

## Resisting Cuts to Social Programs

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According to our society's dominant power holders: "There's no money. The cupboard is bare." Therefore, so they tell us, regretfully there's no other choice than cutting social programs. The results of their policies are all too familiar. Job losses, feminized poverty, greater gaps between rich and poor, more violence—the list of harmful effects goes on and on.

By now it's no secret who is behind these trends. Heads of powerful corporations, their mass media, their lobbies, their economists and other academics have created a climate of public opinion which makes it difficult for other views to be heard. Given the immense influence by these economically privileged interests, what's remarkable is that there is any resistance at all.

Contrary to the image of consensus which is painted by dominant power-holders, there are severe conflicts at the community and institutional levels (including within human service hierarchies), where top-down power is being questioned by groups from below. Much of the organized resistance comes from women's organizations, labour unions, First Nations groups, environmental lobbies, anti-poverty associations, gay and lesbian rights' groups, senior citizen groups, church groups, networks of people with disabilities and other human rights organizations.

Because these social movements include many survivors of violence and of other abuses created by the system, their agenda is social change. Put another way, because the dominant power-holders disempower and marginalize people based on factors such as gender, class, colour and sexuality, this process can cause those who are oppressed to organize themselves and say: "Enough!"

Perhaps because the systemic production of inequality can, over time, mobilize people for progressive change, the powers-that-be seem to go to great lengths to deny the very existence of systemic inequalities. The powerful also like to "explain" the hardships experienced by those who are subordinated, as being caused by laziness or by other signs of "their inferiority". Such blaming-of-the-victim may more easily permit the privileged to quietly view themselves as superior and as possessing those "special talents"

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associated with being, for example: male, white, super-rich and homophobic. While the privileged are generally portrayed as hardy individualists who have "earned" their wealth, cracks are appearing, as evidence grows about the ways that dominant policies have benefitted the privileged at our expense. For example:

- In a recent year in Canada the amount of untaxed corporate profits totalled \$27 billion.<sup>1</sup>
- In Ontario 779 individuals with incomes over \$100,000 pay no income tax. Another 13,167 tax filers with incomes over \$100,000 pay less than 10% of their income in tax.<sup>2</sup>
- During a recent 5-year period, Canada's top 5 chartered banks reported cumulative profits of over \$8 billion, yet during the same time these banks cut their work force by over 11,000 employees.<sup>3</sup>
- The richest 20% of Canadians own 70% of the wealth while the poorest 40% own less than 1% of the wealth in Canada.<sup>4</sup> In Ontario, the richest 20% of households held 74% of the wealth, and the bottom 40% of households held about 2% of the wealth in Ontario.<sup>5</sup>
- In the U.S. between 1977 and 1989, income expanded for all Americans by a total of \$740 billion. 74% of this expansion went to the top 1% of U.S. families. The incomes of this tiny elite grew from an average of \$315,000 to \$560,000 over the 12-year period.<sup>6</sup>
- In the 30 years between 1960 and 1990, the richest 20% of the world's population increased their share of world income from 30 times greater than the poorest to 60 times greater.<sup>7</sup>

Such data about economic and class privileges should be integrated with an understanding of overlapping oppressive relations, such as those based on gender, colour and sexuality. When we apply such an integrated approach to global restructuring, we can better appreciate the pernicious role of corporate control as a major source of the brutal inequalities which are structured internationally.

What to do? Feminists have alerted us to the ways in which political changes are interdependent with the emergence of critical consciousness at the personal level. Such consciousness, in turn, can nourish activism for progressive change.

Largely due to the women's movement, some families and other personal networks are reconstructing their gender relationships on the basis of equality. As a result, some women and some men are experiencing relationships which are more satisfying than those governed by patriarchy. The push for more equality in one area has spawned pressure for more equality in other areas. It's not only sexism and racism which are being challenged, but so are heterosexism, ableism and other oppressive social relations. So far

however, these highly established patterns of domination have successfully resisted widespread changes.

Nevertheless, the persistence and extensiveness of these conflicts suggests that there is an immense depth to our desire for social and economic justice. This also helps to explain some of our inner, personal tensions. More specifically, most of us as children and then as adults have experienced the pressure to conform to unequal and undemocratic social relations. Simultaneously with this top-down pressure, we also experience contradictory cues from deep within ourselves which inspire us as individuals to treat others with more humanity.

Depending on factors such as our personalities, our values and our location in the social order, we may find ourselves conforming to structural inequalities and to their oppressive social policies. Or alternatively, we may decide to withdraw our consent from such conformity. We can either repress or we can actually hear our more egalitarian and more humane impulses. If we listen to our more caring and more progressive feelings, we can channel these into empowering changes in our attitudes and behaviour towards others. At the practical level, it's easier to listen to our more progressive feelings when we know these are re-enforced by viable social movements in the public arena. That is why it's so important for all of us to find ways of acting in solidarity with progressive networks and social movements. These movements and their activists can serve as a lifeline to our personal commitment towards the reconstruction of social policies to express egalitarian, caring and democratic principles.

#### NOTES

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4. J.B. Davies, (1980) "The 1970 Survey of Consumer Finance Non-Sampling Error and the Personal Distribution of Wealth in Canada," in Economic Council of Canada, *Reflections on Canadian Incomes*, Ottawa: Ministry of Supply and Services, p. 329.
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