

CUPE Social Service Town Hall. CUPE Ontario.
March 25, 2011
Sheraton Hotel, Toronto

Cathy Crowe remarks:

We often call on CUPE for support in our work at Toronto Disaster Relief Committee and I'm glad to be invited to speak to you today on this panel.

There's a concept I like to promote called 1/3, 1/3, 1/3 and I'm proud to see you already enacting it today. It's about giving – whether it's your time, energy, passion or money. Giving 1/3 to the organizations that directly help people in need. I see you are doing that today in your collection of hygiene products to donate to organizations for their clients. Giving 1/3 to organizations that provide the solution – and you are sponsoring The Stop Community Food Centre here today which is great. Then the final 1/3 - giving to advocacy – groups like the Ontario Coalition against Poverty and Toronto Disaster Relief Committee and we appreciate that support.

I've been around long enough to know and I know you know that the people who rely on the social services you provide are in worse shape than ever and there are more of them, and in some cases fewer of you. In some cases entire programs that once existed within your workplace have been eliminated or replaced with something less useful and responsive.

This means that many more are in greater need of advocacy and our organizing work, whether it is on housing, on shelter, childcare, senior supports, food, etc.

Naomi Klein helps me to understand this very devastating situation. All the concepts in her book 'Shock Doctrine' can be currently applied to many of our areas of work. She argues that governments and people in power take advantage of the 'shock' caused by a disaster or crisis to make their move. When I look at the state of the discussion on solutions to homelessness and the housing shortage all I hear are the same things Naomi Klein talks about:

- privatization,
- government deregulation,
- deep cuts to social programs

This is a big shift from the expectations we once had about human health, family and social needs.

Look at the development of the sector that provides shelter for women and children fleeing violence.

Look at the historic fights for funded and licensed daycare.

Look at the current struggle for all day learning beginning at JK.

One struggle that is close to home for me was when 13 years ago homelessness was proclaimed a national disaster - we saw years of large rallies, demonstrations and actions calling for compassionate solutions: more shelters, better shelters, and housing. The main thrust was not pulling back, privatizing, blaming those in need – yet that's what we see today.

I would like to suggest that it's time for us to re-examine and question our role with the dominant language and people that pretend not to but really are about the same thing Naomi Klein talks about: privatization, government non-responsibility and funding cuts to social programs.

A primary example is the language around poverty reduction.

Would we call for reduction in violence against women? Reduction in gay bashing? Reduction in child abuse? NO.

Enough time has passed that we have to accept there is not a sincere attempt to 'fight' poverty at the provincial level, the national level. More studies we don't need. More panels we don't need. You know that. That's why I'm glad to see CUPE Ontario support the Raise the Rates campaign.

Another dominant theme that is co-opting anything to do with homelessness is what is known as 'housing first'.

Sadly, I've seen other cities copy what Toronto is doing. And we copied the New York model, the American model: the closure of shelters, new laws criminalizing homelessness or poverty (such as anti-panhandling laws), a shift to 'streets to homes' or 'in from the cold' type programs, emphasis on the private or charitable sector for solutions and funding for everything from shelter operation to social housing, and government de-funding of survival supplies and outreach – in other words 'starve them out policies'.

I'm sure experts in other fields whether it is related to seniors programs, social services, childcare could add to the points I'm making.

We have to make the invisible, visible.

What do we need?

Naomi Klein coined the phrase 'movement muscle'. She used it to reflect what is needed to fight for climate justice but I think she would agree with me that we need that muscle in a few different places today! In our fight for childcare, for better pensions, for more services for seniors,

Thanks and let's work together to make that happen.

Check with delivery