

IT WAS THE WORST OF TIMES, IT WAS THE BEST OF TIMES

Remembering the 1997 Political Protest

By Victoria Hunt

On October 27, 1997, more than 125,000 teachers walked off the job. For two weeks, teachers from every publicly funded school in Ontario were on picket lines, without salary or strike pay, and 2.3 million students stayed home. School administrators often joined their colleagues, and the public showed their support with gifts of nourishing food and hot coffee. This Political Protest, as it came to be known, remains the largest work stoppage in North American history. No, it wasn't a strike. We all knew about strikes for better wages and working conditions. This was different. This was a protest against Bill 160, the *Education Quality Improvement Act*, and the harm it would cause students and the publicly funded education system. It was the culmination of rallies, discussions, and attempts to dissuade the government. It became a movement that has lasted to this day.

Bill 160 was not the first time a government had intruded into the classroom. Just four years earlier, Bob Rae and the New Democratic Party had imposed the Social Contract on public servants, freezing our wages and increment movement for three years, while increasing class sizes. But the Harris government's agenda was different. Elected on a platform dubbed the Common Sense Revolution, the Progressive Conservatives were unabashed in their intention to gut Ontario's public services and social safety net.

The education system was at the heart of the agenda. The Minister of Education, John Snobelen, was recorded saying that he wanted to create a "crisis in education," to undermine support for publicly funded schools. By the summer of 1996, the government was moving towards amalgamating the six boroughs of Toronto and folding 129 school boards into 72. We had also learned about plans related to increased teacher workload, the replacement of qualified teachers with para-professionals or instructors, cuts to Junior Kindergarten and adult education, and the centralization of funding and decision-making.

A collective call for action rang out, not just for the sake of teachers, but for the education system itself. I believe the movement really got going on January 13, 1996. It was a pretty winter's day – not too cold, with big fluffy snowflakes. Early that morning, hundreds of buses arrived at Nathan Phillips Square in Toronto, carrying teachers from every corner of the province. They came to stand up for their students. More than 40,000 teachers from all of the affiliates walked up University Avenue to the Ontario legislature at Queen's Park. Thousands of parents and children joined us. We yelled, chanted, sang, danced, and carried placards. It was impressive. It was a first. I felt a huge sense of pride in my union, the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association, which had organized the event.

Following that rally, the Ontario Federation of Labour's "Days of Action," which were organized to draw attention to the full range of the Harris government's anti-labour, anti-poor policies, took on new life. On February 23, 1996, the OFL organized a rally in Hamilton that attracted 100,000 people, the largest demonstration in Canadian history. Later rallies included North Bay, Peterborough, Kitchener, Kingston, Windsor, and Toronto. The teacher presence at each event was highly visible and spirited.

Joining this broader union movement helped to pave the way for a new era of teacher engagement and activism. In many ways, it was an exciting time. The camaraderie and solidarity was heartfelt. But it was also challenging for many teachers. Walking out of the classroom without any kind of compensation was a testament to the dedication of these professionals, and a reflection of their genuine concern for quality publicly funded education.

I know a few colleagues who believe the protest was a failure. The job action ended with a fizzle rather than a pop. While some of the more egregious changes weren't enacted, we certainly did not stop the government from continuing with their destruction, and we are still missing many of the supports and resources that were cut.

"Before the protest, I wasn't really involved in politics at all, let alone unions. But this event made me into an activist. For me, it was a political awakening; we all realized that we had to stand up and fight for our students and ourselves."

WARREN GRAFTON
First Vice-President

"The protest was a catalyst. It was when I really began my OECTA journey as a staff rep and a strike captain. It was so hard for many of us; I had to listen to the government denigrate and attack our schools and my profession! I proudly held those signs and marched with my colleagues because I know we made a difference and we continue that legacy to this day!"

LIZ STUART
President

But as I look back over the past 20 years, I believe the protest was a success. For example, the Harris government changed the legislation under which teachers negotiate, eliminating the *School Boards and Teachers Collective Bargaining Act* and placing teacher negotiations under the *Labour Relations Act*. Somewhat ironically, this served to formally transform the teacher associations into fully fledged unions.

The protest also helped to focus public attention on the importance of the education system, and to galvanize parents and others in the community. Folks like Annie Kidder, Liz Sandals, and Kathleen Wynne were motivated to enter the political arena to advocate for strong, publicly funded schools.

Most importantly, teachers are now politically aware and active. We realized that we could not just close our classrooms doors and teach. We learned that governments would use education as a political football, and the repercussions would be felt in every school.

Today, teachers have a high level of political sophistication, and there is an understanding by all political parties that teachers are a force to be reckoned with. As we approach another provincial election, it is important to remember where we came from, and reflect on all that is still left to be recovered and achieved.

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"[The protest] showed that we could make a difference. And we slowed the Harris government's agenda in a way no one before – or after – could. It was the single greatest expression of political activism by Ontario teachers. There will always be those who say 'Look at how it ended.' But I say, 'Look at what it started!'"

MARSHALL JARVIS
General Secretary

