

Media Statement

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Toronto Public Library Workers Union, Local 4948

Toronto City Hall

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My name is Maureen O'Reilly and I am the President of the Toronto Public Library Workers Union, Local 4948. We represent 2,400 public library workers in Toronto. Most of our members are women and most work part-time. We work in all 99 branches of the library system as well as in administrative, support and maintenance areas.

Recently we commissioned a study of Toronto public opinion about a couple of key library issues from the highly respected firm of Forum Research. We did this because we were concerned about the rather slapdash, hide-and-seek form of public consultation that the Ford administration has conducted over the future of city services. We are concerned that there will be more library branch closures following the Urban Affairs Branch and we wanted to know if Torontonians would also be concerned. In fact, we have grounds for believing that more branch closures are planned for the near future.

We are also concerned about the prospect of library privatization and we wanted to know what Torontonians think about that as well. The Mayor's brother, Councillor Ford, has declared that they want to "outsource anything that isn't nailed down." Since our books aren't nailed down, you can perhaps understand our concern.

In the United States, privatizing public libraries is already happening. Since Toronto is the busiest public library system on the continent, it would be very surprising if American corporate library management companies were not already up here, looking for a piece of the action.

The results of the Forum Research poll send very clear messages to Toronto Council: "Don't close our libraries and don't privatize them." People don't talk about libraries all that often but when they do, it turns out they have very strong feelings about them. As you can see from this chart summarizing the Core Service Review Public Consultation that Public Libraries score very high on the "Necessary for the city" index.

As you can see from this first chart from the Forum Research poll, three-quarters of Torontonians disagree with closing some local library branches as a way of reducing the city's deficit and more than half disagree "strongly." When a follow-up question was asked about the possible closing of their own local branch, the proportion who disagree "strongly" rises to 64 per cent. I don't think any councillor, let alone the Mayor, was elected by 64 per cent of the vote.

Speaking of elections, we also asked survey respondents if knowing that their City Councillor supported closing library branches would affect their vote in the next municipal election. Just over half said it would affect their vote "a great deal" and another 20 per cent said it would

affect their vote "somewhat." That's a total of 71 per cent whose vote would be affected by their Councillor's support for closing libraries.

When it comes to the issue of privatization, the poll results are equally clear. We asked two questions in this area. First of all, how much do you agree or disagree with the privatization of city services in general?

55 per cent disagreed with city service privatization in general and 38 per cent disagree strongly. When we then asked how they felt about privatizing the Toronto Public Library, the numbers shot up. 56 per cent disagree strongly and another 15 per cent disagree somewhat. So a total of 71 per cent of Torontonians disagree with the idea of privatizing our public libraries.

You should know that some library operations have been already been handed off to private companies. For example, library branches no longer acquire paperbacks based on the needs and interests of their patrons. Private companies, sometimes called "book jobbers," now acquire these for branches. So a lot of pretty bad books that no one would buy in the bookstores end up collecting dust on library shelves. That wouldn't happen if the librarians themselves, who know the communities they serve, made those decisions.

This Forum Research poll is the first stage of an extended campaign our union will be sponsoring to protect the truly world class Toronto Public Library system from short-sighted politicians who simply do not understand the deep social, economic and cultural value of libraries in general, let alone what we have built here in Toronto over the last 130 years. Shutting down a local branch here and there around the city may seem like nothing to them if they can shave a couple of dollars off the tax bill. But for the children, and the seniors and the students who need the library but cannot drive to a more distant branch, it will mean a big change to their lives, and that change will be for the worse.

Our campaign begins with a website where people can sign a petition against privatizing Toronto library services in any way. The site is called *OurPublicLibrary.to*. More initiatives will unfold in the weeks and months to come. We are developing alliances with other organizations that value our libraries and we will be reaching out to Toronto communities whose local branches are threatened with closure. We will also be exposing the hazards of library privatization based on American experience to date.

We don't know whether or not Mayor Ford already has a library card but we will be presenting this special version to his office as a reminder that 1.25 million people in Toronto do have a library card and most use it regularly. We invite the Mayor to visit any library branch in Toronto at any time. Just walk right in, Mr. Mayor and bring along your million-dollar consultants if you like. Talk to the people you meet there and ask them where the gravy is. We think you'll get an earful.

I will now take any questions you might have.