincial government’s municipal amalgamations and, in the case of Toronto, generally steered clear of Citizens 4 Local Democracy. This is because public sector unions, at least at the level of the leadership, understood that amalgamation, despite its shortcomings, could potentially bolster union membership. This is precisely what happened in the new City of Toronto, which inherited 55 separate collective agreements from the former municipalities of Scarborough, North York, Etobicoke, Toronto, York, and East York. As dictated by the terms of amalgamation, municipal workers were forced to participate in representation votes that grew the membership of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), already a dominant
union in municipal government, by bringing thousands of previously nonunion recreation workers and hundreds of previously nonunion office workers into the union fold.\textsuperscript{27}

Amalgamation also provided municipal unions with the best wage settlements and contract language from among the existing collective agreements as a base from which to bargain new collective agreements. In some cases, this facilitated the elevation of salary and benefit packages for a large number of municipal workers. This unintended consequence, combined with widespread local opposition to forced amalgamation, possibly dampened the Harris government’s interest in pursuing this particular strategy in its second term.

Instead, the government shifted focus by passing the \textit{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,” which allowed municipalities to administer and organize their affairs and deliver services more autonomously and with a greater degree of flexibility.\textsuperscript{28} This new, more permissive policy framework facilitated the development of P3s by municipalities—a key component of neoliberal economic restructuring.

In response to the fiscal crisis created by neoliberal restructuring and provincial downloading, many municipalities pressured the provincial government to upload services, while an increasing number of others sought new sources of revenue generation in order to pay for them.\textsuperscript{29} Continued urbanization, the corresponding growth of large metropolitan cities, and increased immigration all drove municipal demand for greater powers to deal with these significant demographic trends.

In May 2004, in an effort to ease the financial burden on local governments, then-Liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin announced a “New Deal for Cities and Communities,” which, as its centrepiece, promised to allocate a small portion of federal gas tax revenues towards development and maintenance of municipal infrastructure.

In 2006, the McGuinty Liberal government, which replaced the Harris government in 2003, passed the \textit{City of Toronto Act, 2006}, a separate municipal statute for Toronto that gave the city greater decisionmaking 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.\textsuperscript{30}

The new government’s decision to grant the City of Toronto more powers was made partly in recognition of the fact that the City is larger than most provincial governments in Canada. In Ontario, however, special treatment for the City of Toronto never sits well with the rest of the province. In order to appease municipal politicians outside of Toronto, the provincial government passed the \textit{Municipal Statute Law Amendment Act, 2006}, which extended some of the powers granted to the City of Toronto to other municipalities in Ontario and introduced new requirements for accountability and transparency in municipal affairs, including the establishment of codes of conduct and ethics guidelines.

Unlike the Harris government, the McGuinty Liberals did not prioritize municipal amalgamations. The provincial government showed little interest, however, in undoing them, either. After campaigning in favour of respecting local decisions concerning de-amalgamation in the 2003 provincial election, the new Liberal government quickly reversed itself once in office by ignoring a local referendum to de-amalgamate the new municipality of Kawartha Lakes.\textsuperscript{31} Instead, the McGuinty government would focus on the issue of municipal service delivery.

In late 2006, the McGuinty government launched the Provincial-Municipal Fiscal and Service Delivery Review. The review, developed in response to municipal outcry about the fiscal crisis caused by provincial downloading, considered the appropriate role for the province and its municipalities in terms of funding and delivery of services in Ontario. In October 2008, based on the review’s findings, the provincial government announced that it would gradually upload municipal responsibility for funding social assistance over an eight-year period beginning in 2010. However, municipalities would still be responsible for roughly half the cost of social assistance, thus ensuring that Ontario would remain the only province in Canada in which municipalities still cover a significant portion of the cost of social services. The McGuinty government also announced that it would gradually upload the costs associated with court security, prisoner trans-
portation, and the portion of the Ontario Disability Support Plan funded by municipalities. Although most municipal leaders praised the agreement, which was negotiated between the province, the City of Toronto, and the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO), a vocal minority complained that the province had not gone far enough in undoing the damage caused by the Harris government’s downloading. Sarnia Mayor Mike Bradley, for example, argued that the deal was “an overall defeat for our communities because we are going to have the same unfair burden year after year, with some relief in certain areas over 10 years.”

Recalling that the previous provincial governments had downloaded responsibility and costs associated with more than just social assistance and court security, Bradley reasoned that “If there’s any mayor out there that thinks this is a good deal they probably thought Napoleon won at Waterloo.”

The politics of uploading and downloading public services is certainly very complex and its implications for organized labour are indeterminate. While, in the abstract, unions have tended to focus on ensuring that public services are funded appropriately, regardless of which level of government is providing them, things are rendered more difficult for the specific unions that represent workers who deliver the public services in question. For those unions, it depends on what is being uploaded or downloaded and to what ends. Uploading and downloading, much like municipal amalgamations, can result in competitive union representation votes that pit various unions against each other. A union that is numerically strong at one level of government may vocally or tacitly support downloading or uploading primarily on the basis that such a move is likely to deliver a greater number of dues-paying members to the organization. While these political considerations are rarely the subject of labour’s public discourse, they very much influence how some unions make decisions internally.

While the McGuinty government demonstrated a willingness to work with municipalities, the Liberals did little to reverse the real financial impact of years of Conservative downloading and amalgamation. As such, municipalities continue to face a serious financial crunch despite their growing importance as economic generators and social service providers.
Resisting Neoliberalism in Local Politics  Roger Keil argues that “urban neoliberalism creates new conditions for the accumulation of capital; yet it also inevitably creates more fissures in which urban resistance and social change can take root.”\(^35\) This dynamic exists because although urban capitalist factions are “united on the big questions,” they “compete at a more discrete level to secure the conditions of accumulation, in their respective sectors or to gain narrower firm advantages.”\(^36\) More importantly, neoliberal urbanism faces the dilemma of making urban spaces and workforces useful to capital accumulation, but also has to ensure social reproduction; the conflicts between these two imperatives create the terrain on which urban social movements organize. In this context, organized labour and its social movement partners have significant opportunities to disrupt, contest, or resist the increasingly neoliberal municipal landscape.

Although some unions, particularly those representing municipal employees, have long been active participants in local politics in Ontario, most labour organizations showed little interest in municipal government in the postwar period, largely because of the inability of city governments to affect the larger economic and policy changes sought by the labour movement.\(^37\) In recent years, however, amid massive restructuring of municipal government, unions have developed a much greater stake in shaping the contours of contemporary local politics, and their collective level of participation in municipal politics has increased accordingly. Traditionally, organized labour has fought hard to be recognized within official state structures as a “legitimate” stakeholder. As such, union approaches to resisting neoliberalism in local politics have predictably taken the form of either state-centred electoral strategies or regulatory strategies to increase bargaining power.

Electoral Strategies  Most union electoral activity at the federal or provincial level in Ontario is done in concert or in collaboration with political parties. The province of Ontario, however, has had very limited experience with municipal parties. The most prominent was the Metro New Democratic Party (NDP), an unofficial wing of the Ontario NDP, which endorsed and supported candidates running for city council and school board positions in Metro Toronto in the 1970s and 1980s. Although the party encouraged
NDP-endorsed candidates to use the party’s colours and logo on election materials, the party could not convince all individual candidates to comply, thus undermining the effort to build a labour-friendly municipal party. Although a number of NDP-endorsed candidates managed to secure election and went on to form an informal NDP caucus on Toronto city council, the absence of a legal framework to help develop and sustain a municipal political party ultimately stunted the Metro NDP’s ability to develop a culture of formal partisanship at city hall.38 The absence of organized civic political parties in Ontario has undermined effective labour and social movement electoral activity in the face of well-organized and dominant business interests. Indeed, municipal elections are, and always have been, overwhelmingly dominated by business and the development industry—the major forces bankrolling individual campaigns.39 With no legal framework in place in Ontario that would allow municipal party fundraising or for party affiliations to appear on election ballots, partisan Left-wing efforts to organize electorally around common issues or platform positions have proven to be extremely limiting.

Working strategically to overcome these obstacles in the face of unprecedented municipal restructuring, the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) shifted its focus to Ontario local politics in a highly organized way for the first time in advance of the November 2006 municipal elections. In the months preceding the elections, community-based labour councils affiliated with the CLC held a series of strategy sessions, schools for campaign managers and candidates, public speaking and media courses, and political-organizer training sessions in 21 cities across the province. Labour councils also interviewed prospective municipal candidates and issued questionnaires in an effort to identify politicians worthy of labour’s support, regardless of party affiliation. 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.40 In the 2010 municipal elections that followed, the labour movement sharpened its focus and endorsed 345 municipal candidates, 285 of whom went on to claim victory on Election Day.
Labour’s interest in electing pro-labour municipal politicians was fuelled, in part, by a desire to aggressively promote a more proactive, socially-progressive policy role for municipal councils, with an emphasis on green infrastructure renewal and local procurement. To date, however, it appears that local politicians of all political stripes have been slow to champion the development of a new progressive culture in local politics, despite the new powers available to municipalities through the Municipal Act. This dynamic was evident in the case of David Miller’s two-term regime as Mayor of the City of Toronto from 2003 to 2010. Miller, whose “progressive coalition” enjoyed strong electoral support from the city’s labour and social movements, walked a fine line between progressive social policy development and neoliberal restructuring.

While his strong commitment to keep city services public won him praise from progressives, Miller’s attempts to transform Toronto into a “creative” global city, dependent first and foremost on the internationalization of capital, has been the subject of some criticism from Left scholars. Specifically, Miller has been criticized for shifting the property tax burden from the commercial to the residential base, for his use of tax incentives to attract “knowledge-based” jobs to the city, and for supporting the waiving of developer zoning and density requirements to make Toronto more hospitable to international capital, often at the expense of the city’s working-class population.

While Miller was celebrated by the Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW) for securing a 50 percent Canadian content rule for the assembly of Toronto Transit Commission vehicles, he raised the ire of Toronto’s public sector unions in the summer of 2009 with his perceived mishandling of a bitter 39-day CUPE municipal workers’ strike. As a result, the Mayor was told that he was not welcome to march in the annual Labour Day parade organized by the Toronto and York Region Labour Council. John Cartwright, the Council’s president, explained that Miller’s presence would be akin to “somebody’s ex-wife showing up at a wedding celebration.” In the end, Miller opted not to pursue a third term and the political fallout from the municipal workers’ strike fuelled Rob Ford’s successful mayoral run in 2010.

The Miller experience, not unlike labour’s uneasy relationship with NDP
provincial governments, was fraught with contradictions because the promise of social democracy in local politics increasingly evolved into a kinder, gentler variant of neoliberalism. As such, the Miller regime represents a cautionary tale for labour and social movements. It should serve as a reminder that the conservative political culture and neoliberal framework under which municipal governments currently operate represent huge obstacles to the achievement of progressive public policy outputs, let alone a more transformative political project that would reject neoliberal accumulation strategies outright.

It is worth noting that labour movement resistance to neoliberalism in local politics is not uniform. Unions are not monolithic political organizations. They often disagree with one another, even internally, about political strategy. That has certainly been the case with the CLC’s municipal election initiative, which draws uneven support from affiliates. In some smaller communities, union locals found it politically difficult to withhold endorsements from their own members who were vying for municipal office, whether endorsed by the local labour council or not. Building and construction trade unions, which have never been closely aligned with the CLC in the realm of electoral politics, did not engage much with the CLC’s municipal initiative. This is hardly surprising given that these unions, which have traditionally trumpeted urban development as a form of job creation, are often closely aligned with pro-development municipal politicians from the Right of the political spectrum.

**Regulatory Strategies** Building and construction trade unions provide an excellent example of how labour can leverage bargaining capacity, or some other material benefit, from employers or developers with the assistance of municipal regulatory strategies. While some unions actively fight developers and the business leaders who have facilitated the downloading of neoliberal policy frameworks from the provincial level to the local level, others, like those in the building and construction trades, have formed strategic partnerships with these same developers and pro-development municipal politicians in order to advance the direct material interests of their members. This latter dynamic was clear in the case of Toronto’s 2013 casino debate,
wherein various building and construction trade unions along with UNITE HERE, the city’s largest hotel workers’ unions, joined forces with casino developers in a failed attempt to convince the city council to host a commercial casino in the provincial capital. The Toronto and York Region Labour Council took no position on the casino issue, while only CUPE came out publicly against the proposal.46

While building trade unions would stand to gain construction-related employment for their members, part of what prompted UNITE HERE to stake out a pro-casino position was the prospect of organizing the casino’s future workforce.47 The union has had some success in the past by extracting immediate pro-labour concessions from developers and other private businesses with whom they interact through card-check neutrality agreements.

A card-check neutrality agreement is a deal struck between a union and an employer that compels both parties to replace the traditional secret ballot election method of union certification with a strict card-check process wherein workers sign union cards as an indication of their support for unionization. As part of the agreement, the employer agrees to adopt a neutral position with regards to union certification and further 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. 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. The Culinary Workers Union in Las Vegas mastered this strategy in the 1990s, building impressive levels of union density and local union power for workers in a right-to-work state.48

Card-check neutrality agreements militate against the inherent coercive power that employers hold over workers by circumventing the mandatory vote process to obtain union certification. Although this mechanism for achieving union certification is not traditional, unions have increasingly taken advantage of the fact that employers in Ontario can voluntarily recognize a labour union as the official bargaining agent for their employees. To be sure, effective card-check neutrality campaigns tend to go hand in hand with political pressure from unions and their allies.49 In Toronto, Local 75
of the Hotel Employees Restaurant Employees International Union had some success working with municipal politicians in extracting card-check neutrality agreements from uncooperative employers by threatening to stifle their proposed developments using a number of formal roadblocks in the approval process, including objections to building permits and zoning processes.\textsuperscript{50}

Other regulatory strategies rely less on buy-in from developers. For example, organized labour has had some success—particularly in cities that have been hard hit by deindustrialization, such as Thorold and St. Catharines—in convincing municipal councils to adopt “Made in Canada” procurement policies, which require cities to purchase buses, uniforms, office supplies, and other provisions from Canadian companies, thus providing greater job security for Canadian workers. The “Buy Canadian” campaign is designed to challenge NAFTA restrictions on municipal spending and is premised on the notion that municipal tax dollars should be reinvested in Canadian communities rather than sent offshore. The campaign is also intended to provide a concrete example of how socially-progressive municipal politicians can leverage public money for the “public good.”

Similarly, municipal living-wage ordinances are being promoted by unions and antipoverty groups as a way of ensuring that public money is not spent subsidizing substandard employment opportunities. A large number of American municipalities have adopted living-wage ordinances that require private businesses that do work for, or have a relationship with, the municipality to pay their employees a living wage.\textsuperscript{51} A living wage, which is translated roughly into the equivalent of the poverty line for a family of four, is calculated differently depending on the municipality, but it almost always outpaces the minimum wage by several dollars. Inspired by US examples, labour and antipoverty activists convinced the City of Toronto to adopt a fair wage schedule in city contracts, and expanded the scope of the existing policy beyond construction to security, landscaping, and maintenance.\textsuperscript{52}

Admittedly, the types of regulatory strategies described above, often carried out in conjunction with progressive community organizations, are not without limitations and contradictions. Ian MacDonald, for example, has noted that urban-based organizing strategies designed to secure
bargaining rights via tactical support for real estate development carry with them the very real risk of gentrifying working-class neighbourhoods, thereby reproducing “structural divisions between labor and community” through “rising rents and loss of affordable housing.”

MacDonald’s research also reminds us that focusing on the regulatory functions of municipal government is limiting for labour insofar as such an approach does not really challenge neoliberal accumulation strategies. Unions adopt strategies that respond to, rather than challenge, neoliberal imperatives, whether the strategies involve land use planning, the establishment of labour market floors, or procurement policies and tax subsidies.

Arguably, this approach may assist in preserving “good union jobs” in the short term, but responding in this way is risky because these strategies are detached from the wider neoliberal political-economic context in which cities operate. In other words, local regulatory skirmishes have little effect on the balance of class forces overall, but risk focusing labour’s strategic capacity on figuring out how to best position workers in relation to interurban competition.

Conclusion

The shifting landscape of provincial-municipal relations in Ontario has provided the labour movement with new strategic opportunities to resist the turn towards neoliberal urbanism. However, the mere existence of strategic opportunities for developing an alternative municipal politics does not automatically guarantee that labour and social movements will embrace them en masse. Labour’s broad defence of municipal public services, promotion of green infrastructure, and demands for cities that are more responsive to the needs of the working-class majority have positioned unions in opposition to many key Right-wing municipal leaders seeking to consolidate neoliberalism in local government. Thus far, however, labour organizations, at best, have focused on combatting the symptoms, rather than the root causes, of neoliberalism by limiting their interventions to leveraging bargaining capacity or some other material benefit from employers or developers, often with assistance from formally endorsed pro-labour municipal politicians. Far from challenging neoliberal imperatives or accumulation strategies, this approach consigns labour to playing the role of junior
partner in municipal politics, thus integrating the labour movement more deeply into the urban neoliberal sphere.\textsuperscript{55}

While the twin pressures of neoliberal restructuring and downloading represent significant impediments to overcoming the conservative political culture that long has been pervasive in local government, openings for resistance persist. Whether or not the labour movement, in the long run, will successfully capitalize on these strategic openings in a sustained and effective way, however, remains an open question. Despite the enduring challenges faced by organized labour in local politics, there is certainly more electoral capacity and arguably deeper community coalition infrastructure at the local level than existed even a decade ago. Evidence of this can be seen in the CLC’s growing presence and, arguably, success in the municipal political arena.\textsuperscript{56} Such coalitions and capacities will undoubtedly grow in importance as neoliberal cities continue to shift the focus towards private capital accumulation for the wealthy at the expense of improving living and working conditions for working-class communities. The challenge for labour movement leaders and activists will be to ensure that labour’s increased capacity is harnessed in a way that challenges rather than reinforces neoliberalism in urban politics.

Notes

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8. Harvey, "Neoliberalism and the City."
24. To be sure, there were important exceptions. The Canadian Autoworkers Union, for example, hosted an anti-amalgamation forum in Toronto in early 1997 that featured Sewell (CAW 1997).
33. Ferguson and Benzie, “Overall defeat for our communities.”
34. These observations are drawn from my own personal interactions and experiences as a member of the Ontario Federation of Labour Executive Council and they are based on my own internal union activism within the Canadian Union of Public Employees more generally.
42. Fanelli, “Managing the Crisis in Toronto”; Albo, “Neoliberal Urbanism.”
45. MacDermid, Municipal campaign funding and property development in the Greater Toronto Area.
55. MacDonald, “Unions and the City.”