

CHALLENGING FOOD POVERTY IN ONTARIO

The Ontario Coalition Against Poverty's Special Diet Campaign

Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP)

In 1995 social assistance rates in Ontario were cut by 21.6% and, in the years that have followed, their spending power has continued to fall against increases in the cost of living. To-day the real income of people on welfare and disability benefits is up to 60% below where it was in 1994. This has created a climate of desperation that has driven down wages and fuelled a huge growth in precarious forms of employment. It has also led to a situation where those on social assistance are unable to pay their rent and eat properly.

As this crisis of food poverty and hunger intensified, in 2004, in the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) we were considering how we might alleviate things by pressing for 'full entitlement' and demanding all supplementary benefits people on social assistance might be entitled to. We came across what was at that time a rather obscure benefit for people on Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) called the Special Diet. This provided up to \$250 a month per person in additional payments but obtaining it required that a health professional fill in an application form. Very few people knew of it and OW and ODSP offices would frequently refuse those applications that were submitted.

In OCAP, we asked ourselves what would happen if we promoted knowledge of the Special Diet, found sympathetic medical providers to assist us and backed up applications for the benefit with vigorous direct action forms of advocacy. With the support of health care providers, we began organizing 'hunger clinics' in Toronto and began to sign people up in large numbers for the Special Diet.

In the first year of these clinics, some 8,000 people in Toronto were signed up for the benefit and, as the word spread, far greater numbers still obtained it by going to their own doctors or walk in clinics. The providers we were working with organized themselves into a group known as Health Providers Against Poverty (HPAP) and became key political allies as well as playing the role they did in the actual hunger clinics. Awareness of the Special Diet spread across Ontario and local anti poverty organizations began to hold clinics and take action to ensure applications were accepted. People in Ottawa, Kingston, Belleville, Peterborough, Hamilton Guelph, Kitchener and Sudbury became involved in the struggle.

This sudden increase in applications for the Special Diet seriously alarmed politicians and bureaucrats at both levels. (Under the Ontario system, 'short term' Ontario Works (OW) is delivered by local governments and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) is in the hands of the Province). By early 2005, they were looking for ways to restrict access. However, the applications we were putting in were totally in accordance with their rules and policies. They were reduced to implementing a covert operation to deny valid applications. This meant that OCAP and allies had to diligently track the applications that went in and act to support those who were denied. Mass delegations were taken to OW and ODSP offices to overturn adverse decisions. From a community organizing point of view, the fact that people had to fight to obtain the benefit once they applied

actually added to the momentum of the campaign. Innumerable actions were taken to win the Special Diet for people and the level of support for those actions grew considerably. People from many poor communities and neighbourhoods within Toronto joined the fight but the most astounding level of participation came from the Somali community. The incredible internal communication network inside that community and its sense of cohesion in the face of attack made it suited to the role of cutting edge in the fight to access the Special Diet. Most actions to drive back attempts to deny the benefit that took place were made up mainly of Somali women.

As it became clear that improper bureaucratic denial was being overcome by community solidarity, the OW administration in Toronto sought to make policy changes that would restrict access and they declared that only physicians, and no longer nurse practitioners, midwives and dieticians would be able to fill in the forms. This outrageous ruling was overturned by an OCAP occupation of the Mayor's office and vigorous protests by health providers.

In September of 2005, we took the campaign to a new level by organizing a hunger clinic in front of the Legislature of Ontario. We erected wooden cubicles to function as 'offices' and over forty health providers signed up well over a thousand people for the Special Diet. All of the applications were submitted to the OW and ODSP offices that people had to deal with and all attempts to deny benefits were challenged. Millions of dollars in vital income was won for and by poor people on that single day.

By the end of 2005, the Liberal Government of Ontario had decided to take action to try and stem the flow of people who were obtaining the right to an adequate diet. The form was changed so that now, it no longer consisted of a set of dietary options a health provider could determine were necessary. Instead, it was now necessary for the provider to select, from a set of medical conditions, those which she or he felt applied to the person applying for the benefit. Our clinics continued but were more difficult and it was often hard for providers to secure the full \$250 for people. One particular Toronto doctor, however, Roland Wong, played an incredible role by signing up enormous numbers for the Special Diet. Roland ultimately faced a disciplinary hearing before the Ontario College of Physicians for his 'unprofessional' efforts to ensure that the health of his patients was protected by helping them access decent food. However, his unique contribution was vital to the whole campaign.

OCAP responded to this attack with several actions. We crashed a fundraising dinner for the Liberal Party and interrupted their feast with cries of 'We won't be quiet till we get the Special Diet!' We also held a large night march into the ultra wealthy Toronto neighbourhood of Rosedale to drive home that poor people were being denied an adequate diet, while tax breaks were being given to the rich.

As it turned out, despite the difficulties created by the changed Special Diet forms, access to the benefit continued to grow across Ontario and the campaign settled in for a sustained effort. The hundreds of millions in benefits that poor people were supposed to have lost that we continued to win remained a huge issue for the Government and a barrier to their regressive agenda. In 2010, the Liberals announced their intention to eliminate the Special Diet. The Finance Minister appeared on a TV Ontario program which was shut down by a large OCAP delegation that had managed to get into the studios. A march was held on the headquarters of the Ontario Liberal Party and a group of

eleven people who occupied the offices were arrested and faced the outlandish charge of ‘forcible entry’. These were eventually dropped.

Faced with continued resistance, the Liberals dropped plans to totally eliminate the Special Diet but went ahead with further severe restrictions. The list of medical conditions was cut and applicants were intimidated from trying to obtain the benefit by a requirement that they sign a statement swearing that they had the conditions named by the health provider. At the same time, a letter was sent to all OW and ODSP offices informing them that staff had the power to assess whether they believed the medical diagnoses of the provider who filled in a Special Diet form and to deny the benefit in the event they disagreed. This is an astounding discretionary power to give to people who lack any medical knowledge or training.

We challenged the new attack with an action at an upscale supermarket in Toronto. A large number of OCAP members and supporters filled shopping carts with items totalling very near the \$250 amount provided under the Special Diet. When items were rung through, we explained that the money to pay for the groceries had been taken away by the Government so we were asking for the Loblaws Company to provide them free of charge and send the bill to the Premier of Ontario.

The change in the Special Diet did go through, despite our efforts to stop it, and we no longer had any basis to organize ways to secure the benefit through clinics and other such activities. The campaign came to an end and we soon found ourselves entirely taken up with an effort to prevent further austerity driven attacks on the benefits of people on social assistance. We had thought that the measures taken by the Government had succeeded in driving down access to the Special Diet. However, we underestimated the momentum and awareness our campaign had generated and the resilience of poor communities. A Freedom of Information request, in 2015, revealed that, in fact, access to the Special Diet had continued to increase since the cut. Before 2004, the Special Diet had only been paying out a few million dollars a year across Ontario but, in 2010, it provided \$209.9 million. However, in 2013, the last year for which figures could be obtained, the benefits going to poor people had actually increased to \$257.3 million. The Government’s effort to maximize hunger by gutting the Special Diet had not been successful.

Looking back on the Special Diet campaign, there are hundreds of moments of inspiration but the one that always stands out in my mind is when a woman called the OCAP office because she wanted to thank us for helping her obtain the benefit. I was the person who answered the phone. What prompted her to call was that she had just done her first shopping since her income had been raised and she was sitting in her kitchen watching her children eat fresh strawberries. It was the first time they had ever tasted strawberries and she was weeping with happiness. That was a wonderful thing for one family but it was also a testimony to the power of community resistance and the incredible alliance that came together around the fight to win the Special Diet.

For more information on this experience, please write to John Clarke at clarkejohn67@gmail.com.