

Workers didn't cause recession

By SID RYAN

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The scorecard's been a little lopsided of late.

Banks, Big Business and the super-rich: Trillions of dollars in government (read taxpayer) bailouts.

Workers: The Shaft.

Is it any wonder workers are finally pushing back?

In Windsor, CUPE members have been on strike for three months, trying to hold the line against an employer (the city of Windsor) that wants to strip future generations of the hope of a comfortable retirement.

Here in Toronto, garbage is piling up, city-operated daycare centres and pools are closed.

The reason? The city wants to strip away years of hard-fought contract language that provides a modest income and benefits -- certainly far less in a year than some e-Health Ontario consultants billed in a single month.

In Ajax, workers at a bankrupt auto parts factory have thrown up blockades in an effort to force their employer to pay them the severance they are owed under the law.

It's enough to drive someone to strong drink -- thank goodness the LCBO and its union managed to pull together a tentative agreement, albeit one day after the strike deadline.

For nearly 30 years since unfettered market capitalism has been the new normal for the global economy, working people have been hearing the same things over and over again -- governments need to get off the backs of big business, strip workers of basic rights and protections like the right to organize and bargain collectively and cut spending on public services to bankroll tax cuts for corporations.

Now we find ourselves in the middle of a recession. But instead of rolling up their sleeves and showing a little humility for the error of their ways, the architects of this latest recession are now using the mess they've created as a pretext to extract cutbacks in working peoples' wages and benefits.

Saddest of all, they're creating the same culture of envy they've used in the past, pitting non-unionized workers against union members, public sector against private sector, service users against service providers.

I don't believe it'll work this time. Unionized workers in both the public and private sector are pushing back against the attacks on their hard-won gains.

What's important here is that when unionized workers gain a benefit, they set the labour market standard.

Ultimately, all workers benefit, particularly the next generation. My children and yours. When those gains are attacked and lost, we all lose.

The mother who needs affordable, high-quality, publicly-delivered child care is supported by the child care worker on the picket line, who wants to deliver just that sort of service. The family supported by an autoworker's wages that relies on safe, well-maintained parks and playing fields, has a friend and ally in the parks and rec worker, who in turn needs their support at this crucial moment.

Their struggles are ours, and ours are theirs.

Sadly, elected government officials might suggest to you that working people in the public sector are part of the problem.

But I'm confident people will see through this self-serving, false division promoted by the people who got us in this mess in the first place, and say "enough".

-- Ryan is the president of CUPE Ontario