

# A SHORT HISTORY OF OCAP



For nearly 20 years, the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) has been mobilizing poor communities under attack. We have resisted all levels of government and a host of institutions that contribute to poverty.

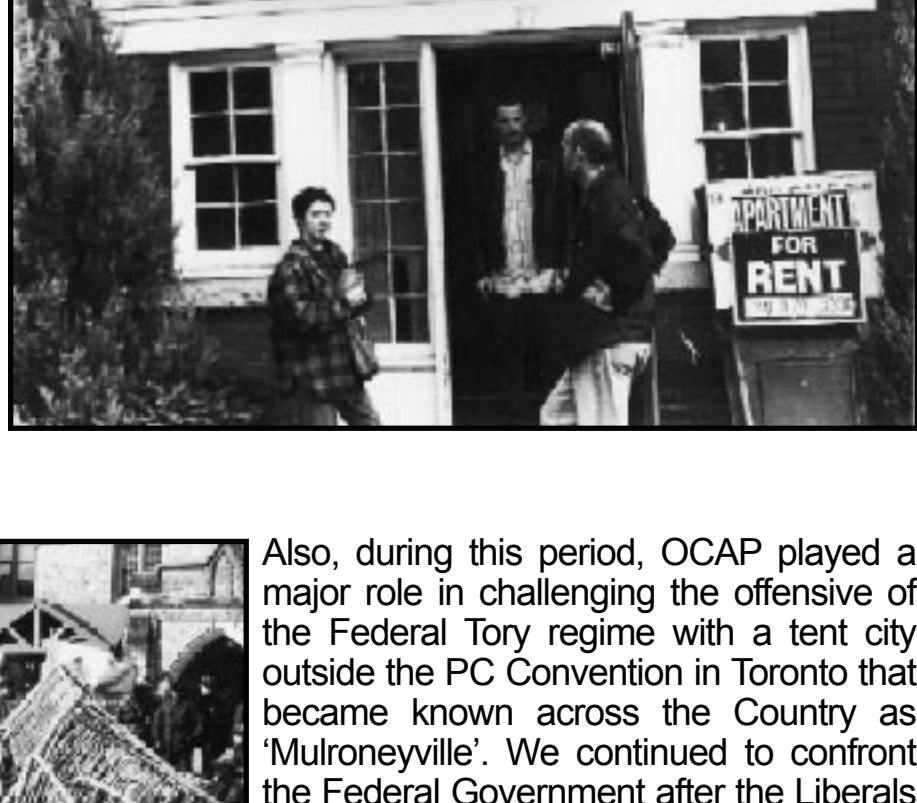
OCAP has its roots in a struggle around welfare reform in the late 1980s. At that time, the Liberal Government of David Peterson was under considerable pressure to introduce some improvements to the Province's welfare system. As a stalling tactic, it set up a review committee that held extensive public hearings and, finally, recommended a number of measures that included an increase in welfare rates (depending on the category of recipient) of between 10% and 20%. During this period the London and Toronto unions of unemployed workers had been campaigning for a 25% increase in the rates. After the release of the review committee's report, a broader formation came together and decided to press for the Government to implement the proposals of its own committee. A three pronged march from Windsor, Sudbury and Ottawa was organized on the Ontario Legislature to fight for this.

The 1989 March Against Poverty to Queen's Park was a huge success. It forced a number of changes out of the Liberals, including a rate increase of roughly 9%. Many of those organizations that had cooperated in the March drew the conclusion that a long term coalition against poverty was now possible and began to work to bring this together. While OCAP was in the process of being formed, a Provincial election took place. Even though we as yet only functioned with a rough steering committee structure, we decided to challenge the fiction that the Liberals had been a 'caring' regime and to expose the growing poverty crisis in Ontario by targeting the Government's re-election bid. We followed Peterson all over the Province, confronting his campaign appearances on over thirty occasions. More than once, his meetings were brought to a halt by OCAP protesters and our slogan "Down with the Poverty Premier!" became a major factor in his defeat.



In the autumn of 1990, the founding conference of OCAP took place. After some debate, it set a course for the organization that committed it to mobilizing poor and homeless people to fight back through militant, direct action and rejected notions of basing the organization on methods of consultation and compromise with those in power. The emergence of OCAP coincided with the election of an NDP Government. This posed major difficulties for us in that the climate became tough for an organization that wanted to take a strong stand. The backsliding of the Rae Government away from its promises to raise welfare rates above the poverty line and 'end the need for food banks' created a lot of confusion and demoralization. For quite some time, people were unclear on how to confront a Government that they had expected and hoped would offer them more than the Liberals and Tories. Resources to carry on our work were very hard to come by and our base of activity was largely confined to Toronto. We held demonstrations at NDP gatherings and gradually, as Rae's measures grew ever more right wing, found a stronger level of support for resisting the Government. We worked with the Street Peoples' Organization to put up a tent city of the homeless at Queen's Park. We hounded Government Ministers and challenged the freeze they imposed on welfare rates. We played a major role in convincing them not to actually cut welfare rates. We pressed forward as best we could but it was a tough period to work in.

It was during the Rae years that OCAP first took up in a serious fashion the Direct Action Casework that has played such an important role in its development. We began bringing mass delegations into welfare offices and taking similar actions. People began to turn to us as an organization that could make a difference in their lives and act to defend families under attack. Since that time, this method of resistance has grown to include mobilizing to stop deportations, to prevent evictions, to compel employers to pay wages they owe and to stand up against the violence of cops and security companies.



Also, during this period, OCAP played a major role in challenging the offensive of the Federal Tory regime with a tent city outside the PC Convention in Toronto that became known across the Country as 'Mulroneville'. We continued to confront the Federal Government after the Liberals took power in 1993 and have resisted their attacks on poor and homeless people. This struggle included two mass delegations of the homeless to Parliament Hill that were a major factor in prying hundreds of millions in funding for emergency shelter spaces out of the Liberals. It is with the election of the Harris Government in Ontario in 1995, however, that the struggles of OCAP took on the sharp character that we have come to see as defining our work. This more recent history being better known, we can confine this account to detailing its main features. We can see four main phases in the struggle against the Tories. At first, immediately after the election of Harris, OCAP pressed for action to be taken by the broad movement. We held a major rally at Queen's Park and a march from Regent Park (Ontario Housing project) to the home of the Lieutenant-Governor in the ultra rich community of Rosedale. Our readiness to move forward after Harris's election did much to convince others to take up the fight and helped to create the momentum that led to the 'Ontario Days of Action'.

Beginning in late '95, the Ontario Federation of Labour began a series of city wide strikes and protests that were called Days of Action. They had huge potential power but were never used as a weapon to challenge the ability of the Tories to govern and were never escalated to the level of sustained province wide action. OCAP participated in all of them, carried out serious picket line actions and agitated strongly for the struggle to be taken to a new level. Sadly, however, this round of generalized resistance to Harris was wound down and abandoned and the late 90s was a period when the Tories could carry on their attacks with only localized opposition to confront them. In this very grim period, when regressive measures came out of Queen's Park at dizzying speed, OCAP turned its attention to fighting to hamper the implementation of a political agenda it could not prevent from being formed. We greatly increased the amount of Direct Action Casework we did. We picketed agencies and employers who were introducing workfare and made the program harder for them to put into effect. We took over empty buildings to win shelter for the homeless. We took to the streets to fight the social cleansing of poor and homeless people. We stood against attacks on squeegeers and panhandlers. We resisted the closing of rooming house stock in poor neighbourhoods. We were a thorn in the flesh of reactionary 'residents' associations that worked to redevelop the urban landscape in a way that served the interests of developers and yuppie colonists.



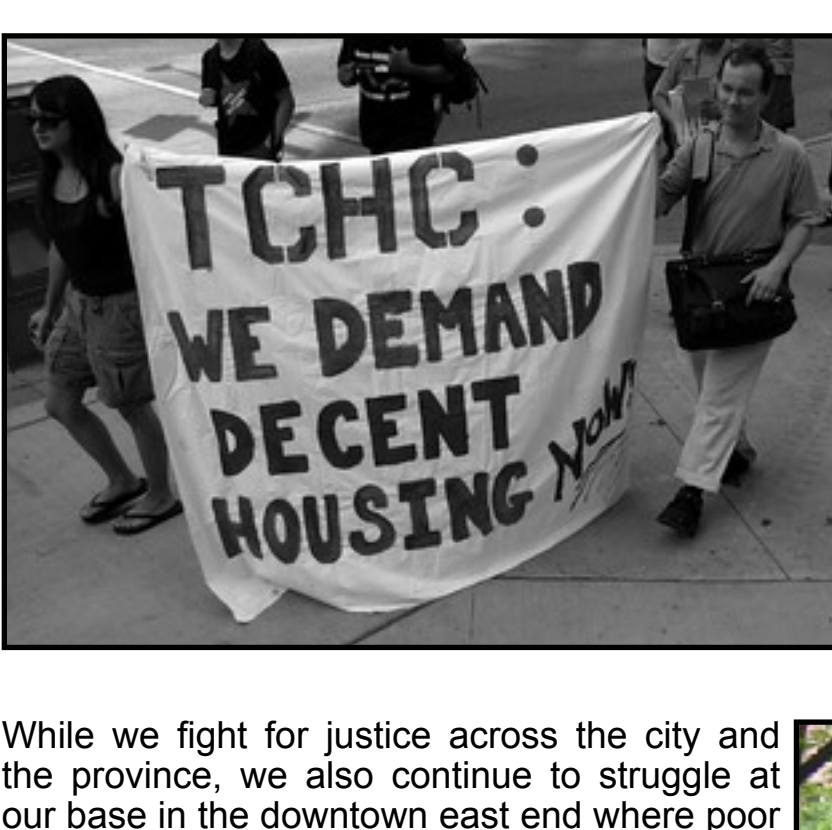
As vital as the work we did in this period was, we realized that the reactivation of a movement of generalized resistance was the only way to move from rearguard action to a real challenge to the Tories. On June 15, 2000, we held a March of homeless people and supporters on the Legislature that demanded that the Government receive a delegation and deal with its grievances. When they responded by moving to clear the grounds with riot squads and mounted cops, a battle broke out that the media dubbed the 'Queen's Park Riot'. The action was as much a call to people in Ontario to 'fight to win' as it was a challenge to the Government. The huge outpouring of support that followed the action, convinced OCAP to call for a Province wide campaign of economic disruption against the Tories and led to the formation of the Ontario Common Front to lead this struggle. This is written days after the October 16 snake march through Toronto's financial district and as communities across the Province, First Nations people and students move into action. There is no question that the period of passivity and retreat is over and that the time ahead of us will be dominated by a growing movement of resistance.

When the Tories left office, however, they were not driven out but merely replaced, in 2003, with a Liberal regime that talked the language of mild reform but consolidated Tory cutbacks. OCAP has taken up the task of challenging this duplicitous political formation. We have demanded the raising of welfare rates by 40% to restore what has been lost over the last decade. At the heart of this, has been a campaign to win the Special Diet for thousands.



In 2005, OCAP turned its attention to a welfare provision that very few had heard of. The Special Diet Supplement of up to \$250 per person per month could be obtained if a medical provider considered it necessary. We began holding clinics, where providers diagnosed Special Diet items to thousands of people. Attempts by welfare offices to deny the benefit were confronted with hard hitting mobilizations. News of the Supplement spread throughout Ontario. 2005 saw an increase in spending on the Supplement of \$40 million. In October of that year, we brought 1,100 to a Queen's Park Hunger Clinic where they obtained the Special Diet from some 40 medical providers. The Government responded by cutting back on the entitlement but, provincial Special Diet expenditures continue to rise. Before the Special Diet campaign began, Ontario Works was spending \$2 million on the Special Diet in Toronto. In 2007, that number skyrocketed to \$30 million.

The Special Diet Campaign led to a wave of community organizing, as people took action to ensure that they were not cheated by welfare offices out of their entitlements. This has led to much deeper roots in poor communities. In Toronto's west end, OCAP Women of Etobicoke has formed within the Somali community and has taken up key fights against police harassment and bad housing conditions. Other such community based organizing has emerged among street vendors, taxi drivers and TCHC residents.



Last Year, OCAP began a campaign against Toronto's biggest slumlord - Toronto Community Housing Corporation. We have knocked on doors, written letters and done case actions. In Moss Park, our strategy won \$9million in repairs. In Gordon Ridge, 100 tenants submitted letters demanding repairs be done and threatening to withhold their rent if the City didn't take action. We continue to build momentum amongst TCHC tenants and repairs have taken place at every corner of the city as a result.

While we fight for justice across the city and the province, we also continue to struggle at our base, in the downtown east end where poor and homeless people fight a constant battle to stay in their neighbourhood and be free of police ticketing, targeting and assaults. We have done shut down City Council on a number of occasions in response to the freezing death of someone on the streets, the loss of shelter beds and meals and to expose the devastation that the City's "Streets to Homes" (more aptly, Streets to Slums) program is causing. Recently, we took over Allan Gardens to give people a safe space to sleep and throughout the two days we were in the park hundreds of homeless people came to take refuge from the weather and the cops. This fall, we also took over and took back Parliament Street with a loud and spirited march through the neighbourhood to tell the City and the yuppies that "we are here to stay."



OCAP is an anti poverty, anti capitalist organization. We are in solidarity with First Nations people. We join workers in their battles. We support struggles in other countries and act as part of an international movement that is rediscovering the politics of resistance. The unemployed in the 30's and the workers who won the right to organize did not want to make a moral case to those in power. They fought for their rights and OCAP stands for just such course of action.