Janus-Faced Austerity: Strengthening the 'Competitive' Canadian State

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Abstract: The global economic crisis has triggered a wave of stimulus spending throughout the world, with particular concentrations in North America, the Eurozone and China. This paper examines its Canadian context. Focusing broadly on the deepening integration of neoliberalism since the election of Stephan Harper in 2006 as well as federal Conservative fiscal and monetary policy, this paper delves into the Janus-Faced character of Canadian austerity measures. It is argued that while social services and spending are restricted for certain segments of the Canadian working class, new arrangements and spending initiatives are rolled out by the federal government in order to fuel enhanced capital accumulation. This paper concludes with some propositions for resisting austerity and strengthening the resolve of the Canadian working class.

Keywords: Canada; Austerity; Fiscal & Monetary Policy; Capital-Preserving Federalism; Neoliberalism.

Introduction

The times are tough, we are told. The grim economic climate appears unmatched in severity since the Great Depression. It is on this basis that social spending is being slashed and wage freezes are imposed on public sector workers across the country and around the world. In order to save a sinking ship, workers are asked to throw wages, benefits and social security overboard. However, the thin veil of collective belt-tightening, the attitude that we must all share the burden, belies an enduring project of class polarization. Hence, rather than viewing the current

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responses to 'economic' crisis as somehow marking a break with neoliberalism, government stimulus policies reflect a profound continuity and further entrenchment of past strategies of privatization, creating openings for capital and public sector spending restraint.

In this paper, we will argue that the current round of austerity measures advanced by the Harper Conservatives is Janus-faced: on the one hand public services, social programs, labour and environmental supports and protections are being 'rolled back' for the working class, while state supports are 'rolled out' to serve the needs of capital. In so doing, Harper is showing no hesitation to use the coercive power of the federal government to centralize policies and institutional arrangements that appease business interests. After briefly tracing the theoretical presuppositions of neoliberalism and the realignment of governance at intersecting scales of operation, we situate the continuing assault on public services and organized labour by drawing attention to what we refer to as capital-preserving federalism. As a political and economic strategy, capital-preserving federalism provides a means of imposing constraints upon newly elected federal governments and sub-national constituent-units' (e.g. provinces, municipalities) ability to bypass market access to goods and services, in addition to restrictions upon withdrawing or opting-out of trade and investment agreements negotiated supra-nationally[2]. In other words, successive federal governments have firmly fixed the parameters of reform to meet the needs of capital accumulation[3]. While this dynamic is advanced on a federal level, it entails the enforcement of market-dependence through multi-scaler, multi-spatial and multi-temporal institutional and legal arrangements, as well as corresponding shifts in socio-cultural and political practices. This entails the marketization of public goods and services, the re-regulation of capital controls such as foreign direct investment (FDI), and the creation of new institutional arrangements under the auspices of 'scarcity' and 'restraint'. What's more, this entails a missionary faith in balanced budgets, fiscal discipline and monetary policy.

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2 'Capital-preserving' federalism represents an effort on our part to develop a corrective to the concept of "market-preserving" federalism. While we cannot enter into a full analysis here, we base our critique on three main propositions. First, the notion of market-preserving federalism reifies the 'market' as if functioning by autonomous laws of supply and demand disembedded from broader social relations. Second, this mystification serves to obscure fundamentally antagonistic class relations where the extraction of surplus-value takes place at the detriment of labour for the benefit of capital. Third, in naturalizing social relations of capital, takes for granted the liberal dichotomization of the economic and political spheres of social life, while--incorrectly we might add—treating the state and market as competitors as opposed to mutually reinforcing. See, for example, Weingast, 1995; Yingyi & Weingast, 1996; McKinnon, 1997).

3 While not employing the notion of capital-preserving federalism, Anderson (2010) outlines similar processes at work. For instance, in 2000 Brazil adopted a fiscal responsibility law that constrains both federal and state governments, with limits on spending for government employees, public debt, expenditures and short-term spending in election years. The federal government can withhold transfers to states when they do not comply and criminal proceedings can be brought against elected officials. Similar examples include Argentina, Mexico, Nigeria, Russia, South Africa and Belgium for example. See Anderson, 2010.

As we will attempt to show throughout, this is reflected in the federal government's most recent stimulus policies. These policies impose restraint measures on the public sector while ceding fiscal control and authority over domestic policies away from local governments and communities toward political and economic elites. For this reason, the response to the current economic crisis entails the 'rolling back' of certain state activities, such as social programs and capital controls, and the 'rolling out' of new institutions and governmentalities that aim to stabilize neoliberal accumulation strategies (Peck and Tickell, 2002). While the federal government's Janus-faced strategy is significant, this by no means marks the beginning of a new era. As Thomas Workman (2009, p.7) has recently reminded: "These institutional constellations evolve very slowly over decades of class struggle." In fact, the adoption of federal stimulus policies should be viewed in continuity with past neoliberal projects. The issue, then, in our view is what these multi-level arrangements and institutions do and on whose behalf? In other words, it's a class question. In what follows, we argue that the federal Conservative government has taken advantage of the current economic crisis and the regulatory, administrative and institutional powers of the state in order to facilitate planning, underwrite expansions, take on liabilities and contain class conflict. In other words, political and economic agents, via institutional arrangements and socio-cultural practices (i.e. "the market"), work through the state utilizing their positions of power to simultaneously cut services, while extending others to suit the valorization needs of capital. While we focus our analysis on the federal government, as this special forum in *Alternate Routes* suggests, this is a pattern being generalized across the country and around the world.

Theorizing Neoliberalism: Realigning Governance to Facilitate Capital Accumulation

In the wake of the economic crisis of the mid-1970s, neoliberalism emerged as a response to the failure of the post-war Keynesian welfare state to sustain capital accumulation. With the unprecedented profit rates of the 1950s and 60s faltering due to the rebuilding of Western Europe's and Japan's productive capacities, increased competition from emergent economies in Latin America and Asia, rising militancy on the part of the working classes and especially trade unions, in addition to increasingly aggressive Cold War geopolitics, a ruling class *coup d'état* was launched to reestablish higher rates of profit. With an adherence to neoclassical economics and classical liberalism, neoliberalism emerged in the 1970s as a comprehensive set of political and economic practices intent on reordering state administrations, creating new profit opportunities for businesses, imposing labour market discipline and a prioritization of 'finance' capital over industrial or fixed capital[4]. A central aspect of this process has been the realignment of governance: unloading the costs of social services onto the individual and compelling diverse communities to compete with one another for 'scarce' resources under an institutional framework of private property, free markets and free trade, while continuing to slash taxes for the wealthy, marketizing all aspects of life, and selling off public assets at bargain basement prices.

This entails a variety of cross-penetrating strategies that reconfigure the jurisdiction of markets across intersecting scales of governance, revamp institutional responsibilities and encourage socio-cultural changes around four central processes. First, neoliberalism presupposes the ongoing and active separation of people from the means of subsistence, cultivating dependency on market mechanisms in areas of life previously outside of the market. Second, under neoliberalism, class solidarities are actively decomposed through the individuation of the labour process and service-provision, increasingly rendering individuals responsible for their own self-management and pitting them against one another for 'scarce' resources. Third, neoliberalism cultivates short-term speculation, aspiring to transform every aspect of life into an investment opportunity. Fourth, this entails the reconfiguration of the labour market away from a stable, skills-based labour force and toward temporary, contract-based labour arrangements that encourage competition between the private and public spheres.

Internationally, 'globalization' is the neoliberal face of a worldwide strategy that aims toward the creation of new zones of accumulation through increasingly authoritarian state apparatuses that seek to entrench market imperatives and reduce the power of labour (Saad-Filho & Johnston, 2005). This includes: lowering and eliminating tariffs on imported goods, the removal of restrictions on foreign direct investment, domestic quotas and monopolies, an export-led growth strategy, the re-regulation of domestic capital markets, as well as the weakening of environmental and labour laws, for example, which are seen as market impediments.

This does not simply entail deregulation and dismantlement of the institutions of the Keynesian welfare state. In fact, as Peck and Tickell (2002) note, there has been a shift from the 'roll-back' neoliberalism of the 1980s to an "emergent phase of

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4 In our view, finance capital is not merely speculative or parasitic, nor the result of the stagnation tendencies of advanced capitalist economies. Rather, what makes finance unique in its neoliberal form is its coalescing with industry, as well as leadership role. In other words, financial volatility actually becomes a developmental feature of neoliberalism that reinforces, rather than undermines the central position of finance-led neoliberalism and capitalist power structures. For instance, while finance may speculate in global money markets or bundle and repackage a host of derivative trading forms, a good many transactions are more often than not based on some form of real assets and commodity production. Moreover, finance has been central to the disciplining of industry and the working class through the availability of credit and reinvestments in mortgages, pensions and loans. Though neoliberalism was from its very beginning a project intent on restoring ruling class power, it went beyond this thoroughly integrating and subordinating the working classes into its dependent orbit. For a fuller exposition, see Albo, Gindin and Panitch, 2010.

active state-building and regulatory reform" which they describe as "roll out" neoliberalism through the 1990s. While the crisis of the 1970s entailed wages freezes and dramatic austerity budgets, over the past twenty years governments have moved toward a more proactive position in unfolding new institutional frameworks that facilitate a deepening project of class polarization under the rubric of 'scarcity' and 'restraint'. Despite the political and ideological antagonism toward state 'interference' in the market, state intervention is central to securing the political, economic and social conditions necessary for accumulation such as the privatization of state-owned industries and utilities, the opening of its banking, healthcare, education and telecommunications systems to private ownership, in addition to competing international pensions and mutual funds.

Domestically, neoliberalism seeks to deepen and intensify internal competition among competing business interests, thereby pitting workers and workplaces in competition with one another through ever-increasing market compulsions. This includes efforts to contract-out and privatize provincial and municipal services, extract concessions from its unionized and non-unionized workforce, in addition to an increased reliance on public-private partnerships (P3's). Central banks are envisaged as inflation fighters, with an inflation control regime of between one and three percent. Provincially, and as creatures of the provinces, municipally, neoliberal policies have sought to shift the burden of taxes from businesses to consumers for competitiveness, slash social services and liquidate assets. In order to become more 'flexible' and 'leaner' in a globalizing economy, provinces and cities have increasingly responded with attempts to move away from the universal provision of social services to marketized provisions with attached user-fees, enhanced inter-jurisdictional competition and sought a confrontational approach with unions, which have aimed to reorient accumulation strategies and to concentrate capital in metropolitan cores, which serve international markets (Albo, 1994; Kipfer & Keil, 2002; Tufts, 2004). The most recent emphasis on austerity and balanced budgets, however, is counteracted by growing state involvement in creating new spaces for accumulation. In confronting the growing indebtedness of the state, an all out offensive is launched against remaining social provisions and universal entitlements, thereby tipping the balance of class forces away from labour and toward creditors and locally dominant capitalist coalitions with alliances to the US ruling-class. In this manner, politicians, economists and policy-makers ensconced in the neoliberal doctrine were successful in moving the terrain of debate from the realm of production whereby labour and capital struggled over the control of the working-day and the appropriation of surplus-value, to the terrain of distribution and exchange thereby strengthening the alliance between capital and the state.

As the always global scope of capital accumulation and the persistent need for more domestic and local forms of 'extra-market' (i.e. legal, juridical, political, repressive) supports enmeshed, rather than ceding power away from the nation-state neoliberalism created new and shifting scales of governance each with an historically unique dynamism. This includes, for instance, the devolution of regulating responsibilities onto local governments without matching fiscal supports or a proportional transfer of power, while also scaling regulatory capacities 'upwards' to regional or international institutions (Brenner, 2004). Likewise, efforts to extend and consolidate neoliberalism have centered on attempts to: reduce the power of organized labour through market disciplining; the commodification and marketization of the state through measures that promote 'competitive austerity'; reducing welfare disincentives to work; promoting the massive encouragement of part-time, precarious and contingent forms of service-sector employment; recklessly opening-up goods and capital markets to international competition; as well as disproportionately cutting taxes for higher-income earners and businesses, while moving-away from the social provision of universal programs to consumption-based levies (Albo, 1993; Clarke, 2005; Brenner & Theodore, 2002; McBride, 2005). For organized labour this has meant the institutionalization of policies that aim to make it easier to decertify unions, unilaterally proclaim them "essential" and thereby removing the right to strike, as well as the increased use of coercive back-to-work legislation. All things considered, then, the capitalist classes have used the economic recession and the rhetoric of 'fiscal consolidation', 'prudent business management' and 'government responsibility" as a strategic political opportunity to strengthen and expand processes of neoliberalism—from the urban to the international—through the state and market.

Under the guise of New Public Management mantras, there has been a retreat from the provision of social services through a stable, full-time labour force, increasingly toward part-time, seasonal and short-term contracts, which are seen as providing a more docile and globally competitive labour force (Ilcan et al., 2003). Likewise, through reduced social expenditures and long-term investments, all levels of government have sought to shed 'liabilities' through attrition, downsizing, leaving vacancies unfilled and retirements. By means of outsourcing, the government is increasingly advanced as a consumer that is responsible for purchasing services rather than actively producing them. This has served to weaken job security, seniority allowances, transfer and promotion opportunities, cost-of-living increases, erode pensions and benefits, in addition to increasing the absolute managerial control over the working-day. Indeed, a renewed assault on the public-sector, and in particular unionized jobs (as we argue below), will likely come down hardest on racialized groups and women since not only has this been where many have made the most gains but also because they are likely to see increases in the unpaid sphere of social life and reproduction. All things considered, we now turn to a discussion of the particular ways in which the election of Prime Minister Stephan Harper's federal Conservatives have acted to preserve the mobility and power of capital, while subordinating and intensifying pressures for the working-class.

'Constitutionalizing' Neoliberalism: Integrating the 'Competitive' Logic of the State

The current economic crisis has provided a calculated political and economic opportunity for the federal government to simultaneously 'roll back' its commitment to the provision of social services, while at the same time 'rolling out' institutions and social policies that are oriented towards the cultivation of new channels for accumulation. The measures advanced by the federal government are by no means based on austerity or restraint, but on expanding and deepening opportunities for capital valorization unburdened by the costs of social infrastructure. Welfare state retrenchment and tight fiscal constraints go hand in hand with irresponsible tax cuts and spectacular mega projects. As the immediacy of the financial crisis recedes and governments around the world restrict spending, with the most dramatic conflicts over public goods and services occurring in Europe, these so-called 'exit strategies' are attempting to re-establish liberalized financial systems and reconstruct the neoliberal policy framework and dominance of the market in regulating economic output and distribution. It is important, therefore, to begin by identifying some of the features of these so-called exit strategies being adopted by the Harper government in Canada, particularly with respect to fiscal policies, given that fiscal austerity is likely to be a flashpoint of political struggles in the coming period.

From his very first budget speech in 2006, titled "Restoring Fiscal Balance In Canada", Harper demonstrated his hard-line commitment to constitutionalism in the Conservatives proposal for a stricter separation of responsibilities by cutting federal social programs that would fall under the auspices of the provinces. Almost immediately after coming to power, Prime Minister Harper slashed the Goods and Services Tax (GST) from 7 percent to 6 and later 5 percent in an attempt to attract investment and spur economic development. The Conservatives devoted the Canadian state to "competitive and efficient" economic policies and proposed plans to harmonize the tax system. Meanwhile, they moved quickly to scrap plans for a non-profit, centre-based, affordable national child care program that had been negotiated by the Liberals with the provinces and territories and replaced it with the Universal Child Care Benefit that saw families on welfare, the working poor and modest-income families netting between $600 and $951 per annum; nowhere near close enough to cover the costs of child-care or to allow a parent to stay at home (Batte et al, 2006; Bezanson, 2010).

A short time thereafter, the 2007 global financial meltdown plunged the international political economy into the most significant crisis of accumulation since the Great Depression. In an act of political brinkmanship, soon after fixing federal election dates to every four years Prime Minister Harper called a snap election breaking his own election promise in the hope of gaining a clear majority. While this did not happen, the biggest losers in the election were the Liberals who had lost twenty-six seats; two-thirds of which were redistributed to the Conservatives and the remainder to the NDP. Meanwhile, governments of all stripes the world over responded with unprecedented levels of stimulus funding. The Harper Conservatives, long a sanctuary for fiscal hawks, likewise responded with stimulus spending. The centerpiece of the 2009 budget, titled "Canada's Economic Action Plan", injected $64 billion over two years toward infrastructure spending, personal income tax cuts and the 'securitization' (or preemptive bailout) of state-backed mortgage and insurance agencies. Harper's government, which since late-2006 required all provinces to consider the P3 route as a condition for receiving federal infrastructure money and in 2007 created the aggressive Public-Private Partnerships Canada Crown corporation, was using its fiscal leverage as a source of cost-sharing and the economic crisis as a pretext to promote P3 projects nationally (see Loxley, 2010). This is in spite of the fact that a growing number of studies indicate that the privatization of formerly public services is often no more efficient or less costly than traditional approaches to service delivery (Loxley, 2010; Armstrong et al, 2001; Mackenzie, 2004). Despite exceptional amounts of stimulus spending, however, the Harper government has remained steadfastly committed neoliberals. With the two year stimulus spending coming to an end and economic "recovery" allegedly underway, Harper's Conservatives are looking to halve their deficits by 2013 under the euphemism of "fiscal consolidation", otherwise known as austerity. With an estimated deficit of nearly $56 billion for 2010-11 that is expected to remain well into 2013-2014, and a forecast debt-to-GDP ratio of about 34-35 percent, this is nowhere near the 25 percent threshold when the books were balanced. However, the state of the federal budget is by no means dire, when taking into consideration the record $14 billion surplus that Harper inherited from an earlier decade of Liberal austerity. In addition, prior to the onset of the current crisis, Canada's debt at 32.3 percent of national GDP was at its lowest in more than a quarter century given the largest payments in Canadian history and federal law that requires all surpluses to be used to pay down the national debt and not for new spending initiatives.

In an effort to rebalance the books, the most recent Speech from the Throne (March 3, 2010) suggests that, rather than depart from neoliberal austerity and monetary policy, Harper's Conservatives are seeking to further expand and intensify them. In other words, a private-sector crisis is being shifted onto the public sector and the power of finance capital is emerging stronger than ever. In their blatantly ideological quest to return to balanced budgets, Harper's Conservatives—no less aided by the Federal Liberals and New Democratic Party—have turned their attention toward an aggressive strategy premised on public sector austerity and private sector prosperity.

For instance, hidden deep in the 2010 budget is a technical change to tax regulations that aim to entice FDI through the weakening of domestic constraints. The budget removes restrictions that foreign investors, especially venture capitalists and private-equity funds, face in selling shares in Canadian firms. This change to Section 116 of the Income Tax Act effectively eliminates the need for tax reporting to the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA). Previously, the CRA required investors to disclose details of the sale for approval in the case that taxes needed to be paid. As a result, rather than repatriate any capital gains, investors kept the proceeds of the sale in Canadian accounts for fear of taxation. As of the Speech, these restrictions have been for the most part eliminated (Viera, 2010). Touting the alleged benefits of the change, Finance Minister Flaherty recently remarked, "[t]he best way to build a more competitive economy is to create an environment that allows the entrepreneurs who employ so many Canadians to succeed and expand—not an environment that stands in the way of their success with high taxes and red tape" (Department of Finance, 2010). Of course, Flaherty failed to mention that these changes are expected to cost Ottawa $130-million in lost revenue over five-years. Meanwhile, in all areas but defense spending which has increased 37% since 2000-2001, government operating expenditures have been frozen for two-years, which given inflation means real cuts. The Conservatives have recently pledged $9 billion to build jails for criminals who do not exist, spent $1.1 billion on turning Toronto into a militarized city for the recent G8/G20 meetings and promised another $16 billion for F-35 fighter jets for fighting 'terrorism' abroad. Finance Minister Jim Flaherty has also suggested that there are some opportunities for the privatization of crown assets, including real estate and the outsourcing of public contracts. In particular, the Conservatives are taking aim at Atomic Energy Canada Ltd., seeking to open-up Canada Posts' procurement of overseas mail, and grant the minister of the environment unilateral powers to waive environmental assessments. In seeking to create new clusters of accumulation, environmental regulations in the Arctic have been 'streamlined' for oil and mining companies to drill, while federal environmental assessment reports have been removed from the purview of the Canadian Environmental Agency to the business-friendly National Energy Board. This continues the removal of environmental initiatives by the Conservatives made most explicit by Harper's dismissal of the Kyoto protocol as a "socialist scheme" designed to suck money from the rich countries.

The weakening of social provisions, labour and environmental laws has been paralleled by new spending as Harper has further concentrated federal stimulus monies in the energy, resource and construction industries. Certainly new public spending is gravely needed given Canada's crumbling infrastructure (estimated at over $123 billion) and the fact that total public investment as a percentage of GDP has fallen from between two and three percent in the 1960s and 70s to about 0.5 percent by the 1990s (Mackenzie, 2004); however this spending has not been equally distributed among the various segments of the Canadian labour market, nor racial and gender neutral (Ontario Health Coaltion, 2008; Armstong et al, 2001; OPSEU, 2007). Attacks against the poor, refugee claimants, temporary workers, live-in caregivers, and non-status persons are increasing as the blatant power of the federal state is summoned to service capital, while abandoning any responsibilities to labour (Thomas, 2010; Hussan and Scott, 2009; Teelucksingh & Galabuzzi, 2005; Galabuzzi, 2006; Paz, 2008). Indeed, recent research by Kathleen Lahey (2009) suggests that women have received only about 7 percent to 22 percent of stimulus funding, since men tend to predominate in the construction, mining and forestry industries. The bulwark of stimulus spending has been untargeted without any long-term planning, community involvement or proactive infrastructural spending, going mainly toward existing backlogs as opposed to rethinking development and the spatial development of where we live and work.

The federal Conservatives have continued to 'slash and burn' funding for equity seeking groups such as the Status of Women, or groups critical of Israeli state policies such as KAIROS, and have in the process punished those that dare to criticize their policies. For example, a short-list of recent Harper controversies includes what have (arguably) been labeled 'politically-motivated' removals such as the dismissal of openly critical and outspoken Veterans Ombudsman Pat Strogran, Chief Superintendent Marty Cheliak a strong supporter of the long-gun registry, former president of the Canadian Nuclear Safety commission Linda Keen who shut down the Chalk River nuclear facility over safety concerns, Chair of the Military Complaints commission Peter Tinsley who was investigating the controversial transfer of Afghan detainees and, most recently, Chief Statistician at Statistics Canada Munir Sheikh who resigned after the mandatory long-form census was scrapped in favour of a voluntary survey, which has been harshly criticized by a plethora of academics, think tanks, politicians, community groups and other levels of government. In addition, this includes last year's prorogation (the fourth time in three years) of parliament for more than two months amid speculation of a coalition Liberal-NDP, the Helena Guergis affair, the dismissal of the arts and cultural community, alleged spending favouritism for Conservative ridings, a foreign aid policy that denies funding for abortion services, a bold-faced 802 page omnibus or "dumpster" bill bulging with disparate issues, and public attacks targeting employment equity and affirmative action for federal employees. Put into perspective, then, this can be understood as none other than an act of capitalist militancy on behalf of and in accordance with the state.

A renewed round of austerity under the banner of "fiscal prudence" has led new President of the Treasury Board, the main cabinet committee responsible for the administration and operations of the federal civil service, Stockwell Day, to suggest that public-sector unions need to 'share the pain'. This was a thinly veiled reference to the concessions extracted by private-sector unions from GM, Ford, Chrysler and Vale-Inco, for example, as well as the political failures and public resentment of striking public-sector workers from Toronto and Ottawa to Windsor and Vancouver (Rosenfeld, 2009; Albo et al, 2010; Fanelli and Paulson, 2009). Stimulus and restraint go hand-in-hand: capital-preserving tax cuts cause deficits that then need to be resolved, which translates into social cuts and wage restraint for the working-class and a vicious circle of more tax cuts to spur business investment further eroding the fiscal base. For instance, over the next five years federal workers will subsidize corporate tax-cuts by $6.8-billion in transfers extracted through wage-freezes and job cuts, which will total nearly $21-billion. Oddly, though, a great percentage of Canadian Federal tax-cuts will flow directly right back into the US Treasury, which taxes its companies the difference between foreign taxes and domestic ones in order to stimulate internal production and slow outsourcing (Weir, 2009). The recently negotiated "Buy American" deal gives permanent and unrestricted foreign access to publicly funded contracts. This is an historical deed as it is the first time Canadian governments have agreed to open procurement contracts to bids by other World Trade Organization members since the 1988 Free Trade Agreement. This is particularly confusing as only about 2 percent of US federal stimulus funding, that is, about $4-5-billion of $275-billion, remains. Still worse, Canada and the European Union are in trade negotiations to enact what the Trade Justice Network, an alliance comprised of labour and social justice groups, has argued would be the largest, most intrusive free trade deal that Canada has ever entered into and is progressing quite quickly with little public scrutiny (Trade Justice Network). According to a recent study by Scott Sinclair (2010, p.3) of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA):

> The CETA [Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement] also will have an adverse impact on public services, especially those provided by local, territorial and provincial governments. The agreement would promote and entrench new forms of commercialization,

> especially public-private partnerships. It would also prohibit governments from setting performance requirements that oblige foreign investors or service providers to purchase locally, transfer technology or train local workers. The combined impact of its investment, services and procurement rules would make it far more difficult to reverse failed privatizations.

The austerity agenda of the federal government has entailed the drastic reconfiguration of public services as Canada is essentially offering to make commitments at the federal, provincial and municipal tiers that go beyond NAFTA and the WTO, opening up services and investments, domestic regulation and standards, public procurement contracts and intellectual property rights (McBride, 2005; Johnson and Mahon, 2005). Foreign multinationals could potentially gain unprecedented access to municipal water services, while the demand for local offsets, the most important leverage that towns and cities have, such as local purchasing of goods and services or labour reinvestments, may no longer be permitted. In seeking to 'constitutionalize' neoliberalism, Canada is pushing to include a NAFTA-like investor-state dispute mechanism that would allow European companies to sue any tier of government should they enact policies that cut into profits. In effect this could nullify and void, for example, fair wage policies and ethical strategies enacted by some provinces and cities, in addition to ceding authority and control over domestic policies away from local governments and communities to business elites whose profit interests trump all others. The CETA, in particular, takes aim at Ontario's Green Energy Act, which offers grants and exemptions for cleaner energy sources and local job creation. Toronto's "buy local" food policy which has committed to increasing the amount of locally procured food served at city owned facilities and the celebrated 'living wage' in New Westminster, for instance, could be prohibited.

For months ahead of the G8/G20 meetings in Toronto, the federal government had been lobbying world leaders to block proposals for a global bank tax for G20 members to be used as a slush fund for expected future bailouts and to prevent banks from shifting to jurisdictions with lower taxes. In an effort to convince G20 member states otherwise, Harper touted the stability of the Canadian banks, which he misleadingly promoted as not requiring a bailout similar in kind to those in the U.S. and European Union. This praise however is both unjustified and dubious, when in fact Canadian banks received upwards of $200 billion—that is more than the initial $700 billion bailout in the U.S. as a percentage of GDP—not to mention a host of additional accounting trickery that kept the 'real' costs of the bank bailouts out of the books (Dobbin, 2010; Stanford, 2010; Campbell, 2009). In fact, Stephan Harper has recently gone as far as to say this would "punish" and be "unfair" to Canadian banks that, in the midst of the crisis in 2007, racked in nearly $20 billion in profits, and which have since had a field day buying up insolvent American banks. Successful with their propaganda, the Conservatives managed to persuade G20 leaders to forego a bank tax and, instead, convinced them to commit to a unified push for austerity pledging to halve their deficits by 2013. In Canada, the potential class-based consequences are clear.

With tens of thousands of baby-boomers expected to retire in the next decade, dwindling revenues and rising social services costs are expected to compound the budget fiasco. Considering the twin perils of a falling birth rate and increasing retirements, Parliamentary Budget Officer Kevin Page has warned that a shrinking tax-base coupled with increasing usage of health care and service benefits will lead to higher government costs and therefore an uncertain fiscal future (Campion-Smith, 2010). The changing demographics of the Canadian labour market is expected to increase by 7 percent the number of retired people compared to those still in the workforce in the next ten years: that's nearly as much as it grew in the last forty years. Wait another ten years and the estimated cost to rectify this dilemma rises from $20 billion to $30 billion as nearly 40 percent of federal service workers are expected to retire in the next five years. In response, Page has argued that permanent fiscal actions are needed either through significant tax-hikes, serious cuts in social spending, or some combination of both. Unfortunately though, while understanding and analyzing the changing demographics of the Canadian labour market is crucial, such uncertainty often invokes alarmist exclamations on the need to shrink the public sector and shed 'liabilities' (such as that which is currently happening throughout the Eurozone, especially around health care and pension reform). True to form and typifying the inherent short-sightedness of neoliberal ideologues, Finance Minister Flaherty's spokesperson, Crisholm Potheier, called Page's warnings an "academic exercise" before dismissing it by replying that "Canadians expect the Government to focus on today's fragile economic recovery".

Despite Harper's dutiful allegiance to capital-preserving federalism, however, the Conservatives continue to remain under pressure from business interests and corporate lobbyists, such as Canadian Federation of Independent Businesses president Catherine Swift, to withdraw health benefits and pension supports. In a letter to the Federal Pension Review Panel, Swift stressed the need to do something about the "large and growing disunity between the pension benefits of private and public employees" stressing that the public sector should follow the lead of the private sector which the market will reward appropriately, in addition to urging the government to raise the retirement age beyond 65 (Whittington, 2010). In making these remarks, Swift was implying that unionized workers are overly compensated and to be blamed for causing the deep economic downturn. More to the point, it is likely that the key reason Swift was encouraging part-time seniors to re-join the labour force was because they remain one of the most 'easily' exploitable subsets in the labour market as they are often seen as flexible, part-time, easily disposable and unlikely to demand higher wages and benefits since many are under duress and relying on their meager earnings given inadequate pensions, social supports and rising living costs.

Contrary to Swift's exaggerated remarks, nearly two-thirds of all Canadian workers lack a workplace pension and over 1.6-million seniors get by on less than $15,000 per year. According to the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC, 2010), in 2008 the average federal civil service pension was just over $23,000, which pales in comparison with the "diamond encrusted" pensions and retirement packages for C-level executives (e.g. chief financial and executive officers). Furthermore, as Toby Sanger (2010) of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) has recently shown, total public spending dropped to its lowest since 1974 to about 36 percent of the economy in 2007 while total government revenues from taxes, on the other hand, dropped to less than 32 percent of the economy in 2009, its lowest since 1985. In fact, federal program spending fell from 17.2 percent of GDP in the early-1990s to 11.7 percent by the end of the decade (Loxley, 2010). Likewise, from 1990-2008, the share of total government spending in the economy has been reduced by 20 percent which, when considering that the federal government plans to cut its corporate tax on income from 18 percent to 15 percent leading to a decline in revenue by $20 billion over the next five-years, may spell long-term budget trouble. With inflation expected to rise 1.7 percent in 2010 and 2 percent or more in 2011, together with the ever-present fear of rating agencies downgrading the federal AAA status, which would lead to vast increases in interest payments and thereby increasing Canada's dependence on foreign capital injections, Canada is by no means out of the global slump.

As of January 2010, 380,000 more people are unemployed and 270,000 fewer people are employed than 15-months earlier. With the Canadian dollar near parity with the US dollar, Canada's manufacturing sector continues to suffer from both the increased penetration of imports and the difficulty of trying to compete in foreign markets, which are either strategically subsidized or draw their 'competitive advantage' by poverty-wages or externalizing costs onto the environment. Despite productivity output per employee rising by more than 37 percent between 1980-2005, real wages in Canada have been generally stagnant since at least 1982, despite the lowest levels of unemployment since the 1970s prior to the recent economic crisis. There has been an inverse relationship, then, between productivity growth and real wages. In an effort to maintain modest living standards workers have increased their hours of work, emptied their savings, added family members to the workforce, and took on huge debt loads by borrowing against their homes and accepting multiple credit cards. Recent job data suggests that a significant majority of newly created jobs are often 10 percent lower than the average wage of the jobs lost, with 20 percent having lost their pension plan by changing jobs (Bernard & Galarneau, 2010; Sanger, 2010b). Emerging amidst such blatantly Janus-faced austerity is a quest to return to the same old orthodoxy of neoliberalism. Under the auspices of 'spiraling' budget deficits, growing unemployment and low capacity utilization, Conservatives have used the crisis to attack the various segments of the working class, in particular those unionized, to lower wages, extract concessions and increase profits, thereby further indebting 'consumers' and leaving them more precarious and with less time to spare than ever. In turn, this further undermines federal fiscal capacities in an attempt to return to a mythical era of unbridled "free market" capitalism and proverbial small government.

The urge to curtail unsustainable spending, therefore, obscures capitalist militancy. While working class incomes have either stagnated or declined over the past thirty years, the wealthiest members of society have enjoyed unprecedented gains. While in 1995 the average executive compensation of the top 50 CEO's in Canada was eighty-five times that of the average worker, by 2007 it was two-hundred and fifty-nine times that (McNally, 2009). Likewise, the income share taken by the top 0.1 percent of income earners in Canada approached 5 percent by the mid-1990s, a level unseen since the 1930s and early years of WWII. The personal savings rate that was nearly 20.2 percent of disposable income in 1982 had plummeted to 2 percent by 2005 (Baragar, 2009). Indeed, 2009 marked the highest-ever debt-to-income ratio of 145 percent in Canada. The Vanier Institute of the Family found that the average Canadian household debt climbed to $96,000 while compared with 2008 mortgages 90-days or more overdue had risen by 50 percent, and the number of credit card holders at least 90-days arrears was up 40 percent. The report also went on the suggest that there is a looming housing bubble in Canada as prices toward the end of 2009 rose to about $340,000, which is about five-times the average after-tax income of Canadian homes. The long-term trend is just over three and one-half-times that (Sauve, 2010). A sudden rise in interest rates, changes in mortgage terms and the bitter realization that current prices are in the long run unsustainable may cause the bubble to burst. As 'exit strategies' come to the forefront, contesting the ruinous effects of these policies becomes a central imperative.

Where Do We Go From Here? Resisting Austerity, Reestablishing the Power of the Working Class

The capitalist classes have used the economic recession as a strategic political opportunity to strengthen and expand processes of neoliberalism through the state and market, and into every aspect of social life. While the federal government proclaims the need to impose wage freezes, sell off public assets, and restructure social services in the face of the baby boom generation's looming retirement, this is by no means driven simply by restraint. In fact, just as the federal government has advanced austerity in the face of new spending, it has also pursued massive tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy, rolling out new institutional structures that facilitate the increasing mobility of capital, and utilizing stimulus as a way of subsidizing the burgeoning construction and energy sector. In this context, new government spending does not spell out a return to Keynesian policies, but is rather symptomatic of a deepening program of class polarization. How can this be challenged? How may social movements adapt? Is the NDP a viable alternative? How can labour unions be pushed in a positive manner?

The struggle over austerity cannot be limited to its federal expression as issues related to service retrenchment and the increasing penetration of neoliberal policies manifests throughout the provinces and municipalities. Likewise, in an increasingly intertwined global political economy, national and sub-national decisions cannot be abstracted from their international context. While exit strategies targeting the public sector are emerging unconcealed in their aggressiveness and vigor, Canadian responses have so far been tepid. The capitalist class is recomposing and repositioning itself to make the public pay, spread the risk and hoard the gains. The shape taken by struggles over austerity and social services may very well dictate the next round of accumulation or, alternatively, lead to something historically unique. Indeed, a good many predictions already suggest a looming 'lost decade' of austerity. New alignments, coalitions and networks will no doubt emerge. More importantly, however, a frank and sober discussion will need to begin that seeks to move beyond the fractured coalition of network politics in hopes of creating something historically unique, all-encompassing and capable of challenging what the working class is collectively up against. The course of neoliberalism has thoroughly beaten down what vestiges remain of trade union militancy and existing social movements must come to the bitter realization of historical defeat. This is the only realistic starting point from which to move forward (Anderson, 2000).

Three decades of neoliberalism have eroded whatever 'progressive' remnants of social-democratic and labour parties that exist. The NDP is not an alternative and neither is, regrettably, the Green Party trapped in erstwhile eco-capitalist "solutions". Both parties have no transformative vision of society, adhere to the economic agenda of neoliberalism and display no interest in challenging the logic of capital or the democratic functions of the state. Moreover, they remain entrapped in top-down organizational structures with little interest in building mobilizational capacities at the community and grassroots level. Finally, when in power they have strayed little from Conservative and Liberal policies. This is demonstrated time and again in the countless cutbacks and repressive policies of a good many social democratic governments' over the past three decades (Caroll & Ratner, 2005).

Moreoever, organized labour bodies from the Canadian Labour Congress to the Ontario Federation of Labour, Canadian Auto Workers and Canadian Union of Public Employees, for instance, have increasingly shown signs of confusion having failed to break ideologically or politically with a social dependence on capital and by their inability to meaningfully intervene in recent battles. Great political and social divergences between Local's and their national or provincial affiliates continue to mar the collective bargaining landscape. If worker militancy as demonstrated by workplace stoppages is an indication of growing labour unrest, the 126 workplace stoppages in 2006 (its lowest since 1935) pales in comparison with the historic high of 1,173 in 1974, and indeed paints a grim picture of the state of labour militancy in Canada (Workman, 2009). By focusing narrowly on workplace gains such as, say, higher wages, the capitalist class and a good many politicians feed off the rhetoric that workplace gains undermine social services. This is a trap that labour gets caught up in when it focuses only on workplace benefits. Labour will need to develop counter-narrative strategies and seek to politicize their gains by rooting them in their communities and also in the form of non-economic improvements (paid leave, educationals, etc). Unfortunately, instead of inspiring new waves of mass protest, demonstrations and the spawning of new working class organizations, the current global economic insecurity seems to have weakened labour's resolve and risks signaling its ultimate class defeat.

To conclude, the power of capital and the state, as well as the impasse of both organized labour and many social movements to confront what the working class is collectively up against, belies the need for a new kind of radical, anti-capitalist political project suited to the current historical and social conjuncture. New political experiments will need to emerge that aim to incorporate the strongest elements of the traditional party, trade unions, social movements and community groups. In this regard, the Left may due well to study the growing brashness of political and economic elites as they reconfigure and reorganize themselves to seize the crisis. Nevertheless, the European anti-austerity protests and emergent anti-capitalist projects may provide a glimmer of optimism. What is certain is that the failure to take up such a challenge to reestablish the power of the working class in Canada would be to accept the existing social relations as unalterable and would therefore recognize the right of capital to exploit labour.

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