(Dis)Ability advocates, union activists, and government reformers:
Patterns of collaboration and conflict

Robert Hickey
Queen’s University
School of Policy Studies
Agenda

• State sponsored segregation
• Disability activists and government reformers
• When movements collide
  – Disability activists and job control unionism
  – Militant unions and marginalized citizens
• Community Living & community unions
  – Points of collaboration
• Opportunities and challenges
Segregation as State Policy

• 1876 - first large scale institution in Ontario

• Social exclusion & Public Policy
  – Protect society from deviance
    • (Eugenics – Sidney Webb and Margaret Sanger)
  – Relieve families of burden of disability
  – “Care” for disabled people

• Segregation and isolation as state policy
  – Ontario closed last institution March 31, 2009
  – Forced sterilization repealed in Albert & BC in 1972
Segregation as State Policy

"Doctor Knows Best"
Christmas in Purgatory

“During the month of December, 1965, we visited – at our own expense – five state institutions for the mentally retarded in four eastern states. ...we were able to visit the darkest corridors and vestibules that humanity provides for its journey to purgatory and, without being detected by ward personnel and professional staff, Fred Kaplan was able to take hundreds of photographs.”

- Burton Blatt, Syracuse University
"There is a hell on earth, and in America there is a special inferno. We were visitors there during Christmas, 1965."
"We saw children with hands tied and legs bound. After discussions with attendants and supervisors in the four institutions, we were convinced that one of the major reasons for the heavy use of solitary confinement and physical restraints was the extraordinary shortage of staff ..."
Community Living Movement

- Family (parent) based movement
  - Refusal to send children to state institutions
  - Local (segregated) educational opportunities
- Adoption of civil rights / human rights frame
- Independent Living Movement
- Self-advocates (People First)
- De-institutionalization
- Person-centred supports / individualized funds
Community Living Movement

When movements collide

• ADAPT 2002 protests against AFL-CIO, SEIU and AFSMCE
• Closure of institutions
• Public policy structure of social services
When movements collide

• Privatization or liberation?
• Direct support staff (12,500 FTEs in Ontario)
  – Worker rights
    • Gendered (“care” work – medical model of disability)
  – Consumer rights
• Direct funding
  – Consumer direct supports / individualized funding
    • Informal labour markets
When Movements Collide

• 2007 & 2009 Labour disputes

“The Respect Our Homes Coalition is a movement of citizens working to ensure that people with disabilities have freedom and autonomy in their home”
- www.respectourhomes.ca
Initial Research Findings

• Qualitative interviews with direct support staff, union representatives, managers, ministry officials, and families.
• Dual commitment of workers
  – Union & people they support
• Family movement caught in competitive frame for scarce resources & structural limitations
• Limited but important examples of community-union coalitions
When movements combine

• “We Count Too”
  – CUPE Ontario

• SEIU partnership with ADAPT
Conclusions

• Job control unionism still dominant
• Social unionism difficult in context of institutionalized interests (cause no harm to current members)
• Tremendous potential for unions to lead & shape public policy transformation in coalition with disability rights organizations
  – Significant (legitimate) points of conflict between the two social justice movements