

Engaging Patrons: Fight Back on the 2011–2012 Toronto Budget and Beyond

Maureen O'Reilly

President of the Toronto Public Library Workers Union (TPLWU) Local 4948 (CUPE)
president@local4948.org

Abstract

Libraries and librarianship everywhere are under attack, but popular resistance has been strong. The Toronto Public Library Workers Union (TPLWU) Local 4948 (CUPE) led a successful community fight-back campaign against the Ford administration's 2011–2012 austerity budget. That campaign not only stopped further crippling cuts to the TPL, it garnered support for the library workers during a difficult round of collective bargaining which followed, and it has begun to change the conversation about the library from "cuts" to "investment."

Keywords

Rob Ford; TPLWU Local 4948; Toronto budget; public libraries

Stop the Gravy Train

Toronto Mayor Rob Ford was elected with a mandate to "stop the gravy train" at city hall. He hired KPMG consultants to do a Core Service Review. Though the review produced very high ratings for the library service and a warning that "cutting libraries will be met with resistance," the beloved and well-used Toronto Public Library (TPL) was targeted for cuts and branch closures. In KPMG's own words, the city needed to "rationalize the footprint of libraries."

In 2011, the TPL was ranked as the busiest public library system in North America. That year the library circulated 33 million items and welcomed 19 million visitors (Key Facts, n.p.). Despite the closure of the Urban Affairs Library the year before, 98 branches remained.

To put TPL's success in context, public libraries in Ottawa, Vancouver and Montreal combined circulated 30 million items, New York 24 million, Los Angeles 16 million, and Chicago 10 million (Rao 10).

The few attempts the Ford administration has made to formulate public policy here in Toronto have been imitative of Chicago, where the Ford brothers — Mayor Rob and Councillor Doug — have a second, and very lucrative, division of their Toronto-based Deco Labels and Tags company. The only economic development trip that the mayor

has taken was to Chicago. Chicago has 79 libraries, so Toronto should too. This seems to be the simplistic rationale for targeting the highly successful TPL for cuts.

These cuts were proposed after several years of deep budget cuts by Ontario's Harris Conservatives. The \$10.5 million provincial spending envelope for TPL was reduced to \$4.6 million. Municipalities, in turn, reacted to the provincial cuts by making cuts to their own budgets. Since the early 1990s, the TPL operating budget has been cut by \$800 million, the acquisitions budget by \$51.6 million, and service hours slashed. Five hundred and thirty two library workers' jobs were also cut during this time, representing a 25 percent loss (Rao 7). Although amalgamation in and of itself was a cost cutting exercise, the library budget under the Lastman and Miller administrations remained static, and it wasn't until Ford took office that dramatic cuts began again.

Project Rescue: Our Public Library

The public responded to the latest assault on the library budget with an unprecedented display of support, one far in excess of the 'resistance' anticipated by KPMG. The 2,400 members of Local 4948 launched a city-wide campaign on July 13th under the banner "Our Public Library." Later that summer the Local presented a petition with over 22,000 signatures to Budget Chief Mike Del Grande in front of a boisterous crowd. I had difficulty delivering our deputation due to the chants of support for the library. We certainly believe we were the first to wake the city up to the Ford administration's true motives. Ford had been elected on a promise of no cuts to service, and this was exactly what was being proposed. (The budget was the first defeat the Ford administration suffered and signified a turnaround in Toronto politics.)

The petition we launched was unique because the software that ran it created an email to the appropriate city councillor based on the petitioner's postal code. This was supplemented by "action alerts" throughout the campaign, which highlighted issues for our supporters and generated even more correspondence to city councillors. I have been told by some councillors that the campaign unleashed an outpouring of public support the likes of which had never been seen at City Hall before.

The campaign really heated up and captured the attention of the media during what I refer to as the "Doug speaks, Margaret tweets" phase of the campaign. I was fortunate to have a team that had the know-how to use social media to take advantage of some of the crazier side-shows going on. Councillor Doug Ford told talk radio that he had more "liberries" in his ward than Tim Hortons locations. Margaret Atwood, who has a Twitter following of 250,000, tweeted her support for the library workers' campaign. Doug's response was to say he wouldn't know Margaret Atwood if he passed her in the street. The campaign took on new heights culminating in the "My Library Matters to Me" contest. Other Canadian authors joined Margaret Atwood in the contest in which both adults and children entered to win a prize of a group lunch and literary tour with one of the authors. This resulted in coverage on the CBC National News.

The campaign was not supported by TPL nor by the Ford appointed library board. Ford's library board councillors especially took great exception to the campaign. Incredibly, they did not think that politicians should be held accountable for their voting record! A Forum Research poll showed overwhelmingly that not only were Torontonians against library closures, but they would not support a councillor in the next election who voted against the library.

The final vote on the city budget took place on January 17, 2012. Further cuts to the library were stopped by a one-vote margin. Three of five library board councillors, including the Board Chair, supported the full 10% cut to the library. Though no libraries were closed, program and service hours were saved, and the collections budget preserved, the library did suffer a cut of 107 full-time library worker positions.

Changing the Conversation

Following this struggle, there was a modest increase in the 2012–2013 library budget. More critical were the comments made both at the library board and city council not to repeat last year's experience! The conversation about the library has begun to change. Library board members are beginning to talk about restoring service at TPL. This mindset turnaround was aided by the appearance of a report from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives "The Great Equalizer: A Case for Reinvesting in TPL."

The library workers will continue the campaign for the 2013–2014 budget cycle with this theme. We intend to launch a whole new phase this September. In 2014, the municipal elections take place, and library workers intend to play a key role. I am crazy enough to think that we can influence those elections. Does Toronto want a mayor who supports libraries or one who wants to close libraries? After all, 55 times more people visited the TPL than voted for Rob Ford!

Works Cited

Key Facts. Toronto Public Library. N.p., n.d. Web. 6 Feb. 2013.

Rao, Govind C. *The Great Equalizer: The Case for Investing in the Toronto Public Library*. Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2012. Print.