

The Agitator

A Bulletin for the Student Left

October 3 2008 ★ no.18

OPPOSE THE TORIES



"For God's sake, does he think that putting on a blue sweater-vest is going to make us think, 'Oh my goodness, what a kind-hearted, cosy, cute little PM,' and forget all about the fact of his soul-sucking, evil work of putting 14-year-olds in jail for the rest of his lives?" In the best election commentary on CBC so far, Marg Delahunty, Warrior Princess, described her motivation behind having a protest bonfire to burn blue sweater vests on a beach in Newfoundland. Here are a few of the many many reasons to kick out Harper's Tories:

The War: Seven years on and with an estimated total cost of \$22 billion and Harper is still backing a losing war. He started the election by promising that the troops would come home in 2011. Why not now? We've already lost nearly 100 soldiers in a war we can't win, and more than 4000 Afghans have been killed this year.

Listeriosis outbreak: At least 20 people have died from foods contaminated by listeriosis from a Maple Leaf Foods plant in Ontario. Food inspectors with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency blame the Tories who have reduced inspections.

Deporting War Resisters: Over 200 American war resisters have come to Canada looking for sanctuary after refusing to be part of the war crimes in Iraq. The majority of

Canadians want them to stay and parliament has voted to let them stay. But Harper has ignored democratic decisions of parliament and has deported one resister, Robin Long, who was sentenced to 15 months in military prison, and will live his life with a criminal record. His crime is having the same opinion as the majority of Canadians: the Iraq war is wrong and can't be supported.

Trying to restrict abortion rights: Tory Ken Epp introduced the the Unborn Victims of Crime Act. Had it passed it would make it a separate crime to injure or kill a fetus while attacking a pregnant woman. In face of mass organizing across the country and on the eve of the election, the Tories said they would withdraw the bill and replace with different legislation.

Cooking the planet: The Canadian delegation at the Bali talks lined up with the Australians and the Americans to prevent agreement on reductions of green house gases. Here at home Harper has given more money in subsidies to oil companies operating in the tar sands then he has spent on carbon emission reduction programs.

An increased NDP vote will give confidence to the social movements where real social change comes from. And that's where our political efforts should lie.

With another possible Tory government only a couple weeks away, only popular pressure can ensure that there is a real opposition to Harper.

UOttawa code defeated

At the end of August, the UOttawa administration withdrew its controversial "student code of conduct". This is an enormous victory for students in Ottawa and around the country.

The proposed code would have allowed the administration to academically penalize students (including removal of financial aid and expulsion) not just for illegal behaviour, but for vaguely defined "disruptive" political protest and threatening the "reputation" of the university - even in the written word. Also, no impartial or transparent process of appeal was provided.

UOttawa students responded in late April 2008 (during exams) with a 500-strong demonstration that proceeded to occupy the university's

administration building for two hours. The action was essential to defeating the code.

The new codes introduced at a number of universities have been met with varying levels of student resistance. At Trent University a petition drive and protests were able to sink a similarly vague and undemocratic policy. Draconian codes still exist at many universities, but the large-scale actions at UOttawa and Trent point towards the type of mobilizations that are necessary to defeat them.

In May, on the heels of the UOttawa demonstration, member unions of the Canadian Federation of Students voted to oppose all such non-academic codes of conduct.

Two faculty strikes erupt

On September 17 University of Windsor full-time faculty, contract faculty, academic ancillary staff, and librarians went on strike for the first time in 26 years. Negotiations began in June but went to conciliation shortly thereafter. Members voted 96 percent in favour of a strike on Sept.4. A tentative agreement was reached on October 2 but has yet to be ratified by the union membership.

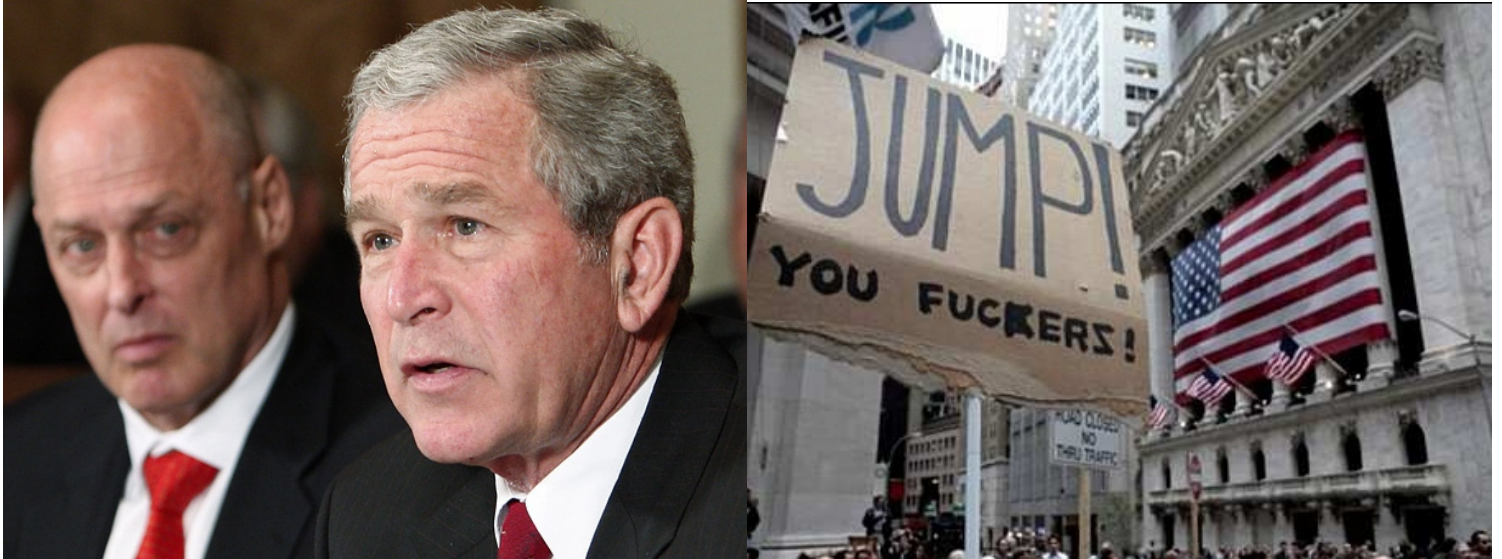
There are several key issues, but wages are central. The admin has fought to remove a pay mechanism, the Windsor Salary Standard, which ensures wage parity for faculty and librarians with the mid-point salary average of Ontario universities. The union also wants contract faculty

covered by the WSS. Windsor's contract faculty are paid \$5000 per course, well below the provincial average, but teach 47 percent of the courses.

Despite attacks by the mainstream media, picket support from students has been solid. Hundreds attended a pro-union rally on September 19. WUFA has also pointed out the spending priorities of the university - a million-dollar rebranding campaign and \$7 million in salaries for 46 administrators.

Brandon University faculty went on strike Sept.29 with an 84 percent mandate. Salaries, pensions and workload are the key issues.

See bufo.org and caut.ca/wufa to send messages of solidarity.



US Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson and President Bush preside over the financial meltdown as thousands of protesters surround Wall Street.

Understanding the economic meltdown

by **Matt Morgan and Doug Nesbitt**

In the past month, a series of spectacular bank failures in the US have sent stock markets tumbling. Lehman's Brothers, Washington Mutual and other banks have collapsed while the US government has taken control of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. The \$700 billion bailout of the bankers has now been passed after initially failing because of massive public opposition. But, the financial crisis extends well beyond the US. The governments of Belgium, Germany, Britain and the Netherlands have all recently intervened to prevent similar financial collapse. The Bank of Canada is now injecting billions into the economy to provide enough money for investments.

Origins

The current crisis has its immediate origins in the housing bubble which grew massively with the introduction of sub-prime mortgages. In recent years, millions of Americans were able to buy homes with sub-prime mortgages which were offered by the banks with no concern for the buyer's income or credit rating. Sub-prime mortgage interest rates were low in the first years, but shot up thereafter. Banks proceeded to bundle the mortgage debts into bonds and sold them on the market based on speculated returns. The bonds were then insured by other banks. In 2006 the first sub-prime mortgages began to kick into high interest. Bankruptcies and foreclosures

multiplied, leaving speculators and insurers with nothing. The banks were hit hardest, leading to restrictions by the very same banks on credit and loans. This "credit crunch" began the massive bank collapses with Bear Stearns last March. The credit crunch affects every sector of the economy, most notably the "real" economy which produces goods and services.

Can the crisis be resolved?

The \$700 billion bailout will not solve the crisis. The US government cannot bailout every failed bank because it does not have the money. There is also a real possibility things may get much worse. In 2004, only 12 percent of US mortgages were subprime. These high interest rates began in 2007, leading to the current crisis. But in 2006, 42 percent of US mortgages were subprime. When these subprime mortgages hit high interest rates next year, there will be even greater turmoil. In addition, the credit crunch is only now beginning to affect the "real" economy and it is unclear how extensive it will become. Just this past month, North American auto sales collapsed 27 percent from last year.

Many critics who recognize the bailout as ineffective at best and mass robbery at worst, suggest that regulation and state intervention will prevent the problems of an unregulated free market. The American "New Deal" of the 1930s is held up as a successful example of state intervention, but this is not in fact true. State intervention did slow the economic crisis but did not stop it. By 1938, the world economy collapsed again and was only pulled out of depression by a war that killed 60 million people.

Capitalism

The capitalist economy cannot exist without crisis because the key dynamic of the system is competitive accumulation. Through competition, companies constantly seek to increase profits in order to capture market share. But because there are multiple companies competing for the same market, overproduction is inevitable as companies produce for a market share they *expect* to capture. Overproduction leads to a fall in profits, creating the conditions for an economic downturn of bankruptcies and mass layoffs. The destruction wrought by economic collapse allows surviving companies to rebuild and return to growth, renewing the boom-bust cycle.

As time passes competition, buyouts and bankruptcies concentrate and centralize capital. A handful of near-monopolies become vital cogs in the system as a whole, meaning their collapse can leave enormous "black holes" in the economy and lead to massive economic collapse.

Crisis is built into capitalism, meaning mass unemployment, destruction of communities, mass poverty, and war is in the DNA of the system. For further reading on the economic crisis google the following articles:

- **"Explaining the toxic crisis of capitalism"**
- **"Behind the world food crisis"**
- **"From credit crunch to the spectre of global crisis"**
- **"Invest in green jobs and transit, not war"**
- **"Workers pay for Canada's manufacturing crisis"**
- **"An easy intro to Marx's analysis of capitalism can be found in his "Wage Labour and Capital"**

REPORTS ★ agitator.online@gmail.com

UVic SUB strike

On September 4, workers in the University of Victoria Student Union Building went on strike demanding a fair living wage. The employer, the University of Victoria Students Society (the student union) has been unwilling to meet these demands even though it supports the BC Federation of Labour \$10 minimum wage campaign.

The demands of SUB workers, who are unionized with the Steelworkers, are for a \$1.50/ \$1.75 per hour increase. Workers have only received \$0.10/h pay increase over the past six years, with some still making as low \$9.50/h. The UVSS has offered an insulting \$0.20/h increase.

The UVSS claims they have tight fiscal restraints, but the SUB manager stated in 2007 that the UVSS was no longer in debt. UVSS has also struck a deal with Coca-Cola allowing control over vending machines for an undisclosed sum. Coca-Cola is notorious for its murder of trade unionists in Colombia.

The student body has been divided over the strike. Student clubs were told by the UVSS they had to cross the picket lines to enter the SUB to get club status and funding. Only a handful of clubs, including the International Socialists, have refused to cross the picket line.

In late September a petition was launched to bring about a referendum to remove the UVSS board at the Oct.16 UVSS Annual General Meeting. Despite getting enough signatures to hold the referendum, the UVSS board conveniently failed to meet quorum at the meeting where the petition was introduced, thus blocking it from the AGM.

The strike has shown that student unions occupy a contradictory position in that they defend student interests and often defend other campus labour unions, but are also employers because of the services they offer. A right-wing executive can do enormous damage in such a position,

which is why it is important that the student left not concede the student union to the right. It is also necessary for the left to maintain an independent presence among the membership in case student union leaders take the wrong positions on critical issues such as a fair living wage.

Send letters of solidarity to the SUB workers at: sub.stewards@gmail.com.

Trent students battle for their student union

The Trent Central Students Association, representing some 7500 undergrads, has been torn apart in a nasty political battle. Last year, Trent students mobilized in large numbers and successfully defeated the implementation of the Non-Academic Misconduct Policy proposed by the administration. However, the mobilization did not translate into the progressive slate winning the TCSA elections. Instead, the progressive slate and the "moderate" slate split the positions of the executive. The presidency went to Liam Mooney, a card-carrying Liberal of the "moderate" slate.

Since then, Mooney has attempted to destroy the TCSA as an effective voice for student. This culminated in early September when Mooney and his supporters launched a petition campaign to introduce a petition to initiate a referendum to remove the TCSA from the Canadian Federation of Students. Dozens of students responded with a petition in support of a united student movement, getting over 1400 signatures, or 20 percent of the student body, in a mere five days. Mooney's team packed up shop after only a day of petitioning and have not disclosed the number of signatures they acquired.

Mooney's campaign to wreck the TCSA started in the summer when he unilaterally fired the TCSA's executive director, a firing which is now

being challenged by legal means. Mooney also censured other TCSA executives (from the progressive slate) for taking different stances on particular issues. Not surprisingly, Mooney has shown no support whatsoever for the freezing or reduction of tuition fees and has turned his back on the CFS-Ontario Drop Fees campaign. While claiming that he wants to open up a debate on CFS membership, he never opened up the debate over CFS defederation in his election campaign.

The pro-CFS petition drive at the start of the year points towards how Mooney and his supporters can be checked. The November 5 Drop Fees campaign, like the petition, can pull in hundreds of students who will then be open to arguments around why a united student movement is essential. An effective and large mobilization will sap Mooney's confidence to do any more damage. Come elections, those involved in the Drop Fees campaign can become a constituency for a progressive slate rooted in the Drop Fees campaign. Ousting right-wingers who want to divide the student movement can be done by manoeuvres within the student union, such as an impeachment process, but the only way to ensure that progressives are elected and the student union represents student interests, is by building a pressure from below through campaigns such as Drop Fees.

CFS-Ontario Activist Assembly succeeds

The first ever "Activist Assembly" held by CFS-Ontario was an enormous success. Over four hundred students from around the province participated in the two-day conference held September 26-27 in Toronto.

The opening panel on Friday night was entitled "Student Power and the Resistance of 1968" with two speakers who

had been present in the struggles of that time, and one speaker heavily involved in the Canadian student movement in the 1990s. Keynote speakers on Saturday evening were Linda McQuaig who took aim the Bush-like policies of Harper, and John Ralston Saul who criticized the irrational rationality of modern society.

The heart of the assembly was the impressive series of workshops on Saturday, covering virtually every topic imaginable. A number of workshops concentrated on the ABCs of activism: poster-making, delivering class talks, making effective arguments. Others concentrated on issues such as the Quebec student strike, the rise of counter-recruitment on campus, and the lessons of the 1960s.

While the clear direction of the assembly was to inspire, train and educate dozens of student activists to help build the November 5 Drop Fees actions, a few themes ran throughout the weekend. One theme was how to build a mass movement. In this discussion, the general consensus was to see the student movement united around relevant demands but maintain tactical flexibility in order to keep broad support. The wrong tactics at the wrong time could alienate or isolate itself from the general student body.

Another important theme was unity between students and workers, between student unions and labour unions. The slogan "our learning conditions are their working conditions" was the generally agreed upon understanding. This theme struck at the heart of where substantial social change can emerge from. Through campaigns like Drop Fees, the student movement has the potential of bringing wider segments of society, workers in particular, into opposition to the government and employers.

The Activist Assembly has laid the groundwork for what is shaping up to be an impressive action on November 5.

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Ending the war in Afghanistan

The war in Afghanistan has effectively spread to Pakistan. A series of border clashes have erupted as American helicopters have entered Pakistan to fire on what the Americans claim are Taliban bases. Both popular militias and the Pakistan Army have fired upon the Americans.

Meanwhile, the war in Afghanistan has become more bloody as both civilian and NATO casualties have mounted to record levels. NATO airstrikes which have killed dozens of civilians, prompting widespread protests and anger against the occupation. Meanwhile, aid and reconstruction remains virtually non-existent as promise after promise of Western aid falls through, or falls into the hands of corrupt Afghan government officials and Western corporations winning no-bid, no-oversight reconstruction contracts.

While Harper makes the dubious promise to pull-out in July 2011, the two American presidential nominees are promising a massive surge in Afghanistan and attacks on Pakistan.

Priorities

Harper, the Tories and news media experts pegged the cost of the war at \$8 billion at most. An academic study released September 17 found that the war has in fact cost \$22 billion.

The pull-out in July 2011 still leaves 40 more months of combat. So far 30 have passed. At that rate there will be over two hundred dead Canadians, countless dead Afghans, and billions of wasted Canadian tax dollars.

But the war in Afghanistan is not just a mistake to be over, as Harper wants us to believe, in July 2011.

This past summer the Harper government committed to a twenty-year \$490 billion investment in "defence" spending. The annual military budget would increase \$18 billion



An American flag is burned in Pakistan after a US missile strike kills twelve.

to \$30 billion annually. Current spending is already highest since the end of the Second World War, even higher than the Korean War.

Such a spending program does not suggest a stepping down from a war footing, but rather the opposite. As American economic power becomes increasingly shaky, while its military is bogged down in the Middle East and Central Asia, its key allies will be expected to pick up the slack. This does not mean Harper is simply a lackey of Bush, but that Canadian capitalism has prospered off the markets carved open by American military and political might. A process of militarization in Canada is starting to get underway to prop up a crumbling American empire which used to protect Canadian foreign investments.

The Canadian state is militarizing as the world becomes more multi-polar, as economies falter and new wars flare up that indirectly pit the great powers against one another.

Challenges

Only if we build the anti-war movement in the here and now can we ever begin to build the movement necessary to stay the hand of militarism. Such a victory could spread a tremendous amount confidence among thousands to begin fighting back not just against politicians but against the bosses and corporations, to begin to question the underpinnings of the system - just as the civil rights and anti-war movements did in the 1960s.

By focusing on the Canadian state and its war we can begin to pose new questions about spending priorities and open up new terrains of struggle. The billions spent on war could easily eliminate tuition fees, restore and improve medicare, and expand mass transit and create new jobs.

TROOPS OUT NOW
END THE OCCUPATION OF AFGHANISTAN
OCTOBER 18

see www.acp-cpa.ca for local details



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