

Sefton Lecture
University of Toronto
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HOSTILE TAKEOVER – The Threat of Privatization

Good evening.

It really is an honour to be here. I have to admit, this is a bit of a departure for me. I'm not sure if I've ever given a "lecture" before. Mobilizing Speeches, rally speeches, yes. But, lectures, never! I'm much more comfortable speaking at rallies like the one that just took place outside these doors a few moments ago than speaking in lecture halls.

For those of you who might be wondering what some of the commotion was about outside, it wasn't a picket line. If it was, I wouldn't be here.

- But it was a protest.
- A call for attention.
- A call for attention to be paid to a group of workers at this university who don't get a lot of attention being among the lowest paid and exploited employees on campus, the Graduate Assistants at OISE, members of CUPE Local 3907.

Their contract talks with the University have collapsed and they are headed for a possible strike—a strike that no one wants. And all our members of Local 3907 want to settle the dispute is similar benefits and wages as other teaching assistants have on this campus. Not a lot to ask for, and I hope that you will give them your support.

But, really it is good to be here. Especially to talk about privatization. Not so long ago, not a lot of people were debating privatization. It was just happening. No debate. No discussion. Governments were just doing it. And the public wasn't paying that much attention. And our union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees, took very deliberate steps to make sure that privatization stopped just happening without debate. And I feel very proud because a lot has changed in the last little while.

Privatization is a raging issue everywhere today. It's still happening. In fact more than ever. But at least it's getting some public attention.

Just look at BC. The new Campbell government is proposing a massive sell-off of public services there. And people are in an uproar. I just got back from one of the largest rallies in BC's history and it was all about privatization...It was an amazing event. Thousands and thousands of people standing up for public services. And it wasn't just all union members – not by a long shot. There's a real citizen's movement building in BC. Towns with 10,000 people are getting 1,000 people out to a rally or a town-hall meeting. That's happening right across the province. And Saturday was only just the beginning.

Speaking of BC, as I'm sure you can appreciate – there are a whole lot of Gordon Campbell jokes making the rounds. And since I've got pretty serious stuff to tell you about, I thought I'd share one with you first. A CUPE flight attendant passed it on to me.

- On a flight from Victoria to Vancouver, Gordon Campbell sitting and musing with two of his cabinet colleagues. He's just passed his new budget and he's feeling pretty warm and fuzzy knowing that his financial future and future of his business backers is now secure following the sale of British Columbia to the private sector.
- Looking out the window as the plane is approaching Vancouver, Campbell – in a warm and generous mood said – “You know, I should throw \$20 out the window – when it lands, it will make somebody happy”.
- Minister Colin Hansen, Minister responsible for privatization of health care sitting close by, suggested, “why don't you throw two \$10 bills out – make 2 people happy?”

- Across the aisle, Minister for Potential Slave Labour Six Bucks Sucks Graham Bruce suggests, “why don’t you throw four \$5 bills out the window and make 4 people happy”.
- An overworked but very politically astute CUPE flight attendant – overhearing the conversation said “with all respect, Premier, why don’t you throw YOURSELF out the window and make the entire PROVINCE HAPPY.

All joking aside, I am here tonight to talk about a very serious matter – and that is a hostile takeover that is threatening the very fabric of Canadian society – the privatization of public services that is happening today from coast to coast.

Why call it a hostile takeover? Because it is hostile. It’s hostile to the interests of every person in this room and in this country.

And it’s also hostile because most people don’t want it. We’ve never voted for it. We don’t like it. Yet it’s happening anyway. It’s social policy by stealth.

And the fact is there’s not one single public service in this country that is untouched by privatization.

A former Ontario Tory cabinet minister, Claude Bennett, the man Mike Harris appointed to oversee the municipal merger in Ottawa-Carleton, said something recently that really brought this home to me. He said the public sector has no business providing any service that can be found in the Yellow Pages.

Well, I flipped through the Yellow Pages in Ottawa the other day and here is just a sampling of what I found.

Ambulances
Child care services
Community colleges
CBC

Hydro-electric utilities
Garbage collection
Home Care
Hospitals
Municipalities
Nursing homes
Police
Political Parties – no surprise there – most of them are already bought and sold!
Post Office
Pregnancy
Public Transit
Recreation Centres
Schools
Sexual Assault centres
Snow Removal
Transition Houses
Water
Waste treatment facilities.

I could go on, but you get the picture. There is literally NO public service that's

NOT listed in the Yellow Pages.

I'm sure you'll find the same if you flip through the yellow pages in the Toronto phone book.

Here, in the city of Toronto, City Council is being pressured to privatize everything from water services to waste collection to ambulance service to child care – all in the name of Alternative Service Delivery, getting government out of the way because the private sector can do it better and cheaper.

And the reality is that in communities across this country, public services have already been cut back to the point that, in effect, they've been privatized.

By that I mean, either corporations have come in to exploit a new-found vacuum or it's fallen back onto individuals to pay for or provide for these services themselves.

And it doesn't stop at City Hall. We see the same in school boards.

They're looking to contract out the cleaning of schools and administrative support. They're pushing back the responsibility for special needs education, English language training and cultural studies onto parents and the private sector.

And look at the university itself.

Spiraling tuition fees are shifting education costs to students.

More of the university's revenues are tied to corporate funding – which ties them in turn to corporate priorities.

Business schools are housed in shiny new buildings.

Research grants are married to markets.

Critical voices are shunned – and sometimes stifled.

Liberal arts are held together with duct tape.

And, thanks to Mike Harris, a new, for-profit university is coming to a corner, or a computer, near you.

Across the street at Queen's Park, we find many more examples of privatizers run amok. And here we're dealing not just with those who've been swept up in the frenzy. – Here we find the true believers.

The Harris government is tripping over itself to invent new ways to deliver up our common wealth to private greed.

Public assets like Ontario Hydro – built up over generations – sold for a song.

The 407 – it gives a whole new meaning to the term highway robbery.

Responsibility for environmental enforcement – handed over to the polluters.

Privately owned and operated hospitals – pushing us further down the road of U.S. style Health Management Organizations – HMO's- where the quality of care you get depends on the size of your pocket book – where they check your purse before they check your pulse.

The consequences are potentially devastating – for the economy, for public safety and security, for the most vulnerable people in our communities.

But then this government's agenda has nothing to do with good governance --and everything to do with ideology.

Let's come back to Ontario Hydro for a moment, because the scale of this folly is truly staggering.

Ignoring the experience of New Zealand, of California, of Alberta, and elsewhere, we are proceeding to dismantle a public utility that provides among the cheapest and most reliable supplies of power in the world.

Not only is the government handing over huge revenues, it's giving up one of the most important economic levers any government could hope to control.

Adam Beck must be spinning in his grave to see such a powerful instrument of public policy sacrificed on the altar of private profits.

But in its zeal to privatize, this government hasn't only worked to make the wealthy wealthier. It has also gone out of its way to make the poor poorer.

By abandoning any commitment to affordable housing, by cutting back mental health services, the province has privatized responsibility for sheltering our most vulnerable citizens to the market, to families and to charity.

We see the human face of this tragedy everyday on the streets of this city.

But the privatizers have a solution to this too. Would be Ontario Premier Jim Flaherty is proposing to jail the homeless – which I guess would go a long way to assuring a full house for his privatized prison in Penitanguishene. If it weren't so tragic, it might be funny.

The province has also played a major role in pushing privatization at the community level.

By starving local authorities at the same time as downloading responsibilities, they've cranked up the pressure on local communities to turn to the private sector for a quick fix to their pressing need for cash.

But the reality is the federal Liberals are just as bad.

They shamelessly attack the Tories. But they themselves have followed the same path, cutting back services and funding, and paving the way for privatization at all levels of government.

As Harris and Klein and Campbell attack our public health care system, the federal government hands them the excuse, slashing funding to this most important of public services.

For some time now, there's been an enormous gap between the Liberals' rhetoric and their practice. They wrap themselves in the medicare flag, but, they sit silent as the advocates of trickle down economics offer trickle down health care.

Infrastructure funding. Research grants. You name it. To qualify for federal government support, you now need a private partner.

Well, public private partnerships or P3's as they're now known – are frankly just the latest form of political patronage, socializing risk and privatizing profits -- shovelling your tax dollars to corporations that pay little if any tax, but fund political parties bigtime.

Speaking of P3's, at a conference in Toronto last year, NFLD comedian Greg Malone said he thought P3's should really be called P6's – Public Private Partnerships to Plunder the Public Purse. Or P12's – Public Private Partnerships to Plunder the Public Purse and Pursue Policies of Peril to People.

I say keep it really simple – P3 stands for picking the public pocket – full stop. I've also been known to say, "it's time to PPP all over that idea – but since this is a lecture, not a rally, I can't say that here!"

All joking aside, let's not forget, it's the federal government that sits at the G8, at the World Bank, at the World Trade Organization -- and sets in motion the policies that in the end squeeze other levels of government, that create enormous pressure to privatize all throughout the public sector.

Despite all the Canadian government's rhetoric about protecting public services, the fact is the Chrétien Liberals are supporting policies at a global level that will serve up Canada's public services on a platter to the world's largest corporations.

If we look to the negotiations for the General Agreement on Trade in Services – the GATS - we see that Canada's ready to carve up – rather than carve out – vital public services.

And under the terms of the GATS, under the terms of NAFTA... once a service has been privatized it is virtually impossible to reverse it. Because the investment provisions in these so-called free trade deals give corporations the right to scream foul – and sue for millions of dollars in compensation – if we ever try to close markets once they've been opened.

Why is this happening? It's no accident.

It's the result of a concerted push by corporations to expand their wealth and remove all constraints on wealth.

With ever-larger corporations, ever-greater concentrations of wealth, companies had long since jumped their borders and expanded into global giants. They are constantly looking for new sources of profit, new markets in which to expand.

And so, the same guys who brought you junk bonds, dot.coms, Enron and Arthur Anderson – decided that one of the fastest ways to make huge profits was to take control of the delivery of services within the public realm.

To turn education, health care and water into commodities to be bought and sold.

To capture our public wealth and transform it into private profit.

Of course, greed is not a popular thing. Neither is making profit from the public purse. And so, the promoters of privatization have developed what I must admit is a very effective communications strategy – complete with a whole series of false claims to convince us that privatization is actually good for us.

To read the reports of the Fraser Institute, to hear the candidates for the Ontario Tory leadership, to listen to talk radio, you'd think there was sound evidence that profit and privatization is the cure for all that ails us.

In fact, there's overwhelming proof that this particular emperor has absolutely no clothes. Let's take a closer look at their claims:

Number one: private delivery of public services saves taxpayers money.

Not.

Our union has researched this claim pretty carefully. We've spent hours analyzing the latest rage in privatization — private public partnerships or P3s as they are known. And we have found they cost the taxpayer more every time.

The fact is that for big capital projects in the public sector — like highways or hospitals — the biggest cost is the capital itself: the interest paid on the money borrowed to put up the project.

Well, guess what. Governments pay lower interest rates than even the largest corporations do. So, over a span of thirty or forty years — the life of these long term leases — private companies pay millions more to borrow than governments do. And when governments hand over the building, operation and the ownership of these projects to the private sector through so-called partnerships, these higher borrowing costs get charged back to the government.

And it's not just CUPE that is concerned about this. Auditors-general in both New Brunswick and Nova Scotia have said that P3 schools in those provinces were a bad deal for taxpayers. The only ones to benefit are politicians who looked good by hitting on a scheme that allowed them to build new public infrastructure without showing debt on the books. And of course the private consortia who signed contracts guaranteeing them a good return on their investment for years into the future.

And then there's the price of incompetence and corruption.

Look at the reports of the auditor-general in this province to see the millions that were poured into the coffers of corporations like Accenture or Terranet and other scams that resulted in millions of dollars being transferred from the pockets of the poor into the champagne glasses of CEOs.

In fact the evidence is so overwhelmingly stacked against the claim of private is cheaper, many of the privatizers have abandoned this argument. Instead, they latch onto the claim that private is better.

Now I'm not going to stand here this evening and defend the current state of public services in this country.

I represent half a million Canadian men and women who work day-in, day-out delivering public services.

We know there's an urgent need for reform, reinvestment and renewal of public services.

We have no interest in defending the status quo and as you know, we aren't shy about criticizing management – or government.

Having said that, we know that on balance the public services we deliver are quality services – and we don't buy for a moment the privatizers pitch that for-profit services are somehow bigger, better or faster.

In long-term care facilities, extensive studies show that patient care is better in **public** than private nursing homes.

Independent studies have found that school maintenance is performed better by public sector workers than by contractors who cut corners on cleanliness and safety.

You wouldn't want to stay in a hospital room that was cleaned to the standard of a hotel room.

And study after study shows public, not-for-profit child care provides better quality care than commercial centres.

There are many reasons for this – but the most obvious is that if you pay people minimum wage and you encourage casuals and part-timers, you get a high turnover.

Think about it. Do you really want a different custodian cleaning your child's school every couple of weeks? I don't.

Do you want a revolving door of child care workers caring for your kids? I don't.

It takes some gall for a privatizer who's never operated a municipal water system or transit system or recreation complex to say they have more knowledge, insight or experience than those who've been managing for years.

Especially since, very often, their first act after snagging a contract is to hire some of the same managers who operated the service in the public sector – at twice the salary. Now there's real productivity for you.

A third claim the privatizers make is that the market will ensure greater accountability. But for anything more complicated than returning a defective windshield wiper to Canadian Tire, it's almost impossible to hold a corporation to account.

They're not just experts at dodging taxes. They're also past masters at dodging responsibility for their actions.

But it's not just that. Now more than ever, corporations are in it for the quick buck.

You can't hold them to account because they're here today, gone or gobbled up tomorrow.

Look at Hamilton that privatized control of its wastewater treatment. In the past four years, four different corporations have operated the system.

One went bankrupt. One was owned by Enron. Another was gobbled up in a frenzy of corporate concentration.

None were Canadian. None were accountable to the community.

City councillors have been consigned to the sidelines as control passes from one corporation to the next.

Worse still, the city has been left holding the bag, paying to clean up the largest spill of raw sewage in the history of Lake Ontario. 180,000 litres of raw sewage was dumped in Hamilton Harbour a few years ago - sewage was backed up in hundreds of homes - and in hospitals too. And the Ministry of Environment can't process the violations fast enough to have the same owners who broke the law pay the fines.

So if it's not cheaper and it's not better and it's not more accountable, what is it all about?

Well it's about choice, say the corporate cheerleaders.

24 hours a day. 7 days a week. At your fingertips. At your street corner. That's the market myth.

And isn't it ironic that the same people who pushed mega-hospitals and mega-schools and mega-cities are now singing the virtues of specialization and local access.

But even at that, the promise doesn't mesh with reality.

Take a look at P3 schools.

In several provinces we see governments turning to grocery chains to finance, own and operate school buildings.

But when market forces determine whether and where a school will be built, look out. You know the interests of the community are going to be sacrificed to those of a privileged minority.

In Abbotsford, BC, for example, a developer built a school in the middle of what is virtually a gated community. He is quite open in saying he built the school to sell houses, but the location certainly doesn't serve the interests of the surrounding neighbourhoods.

Or take the new private recreation complexes that are replacing local arenas and pools in some communities.

To succeed on a commercial basis, they need to be big, regional facilities, drawing people from far and wide.

Before the developer agrees to build, the municipality must guarantee them a virtual monopoly, promising to close neighbourhood facilities. Now that's choice for you.

The fact is that turning public services into commercial ventures widens the class divide.

User fees, hidden charges, the fact you need a car and a driver to get there – all of these represent huge barriers to children from disadvantaged communities, from minority communities from First Nations communities – as well as huge barriers to seniors, to women, to people with disabilities.

The consequences of this go far beyond the question of who gets the best ice time at the community rink and how much they have to pay for it. Or even whether there is a community rink.

It goes far beyond the specifics of education or health care or income security.

Because public services are a great equalizer in our society.

Public services play a key role in supporting our quality of life and strengthening our democracy.

In the end, privatization is not about choice versus no choice.

It's about choices for whom.

Because privatization represents a fundamental attack on the logic of universality, and our rights and entitlements as citizens.

It prizes the individual and negates the community. It's about me, without regard to us.

By contrast, public services offer opportunities for everyone in the community to make choices .

And properly funded public services have shown an amazing capacity for excellence and innovation – which is in everyone's interest.

The fifth false claim pushed by the privatizers is that they're simply doing what the public wants.

Now it's true if you spent your mornings reading Compas polls or Asper editorials, you might think there was a great public outcry in support of privatization. In fact, nothing could be farther from the truth.

Canadians don't want it and they know why.

They value good jobs in the local economy.

They value equality of access. They value accountability.

Women in particular, are strong advocates for public delivery of public services.

The gender gap is wide and it's not surprising.

Women are more likely to rely on public services, more likely to work in the public sector and more likely to shoulder the load when a public service has been privatized.

Generally, the older you are the more you support public services: one, because you're more likely to rely on them and, two, you're more likely to remember what life was like before them.

By contrast, those most likely to support privatization are the middle-aged white, male professional class who are concerned first and foremost about taxes -- and seemingly content to pay directly for the services they consume.

But support for privatization is also growing among a minority of young Canadians.

This is certainly troubling, but again, it's not surprising.

When you're young and invincible and bombarded with propaganda from the corporate sector, private health care may seem like an option worth considering – especially when your experience of the public sector hasn't been the best, when you've lived through a decade of cutbacks, shortages and disruptions.

But the fact is that the majority of Canadians support public delivery of public services – and among women, visible minorities, rural communities, seniors and many other groups that support is very strong.

And if you need further proof of this, take a look at the platforms of most political parties in Canada.

You will certainly find mushy statements about “strategic alliances with the private sector” – about “partnerships”, about “alternative service delivery”. But no government in this country has campaigned on a platform of overt privatization – not Mike Harris, not Ralph Klein, not Gordon Campbell.

Once they’re elected, they govern as if they did have this mandate. But there aren’t many with the guts to stand up before the voters and defend a platform of privatization.

And it’s not because they lack the testosterone. It’s because they lack the integrity – they know the public won’t buy it.

And that brings me to the final claim I want to touch on tonight, the claim that privatization is inevitable, and, like it or not, we simply have to get on board.

They say ‘the whole world is doing it,’ ‘we have no choice,’ ‘the public sector is broke.’

Of course, the World Bank, the IMF and the WTO do their best to make this true. They are incredibly aggressive in imposing privatization wherever they can – and they have been successful in imposing their will through so-called structural adjustment programs on developing countries who are often powerless to stop them.

But whether we're talking about countries of the north or the south, there's a chorus of corporate consultants – most with clear conflicts of interest – who advise governments to privatize, and then make profits from the privatization of these same services.

Just take a look at the Mazankowski report on health care in Alberta.

Here we had a Ralph Klein-appointed panel declare that our public health care system is unsustainable and the solution is greater privatization.

The panel was chaired by a former Tory cabinet minister, now a director of one of the largest private health insurance companies in the country, Great West Life.

Among its members, you'll find the directors of two for-profit health corporations, two pundits from right wing think tanks – and the chair of a regional health authority that's building a private hospital in BC.

Talk about stacking the deck.

And unfortunately, they've been aided by a corporate media that parrots every so-called privatization 'success' story – without investigating to find that many of these so-called successes have long-since unraveled into costly scandals of corruption and incompetence.

They're not about to tell us that New Zealand has re-nationalized various services, because privatization was a failure – not a success.

And their attacks on people who dare to disagree with them are, quite frankly, vicious.

CUPE is a union the National Post loves to hate, and they rail at us regularly, calling us ‘Marxists,’ ‘fear-mongers,’ ‘dinosaurs’ and worse!

Well, I want to assure you my union is not prepared to accept that there is no alternative. And no amount of name-calling is going to deter us from fighting back against privatization.

The pushers of privatization are using all the power they have to drive through their agenda, and we are determined to mobilize the full power of our membership — and we hope the full power of every community across this country — to stop their steam-roller.

We are determined to turn things around and go on the offensive.

- To take back our public services.
- To take back our public wealth.
- To expand the public sector through improved, quality services and programs.

Our strategy is straightforward.

We are making privatization as difficult as possible. We are putting every obstacle possible in their way. And I’m very proud to tell you that the Canadian Council on Public Private Partnerships, in their official document has identified CUPE as the biggest obstacle in the path to privatization in Canada. And, I want you to know, we in CUPE are very proud of that. And that’s exactly where we plan to stay.

Our first line of offence is our collective agreements. For more than a decade we have made privatization a top issue at the bargaining table, negotiating provisions that make privatization and contracting out of public services either impossible or very expensive. We've got a lot more work to do, but we are gaining some ground. And our experience shows that our bargaining power is one of our strongest weapons.

A second key element in our strategy is building alliances. And here again we've made significant progress. We rarely take on a fight these days without lots of other groups on our side. And, we've been doing a much better job getting our members active in supporting other groups working for social justice and fairness.

There is a very powerful grassroots movement building in this country and around the world calling for greater democracy, more public control, for our share of the world's wealth.

It's a movement that brings together workers, students, youth, the unemployed, farmers, environmentalists, seniors, women, human rights activists, and many others.

- The kind of movement that is growing to be as powerful as the most powerful corporations.
- The kind of movement that is not going to be satisfied until we really have achieved real democracy and public control—including public ownership and control of our public services.

A third, critical piece of our strategy is to articulate what we're for, -- not just what we are against. And to show that another way is possible.

- We have all kinds of examples of public services that work. We have all kinds of examples where public is cheaper, better and more efficient than private.
- We have all kinds of concrete proposals for making public services work better.

And our union is determined to show case these examples—to prove over and over again that going public – and staying public makes sense.

- We can prove that strengthening Medicare is the only option for Canada.
- We can show that expanding our public health insurance plans to cover prescription drugs and home care is affordable.
- We can show that we can't live without public health care.

The fourth key element of our strategy is to win the fight against privatization—and win support for public alternatives—in our local communities. And to build massive resistance to privatization throughout the country, community by community, coast to coast to coast.

Our union is ideally positioned to carry out a community-based strategy. We represent 506,000 working women and men. Our Union is made up of 2,500 LOCAL unions. We represent workers who deliver services to the community. I would wager that each one of you comes into contact with a lot of CUPE members every day of your lives.

Our members clean your streets.

- We pick up your garbage.
- We drive your kid's school bus.

- We even drive city buses and subways in some cities.
- We look after your children.
- We teach your children in special ed. programs
- We care for your elderly parents.
- We shelve and check out the books at your library. We issue your overdue notices – I used to do that myself, at the Robarts Library, not far from here.

Every one in sixty Canadians is a member of CUPE. One in 15 Canadians has a CUPE member in their family. So there are one heck of a lot of us out there in every community. And we think we can make the greatest difference by working at the community level.

That's why we're organizing community by community against the privatization of electricity in this province scheduled only a few months from now.

That's why we're setting up a community water watch campaign here in Toronto—like we've done in a lot of other cities—where the privatization of municipal water is being considered.

That's why we're going to take part in a massive door-to-door canvass in May urging our neighbours to tell the Romanow Commission and the Chretien government to modernize, not privatize Medicare.

That's why we've brought experts to several communities in where P3 hospitals are planned, who have studied the disastrous British experience of private hospitals – where, as a direct result of long term leasing costs, hospital administrators have been forced to cut staff who provide patient care by 25% and eliminate 30% of the beds.

That's why we're working to get every municipal government in this country to pass a resolution opposing free trade agreements—like NAFTA, like the new FTAA, like GATS... agreements that will make it impossible for municipal governments to govern without interference by transnational corporations.

And this brings me to the fifth element of our strategy: act locally, but think globally. Because we know that privatization here in Canada is part of a massive international restructuring of the economy.

- Corporate globalization.
- The World Bank.
- The International Monetary Fund.
- The World Trade Organization.
- And new multi-lateral and bi-lateral trade agreements.

All these institutions and changes lead to one thing: entrenching the domination of transnational corporations over people and our basic democratic rights on a global scale. Therefore, a critical part of any strategy to fight privatization is taking on these international institutions and global changes.

We are committed to taking them on in our own workplaces and in our communities—by refusing to accept lower standards of living for ourselves or for others.

We are committed to taking them on in the courts, as we are currently doing with a charter challenge against NAFTA.

We are committed to taking them on through the ballot box and in the legislatures of this land.

And we are committed to taking them on in the streets if we have to.

As a union, as public employees, we care passionately about the public services to delivery to all of you
– and to all Canadians every day.

We also believe passionately that the working men and women who provide those services have a right
to dignity and respect – and that includes good working conditions and decent pay.

We live in one of the richest countries on the face of the earth.

This country has been built by our physical and mental labour.

We believe it is time that workers who created that wealth started to share that wealth...

That's what J.S. Woodsworth and Larry Sefton worked for.

It's time to put that wealth back in public services, back into our workplaces, back into our
communities, where it belongs!

Thank you very much.