

Class politics at work

Ernie Tate at CUPE Local One



Brother Ernie Tate (1934–2021)

BY ROB FAIRLEY

Following Ernie Tate's death on February 5, 2021, numerous tributes have been published highlighting his lifelong commitment to socialism and remarkable contribution to the anti-war movement. (Links are provided below.) His two-volume memoir, *Revolutionary Activism in the 1950s & 60s*, provides a detailed account of this work.

Ernie's role as a union leader has received less attention. Working at Toronto Hydro from 1977 to 1995, he served as an Executive Board member and eventually as Vice-President of CUPE Local One, which represented roughly 500 blue collar and 450 clerical and technical workers at the utility.

This article includes recollections of several local leaders retracing some of Ernie's activity in Local One, including a few of the many battles Ernie had a hand in. With others there at the time, I describe the community of which Ernie was a part, and some of its history and his contributions. I apologise to the scores of others I did not reach out to.

ERNIE TATE WAS A WORKING-CLASS INTELLECTUAL, a highly developed Marxist and a hands-on fighter who did not turn his nose up at the day-to-day struggles of working people. His eyes were wide open to the limitations of trade unionism, but he understood unions' critical role in society. He also recognised the labour movement as a place where the left can learn the tradecraft of struggle.

Ernie was sharply critical of ultra-leftists and left sectarians who believe that progress is possible without the often humbling, hard work of real-world struggle. We shared the view that left cadre should be people useful to the working class in the here and now.

I first met Ernie at a union meeting a couple of years after the local's strike in 1975. (I had started at the utility in 1972.) After I made a speech, someone I had never seen before stepped up to the mic and spoke

in a loud, clear voice. "I would like to build on the comments made by the comrade – er, brother – who just spoke." There was a low buzz in the room.

Of course, I went over to chat with him after the meeting. Imagine, a veteran left leader like Ernie Tate showing up in your workplace and in your union! Ernie and I went through a lot together in a friendship that lasted over 45 years. He was always rock solid.

During that time, I also came to know his dynamic life partner and comrade, Jess MacKenzie. Jess and Ernie shared a tremendous passion for life and had a wide range of interests including the arts, travel and birding. Dinner was delicious and conversation always fascinating at Jess and Ernie's dinner parties.

I felt a special bond with Ernie. I miss him terribly.

— continues

A memorial plaque: Ernie was the driving force

Following the workplace death of Brother Neil Morrison in 1983, members of Local One urged the local's Executive Board to create a permanent reminder of members who had lost their lives over the years.

On the Executive Board at the time, Ernie proposed commissioning a Toronto wood carver he knew, Earl Thomlinson, to create a plaque. Carved from a block of laminated walnut slabs, the plaque features a pair of hands in work gloves 'skinning' a cable. On either side, inscribed plates were mounted with the names of the memorialized.

There was much anticipation about the project. When the plaque was unveiled, members were very happy with it. As Ernie wrote in an article, "What pleased them the most is that it is an original work, with a high level of skill and obvious dedication by the artist. Everyone is proud of it."

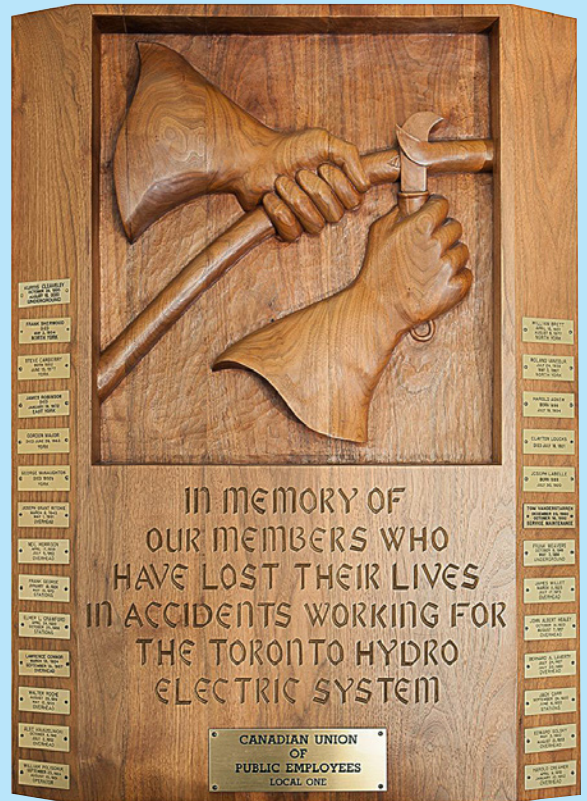
As often happens with monuments and statues, the plaque quickly became a flashpoint. Local One leaders tried to have the plaque displayed in the lobby of the Hydro's head office, but the Hydro Commission refused, saying the plaque was negative.

Eventually it was mounted in the lunchroom at the Hydro's main depot, where it became the centre of annual ceremonies marking April 28, the Day of Mourning for workers injured and killed on the job. These were always occasions for a clash with Hydro management.

The general manager would prattle on about Hydro's "commitment to safety" and tell us that if we all worked safely, everything would be okay. Local One's health and safety rep would reply, "The union has a very different view of safety. Of course we should all work safely, but the employer is responsible to ensure that the workplace is safe. The real issue is Hydro's reluctance to pay the cost of doing so."

Local One legend has it that our plaque was the inspiration for Canada's national Day of Mourning. The story goes that Jeff Rose, then president of CUPE National, was so impressed by the local's plaque that he suggested a day of mourning to the CLC Executive. The rest is history (or legend).

On far too many occasions, grim gatherings at the plaque added another name. Those tragedies sent out waves of trauma and suffering affecting many people.



Local One memorial plaque honouring members killed on the job.

MIKE THEODORE

**Toronto Hydro 1978–2014. Power System Controller.
A Local One activist 1978–2014.**

I started my life at Toronto Hydro in April 1978 at the Pearl Street Steam plant, where I worked as a cleaner. It was an extremely hot, smelly and noisy place to work. I was quite depressed about my prospects. The older men working there were dour and humourless, except for one, Ernie Tate.

Here was a horse of different colour. He took the time to show me how to work safely – unlike the boss. He talked about the union Health and Safety Committee and said I should go to union meetings.

As I worked with him I began to realize that this was a man of incredible depth and experience in life. He had gone places and seen things that I could only imagine. He was a wonderful teacher and a great asset to our union. To me he embodied the virtues of hope and optimism. I'm so sad that he is gone. RIP Ernie.

Ernie was a consistent source of strength and stability in Local One. He mentored many emerging leaders.

In 1987, Local One was in crisis. The president had resigned and had taken a job in management after negotiating an unpopular settlement. Ernie came to see me on the job and encouraged me to get back onto the Executive Board. (I had stepped down for a couple of years.)

Ernie had been local vice-president for a number of years and planned to stay on in that position. Knowing I would have the benefit of Ernie's experience, I decided to run for president and was elected. Ernie was known for nudging members into union leadership positions.

DAVID CARRINGTON

Toronto Hydro 1987–2019. A Local One leader 1989–2019.

My first encounter with Ernie was in 1987 at a union meeting in the auditorium at the Casa Loma campus of George Brown College. The local was in upheaval. The membership had been shaken by the sudden departure of our president.

At the meeting, Ernie, our vice-president, and Rob Fairley, our newly elected president, presented a message of confidence and stability. I got the sense that there was a plan and a course that we were on, but as a novice I didn't understand a lot. I was happy to hear that the new leadership recognized militancy in the salaried bargaining unit as well as in the blue collar membership – which had always been the focus in the past.

With Ernie there was never bellicose rhetoric when speaking with members, either at General Meetings or one on one. He was willing to listen to disparate views and then, after considering the input, select a path forward rooted in working-class ethics.

Ernie's leadership was nurturing. Through his kindness he made me and others want to be involved. Ernie deepened our understanding so there would be member buy-in when it was needed. Consequently, when the local set aggressive contract demands in 1989, the members were ready to strike.



(L-R) Ernie Tate (V-P) and Rob Fairley (Pres.). Hydro bosses thought we were about to storm their H.Q.

The 1989 strike

Our first big test came quickly, as expiry of our collective agreements loomed. I was on a steep learning curve; though an experienced shop floor fighter I had never served on a negotiating committee. Local One's culture of self-reliance extended to collective bargaining. The president was always the chief negotiator; CUPE National staff had little or no role. I depended heavily on Ernie and other old hands.

Ernie had a central role in drafting a bold set of demands, including a double-digit percentage raise. This was at a time when, despite a healthy economy, the pattern in the public sector was 3.5%, below the rate of inflation.

We defined our demands in class terms. "When working people go out to buy a car or a place to live or groceries, we experience something that has come to be known as 'sticker shock'. It's time that the bosses experienced some sticker shock!" we proclaimed.

It was a militant strike. We had been preparing for months. Members were determined to restore their power and force the employer to back off. Local One flying squads, operating mostly at night, drove out private contractors who were doing our work. Electric hot water heaters in wealthy neighbourhoods mysteriously lost power. Management was run ragged trying to keep the lights on. Not a single Local One member crossed the line.



*Not a single
Local One member
crossed the picket line.*

Marching up Yonge Street during the 1989 strike, confident and proud after near-unanimous rejection of Hydro offer.

DAVID ONYALO

**Toronto Hydro 1985–1993. Warehouse worker.
Vice-President of Local One 1989–1992.**

During the 1989 strike, I was on the Local One Negotiating Committee representing inside workers. That's when I really got to know Brother Ernie Tate. As a shop steward for warehouse workers, I had interacted with Ernie before the strike, discussing the merits of proceeding to the next level of the grievance procedure. During bargaining, I remember Ernie as a beacon of strength and fountain of information on working class struggles since the industrial revolution.

Ernie reminded Negotiating Committee members to stay focused on the big picture when we found ourselves debating proposed changes in isolation from collective working class interests.

When we wrapped up bargaining and prepared to recommend a settlement to the members, Ernie pulled

me aside. He told me that he was going to step down as the local's V-P and had told Rob, the local president, that I should run in the election to replace him. I was shocked when I heard this but I won the election. Ernie remained my biggest supporter and mentor.

In 1992, I started working on assignments away from Local One, starting with the Ontario Workers Health and Safety Centre, as co-ordinator for electrical utilities.

Next I worked at CUPE National as a senior education officer. Eventually I was hired by the Canadian Labour Congress, where I worked as a national director. In all my work in the labour movement, I remembered Ernie's counsel to keep focused on the big picture.

Ernie's previous experience in negotiations was crucial to our success. He combined fighting spirit with a steady hand on the tiller.



Sisters Lisa Triano (L) and Cheryl Morin (R).
Spirits were high throughout the five-week strike.

Ernie's decisive advice

After five weeks on strike, with excellent media coverage and membership that was still rock solid, progress at the table stalled. We were not entirely surprised; Local One had set the bargaining pattern for most of the public sector in Ontario for decades, so Toronto Hydro was under intense pressure to keep the lid on us.

Ernie had some important advice. “We won’t necessarily improve our position by staying out longer; in fact we may now be at the peak of our power,” he told us. “We should wrap up the strike on the best terms possible and get ready for the next round in two years.” This advice was driven by what was best for the membership, not by a romantic left need for glorious combat. Such decisions build member trust and lay the groundwork for future struggles.

We (reluctantly) took Ernie’s advice. At a huge meeting, called on short notice, we asked for a unanimous vote against the Hydro’s current position in order to break the logjam. It was a short meeting. Blue-collar workers voted 100% to reject, as did all but 13 of the clerical and technical staff. After the vote we marched up Yonge Street to the Hydro’s head office, chanting with fists in the air.

Ernie’s strategy worked. We quickly nudged the Hydro up to 14% over two years and settled. The local emerged united and confident. A new generation had proven itself. The strike had a high profile at the time and helped raise expectations and fighting spirit in the labour movement.

Long-term impact of the 1989 strike

In 1989, Local One was reborn. A new generation of leaders emerged and was tested. The membership developed a taste for struggle. We reasserted our power at Toronto Hydro and laid the groundwork for years of successful struggle that followed, on many fronts.

In 1991, management was in no mood to tangle with us again. We made a historic breakthrough in negotiations: a 37.5-hour work week for 40 hours’ pay for blue collar workers. We could hardly believe it! (Salaried workers already had a 35-hour week.) In 1993, we won precedent-setting accommodation language for injured workers, and employer funding for a full-time union Health and Safety Representative – elected by the membership and accountable to the union.

Local One continued battling in collective bargaining in the years that followed. Twice, Local One strikes lasted only one day. We mounted the only strike against Premier Bob Rae’s Social Contract.

In 1999 Local One played an important role in defeating Mike Harris’s draconian Bill 136, a huge threat to Local One. At the time, we faced the task of harmonizing collective agreements from six former utilities that had been amalgamated into a new Toronto Hydro. Bill 136 sought to throw out existing collective agreements of unions in our situation and force us into first contract arbitration, essentially starting over. Local One waged a successful three-week strike that was an important contribution to the province-wide campaign that defeated Harris’s scheme.



Serious meeting at dusk in the 1989 strike
– Local One flying squads

Union renewal based on self-reliance, capacity-building and class struggle

Ernie and I and many others set out on a path of union renewal that continued for many years. There was much to build on. The membership had a deep awareness of their contribution to society and of their role within the labour movement, particularly as a lead local in collective bargaining.

Unlike many union renewal models hanging on two or three rigidly applied measures, the approach we took was an unfolding, comprehensive and adaptable process. Some of its features were:

- ▶ A high-capacity, workplace-based leadership group with the ability to plan, act and evaluate (and learn), not just a network of activists. The Local One Executive Board was a powerhouse, and so were the rings of other strong workplace leaders.
- ▶ A local that was almost entirely self-servicing and self-reliant. A highly capable local leadership and strength in depth in the workplace were necessities, supported by a culture of mentoring.
- ▶ Aggressive steps to make the leadership a diverse group with much fresh blood, including women and workers of colour. It was no longer a bastion of white men, although leaders of the traditional workforce remained fully engaged.



Simultaneous picket at Hydro depot by Hourly Unit members in solidarity with meter readers. At noon, Hourly Unit trucks rumbled by Head Office (a popular 'drive-by' tactic) with a message for Hydro Commissioners arriving for a meeting.



Early morning picket at Hydro's Head Office by meter readers in the Salaried Unit in 1994. Although guaranteed continued employment, they fought contracting out of their jobs. "Say yes to steady jobs!" "Cutbacks in services hurt us all!" "Job creation NOT job elimination!" "Every job matters"

- ▶ A tough, transparent and member-engaged approach to labour relations, featuring a single-sheet agitational union newsletter modeled on workplace 'shop papers' of the 1930s.
- ▶ Relentless campaigns involving work stoppages and mass bullhorn rallies outside our workplace. Some campaigns extended beyond our workplaces and achieved victories with significant impact.
- ▶ A willingness to take risks on equity issues.
- ▶ Rigorous preparation for negotiations and full strike prep every time we went to the negotiating table.
- ▶ Internationalism – Local One built relations with electrical utility unions in Quebec and Haiti, including workplace exchanges.
- ▶ A 'Back to Basics' push for union renewal within CUPE National, calling for rebuilding the union organization at the local level and restoring the focus on member power and collective bargaining.



Local One's agitational newsletter challenged employer propaganda and 'fanned the flames.'

JOYCE NOBEL

Toronto Hydro 1986–1998. Electrical Mechanic.
Local One Health and Safety Rep 1990–1995.

I have great appreciation for people like Ernie Tate who have kept the flame of social change alive; people who take action as well as think and write. The 'old-timers' at Local One, and there were many, made it their business to constantly share their values and experience with us newcomers arriving in the workplace. In some ways, "women in trades" were an uncomfortable match with those guys, but together we made it work.

Ernie in particular helped me stand up for myself – because I had to learn to stand up to him. He always wanted me to think, and he knew I could. He never let me off the hook and he didn't give it away. It didn't always (OK, maybe ever!) feel comfortable, but I know now that it was a tremendous gift. That's a high bar and I appreciate being held to it. He did not condescend to me. He expected things of me as part of the next generation of leaders.

He was very pleased and proud of my decision to go on a solidarity construction brigade to Nicaragua in 1989. He helped me gather donations of tools and equipment to take. I thought the trip was about Nicaragua, but it was really about talking to working

class people in Toronto about international solidarity and why it is so important.

Ernie taught me so much, both directly in hard-nosed conversation and through his leadership of Local One. He was the one who insisted that we aim high and far. It was a critical challenge to the prevailing sense of what was possible. "You will never win more than you demand," he said to me. "They aren't going to give it away. We have to take it."

BRUNO SILANO

Toronto Hydro 1989–2020. Engineering Technologist.
President of Local One 1996–2006.

In May 2006 I was up for re-election for president of CUPE Local One. I had been president for ten years. My opponent ran on a platform of "Time for a Change."

As they often did, both Ernie and Jess dropped by the Local One offices for an impromptu visit and a chat regarding how things were going at the local. I showed Ernie my opponent's flyer with the slogan "Time for a Change." Ernie studied it carefully, looked at me and said, "Change without substance is meaningless!" I knew immediately he was right. It was so true, in so many ways. We had a chuckle and went on to discuss the deeper meaning of "change."

Ernie Tate was a wonderful human being. He was strategic thinker and was passionately committed to helping progressive left movements in Toronto and abroad.



Labour Day photo of Ernie (R) with Brothers David Carrington (L) and Bruno Silano



Local One at CUPE National's 1991 convention. (L-R): Mark Clark (Treasurer), Rob Fairley (Pres.), David Onyalo (V-P) and Joyce Nobel (H&S Rep.)

Putting member power behind progress on equity

Following the 1989 strike, Local One won significant progress on equity issues. In this period many union organizations were disconnecting from their members by moving out of the workplace – even as they were announcing great equity policies. Fear of backlash from their traditional (white male) members often meant union leaders failed to carry the process of change into the workplace, and the disconnect widened.

The class analysis of Ernie Tate and others guided Local One to success on the difficult terrain of equity



Local One wins the right to refuse harassment in 1992, almost 20 years before it became the law in Ontario.

issues. We respected the traditional workforce (many of us were part of it), and we were determined to move forward with it on these issues. We made sure that leading blue collar brothers continued to play a key role in the local and that we maintained focus on issues important to them – and delivered on those issues.

The culture of struggle and change also played an important role. Here are a few low-profile victories that played a role, as such victories often do, in social progress.



- ▶ We successfully challenged Toronto Hydro's racist hiring policies and changed the face of the workforce.
- ▶ We won a ground-breaking anti-harassment policy, *Respect at Work*, which identified harassment as a workplace safety hazard. It gave workers the right to refuse – to leave the scene of harassment with pay and to seek union representation.

This breakthrough made it into Ontario law in Bill 168 – nearly 20 years later.

- ▶ In 1993, before many unions had negotiated health benefits for members with same-sex partners, Local One negotiated coverage of them for all terms and conditions of the collective agreement, including bereavement and adoption leave – everything!

Fighting Hydro privatization through the Ontario Electricity Coalition

Shortly after he retired from Toronto Hydro, Ernie helped establish the Ontario Electricity Coalition (OEC), which defeated Mike Harris's attempts to privatize Ontario Hydro. Remarkably the OEC was hosted and led by a municipal hydro local – CUPE Local One – not the huge union at Ontario Hydro!

Sister Charlene Mueller nudged Paul Kahnert. "What the hell is going on? They're trying to privatize Ontario Hydro and nobody is doing anything about it! We'll be next if we let that happen." In the cab of his truck, Paul hatched the plan to launch a province-wide campaign. He later told me, "At Local One we knew about winning. We knew about our power. Defeating Hydro privatization looked entirely doable."

Ernie was among those who came on board and made it happen. Charlene handled most of the logistics while Paul hit the road, sometimes taking co-workers. The OEC organized over 40 public meetings across Ontario – even in distant communities like Dryden, a 20-hour drive from Toronto!

The campaign culminated in a court challenge by CUPE and the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP). On April 19, 2002, Ontario Superior Court Judge Arthur Gans found that the provincial government did not have the authority to unilaterally privatize Ontario Hydro.

Although this was a stunning win, the Conservatives could easily undo it. They moved quickly to pass Bill 58, giving them the authority to go ahead with privatization. But they didn't dare use it. Why? Because the OEC and others had pushed public opposition to hydro privatization to over 90%.

Sadly, the OEC story does not have a happy ending. Although Toronto Hydro is still publicly owned, in 2015 the Wynne Liberals used the Conservative legislation to commence privatizing Ontario's electricity system. A fight was mounted, but Local One found it hard to draw allies back into the campaign. The issue lacked sizzle in the eyes of many. It was no longer a priority for the left.

"We cannot expect to win every battle", Ernie commented. "We learn what we can and move on."



Hydro lineperson Brother Paul Kahnert spoke at dozens of OEC-organized public meetings across Ontario, sometimes with other Local One members.

PAUL KAHNERT

Toronto Hydro 1979-2012.

Lineperson. A Local One leader 1979–2012.

Ontario Electricity Coalition spokesperson 2001–2010.

I met Ernie Tate on my first day at Toronto Hydro. I was totally green. I remember how kind he was to me.

Here is one of many memories of Ernie from the OEC campaign. Few people know this story.

On the heels of our win against Harris, the NDP came perilously close to heading down the Hydro privatization path. (They had not learned from their disastrous Highway 407 tollway P3.)

Ernie Tate had read up on issues coming to the floor of an NDP convention and blew the whistle. The Resolutions Committee was recommending an NDP program that called for private ownership of all new electricity generation in Ontario!

The OEC dispatched me to Queen's Park to get NDP leader Howard Hampton to intervene. I respected and liked Howard – we had attended many campaign rallies together across Ontario.

The following weekend, he went to the mic at the convention and surprised delegates by urging them to vote against the Resolution Committee's recommendation and to affirm the NDP's commitment to public power. They did. It was a very close call.

Over many years Ernie played an important (often unseen) role in many fights. He is an example to us all.



Local One leader and OEC organizer Sister Charlene Mueller with her T-shirt mural.

CHARLENE MUELLER

**Toronto Hydro 1980–2016. Power System Scheduler.
A Local One leader 1989–2016.**

Ernie was a founding member of the Ontario Electricity Coalition (OEC), which defeated Hydro privatization in the Harris/Eves era. Ernie attended all Toronto events of the Ontario Electricity Coalition and Local One's "Keep Toronto Hydro Public" campaign.

One day we invited supporters to a rally at the huge statue of Sir Adam Beck – the Conservative politician who, over 100 years ago, fought to establish public ownership of power generation.

Ernie was so generous to me that day. I had been assigned to MC the event essentially unprepared, a total novice. He gave me excellent advice as well as confidence-inspiring encouragement. His tips for capturing the crowd's attention were great, and I held on to them for the rest of my years in the labour movement. I will miss his friendly presence at Labour Day very much.

LOGAN SELLATHURAI

**Toronto Hydro 1990-2013. Accounting.
Local One Executive Board five terms.**

During the 1960s, for thousands of youths of my generation from the Global South, 'radical Left' or militant trade unionism were not just words or a choice, it was our way of life. Our survival and our next meal depended on our struggles.

In Sri Lanka (where I come from), India, the Philippines, Indonesia and many other countries, social, economic and political conditions drove us to become active in the trade union and peasants' movements.

I never thought my life would end up here in Toronto or that I would encounter anything like Local One. After moving here, I was fortunate enough to get a job at a unionized workplace, Toronto Hydro. My understanding of North American trade unions was always negative, so imagine my surprise to find myself in a union where left comrades were engaged in struggles along with hundreds of militant workers!

Once I got to know more about my local, my impression of Canadian unions gradually changed and I got involved. It was especially important to me that this local was not just engaging in day-to-day workplace issues. It was building solidarity with electrical workers in Haiti, Quebec, Mexico and France.

In the early seventies, after the devastating setback of an uprising in Sri Lanka, we realized sectarianism within the left was one reason for its collapse. I was aware that Rob and Ernie hailed from different left traditions. Their comradeship and friendship is a lesson for younger-generation comrades.

Ernie was not a person to run ahead, leaving the people behind and then blame them. Nor would he stay at the starting point and watch. Ernie always said, "Let's move forward, together." That was the leadership quality I learned from him. It is more urgent than ever to pass this torch to the emerging generation of youth on the left.



In retirement, Brother Logan Sellathurai has continued to mentor youth on the left.

In conclusion

The anti-sectarian, member-focused, socialist politics of Ernie and others mixed well with Local One's culture of solidarity and fighting spirit. It was a powerful brew.

Ernie Tate is held in high esteem by those who had the honour of fighting shoulder to shoulder with him. He was an upbeat and highly capable comrade who provided generous support and guidance to many. Ernie is dearly missed. We can best honour him by carrying on the struggle for a better world.

ROB FAIRLEY started at Toronto Hydro in 1972 as a cleaner/labourer and progressed through apprenticeship to become an electrician. Rob served in many roles at CUPE Local One including president 1987–1995.

Since leaving Local One in 1995, Rob has worked on many campaigns and strikes as a freelance organizer. Retired as Director of Strategic Services at the Toronto & York Region Labour Council, he is co-author of its "Campaign Planning Handbook" and author of "Achieving a State of Readiness". Both are available at www.labourcouncil.ca and at www.campaignorganizing.org

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ERNIE TATE'S TWO-VOLUME MEMOIR, *Revolutionary Activism in the 1950s & 60s*, is published by Resistance Books, London.

TRIBUTES TO ERNIE INCLUDE:

"In Memory of Ernie Tate (1934–2021)"
– John Riddell, *The Bullet*

"A Tribute to Ernie Tate"
– Phil Hearse, *Socialist Resistance*

"Fare thee well, comrade: A tribute to Ernie Tate"
– James Clark and Pam Frache,
Spring Magazine

"The fortunate Marxist: Ernie Tate (1934-2021)"
– Bryan Palmer, *Canadian Dimension*

"Vale Ernie Tate: 'May there be many more comrades like you'" – Green Left

"Ernie Tate: The Unrepentant Marxist"
– Louis Proyect



Labour Day March, Toronto 2014. Brother Ernie Tate with his life partner and comrade, Jess MacKenzie.

