BOOK REVIEW

Austerity and Resistance: The Ontario Days of Action, 1995-1998, by Paul Kellogg. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2026. ISBN: 9781487556631. Pages: 1-302

Reviewed by **Ryan Kelpin**[1]

It has been 30 years since the historic Days of Action labour and social movement that contested the austerity politics of the Mike Harris Progressive Conservative government in Ontario. Most of the writing on this era, except for John Clark's work (and a few others), was written in the moment or while Harris was still in power. Paul Kellogg's new book, *Austerity and Resistance: The Ontario Days of Action 1995-1998*, has the benefit of not just historical hindsight but also his personal recounting of his on-the-ground experiences with the movement as it unfolded. Much like I argued about Stephen High's recent book on Bob Rae and Ontario politics (Kelpin, 2025), it provides space to assess a time in power that has loomed as a spectre not just for organizing on the left but also for the collective memory of Ontarians.

Austerity and Resistance combines a historical lens with a sort of personal ethnography, in a manner of speaking, to understand the successes, tensions, and missed opportunities of the anti-Harris movement of the late 1990s. Despite the well-trod scholarly and activist ground of the Harris era of politics, Kellogg implicitly places the discussion within an impetus posed in many leftist and activist circles over the last eight years: why has there been no similar organizing and general strike action against the current government of Doug Ford, despite its similarities to Harris's? Kellogg aims to provide an account of the actual organization and mobilization of social movements and unions to show how the Days of Action unfolded and, perhaps, why we have not seen them replicated in the twenty-first century.

The main objectives of the book are threefold. First, to provide an overview of the overall Days of Action, with a deeper focus on what Kellogg calls three watershed moments, represented by the Hamilton and Toronto events, as well as the two-week illegal teachers' strike. Utilizing media sources, interviews with activists and union members, union newsletters and communications and other primary sources within the movement, Kellogg is able to illustrate how these historic movements worked when unions came together, the issues over organizing and different material perspectives, positions in relationship to the state and austerity, and the composition of membership.

Within this analysis, the secondary component of the splintering between the pink paper unions and the more activist ones is highlighted. Rather than dismissing labour tensions as a binary between labour management and radical workers, Kellogg aims to conduct a historical analysis of tensions between private- and public-sector unions, the types of work they perform, and their relationship to the state and to Harris's overall austerity project.

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This is perhaps most directly reflected in a quote from a private-sector union representative who told a public-sector labour leader, “We took our hit during NAFTA… it’s time you people took your hit” (2026, 19). Third, Kellogg adopts his form of statistical discourse analysis from his earlier work to report on the undercounting of attendance figures and, therefore, the political impact of the Days of Action. Using specific examples from the state and the media, he quite artfully shows the ruling class’s focus on making the radical events seem smaller and less rooted in solidarity than they actually were.

The first two themes are where much of the book's strength lies. Its in-depth historical analysis of the different unions and social movements involved in the Days of Action, and indeed, broader radical actions against the Harris government, shows a nuance that can sometimes be lacking in labour histories. Kellogg highlights the role of student group organizing, broader resistance to Harris’s attacks on the welfare state through race- and gendered lenses, and smaller pockets of resistance often subsumed into the grander narrative of the major cities and of Harris resistance. Indeed, Kellogg (2026, 39) argues both that the “re-energization of the labour movement was built on a foundation created by forces outside of the labour movement” and “The attacks by Mike Harris occurred at an intersection of the poor, people of colour, women, and organized workers. When a parallel intersectional response of the poor, people of colour, women, and organized labour began to resist and, importantly, began to resist by at least in part ‘recognizing’ each other in the struggle, then a mass movement became possible” (2026, 69).

While dysfunction, power politics, and material differences between unions often caused an undercutting of political goals in the name of insular economic ones, Kellogg highlights how the success of the Days of Action, even just as mobilizing events, were built on solidarity and the extension of goals into the political realm. While the pink paper unions often undercut the movement with their focus on insular economic goals and electoralism through the NDP, there were key moments when everybody came together. Indeed, on the topic of the illegal teachers' strike in 1997,[2] Buzz Hargrove at the CAW stated “the CAW will stand in solidarity with the teachers and public sector workers;” Gord Wilson argued “that any move by the government to legislate teachers back to work will trigger a walkout by private sector unions;” and Sid Ryan said “If we don’t see the promised changes in 48 hours we will be calling a province-wide strike” (Kellogg, 2026, 146).

Kellogg repeatedly reminds the reader that this era should not be taken for granted: there were consistent calls for a general strike from even the most traditionally conservative labour leaders and unions. This was a radical moment in history, one represented by:

[2] On a personal note, one of my most formative political memories was as an 8-year-old bringing soup to the striking teachers at my elementary school on a cold November morning with my mom, who was by no means a radical.

> "Ontario workers [were] engaging in political strikes, far outside the norms of everyday labour relations. In addition, the five strikes listed had been, in the sense that there was no provision for them in their collective agreements, illegal – and yet still tens of thousands had walked off of the job. Finally, this whole massive confrontation between labour and capital and labour and the state was simultaneously a moment of developing unity between organized labour and social justice community movements and coalitions, some of which had previously operated in an orbit that only rarely intersected, at least in a consistent way" (2026, 107-108)

That the notion of 'when unions and movements come together, they are more powerful collectively' is obvious, but it does need to be said and explicated with actual historical research to move beyond colloquialism. Someone needs to do this important work, and Kellogg has done this here. It also shows what is lacking from current resistance against Ford, at least outside of the Fall 2022 education workers strike and broader union organizing against Ford's back-to-work legislation and unprecedented use of the notwithstanding clause against Ontario workers.

There are two weaknesses to the book, but neither detracts from the central claims and historical analysis of the Days of Action. The statistical discourse analysis feels a little thrown in, both in its placement in standalone boxes at the end of chapters and in its lack of connection to more concrete theorizing regarding power and the role of the state in media number-setting. Much work has been done on the power of quantification and statisticalization, some of it outside the scope of more traditional political economy and labour history, which would have been fruitful to engage with.

The second is in the conclusion, and almost unrelated to the scope of the book, but bears mentioning. Kellogg provides what he refers to as a more nuanced take on the Liberal era of Premiers Dalton McGuinty and Kathleen Wynne, where he tries to focus on differentiating them from the government before them. This is all well and good, as there are clear material and ideological differences in their electoral bases and the policies they pursued. The issue is that Kellogg is often far too forgiving of McGuinty and Wynne's neoliberalism due to not identifying them as more in the Third Way (or 'progressive' or 'inclusionary') vein of neoliberal policymaking (Albo, 2018; Fanelli, 2018; Kelpin, 2024).

While highlighting spending in education and investment in post-secondary student grants (Third Way focus on skills and human capital), Kellogg makes no mention of McGuinty's attacks on teaching unions, imposed collective agreements, and forced pay freezes in the 2010s. Secondly, while highlighting that Wynne only partially sold off Hydro One (thus making it less neoliberal than a full privatization?), and aimed to invest some of the proceeds in infrastructure and transit (with much dedicated to debt reduction repayments), this same money could have been allocated through, say, tax increases on the rich and corporations. The issue is that McGuinty and Wynne oversaw a regime of tax cuts and reductions in program and ministerial spending due to their embrace of a low-tax economy. The reality is that from 1990 to 2018, real per capita government spending in Ontario only went from $11,185 to $12,600, with Wynne's time in office representing negative growth in real per capita spending due to her focus on deficit reduction (Financial Accountability Office of Ontario, 2025).

The same goes for Ford, who, Kellogg notes, has been able to adopt a "more muted approach to austerity" than Harris due to increases in federal transfers compared to the Harris era. Contesting the term "muted" aside, while I do not think Kellogg would disagree, it is also important to note that Ford can be less muted because he inherited 20 years of neoliberal austerity and stagnant program spending, combined with low revenue generation. He is muted because much of the work has already been done. Whether Ford can be described as muted is also up for discussion, but outside both his book and this review. The call for nuance in assessing different historical phases of neoliberalism and its class and electoral compositions is welcomed, but the follow-through is lacking at times.

That being said, the book's core focus and themes are well done and give the reader both on-the-ground experiences and historical hindsight into an incredibly important period of radical politics in Ontario's history. Kellogg is right that we should not take these events for granted, and his book encapsulates how we can understand and appreciate the complex social relations at play.

References

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