

Toronto janitors organize for rights, respect and justice

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As darkness falls in Toronto and tens of thousands of office workers pour out of the downtown skyscrapers, another army enters the buildings, quietly and unperceived - the night shift that cleans the office towers and readies them for the next day's activity.

These buildings house Canada's richest corporations - the banks alone had profits of \$20 billion in 2007 - yet their janitors are among the worst paid and worst treated of Toronto's work force. And they work within an employment structure carefully contrived to render them powerless.

Is resistance futile? Not according to Julio Da Silva, a cleaner for Bee Clean at Scarborough Town Centre and a member-organizer for the "Justice for Janitors" campaign of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 2 in Toronto.

"In my six years as a cleaner," Da Silva says, "it's always the same problem. Wages are low, close to minimum wage. No benefits, no protection against firing. The supervisors have all the power. Yet we brought the workers together and won the vote for a union at Bee Clean."

In Toronto, minimum wage (currently \$8.25/hour) will do little more than pay for your basement apartment, Da Silva says. "You need a second job for food and clothing, and sometimes a third."

"I don't say that Canada is bad," says Da Silva, a recent immigrant from Brazil. "But the work we do is important, and we work hard. We can get more, but only through the union can we obtain the power" for such gains.

Sub-minimum wage

In fact, some of Da Silva's co-workers in office towers get even less than minimum wage. According to a Justice for Janitors fact sheet, "Many cleaners only get work if they become sub-contractors." Arbitrary firings are frequent. Workers coerced into contractor status often get no vacation pay, no employment insurance, no Canada Pension Plan, no job-accident coverage. The Ontario government views them as self-employed businessmen, not workers. "So we have to pay all these taxes," Da Silva says - the employer's share of social benefit deductions.

The wages of such workers "can amount to as little as \$4 an hour, half the legal minimum in Ontario," reported Rita Daly of the Toronto Star on March 10, 2007.

Even worse, some jobless workers pay up to \$12,000 to brokers, in return for promises of getting cleaning work as sub-contractors - and often receive nothing in return. The cleaning contractors who impose such conditions range from fly-by-night outfits to huge multinationals. One cleaning firm, ISS World, has 350,000 employees, and is owned by the banking giant Goldman Sachs.

Yet cleaners' working conditions are ultimately dictated not by the contractors but by the owners and managers of the office towers.

Contract system

Time was when office buildings employed maintenance workers, who had reasonably stable jobs, benefits and pension rights, and often belonged to unions. But that all changed in the 1980s, explains Justice for Janitors staff organizer Ritch Whyman. The building managers laid-off their cleaners and started contracting out the work to cleaning companies.

Needless to say, abuses and illegalities flourish in this cutthroat world. In 2006, the Ontario government received 16,000 complaints regarding unpaid wages. Only 450 of the employers were prosecuted; those who were convicted were let off with an average fine of \$360.

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"We have written the Ministry again and again, reporting on these abuses," Whyman says. "They simply do not respond."

The beneficiaries of this inhuman system, of course, are the building owners and their tenants, among the country's richest corporations. They succeed in shaving a bit off their overhead costs. "Obviously the building managers know the score" about unethical labour practices, Whyman says. They are aware of what it takes to drive down building maintenance costs to this extent.

Justice for Janitors

The Toronto Justice for Janitors campaign was launched two years ago by the SEIU, which has won bargaining rights for about 900,000 workers in Canada, the U.S. and Puerto Rico during the last decade. With 2 million members, mostly in health care, public service and building maintenance, the SEIU is one of the very few major unions in the U.S. to have grown in recent years.

In building maintenance, as in many other fields where precarious and contract-based employment has become the norm, the conventional model of union organization - based on organizing a single workplace - is no longer viable. If a union organizes cleaners working in a given office tower, for example, building management can switch contractors when the cleaning contract term is up, getting rid of the workers and the union in one fell swoop.

Justice for Janitors has therefore gone back to an earlier model of union organization: organizing an entire industry.

The SEIU has set out to organize the 13 largest building cleaning firms operating in Toronto, with the goal of achieving a master contract governing all contractors and all workers in this economic sector. So far, Justice for Janitors has organized six companies, and about 2,000 workers are now protected by collective agreements.

Out of the darkness

The heart of the union strategy, Da Silva says, is to "take workers out of the darkness and show the owners that we want the union." Union organizing leaflets feature many portraits of named unionized workers, as a way to demonstrate that they can be effectively protected and to encourage others to take a public stand.

Union get-togethers are held near the workplace, and there are also industry-wide meetings, where union supporters at different workplaces can exchange experiences. Some rank-and-file members, like Da Silva, are assigned ("seconded") to full-time union organizing work, with the SEIU paying their regular salary.

Among the cleaning workforce, 78 per cent are women. Justice for Janitors has worked to open the doors for women to play leadership roles in the union local. Women are a majority among those attending monthly city-wide membership meetings and among those seconded to organizing roles. Most union stewards are women. The union is working to eliminate the generalized pay discrimination against women cleaners.

"We can't remove the sexist dynamic in society that holds women back," Whyman says, "but this progress is encouraging."

The union has also built a system of alliances with other unions and social movements, embracing the Labourers' union (which also organizes in the cleaning sector), the Hotel Workers' Rising campaign of UNITE HERE, the labour-based Good Jobs Campaign, community development organizations, immigrant organizations, churches and social movements.

Workers rally in public protests against unfair labour practices. The union brings public pressure to bear on cleaning contractors who refuse to meet union standards. Building owners are challenged to get rid of contractors with substandard labour policies.

"We had big problems with an employer called Hallmark," Whyman says. "We carried a year-long campaign, during which they lost \$6 million in contracts. Finally they agreed not to oppose unionization and to sign collective agreements. We have extended this to Ottawa, where 350 Hallmark cleaners are now under contract."

The union's present focus is on Impact Cleaning Services, which stands accused of many unfair labour practices. Campaign supporters are urged to go to its website, www.Negative-Impact.org, join in union rallies, phone the president of Impact and send letters of support.

So long as the majority of the industry remains unorganized, there are narrow limits to what union agreements can achieve. Major wage gains at any one individual employer would tend to price it out of competitive bidding for cleaning contracts. Thus the initial wage gains achieved by the union at Da Silva's workplace, while encouraging, do not go much beyond 10 per cent. Pay lags far behind the level in Montreal, where the city regulates the building cleaning industry, or in Toronto schools, where unions have been able to block the contracting out of cleaning services.

The Justice for Janitors campaign is limited in the resources it commands and in its scope. But it forms part of a small but promising network of resistance among the most exploited workers, which could in time transform the labour movement.

Da Silva recognizes the magnitude of the task, but is still encouraged by results. "We keep these gorgeous buildings clean, safe and healthy for property managers and multinational tenants that make billions in profits. We're not getting our fair share," he says.

"We need to have a say in this industry. Our wages are now decided by the building owners and our employers; we want a say in this," Da Silva adds.

"Through the union we can get the employers to give us a living wage, benefits, and respect for many immigrant workers like me. Today cleaners have no power. This is a fight to gain that power."

Visit the [Justice for Janitors website](http://www.justiceforjanitors.org) for more information on their campaign.

John Riddell is a Toronto-based activist and co-editor of [Socialist Voice](#) [4].

summary:

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Item 1:

[Good Jobs for All Summit maps 'green-brick road' for labour](#) [5]

Item 1 (Author, Where published) :

The Good Jobs for All Summit (GJAS) held at the Metro Convention Center in Toronto was a trailblazing success that ignited a new alliance of like-minded constituencies.

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