

February, 2012

An Open Letter to Mayor Ford and the City Council

We, the undersigned, are a group of concerned academics and community leaders who have come together to endorse the Justice and Dignity for Cleaners Campaign to keep these services public. This open letter is therefore, an appeal to our Mayor and the Toronto City Council to stop the outsourcing of hundreds of city cleaners' jobs. Here are our reasons:

Cleaning industry in Toronto has traditionally been considered a major source of employment for newcomers as well as older immigrant workers, many of whom are racialized. By eliminating close to one thousand cleaning positions in police stations, city buildings, community housing, childcare and long term care facilities, we will in effect deprive these workers of secure jobs and stable incomes, which will affect not only them but also their families. They are just ordinary citizens who work hard, pay taxes, and raise families. They put a great deal of skill and effort into keeping their workplaces clean, yet they are often invisible workers as many come to work when others have left for the day. Earning less than the average wage in Toronto, these workers are hardly on any "gravy train".

The outsourcing of public service cleaners is a major setback for cleaners in the private sector who are struggling to bring their wages up and improve their basic benefits. Contracting out of cleaning services has given rise to a growing sector of work that is often misclassified as independent contracting so that employers can bypass Ontario's Employment Standards Act. Too many cleaners are working below minimum wage, without vacation and public holiday pay and no protection against such abuses.

We are further concerned that in this highly-competitive cleaning industry, these private cleaners will be further exploited and used as fodder to justify the outsourcing of unionized public cleaners. One cannot help but be reminded of the embarrassing situation when the City's Fair Wage Office found the payment of wages well below the minimum to immigrant workers working for a private contractor at Union Station.

Toronto's *Vital Signs 2011 Report* pinpoints overcoming the widening income gap between its richest and poorest residents as the city's biggest challenge. Within one year, the poverty rate rose 22% in the Toronto Region; and the rate of child poverty went up more than 43%. This is only the latest in a string of studies that point to the shrinking of the middle-class, and the growth of entire low-income neighbourhoods in Toronto. These staggering increases should serve as a warning signal to the elected members of City Council that there are already too many poverty wage jobs in Toronto.

There are too many workers particularly women workers and longtime immigrant workers who are over-represented in precarious employment. Turning good jobs into poverty wage jobs will only deepen the current job crisis. It is a strategy that we cannot

afford right now. Toronto's budget issues should not be resolved at the expense of these cleaners, their families and their neighbourhoods.

We question the fairness of such decisions when the deficit reduction is done on the back of those who can most ill-afford to lose their employment, the ones who are already marginalized in this market, such as women and racialized workers.

Toronto Region has experienced a massive loss of tens of thousands of manufacturing jobs in the past decade. As we try to recover from the economic recession of 2008/2009, it is critical that we see the service sector as a source of potential good employment. There is much to be done to recognize these cleaners' work as a skilled occupation with professional standards and remuneration. This can only happen when we have a municipal government that is willing to lead by example – to come up with creative strategies to maintain the wellbeing of our residents and create good jobs.

Now is not the time to retreat into the easy solutions of cutting public services and decent jobs. We will end up having to pay for the human costs of such short-sighted strategies in decades to come. Let us strive to build a livable city with opportunities for growth and dignity for all its diverse communities and neighbourhoods.

Yours truly,

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