

CUPE POLICY STATEMENT
ON OUR TOWNS AND CITIES

*On the front line:
Taking back our
communities*



CUPE National Convention • Vancouver, November 19-23, 2001

Our towns and cities are feeling the worst impact of globalization, downloading, funding cuts, restructuring, and amalgamations – and this means CUPE needs to take on the new challenges facing our communities in a new way.

We have a proud history of defending our communities, and have always played a key role in making sure municipalities meet the needs and serve the interests of their citizens. Now, we must build and expand on our achievements and our strengths. Community-based action and resistance must become a very explicit strategy for CUPE in the next few years.

As a national union made up of 2,300 local unions, CUPE represents workers who provide public services on the ground. Our members live and work in urban and rural communities, and this puts our union in a unique and strategic position to take on the privatizers and push for local democracy and accountability.

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The pressure on towns, cities and communities from private corporate interests and higher level right-wing governments is intense and growing. There's pressure everywhere to:

- Privatize key public services.
- Sell off vital natural resources.
- Pollute for profit.
- Ignore critical social needs.
- Exploit land development creating urban sprawl.
- Behave like a business.
- Eliminate jobs, fair wages and the right-to-strike.
- Blame the poor and our most vulnerable citizens for their circumstances and discriminate against those that are seen as "different".

We can advance and win specific demands at the local level, because we've mobilized and won in the past. We have the ability to do so again around emerging issues. We can take action to win improvements to living standards in towns and cities from coast to coast.

And we can also win on the big issues – like free trade – if we resist and mobilize in our communities.

Creating sustainable, healthy, quality communities supported by vibrant, expanding public services is how we can turn back the right-wing policies of the day. The key is to build strong activism and press for workplace and community democracy.

OUR COMMUNITIES ARE CHANGING

Increasingly, our cities and towns are being re-oriented to do business with the United States, instead of with other communities across Canada and Québec. International and regional trade agreements are about strengthening already-powerful corporations. Public money is being used to encourage north-south integration, for example by building the so-called “NAFTA highway” to facilitate trade in goods between industrialized southern Ontario and the U.S.

Cuts to federal and provincial programs, downloading responsibilities to municipalities, declining infrastructure, loss of local control, static or falling revenues, privatization pressures, mergers and amalgamations are causing widespread and alarming changes in the places where we live and work.

The quality of life in our towns and cities is declining. Violence as a result of homelessness, racism and homophobia is on the rise. There has been an alarming increase in youth suicides in Aboriginal communities. There is a desperate shortage of adequate housing in many cities. Utilities need upgrading in many communities. Cuts have been made to waste management, family services,

libraries and recreation services. Schools are being closed and the ones that remain are overcrowded. There’s inadequate access to emergency health services, and not enough public transit.

Privatization through unregulated land use (including urban sprawl) has had serious negative impacts on the economy, environment and society. It is a bad use of land. Market-driven sprawl destroys communities; it drains resources and contributes to increased dependence on cars. This undermines efforts to improve air and water quality, and conserve energy, and puts pressure on public transportation systems.

The quality of life in our towns and cities is declining. This decline is not inevitable. We can successfully resist privatization and loss of services, and mobilize to improve our quality of life.

Rural towns are also struggling to maintain services.

There is tremendous pressure to do more with fewer and fewer resources. Those who live in rural areas either go without, or have to travel long distances to get essential services. Jobs are scarce and youth are often forced to leave the community to find work elsewhere.

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OUR WORK IS CHANGING

Our towns, cities and rural counties face incredible pressure to commercialize and privatize all public services. The transformation of municipalities into business operations is causing major problems for municipal workers and for citizens.

Many municipal workers are facing tremendous workplace change as our employers amalgamate and local public service delivery is reorganized and cut in the drive to slash budgets and minimize public debt. All too often, our members are being faced with service and job cuts. At the same time, we have to contend with employers forcing new job duties on us. The result is fewer staff doing more work, causing major workload problems for workers. At the same time, employers are constantly trying to privatize services, handing over our work to the non-union, low-wage sector.

Our employers reorganize our workplaces and the services we deliver with little or no input from us as workers, or those who use our services. This lack of democratic control leads to poor results that are often more expensive overall. For example, city councils think they can just hand over the operations and ownership of local water systems with little if any public debate or discussion, even though it will cost millions more and means the

loss of a valuable public asset that citizens have paid for through taxes.

Moreover, the public is repeatedly told that the services we provide are inefficient, that public sector workers have it easy, and that the private sector is inherently better. As more of our public services erode because of funding cuts, the public has less confidence in and respect for the services and the people who deliver them.

Public services are critical to local democracy. We need public ownership for citizens to have control of their water, hydro, roads, and human and social services. That's why keeping services public is central to our vision of stronger, healthier communities.

But even though the deck seems stacked against us, we've had our share of victories. When CUPE locals have actively opposed privatization and budget and service reductions, we've often been able to build public support and maintain and improve community services. We must keep building on our successes.

DEMOCRATIC CONTROL AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Public services are critical to local democracy. We need public ownership for citizens to have control of their water, hydro, roads, and human and social services. That's why keeping services public is central to our vision of stronger, healthier communities.

All forms of local authority must become more accountable. Municipalities should not be reduced to being businesses that treat citizens as customers and consumers. As the level of government that is closest to people, municipalities are in a unique position. Municipal politicians can be connected in an immediate way to the day-to-day pressing needs of communities and their citizens.

Municipalities can play a role in reinvigorating the notions of citizenship and the value of our common wealth. Local governance, strongly guided by real democracy and real accountability, must be the cornerstone of our community action plan. We must work to elect representatives of workers to local boards, increase measures for citizen involvement and ensure that our voices are heard in the many levels of municipal governance.

But keeping services public is not enough. We must push for more public and community involvement in local governing bodies. This is becoming a major problem as local governments grow in size through amalgamations and mergers, and as a result of population growth and development.

Increasing access to an expanded range of public services means improving the quality of life in our urban and rural communities. We have to reclaim the services we've lost, but also modernize local services so that communities are meeting their new, diverse and ever-changing needs.

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LOCAL AUTHORITY

Local authority is being undermined by trade agreements that give extraordinary powers to corporations, particularly foreign corporations.

Stopping free trade agreements is an integral part of our program for stronger, healthier communities.

Our towns and cities need expanded legal and legislative authority to act in the interests of their citizens and to protect our communities. They can't function properly without the legal and legislative authority to decide how to carry out their growing responsibilities. Some of the new mega-cities are larger than some provinces, and yet provincial legislation gives very limited powers to municipalities.

FUNDING OUR COMMUNITIES

The property tax base is inadequate and flawed as the major source of funding for municipal services. Because property taxes are not related to income, they are regressive, placing a heavier burden on those with lower and middle incomes.

We need to broaden the sources of revenue available to local governments so they have the ability to support and invest in the broad range of public services our communities need. Local governments should receive a share of income tax revenue collected by the federal and provincial governments. Other taxes such as the gasoline tax should be shared to fund infrastructure and road improvements.

They also need a large injection of capital funds to rebuild our social and physical infrastructure. Our pension plans and the Canada/Quebec pension plan should be used to reinvest in public services and public infrastructure by:

- holding more municipal and provincial bonds;
- supporting economically targeted investments such as housing and long-term care facilities;
- targeting the CPP reserve fund to be invested in infrastructure projects (retrofitting and new facilities), as it was until 1998.

GREENING OUR COMMUNITIES

Environmental protections and sustainability are necessary conditions for healthy communities.

We need to stop cross-border toxic waste dumping. We need to work with environmentalists and concerned citizens to find safe ways to reduce and deal with toxic waste. The answer does not lie in shipping toxic waste to some other community where environmental regulations are lax. And once we start shipping it across borders in North America, private companies could use the corporate rights of NAFTA to demand ongoing access to this profitable business.

Environmental racism – like the dumping of toxic waste on aboriginal lands and other marginalized communities – must be exposed and challenged.

We need to call for an aggressive plan for public investment in:

- water and sewage treatment facilities;
- energy retrofits to public buildings that save money and conserve energy;
- investment in public transit to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and gridlock on our roads, among other things.

DIVERSITY IN OUR COMMUNITIES

There are many groups who are not well served by our communities. Redressing these inequities must be a top priority.

- Racial inequities are particularly dramatic in many urban centres. Public services can play a vital role in meeting the diverse needs of our communities.
- We need community programs and meaningful policies to counter gay-bashing and racism.
- We need to address the needs of the poor and the homeless. More public and affordable housing is desperately needed. Rent control legislation is an important tool to increase access to affordable housing.
- More public investment in community centers and municipal recreation programs is essential for our youth, especially inner city youth. Studies show that neglecting youth recreation needs now will be far more costly in the long run.
- Youth need more direct involvement in the running of communities, including direct participation in decision making. Community participation is a building block to better futures.
- Immigration policies must be monitored and we must fight for policies that encourage diverse communities.

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- Investing in early child care programs helps all family members, and is vital to reducing social and economic inequities, as well as giving our children a good start in life.
- We need to invest in changes to make our communities more accessible to the disabled.

LAW ENFORCEMENT REFORMS

We also need major reforms to the criminal justice system and to the policies and practices of police enforcement. We

need to mobilize against the brutality and discriminatory treatment experienced by those on the so-called margins of society. People of colour and aboriginal people have been especially targeted – and so too have poor women and poor youth. Gay-bashing is a recognized problem in many communities. Policing practices that base the potential for criminal behaviour on a person's race should not be tolerated.

The criminal justice system and police forces need to be held directly accountable for their policies and actions. They need to be challenged to own up to the systemic discrimination that results in a disproportionate number of aboriginal people and people of colour being mistreated by the justice system and the disproportionate number of aboriginal people and people of colour who end up in prison.

JOBS IN OUR COMMUNITIES

Collective bargaining and our collective agreements play a vital role in stopping privatization and creating good pay and employment conditions for local workers. The benefits of good jobs need to be shared broadly in our communities. Bargaining strong language and good pay has a positive effect on communities.

We must continue to negotiate no contracting out language. And we also have to negotiate collective agreement provisions to bring contracted-out work back in-house.

At a local level we need to identify areas of work that should be contracted-in, and gather persuasive evidence and arguments. We need to develop concrete proposals and work with our allies to achieve them. A number of CUPE locals have made important headway on contracting-in. And a new workshop is now available through Union Development to encourage CUPE locals to bring contracted-out work back in house.

We also need to:

- Call for fair wage policies for public sector agencies so that more workers in the community can benefit from higher wages. A fair wage policy means that any company that has a contract with local public agencies must guarantee to pay their workers wages that are in line with municipal policy. We will

commit to research on fair wage policies that can be distributed to our locals.

- Press for measures to ensure our employers' workforce reflects the full racial and ethnic diversity of our communities.
- Advocate for community-wide employment equity policies. This means that anyone doing "business" with municipalities or public sector agencies would be required to demonstrate that their workforce is representative of the diversity within our communities.

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TAKING BACK OUR COMMUNITIES

To build our vision of community, we need to engage in activism and mobilize, community by community, like never before. We need to:

- Go on community alert. This could include forming Community Works/Watch committees with our social partners and allies. We need to strongly defend our communities from further erosion, but we also have to go on the offensive. To win, we will have to become much more coordinated and active at the local level, and build broad-based alliances with groups that are already working incredibly hard to turn our communities into better places.

- Work in coalition with others to take political action in our communities. We need to seek out and work with our allies during elections and in between elections. We need to build a broad spectrum of support around issues related to revitalizing our communities and promoting more and better local public services.
- We need to make the links between what's happening to our communities and globalization, and develop ways to mobilize quickly and effectively around issues that threaten the well-being of our towns and cities. For example, thanks in part to the work of our municipal locals and CUPE nationally, more than 55 municipalities have passed resolutions calling on the federal government to protect their authority from trade deals. This has now become a major problem for Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, and our active support in the municipalities' opposition to free trade needs to continue.
- **During local elections:** We have much better success at running and electing progressive candidates at the local level than at any other level of government. Local elections deserve as much of our attention – if not more – than provincial and federal elections. We can build broad public support for progressive candidates and key issues.
- **In between elections:** Our political work must continue year-round and we must work with other groups in these efforts. We need to keep in constant communication with local politicians and officials to lobby for the kind of changes we want to see in our communities. We need to find ways to keep the pressure on the politicians and bureaucrats, and we need to monitor committee and council meetings for emerging issues.
- Participate actively on local boards and commissions. We must ensure that CUPE activists are part of local decision-making structures. We need to educate members of boards and commissions about the benefits of public services, including the evidence that public services are more cost-efficient than privatized services.
- Strengthen participation in CUPE District Councils and local labour councils and push for these local labour bodies to mobilize at the community level. Some labour councils and CUPE District Councils are doing a tremendous job at community organizing. We need to reach that same level of activism in every community.

- Monitor changes to provincial and municipal legislation for how they will impact on our workplaces and our communities. We need to lobby to maintain and expand workers' rights in our communities. Efforts to encourage municipal councils to declare official Municipal Workers' Days can help focus attention on the important role CUPE workers play in creating healthy and safe communities.
 - Dedicate resources to a major national initiative. To advance our program for better and healthier communities this initiative will consist of local, provincial and national campaigns to:
 - stop privatization and contracting out of services
 - expand public services in communities
 - organize municipalities and communities to say "no" to free trade agreements
 - bargain and negotiate good wages, employment equity, and more public sector jobs in our communities
 - fight racism and homophobia in all its forms
 - rebuild community infrastructure through major public investment, including investment of public pension funds
 - take back control of our pension funds so that we can invest in the public sector, including affordable housing, water systems, public transit and other projects that will promote sustainable development
 - ensure that the needs of all families – in all their different forms – are met. This includes organizing for child care programs and support programs for seniors and people with disabilities.
- It's time for us to demonstrate that we have a powerful vision and concrete proposals for transforming our communities into healthy places – places where citizens have a say over their lives; places free of racism, homophobia, poverty, and violence; places where workers earn decent wages and where workers are organized into unions; places where families of all kinds can thrive; places where people – not profits – come first.

