Labour Spaced Out: Unions Confront Austerity and Populism in Canada

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CRIMT International Conference
12-14 May 2014
HEC, Montreal
Unions Confront Austerity and Populism in Canada

■ “Put simply, the world of work has changed, but our laws have not kept pace with worldwide trends….Mandatory union membership, forced paycheque contributions, closed tendering for government contracts…these are not policies that foster the open, innovative economy Ontario needs.”
   - *Paths to Prosperity*, Ontario PC Party, June 2012

■ “We’re going to target ‘jobs for life’ whenever we can, because nobody should have a job for life. I can tell you we’ll go after it in every negotiation we can. I can’t say we’ll be successful, but I can say we’ll give it one hell of a try.”
   - Doug Ford, Toronto City Councilor, February 2011
Research Focus

- The *nexus* between ‘uneven austerity’, rising populism, and union strategic capacities
- Case studies of the interplay between populism, austerity, and the crisis of labour in Canada at the federal, provincial, and municipal levels
- In what ways does the interplay among these processes illustrate the complex and multi-scalar challenges facing organized labour in Canada in the contemporary context?
- In what ways may the *populism-austerity-labour* nexus also be a terrain upon which new union strategies can be understood and developed?
Three Processes

- **Austerity** - policies and practices of neoliberal governments in the years following the 2008 financial crisis

- **Populism** - an approach to politics that includes broad appeals to the interests of ‘the people’ and the threats created by the dangerous ‘other’ (often ‘elites’, particularly those with an institutional basis)

- **Crisis of labour** – stemming from the reorganization of capitalism on a global scale that began in the 1970s
Uneven austerity

Crisis of labour ['labour spaced out']

Rising Populism

Populism-Austerity-Labour Nexus
## Case Studies

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Back-to-Work CUPW

3 June 2011- CUPW begins rotating strikes in Winnipeg

14 June 2011 – Canada Post suspends operations and locks out workers

15 June 2011 – Raitt announces the federal government will introduce the *Restoring Mail Delivery for Canadians Act* (Bill C-6).

23 June 2011 – Bill C-6 receives Royal Assent

27 June 2011 - Canada Post resumes operations and negotiations are referred to Final Offer Selection arbitration

“Our Government is concerned about the effect this strike is having on Canada’s economic recovery and on Canadians... Canadians gave us a strong mandate to complete our economic recovery and this is why we will put legislation on notice to ensure resumption and continuation of postal services ”
- Lisa Raitt, Minister of Labour
June 2011- *Continuing Air Service for Passengers Act* (Bill C-5) to end the work stoppage by CAW 2002 (customer sales and service agents)

October 2011 – Threats to introduce BTW after CUPE Air Canada Component (flight attendants) rejects tentative agreement. Negotiations referred to binding arbitration.

March 2012 - *Protecting Air Service Act* (Bill C-33) to prevent strike action by IAMAW (airline mechanics). Negotiations referred to binding arbitration.

“I have no doubt that a work stoppage at Air Canada is contrary to the best interest of Canadians and Canadian businesses, and I have no doubt that a work stoppage could cause serious harm to the health of our recovering economy.”
- Lisa Raitt, Minister of Labour
Right-to-Work in Ontario

June 2012 - Paths to Prosperity: Flexible Labour Markets

“Of particular concern is a series of government policies that favour union leaders over employees and their employers in ways that reduce opportunities for individual workers and are obstacles to economic growth. Union leaders have become so powerful that many employees in effect have two bosses, their actual employer and the people who run their union”

Public sector unions are “monopolies that are immune from economic conditions and the public’s ability to pay”

- End to “mandatory union membership” and “forced paycheque contributions”
- Enact restraint in public sector compensation
Privatizing City Services in Toronto

October 2010 – Rob Ford elected Mayor of Toronto
Main election promise: to end the “gravy train”

February 2011 – Ford announces he intends to contact out all residential curbside waste collection in the west half of the city

February 2012 – Ford announces plans to contract out cleaning services in municipal buildings

April 2012 – City council resists privatization of cleaning services

August 2012 – Privatized garbage collection begins. Ford promises to privatize collection in east half of the city if re-elected in 2014

“…just my personal opinion, we shouldn’t be paying cleaners $22 an hour”
– Doug Ford, Toronto City Councilor
Conclusions

- Austerity is implemented in a variety of forms (BTW, RTW, privatization) and at multiple scales
- Austerity may be constituted and expressed through right populism (discursively and materially)
- The *populism-austerity-labour nexus* both shapes the challenges faced by labour and creates possibilities for resistance
- *Spacing in labour* must involve overcoming fragmentation and reclaiming political space in public debates about economic recovery