

In the year 2000 approximately 60,000 families were evicted from their homes in Ontario, Canada. This figure has grown by ten per cent per year since the provincial government's abolition of rental controls in 1998, just one in a number of neoliberal measures that have become familiar worldwide and one instance where the willingness of anticapitalists to fight back has outraged the powerful and emboldened the poor. The Ontario Coalition Against Poverty has been compared to the piqueteros of Argentina. They have a broad and diverse membership, they are well organized, committed to direct action and – most alarming for the state – they are often successful.

Whether it's actively supporting asylum seekers through direct action and legal casework, coordinating with Mohawk hunters to distribute meat to low income families, converting empty buildings into housing and community facilities, or laying siege to the Ontario Provincial Legislature in an attempt to have the voices of the poor recognized, OCAP is on the frontline.

OCAP's continued growth and broad appeal illuminates one of the many ways forward for Northern movements caught between the local and global, working with communities of activists, or communities in struggle. By understanding and respecting their radical history, and by organizing alongside unions and people of First Nations, they have managed to combine the tradition and culture of community organizing with its emphasis on education and the defence of hard-won gains, with a preference for direct action that is no-nonsense and effective.

Fighting To Win: the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty

by Jeff Shantz

The preamble to the Constitution of the Industrial Workers of the World begins magnificently: “The working class and the employing class have nothing in common.” Gathering steam, it continues: “There can be no peace so long as hunger and want are found among millions of the working people and the few who make up the employing class have all the good things in life.” In the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) we have taken this message to heart.

From the beginning, OCAP has been dedicated to militant direct action rather than consultation and compromise. Our actions are determined by the real needs of our members, and we take a course of action in which we do whatever it takes to meet those needs. OCAP is a poor people's movement and we organize among the diverse members of the working class rather than trying to reach out to small business people or middle-class liberals. We do not organize as a broad but meaningless coalition

There's a line that goes: “the barricades run through the neighbourhoods.” That's where you'll find the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP). Our members are the people in our neighbourhoods, the working class in all its diversity: young, old, students, First Nations, disabled, unemployed, psychiatric survivors, immigrants, refugees, low-wage workers, rank-and-file unionists, artists and

playwrights, sex workers, homeless, and assorted ne'er-do-wells and even some older Greek Communists.

We fight together and we win. We know what class we're in and we take our lead from our own needs, interests, and desires rather than what the various bosses and bureaucrats tell us we should be happy with. OCAP is about dignity and self-respect in a system that refuses us both.

Direct actions get the goods

OCAP is a 'do-it-ourselves' organization and so we don't rely on representatives, vanguards, or experts to do things for us. Our collective power of disruption is applied both to defend individuals and families and to challenge broader political practices. This allows us to win real victories in the here and now while also building the struggles necessary to bring the system down. Right now, direct action at the point of oppression is the most effective means we have to oppose hostile conditions and make gains on our own terms.

As a tactic of self-defence OCAP has developed 'direct action casework'. This involves bringing large numbers of members and allies directly to an offending agency, landlord,

or workplace and staying until we get what we came for. If people are facing an eviction, we go directly to their home to make the eviction impossible for the landlord and sheriff. If someone is being denied back pay, we take a picket right to the boss and disrupt business until the money is forthcoming. If an acceptable settlement is not forthcoming, we raise the costs of offending agencies to the point where it is no longer worthwhile for them to act in an oppressive way.

Often this means directly targeting businesses. When a Hollywood movie production drove sex workers from a downtown street without compensation (which had been given to small businesses for lost earnings during the shoot), we disrupted filming with a contingent of people. The next day an envelope full of bills arrived at our office for the workers. When a restaurant owner successfully lobbied to close a downtown shelter, we ran an ongoing picket at his business until he asked the City to allow the shelter to be reopened.

For people who are excluded from channels of power and don't want to deal with such rotten channels anyway, direct action – taking responsibility for the decisions that affect

repression backfires and support for the farmers' cause increases exponentially – police cars are burnt, Coca-Cola trucks are seized and used to blockade the national highway, and 13 government and police officials are taken hostage in a successful bid to free their own prisoners. Days later, victory is celebrated as the government announces the cancellation of its airport plans. The peasants vow to continue struggling, declaring their

opposition to Plan Puebla Panama and the FTAA.
>> **July 15** >> Activists from the KRRS and the Green Army in Davangere, India invade a shop selling genetically engineered Bt cotton seeds and set fire to the seeds. The KRRS notes that they are merely fulfilling a commitment they made to the government, that if Bt cotton seeds were sold, they would destroy them immediately.
>> **July 17** >> As the Escravos protest ends, over 3,000

women in Abiteye, Makaraba, Dibi, and Olero Creek, Nigeria occupy four more Chevron/Texaco flow stations, and have their demands quickly agreed upon.
>> **July 18-28** >> A No Borders camp, organized in large part by immigrant organizations from France and Germany, sees 3,000 people gather from across Europe, North Africa and Latin America in Strasbourg, France for discussion and action. Strasbourg was chosen because of the Schengen



An empty building becomes a home. Pope Squat, Toronto, Canada

Jeff Blance

our lives and acting on our own needs and interests – is the most effective means of building collective power.

These methods of collective direct action are also applied to broader struggles. In 2000, OCAP organized in cities, workplaces, and reserves throughout Ontario, working towards a series of acts of political and economic disruption throughout Ontario and beyond. The Ontario Common Front (OCF) tried to build a network among allied organizations (unions, First Nations, other OCAP-style direct action groups) which would target significant corporate backers of the conservative Tories, especially the major banks and real estate developers, in different parts of Ontario.

Among the notable actions around the province was a blockade of a major trucking route by Mohawks, and a march through Bay Street in Toronto (Canada's equivalent of Wall Street). The OCF still exists as a network of action groups in a number of Ontario cities and continues building OCAP-style work in cities such as Sudbury, Ottawa, Kingston, and Belleville.

It has often been said that the first casualty of war is the truth. If that's the case then the second casualty is dissent (connected as they so often are). After the events of 11 September, many activists in Toronto and beyond argued that we should call off the economic disruption planned for 16 October in Toronto's financial district. "The symbolism is too sharp; tensions are too high," they said. The altered context after 9/11 suggested to some that direct action was no longer a viable tactic. Some union leaders said that protest was no longer possible.

Indeed, in the days and weeks after the attacks in the US, we gave much thought and discussion to the possibilities for action on O16. In the end, however, we came to almost unanimous agreement that the economic disruption must go ahead and must not be merely symbolic in nature. The reason for this conclusion was simple: the Tory government in Ontario has in no way backed off from its vicious neoliberal agenda of attacks on poor people in the province. In fact, only days after 11 September, the Tories announced that new corporate tax cuts scheduled for January would be instituted immediately (something which proved unworkable). Even more ominously, they established a new provincial security detail to carry out surveillance and harassment of immigrants and refugees.

As an internationalist organization having only contempt for the borders that divide working class and poor people and shelter capital, defence of immigrants and refugees is an important aspect of our work. Along with our allies in the Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 3903 flying squad, we have gone directly to Pearson International Airport to stop deportations. We've handed out leaflets to

passengers alerting them to the situation and gone directly to the Immigration Canada deportation office in the basement of Terminal One. During one airport visit, we successfully stopped three deportations, a testament to the powers of direct action, especially when backed by labour.

We have also fought against borders by building active alliances with anti-poverty and workers' organizations in other countries. During the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, OCAP responded to a call by our allies in the West Cape Tenants' Group by taking a picket to the offices of the South African Trade Consulate. A couple of weeks later, at the request of the Equality Trade Union of South Korea, OCAP held a picket against Korean Air in solidarity with migrant workers in Korea who were being attacked by the South Korean government. In this case, we targeted the capitalists who support, direct, and benefit from government policies rather than the government itself.

Direct actions are also about education, especially self-education. When we do an action we learn that despite this system's best efforts to beat us down, we can actually enjoy some victories. We also learn that the authorities are not

Information System computer which is located there, and contains information on all the known immigrants and asylum seekers in Europe. Despite police attacks with tear gas and rubber bullets on numerous occasions, resulting in a broken leg, countless other injuries, and at least 30 arrests, the camp perseveres.

>> **July 22-23** >> Healthcare workers across Niger go on strike, providing minimum health services for emergency

cases only. They demand a housing allowance, and more training, as well as more secure jobs for auxiliary staff.

>> **July 25** >> During the Pope's visit to Toronto, members of the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty occupy a building in Toronto, Canada and name it the Pope Squat. It serves as a thriving community centre for over three months until its eviction.

>> **August 4** >> Farmers of the KRRS destroy two acres

of Bt cotton in Rudranakatte, India, after convincing the farmers cultivating the crop that it poses a grave threat to the environment. Police are therefore unable to intervene, as the farmers participate in destroying their own crops. >> **August 4** >> Montevideo, Uruguay sees the largest demonstrations in a decade as thousands respond to a general strike called by 62 unions. The strike, accompanied by looting, is in response to the closure of banks and the

all-powerful or beyond our grasp, and we are not as alone as we might sometimes feel. Actions teach us how bureaucracies work, that decisions are often arbitrary and based on nothing more than expediency or the hope that we'll accept no for an answer. Institutions that appear mysterious or impenetrable often come undone when confronted by a delegation of 10-20 people who are sure of their purpose. Direct action lets us see the fear in the eyes of bosses, cops, bureaucrats and landlords when they have to face our unleashed collective anger borne by the strength of our solidarity. It teaches us that we can shake those in power and build a movement that fundamentally challenges the existing arrangement.

Reform and revolution?

Although we do press governments and bosses for resources that we need to sustain us and help us build our capacity to fight, OCAP is not a reformist group. OCAP is an explicitly anticapitalist organization, so our long-term goal is the end of capitalism and the development of a society based upon mutual support and self-determination. Along the way we have a responsibility to take care of each other, defend ourselves against bosses, landlords, cops and courts. Since, the state's and the bosses' resources are all stolen from the working class anyway, why shouldn't we take back all that we can get?

OCAP tends to agree with Lorenzo Komboa Ervin's [of the Black Radical Congress] position that reforms are part of our survival pending revolution. When people are losing their

"I'd be lying if I said we weren't inspired by OCAP ... We need to have direct action to understand who we are fighting against. Direct action and direct confrontation are very important"

– Ivan Drury, a community worker at the Downtown Eastside homeless shelter, Vancouver, Canada

home or can't feed their children, it's tough to fight for the revolution. Even small victories give people a sense that they can actually win. This breaks the demoralization and apathy, and also gives us a taste for bigger victories.

Having said this, it is important to understand the place of reforms in longer-term strategies and not limit our focus to reforms. OCAP does not pursue reform for reform's sake and we do not organize primarily to win more or better reforms. As stated above, we take whatever we can get to make our lives a little better and to give us the strength and momentum to keep fighting, but we never lose sight of the fact that things are only really going to get better if we get rid of capitalism and build something new. At the same time we have to realize that there is a tension between the reformist and anticapitalist aspects of OCAP's work, and must always work to ensure that the day-to-day 'reformist' work does not come to dominate our activities or obscure the bigger picture.

Some European social movements push wide-ranging and

diverse demands on the state to make reforms that they know it cannot make. Revealing the state's limitations and playing on its inherent contradictions can press the state to potential crisis. There is still much debate about this perspective and, while it makes some sense, it can only be a part of broader organizing work.

The failure to recognize the limits of reforms and to situate demands for reforms within a broader strategy is a problem that still afflicts much of the labour movement in Canada. Many union leaders still give all of their hopes to an idea that the welfare state will be rebuilt. They continue to offer compromises long after the other party has walked away from the table. For many union 'leaders' there was nothing before the welfare state and workers only faced desperation. They forget that at one time in the history of the labour movement, unions offered the basis for such dual power, providing medical clinics, elderly care, hostels, underground railroads and schools for workers. Today unions neglect this work, leaving the state to provide these things for workers. This has done a great deal to undermine working class autonomy.

Building dual power

At the same time we recognize that one of the areas where we've needed to do more work is in building dual power institutions [which confront the state while developing alternatives to it] that can meet our needs in the here and now without having to rely on claims against the state. These dual power institutions would offer real alternatives and a self-determined base for developing our strength.

Our recent squatting efforts are part of a turn towards building more permanent dual power institutions where we provide for our necessities – in this case, shelter – whether the state acts or not. When we took over the abandoned building that became known as the Pope Squat during the Pope's visit to Toronto in the summer of 2002, our intention was not to turn the squat over to any level of government to manage but rather to self-manage the space as social housing and a community resource centre.

For four months, the Pope Squat offered a beautiful community space. Guerrilla gardeners came by the squat to plant seeds of hope in a lovely garden where there had been only an overgrown mass of weeds on the building's front

devaluation of the peso, as Uruguay shares the economic catastrophe of Argentina.

>> **August 7** >> Several thousand dockworkers in Szczecin, Poland invade the Odra clothes factory where women workers have not received pay for several months. The textile workers are on partial strike; they stop working for six hours a day. The intruders throw eggs on the boss, and perform the age-old firing-your-boss ritual of driving

him out of the factory in a wheelbarrow. The police refuse to intervene, due to "fear of enraging the demonstrators."

>> **August 14** >> Perseverance pays off for farmers of Karnataka, India where the state government decides to ban the cultivation of genetically engineered Bt cotton as a commercial crop until experts produce a report on potential adverse effects. Sown in other Indian states, the Bt cotton crop fails dismally come harvest time.

>> **August 20** >> In New York, US, the city sells 11 apartments buildings for \$1 a piece to a nonprofit agency who passes ownership on to the squatting inhabitants, many of whom have lived there openly for over ten years. Acquisition of the 167 apartments is an immense victory – the buildings were nearly lost in a 1995 eviction, which was overturned in court.

>> **August 30** >> About 500 protesters gather in

lawn. Similarly, the first days of the squat also saw artists and non-artists alike take part in a mural painting on the front of the building in an act of shared public creativity which broke down the divisions between artist and audience. The mural also made the connection between housing as privatized space and the privatization of creativity in the restricted spaces of galleries and museums. Additionally the mural, as part of the living space, took art away from the commodified form of *objets d'art*.

Other events included a day-long street festival, filling the squat's yard with a variety of sound ranging from protest folk to experimental rock. Community-oriented events throughout the week included movie showings on the side of the building. A yard sale raised over \$400 and brought several neighbours over to take a look.

One summer evening, Naomi Klein and her partner Avi Lewis gave the Canadian premier of their documentary on political and economic repression in Argentina. The short but intense video which commemorated the life of Gustavo Benedetto, a young unemployed man killed by security guards, was well received by the 300 or so people who watched it in the backyard. Lewis and Klein properly drew connections between groups like OCAP in Ontario and the *piqueteros*, unemployed and poor people in Argentina, fighting against the machinations of global capital which would obliterate them.

As is usually the case in such participatory forms of community-building, decision-making developed through trial and error and experiment. Community assemblies were

held in the yard every evening around 8.00 pm and involved upwards of 60 people. Squatters gave reports and updates of the day's activities inside the building before the assembly took up discussions of strategies for dealing with issues involved in keeping the project open.

The Pope Squat signalled a partial shift in strategy towards a focus on constructing alternatives, and do-it-ourselves institution-building, rather than protest-style demands made upon government institutions. In this regard the squat was an aspect of constituting dual power structures in which participants build the capacity to meet their own needs. The Pope Squat was an integral part of preparing the facilities to house a self-managed social housing and community centre.

In November, the provincial government finally moved to evict the squatters and take control of the building. As of January 2003, armed guards still occupy 1510 King Street. The government has decided it has hundreds of thousands of dollars to guard an empty building rather than spend nothing just to let people build a home for themselves. Such is the true character of the state.

OCAP and our allies refuse to let the Province's actions stop their work of building squatting movements in a country where all squatting is illegal. This year, people are organizing for a cross-country squatting campaign.

This emergent squatting movement is partly the result of widespread frustrations among anticapitalist activists, whether focused on fighting global capitalist institutions or on local manifestations, with the reactive or oppositional

character of most recent actions. Squats represent positive and constructive acts of building community-based alternatives to capital in the here and now of everyday life. Making a real contribution to meeting peoples' human needs rather than condemning capital for failing to meet those needs offers a glimpse into how things might be done differently while materially beginning the process of providing real social change (as opposed to social critique).

Doing what's effective

We don't do protests anymore. OCAP learned a long time ago that marches and rallies to protest, register our dissent, or to shame governments that have no shame are almost completely useless. Protest rituals and reliance on moral arguments confine struggles to the terrain of what the state and bosses find permissible and thus are ineffective for making real gains on our terms and in ways that meet our needs. Our members just don't have the time and means to come out for purely symbolic actions.

Recognizing that we have no interests or values in common with the economic and political elite, we don't try

to reach them on any level. Instead we attack them directly where it hurts: in their bank accounts. Part of that strategy means acting in ways that raise their costs of doing business. It also means refusing to accept any right they might claim to make the decisions that fundamentally affect us. We neither recognize nor respect government or corporate authority and see it plainly for what it is: an impediment to our self-determination and an attempt to monopolize social power in their own hands. We do whatever we can to make it impossible for the exploiters to implement and carry out their agenda.

Jeff Shantz has been active with the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty for several years. He is co-host of the Anti-Poverty Report on community radio station CHRY in Toronto and a founding member of his union's Anti-Poverty Working Group.

Resources:

- » **OCAP website:** www.ocap.ca
- » **No Logo website:** www.nologo.org

Helsingborg, Sweden for a street party and a friendly game of dart-throwing at artfully displayed election propaganda. While a sound system rages outside, a summit entitled 'Partners in Prevention' is held by a coalition of representatives from NATO, EU, UN, and OSSE. The demonstration focuses on the use of terror by these organizations to criminalize dissent, and highlights the cancellation of the planned educational forum due to

police pressure on the property owner.

>> **September 1** >> Following up from the Seed Satyagraha begun in 1993, Indian farmers in Jyothigowdanapura, Karnataka, India inaugurate an international centre for sustainable development called Amrita Bhoomi, or The Eternal Planet. The facilities are comprised of over a hundred acres of land, have a national seed bank to collect and conserve seeds from all available

indigenous varieties of plants, trees, and medicinal herbs, and contain a Green School which offers classes on environmental issues and civil disobedience techniques and philosophies. Run by national and international advisory bodies and held as a public trust, the centre promises to provide support to international movements in designing a way of life to live with nature without damaging it.

>> **September 6** >> Tens of thousands of workers in