

Opinion / Commentary

When will the city learn to love its librarians?

Two years after Toronto's librarians went on strike, the keepers of our city's beloved collections are still fighting the same battles.



TORONTO STAR STAFF / RENE JOHNSTON

A picketer flies the librarian glasses flag at Nathan Phillips square during the library strike that began two years ago next week.

By: Maureen O'Reilly Published on Fri Mar 14 2014

My librarian colleagues and I were hardly surprised to learn that Mayor Rob Ford, in one of his first statements in his Ford Nation campaign video, wrote us out of history. "We haven't had one strike," he said, boasting about his "very successful" negotiations with city workers. It was another classic Ford lie.

Yet we weren't surprised because we are library workers, and we're used to being overlooked. We are notoriously retiring and deferential. It's our curse. But it is also a fact that two years ago next week, we were the first group in the city to stand up and say no to the ruinous Ford agenda, taking an 11-day strike to beat back the city's all-out attack against its weakest and most vulnerable employees.

Two years of turbulent history since then has only confirmed the wisdom of that action in my mind. Somebody had to do it — even if it was only "a bunch of women" like us.

Admittedly, we had some experience. A year earlier, we mounted the barricades to defend Toronto against a slash-and-burn campaign that targeted more than 30 branch libraries for closure. Buoyed by a massive outpouring of public support for our campaign to save them (see the provocative video at OurPublicLibrary.to), we managed to turn city council against the Fords and save every one of them.

Libraries were only one of the valuable city services set onto the chopping block that year, but they were overwhelmingly the focus of public opposition to the cuts. Torontonians love their libraries —

and with good reason. We are blessed with the busiest public library system in North America. Our libraries are an important part of what makes Toronto special. But librarians? Clearly city government doesn't think so.

We learned that yet again when the time came to negotiate a collective agreement with the Ford administration not long after Torontonians made their love of libraries so clear. Facing a long list of concessions on job security and working conditions that would make part-time work even more precarious, 91 per cent of our members voted to strike. It was the first time in 30 years library workers went out.

The strike was never about money. The money issue was already settled. Suffice it to say, you'll never see any librarians on the Sunshine List! In essence, the strike was our stand against implacable forces bent on stripping all dignity and stability from our vocation.

Even then we knew that Torontonians supported us. An Environics survey done for CUPE on the eve of the strike found that 60 per cent of Torontonians supported library workers in their struggle against the clawbacks, compared to 40 per cent who supported city workers as a whole. Yet we were the only union that went on strike.

There is a pattern here, and it begs a question: Why is it that when politicians talk about "getting tough on unions," it is so often the lowest-paid, most vulnerable workers they end up targeting? Half of our members work part-time, almost half of our part-time workers have no benefits, and most of them will have to work 20 years before they qualify for even the slightest taste of job security. Moreover, three quarters of us are women.

Bullies like to pick a vulnerable target. Rob Ford thought that was us. But we proved not to be so vulnerable.

Back on the campaign trail, Ford is once again claiming to be the friend of the little people victimized by elites. But he still couldn't stop himself from attacking libraries and the people who work in them when he advanced his personal list of service-cutting amendments to the 2014 municipal budget.

I don't want to lead the fight against a new administration. For us, all that has meant is a perpetual struggle to retain what little we already have. We've already lost 25 per cent of the jobs we had 20 years ago, even as the system has grown. Expanding workloads, automation, the elimination of specialists like children's librarians and the erosion of job security have combined to turn what was once a vocation into just another job — and a precarious one at that.

Can you have good libraries without good librarians? Without any librarians at all? We know where the people of Toronto stand on that: They love their libraries and want library workers to be treated well. We only wish the politicians would listen to them.

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