

SPLIT SHIFTS AND SPINNING SOLIDARITY

Library Workers in the Real World



PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN ELM SLIE

By Mike Smith

Kamikaze politicians. That's my label for North America's growing cohort of public administrators who seem to reject the ideas of both "the public" and "administration," while inserting themselves into the governments and services they condemn. Toronto's current mayor, Rob Ford, may be our most famous example, having won the job by repeating, over and over, that he didn't want it and no one should. A lesser known example might be Stephen Dulmage, recently resigned from the Toronto Public Library board.

One can only speculate what kind of self-loathing made Dulmage accept the post. He actively resented the existence of library branches, and railed against the "old business model" of libraries stocking "millions" of things called "books." (And did you know libraries are *free*? Insanity.)

For those who love — or even simply accept — books, Dulmage's resignation is good news. But we might worry that a man who wonders aloud why

the *library system* is running all these *libraries* ever had a seat on a public library board in the first place — and note that it's allowed regressive voices to appear, by contrast, reasonable. After his resignation, the *National Post* published a point-counterpoint between Dulmage and board chair councillor Paul Ainslie — casting as defender of libraries a man who had negotiated, two months earlier, to strip employment security from half of Toronto's librarians.

THE LONG MEMORY

Upon us meeting, it takes Cathy Thomson about 60 seconds to mention the Luddites — invoking a contentious piece of labour history, and saving me at least one leading question.

It's March 27, a week and two days since the Toronto Public Library Workers Union (Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 4948) went on strike, and two days before they will vote on a settlement offer. Outside City Hall, in Nathan Phillips Square, picket captains use megaphones to

LEFT (p.32): There was a large outpouring of community solidarity with Toronto's library workers during their strike in March, including creative events such as a "knit-in." Library workers Sheila Fairley (left, at the spinning wheel), and Cathy Thomson (centre) helped organize it, and took part.



PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY TPLWU LOCAL 4948

rally the circular picket line, but the news cameras are looking for angles on a spinning wheel set up by the fountains.

I'm checking out the hastily organized but surprisingly popular "knit-in," which Thomson, a 30-year librarian who oversees the Toronto Public Library (TPL) "Leading to Reading" program, helped envision.

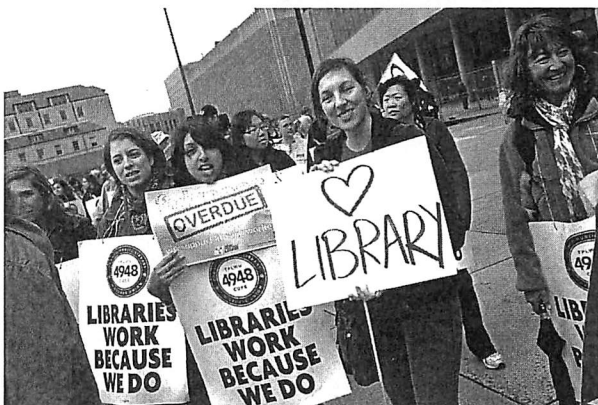
"Labour has roots in the fibre industry. Do you know the Luddites?" She means it in the original sense: British textile workers in the late 19th century who took to destroying mechanized looms that threatened to de-skill the industry. Even without knowing the tale, labour activists could likely intuit that Luddites weren't against technology, only certain ways of using it. Theirs wasn't a struggle against progress, but for the right to define it.

Thomson reminds me that Gandhi advocated spinning. She says he believed it was a way to pursue peace; practicing economic self-sufficiency and breaking reliance on British textiles likely didn't hurt, either. But, either way, it does seem to produce conditions for peace this afternoon in Toronto: workers young and old, male and female, some just learning to knit or spin for the first time, sit, talk, share. Though I don't try my hand, so I may never know for sure.

There's no similar sharing when you buy a wool sweater at The Bay — nor as often as there once was in library branches, with automated book check-outs becoming common. "People miss chat-



PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY TPLWU LOCAL 4948



PHOTOGRAPH: JOSHUA BERSON

ting with staff," says librarian Sheila Fairley. "And when we chat, we find out what they like to read, what they're borrowing, and why. It helps us keep a better idea of what's moving, what we'd be better off ordering."

Like the Luddites, the public library workers' fight for employment security can be (has been, will be) misinterpreted as a quaint struggle to make time stand still, especially now that "journalists are jobless because of the internet" has become a truism — and further concealed questions of ownership in information work. *Librarians are worried? Well, no wonder. They put physical books on real shelves in actual rooms. How can they expect job security? Haven't they heard of Wikipedia?*

"When I first came to the TPL 30 years ago, we were using something called a Recordac machine," Thomson tells me later by phone. "We were using telex; things were on microfilm. If Leading to Reading had money for iPads, that would be fantastic. We're not anti-technology." Books, after all, are a fantastically successful technology. But neither they nor iPads can help a child read if someone doesn't help the child use them first.

Thomson links her work to Toronto's "handicraft revolution." "Librarians care about their job — about doing things carefully," she says. "Why not just buy socks at Wal-Mart? Well, it's not about quick-and-easy. It's about making sure people get the right book, and that their children learn to read."

We're told our future is in the "information



PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY TPLWU LOCAL 4948

The Writers' Union of Canada hosted a rally and read-in to support the members of CUPE Local 4948 (the Toronto Public Library Workers' Union).

economy" — though with each wave of info-evangelism, the information economy seems to have less room for information *workers*. (Consider the new "creative class," in which those working on laptops are supposed to have the same interests as those selling them.) But, for three weeks, Local 4948 pushed the reality of knowledge work into the rhetoric of knowledge production.

THE LONG WAIT

For the record, Maureen O'Reilly prefers the term "library worker."

The most common image of a library worker is the traditional image of a librarian: someone with a cushy job and comfortable seat behind the checkout desk, from which they might occasionally rise to put a book on a shelf. In reality, 2,300 workers in Local 4948 fill dozens of job descriptions to keep 99 public branches (and a few buildings internal to the system) running. Not only are there specialized librarians — science librarian, youth librarian — but there are also "Pages," who spend most of the day on their feet moving books; staff who administer public programs; staff who run theatres; and many who work behind the scenes

building, maintaining, distributing, repairing, and preserving collections. Since 1998, TPL usage has risen 29 per cent. Staffing has fallen 17 per cent.

"I really believe that the public library could disappear in 30 years," O'Reilly tells me. "And it's not because of the internet, or 'the information age.' That's brought more people in."

O'Reilly is not City Librarian (that role is currently filled by Jane Pyper), though you'd be forgiven for thinking so. The president of Local 4948, who got her start as a worker at the Richview branch, speaks of Toronto's public library system with a warmth and enthusiasm that comes from knowing that workers make the TPL what it is. We meet in the boardroom of Local 4948's Yonge and Eglinton headquarters, apartment buildings outside the windows close-packed like library stacks. She reminds me that the TPL had 19 million visits last year; this, in a city of just over 2 million people. "We're the busiest public library system in the world," she says. "We should celebrate that. But the foundation is shaky. There has been an exploitation of women's work, something the library community doesn't speak about. I think it's time to pull the curtain aside."

Over half of TPL staff, three quarters of whom are women, are part-time, and few qualify for benefits. Many who do can't afford to pay into them. Opportunities for full-time employment evaporate, while work increases. Before the strike, Local 4948's contract gave employment security to all members, presenting a significant speed-bump to layoffs intended to shrink the system.

During the 2011 City budget, even the library board called for cuts to 107 staff. Some argued that since cuts were "inevitable," it would be better for the TPL to guide them than the mayor. But, to many, by doing this the Library abandoned its mission, and chose a hostile minority at City Hall over their own people.

"When the City Librarian recommended staff cuts, she actually said it would not affect front-line service," says O'Reilly. "Now here we are, six weeks after the strike, and it certainly has. The library can't operate with a 17 per cent staff cut. This year is really going to be a testing point."

The large proportion of part-timers known as "Pages" are, theoretically, in a temporary student position that often turns permanent. Theoretically. Ariana Sanchez-Mcauley, a single parent and recent Master's graduate from the University of Toronto, has been a Page for 10 years. She works mostly at the downtown Lillian H. Smith branch. "I interviewed for a temporary full-time position, only nine weeks long, and was told I had all the qualifications, but my seniority was much lower than other applicants, so I was unlikely to get it."

The most heavily-used public library has some of the most heavily-used part-timers. Hours are unpredictable; locations shift; staff sometimes chase work across the city. "You may work a split shift that requires you to travel from one end of the city to another on the same day," Sanchez-Mcauley tells me — for two 3.5 hour shifts. "It's difficult to have a regular day off."

Management treats Pages as unskilled labour, yet draws on their skills more and more. Though technically against the rules, Pages often forego extra pay — up to \$10 an hour — when filling in for other job classifications, called "superior duties."

"It's almost like two separate workforces," says Mary Bissell, an experienced librarian with an undergraduate degree in English literature, a master's degree in library science and a PhD in information studies, who has only found part-time work so far in the Toronto Public Library. She says the pressure to stay in the system and build seniority means part-timers "voluntarily" take on extra responsibilities. "Technically, management can't force you to take a split [shift]," she says. "They're saying people agree to it. *Of course* they're agreeing to it. What's the alternative? When I started, two full days was the norm, but, suddenly, there's been a change. The demands of the work didn't change. Management changed."

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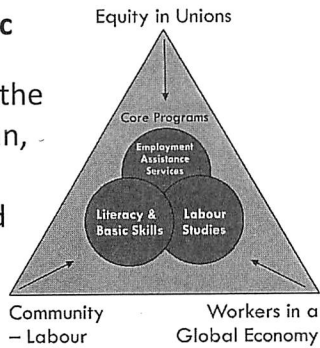
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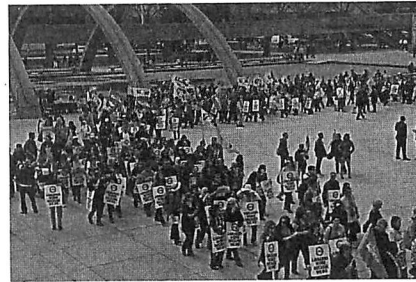
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Many solidarity rallies were held in support of the library workers, who are dear to the hearts of Toronto's communities.

Books nor iPads can help a child read if someone doesn't help the child use them first

She calls it a "Wal-Mart model," in which part-time staff are products like any other to be moved around and "plugged in." "What strikes me is the feeling that you're viewed as a worker bee, rather than valued for what you bring to the organization. You start to internalize, wondering: 'Am I being too sensitive?'" When she began speaking at rallies leading up to and during the strike, that feeling shifted. "I had more and more people coming up to me, thanking me for articulating the problem, saying that's exactly what's been happening. There was an isolation felt by part-time workers, but once it came out, people started talking about it."

That isolation, which was dissolved at least temporarily by the strike, isn't just hurting workers, but the institution as well. "The history of librarianship is one of insecurity," says Bissell. "For 100 years we've debated what our role is and who we are. People know what a nurse is, but librarians, we're always having to redefine ourselves, prove ourselves, justify our work."

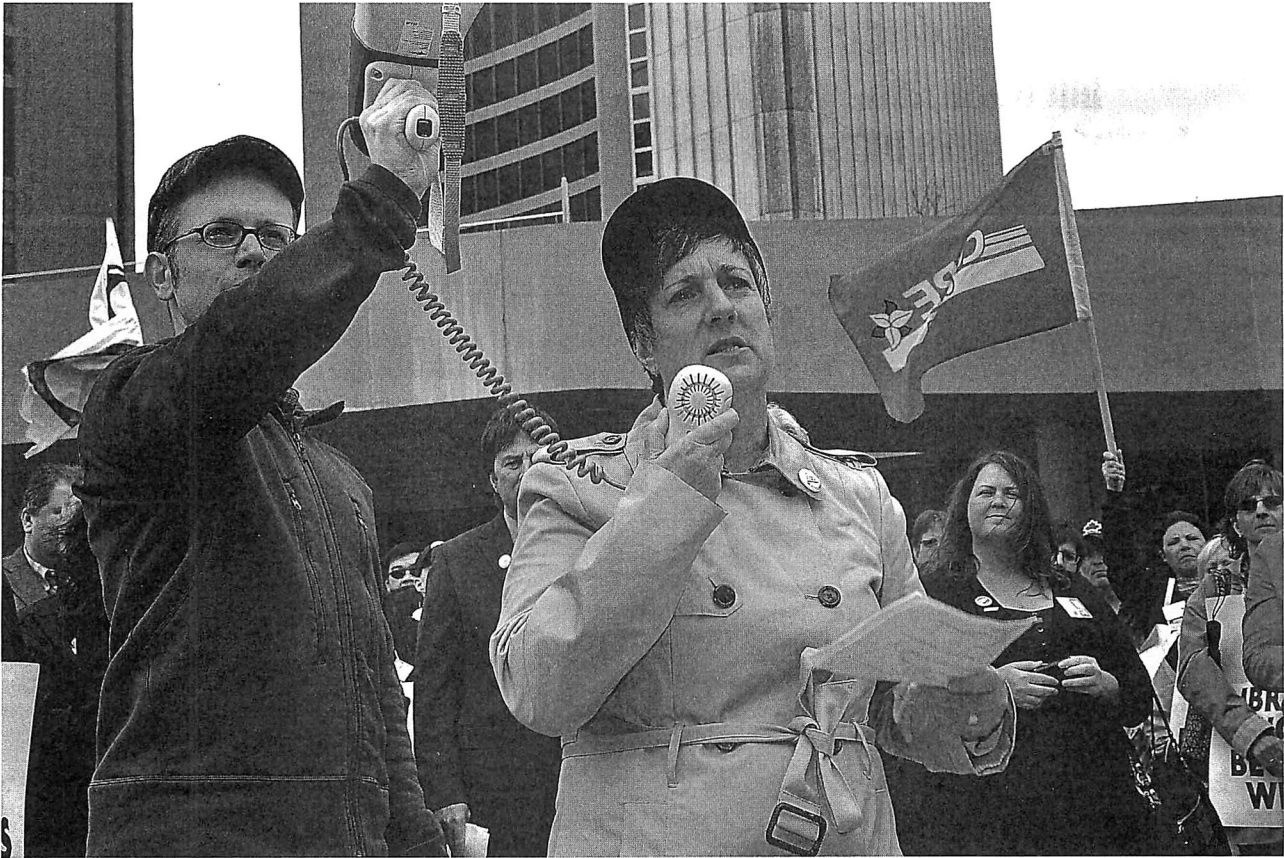
Lately, they've been told they should consider their library work to be in competition with Chapters, on the one hand, and community centres on the other.

"We do great outreach work, supporting communities and newcomers," says Bissell. "But I think we're diluting what we should be doing: providing alternative sources of information. It used to be the case that we stocked a lot of smaller presses as well, alternative presses, left literature. Now, you might get one copy of certain books at the reference library, but they're not circulated. And different branches had different collections — they served different communities, and hired librarians with different interests." Diversity was encouraged.

As opportunities for permanent work evaporate, so does the ability to build on this shared memory of experienced staff, and the ability to approach a book collection as a web of linked questions — about history, philosophy, culture — rather than an agglomeration of best-selling easy answers.

In a similar tone, O'Reilly invokes the recent closure of the Urban Affairs Library at Metro Hall

PHOTOGRAPHS: JOHN MACLENNAN



Maureen O'Reilly, president of Toronto's library workers' union, says, "There's been an exploitation of women's work, something the library community doesn't speak about."

(a civic office building and kind of adjunct City Hall). "The point of the UAL was to support government, which won't be able to turn to them any more. All these problems are going to build upon each other. Toronto will realize, at some point, that there's less service, but they'll have trouble identifying it."

When Toronto's library workers walked off the job this past spring, it was on these abstract but crucial principles — memory, quality — and on concrete matters others are reluctant to touch: conditions for part-timers with no seniority. And they did it at a time when the received wisdom, proffered by the left and the right, was that a public sector strike would be ritual suicide. Yet, three weeks later, they returned to work, not, by O'Reilly's own admission, in triumph, but certainly intact, invigorated, and in fighting form for what's to come.

THE LONG GAME

Of course, they relied on the goodwill communities have for their public libraries and librarians that is not shared by, say, solid waste workers. But Local 4948's success in building long-term strength, even while making short-term concessions, still required a proactive strategy. It seems to have relied on three major points.

One: Don't wait til you need something to start reaching out. "We knew the feeling that a fight-back would be suicide was out there as far back as

2009," says O'Reilly. "The leadership decided, in preparation for the next bargaining round, to give ourselves a larger profile. That started off with the 'Our Public Library' campaign, which we accelerated during the City budget," a months-long debate over cuts that threatened the entire public service. "We gave ourselves a long lead-in."

Two: Widen your struggle. "Ours was one of the first budget campaigns. People were attracted because it was a safe campaign, politically, and we believe it built the momentum for Toronto to step up and push back Ford's agenda. Daycares, nutrition programs, programs for kids — they all had a huge impact on that budget. Library workers were seen as champions of the service, and, as we went into bargaining, people were ready to hear us."

Three: Link your needs to the public's. Where Local 4948 had arguably the least success, but also faced the highest barriers, was in emphasizing the connection between service levels and protection for the workers who deliver services. Still, the good fortune that saw the press move right from budgets to bargaining offered the union an opportunity to educate the public about the lack of employment security for library workers, in contrast to the "jobs for life" fiction, which made better headlines.

There's still much work to be done. "The strike pushed back the austerity agenda," says O'Reilly. "Where we didn't succeed was employment secu-

People know what a nurse is, but librarians are always having to prove ourselves and justify our work

rity. On the face of it, compared to other city locals, it looked like success. They were stuck at [employment security only applying to those with seniority of] 15 years; we secured 11. But, as soon as you scratch the surface, it's devastating."

While the new contract stopped more work from being made part-time, allowed the creation of new full-time positions, and restructured benefits to serve part-timers better, half of members could now be laid off summarily, the implications of which failed to interest a press trumpeting "labour peace."

The question is whether a politically beset TPL administration has the courage or capital to follow through. The strike is over, the latest contract signed, but for Local 4948 members and leadership, negotiations have just begun. If past practices are any indi-

cation, they will try to bring the public to the table by whatever method they can, including the internet, where activists can bypass an indifferent press corps, and of which librarians are supposedly so afraid.

"The threat isn't from outside," says O'Reilly. "It's from inside. Unless we can continue to define ourselves as a public library, unique from bookstores, unique from community centres, we will not exist. It's extremely important to keep pushing back."

Mike Smith is a journalist, poet, performer, and communications worker based in Toronto. He knows his library card number by heart. See his site at linebreaks.com for more information.

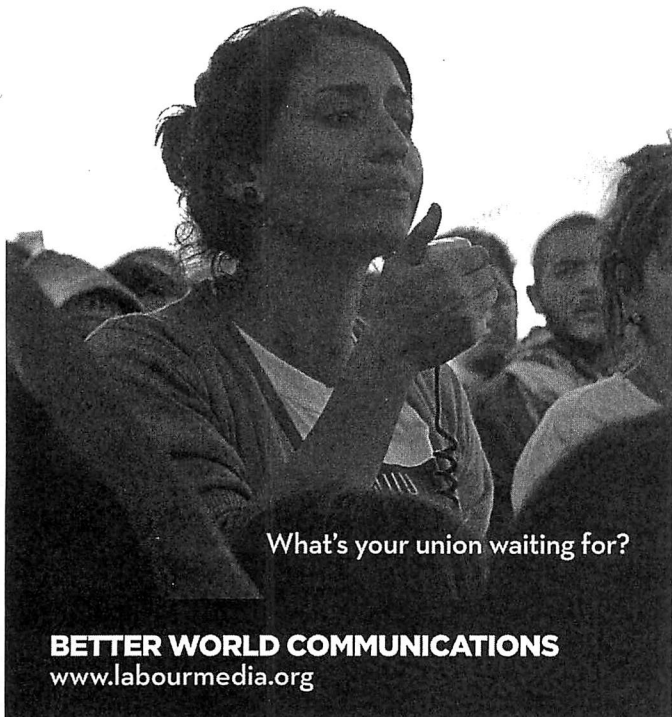
For more information about the Toronto library workers and community support for public libraries, visit www.ourpubliclibrary.to for more information, as well as the Toronto Public Library Workers' Union's website: www.local4948.org.

Our Times would like to thank Viveca Gretton, TPLWU (CUPE) Local 4948's recording secretary, for her help in gathering photographs for this story.

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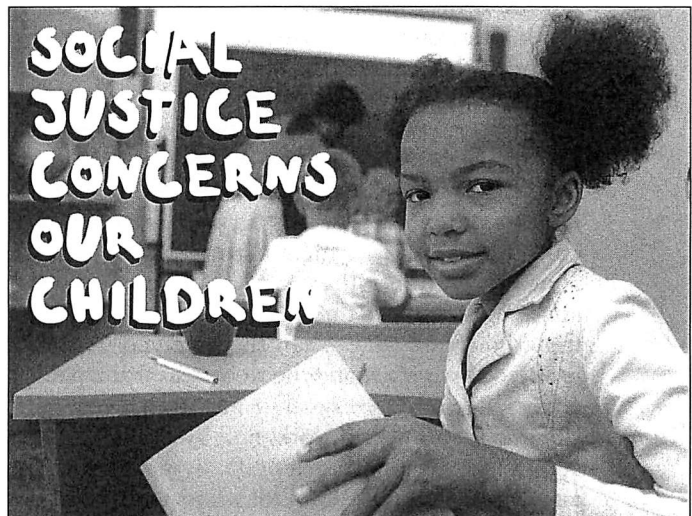
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