

STEWARDS ASSEMBLY TORONTO 2009



Stewards Assembly Makes History

By Kristin Schwartz

On May 7th the Toronto and York Region Labour Council called a union stewards assembly, the first in Toronto's history, to respond to the current economic crisis. At first the council booked space for 1,200. Then 1,400. On the evening of the mass meeting on May 7, the Labour Council had to bring in more chairs to accommodate the 1,600 union stewards who packed into the ballroom at the Sheraton Centre in downtown Toronto. Over one hundred local unions responded to the call, and they were joined by officers of the Canadian Labour Congress and national leaders of public and private sector unions. That's how worried people are about the rising unemployment and the assaults on wages and pensions.

Pearl Almeida, a vice-president of Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Local 6006, shared her story to illustrate what is at stake. She works at a Bell help centre in Scarborough, Ontario. Almost 200 of the 1,200 members of her local have been laid off due to outsourcing, restructuring, and Bell's decision to ship jobs out of the country to lower-waged jurisdictions. She has been offered either a severance package, or a part-time position as an entry-level customer service representative at more than a 50 per cent pay cut.

"This crisis was not caused by workers, it was caused by the greedy, irresponsible unproductive speculation of the financial sector," said Canadian Auto Workers economist Jim Stanford, who gave a presentation on what caused the crisis. He warned that corporations are taking advantage of the atmosphere of panic to force concessions out of workers who wouldn't accept them during normal times. "They want to devalue our jobs. They want to rip up our contracts. We're going to see it in the auto sector, in airlines, in forestry, resources. The public sector will be right behind."

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LABOUR
TORONTO & YORK REGION
COUNCIL





"There are huge global forces at play," said Labour Council president John Cartwright. "The same guys who have prescribed deregulation, privatization, contracting out and outsourcing, and unlimited free trade, are now prescribing more of the same. That economic model has led us to this crisis and we've got to reject it."



Strengthening workers' solidarity is essential he said, warning that right-wing politicians will pit immigrant workers against those born in Canada, young workers against those with seniority, private sector against public sector. "We saw that division, and the underlying racism, that people like former Ontario premier Mike Harris put into effect in the 1990s. We must not allow that division to separate us again."

THE FIGHT FOR EI

The assembly rallied support for the fight to fix the unemployment insurance system. The federal government has siphoned off \$54 billion dollars from the EI fund to pay for tax cuts and other programs. That money was deducted from workers paycheques but never paid out in benefits, because rules have been changed so that fewer and fewer workers qualify and benefits have been cut back.

Among those on the front-lines of the EI campaign is Fa Lim, who was laid off when his company, Progressive Moulded Products, shut down production in July 2008. A non-union auto parts maker, the company owed \$30 million in severance and termination pay to the workers. Now the PMP

workers are fighting for EI reform. "We need these EI improvements just to get through the rough times like this."

Toronto Mayor David Miller noted that workers in Ontario need many more hours to qualify for benefits than workers in other parts of Canada. Miller also touted the City of Toronto's commitment to hire 1,000 more employees this year. "The right wing said we should be ashamed for hiring people," he said. "I was



shocked. They should be ashamed! We want people in this city and this province to be working."

GOOD JOBS FOR ALL

Fixing EI, investing in public services and public sector jobs, and supporting manufacturing jobs through local procurement policies, are all demands of the Good Jobs for All Coalition, a labour-community alliance initiated by the labour council. In November 2008, the coalition hosted a wildly successful day-long Good Jobs Summit which brought together over 1,000 people to denounce the trend towards insecure, low-waged, non-union employment, and to demand good jobs for all. "We are working to break down the artificial divides of public vs. private, union vs. non-union, labour vs. community," said coalition co-chair Winnie Ng to the assembly. "We can't counter the onslaught of corporate globalization, which is premised on disunity of the working class here and everywhere in the world, alone. To push back and forge a green





economy, where there will be jobs for all, we need each other.”

While the Good Jobs for All Coalition is reaching out to communities, the Stewards Assembly focused on deeper education and organizing within the labour movement itself. Following the presentations, stewards participated in roundtable discussions about how best to bring the messages of the assembly back to their workplaces. The Labour Council distributed a solidarity checklist to support workplace education efforts, which includes a call to “work hard to renew solidarity.” “Just looking after our own members will not be enough to get us through these difficult times,” states the Labour Council. “Helping each other in key struggles will be essential if we want to uphold the quality of life in greater Toronto. And helping other workers organize into unions will make us all stronger.”

CELEBRATING OUR VICTORIES

In the face of this economic crisis, the Stewards Assembly drew its power from stories of workers’ victories. John Cameron of the Society of Energy



Professionals, described his union’s successful 105-day strike in 2005. The strength and determination of these union members protected good jobs for the next generation of workers in the utility industry. “In 2009 we have a new cause: to get the message out that this is not our crisis, and this crisis doesn’t have to be solved on our backs.”



One of the most inspiring of today’s labour struggles is the campaign of UNITE-HERE to raise the standards for workers in the hotel industry. Mahendraraj Krishnamoorthy addressed the assembly on behalf of UNITE-HERE Local 75. Over the past two years, the union has won the best collective agreements that workers in his industry have ever had, and organized workers in 75 additional hotels across North America. Krishnamoorthy urged shop stewards

to consider themselves “leaders, not grievance handlers.” He is focused on finding ways to fight and win. “The more we fight, the more our confidence grows,” he said. “I don’t know the answer to the problems we are all facing, but I do know it starts with us.”

To close the stewards assembly, union leaders rose, one by one, and pledged to stand and face the economic crisis together. Nurses, building trades, transit, manufacturing, food service and postal workers, teachers, firefighters, and many more were represented. A rousing chorus of “Solidarity Forever” was a fitting conclusion to the historic evening, and remains a fitting anthem for the movement-building that lies ahead.

Kristin Schwartz is a tenant organizer at the Federation of Metro Tenants’ Associations in Toronto, and a member of the Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 1281. She is also an independent writer and radio journalist. This article is printed with the kind permission of Our Times magazine, where it first appeared on www.ourtimes.ca

Jim's ABCs of the Economic Crisis



"We didn't create this economic crisis, so we shouldn't pay for it," economist Jim Stanford told the Stewards Assembly. The well-known author, Globe and Mail columnist and economist for the CAW delivered a hard-hitting yet humorous speech on the cause of the current financial crisis, the factors at play and what labour needs to do. Here's Jim's take on the situation.



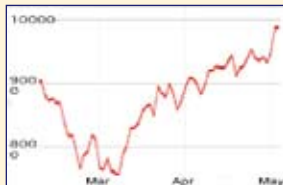
IT'S THOSE GUYS WHO BUY AND SELL PIECES OF PAPER WHO CREATED THE CRISIS. THE FINANCIAL SECTOR CREATED A 'PAPER ECONOMY'.

What is the Economy?

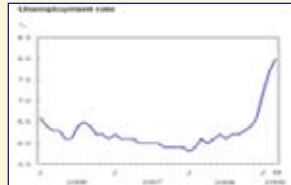


Recovery...For Whom???

Stock Market:
Up 30% in 6 weeks



Unemployment
Up 30% in 6 months



WE'RE THE REAL ECONOMY. OUR WORK IS THE SOURCE OF ALL VALUE IN THE ECONOMY. NOW THE PAPER GUYS WANT US TO THINK THAT THE ECONOMY IS RECOVERING. THEY'RE IGNORING THE SKYROCKETING UNEMPLOYMENT RATE.



LISTEN, IF YOU'D BOUGHT A CASE OF BEER IN 1999 AND YOU BOUGHT NORTEL STOCKS WITH THE SAME AMOUNT OF MONEY, THE EMPTIES WOULD BE WORTH MORE TODAY. BUT EMPLOYERS WANT TO BLAME US AND SOLVE THE CRISIS ON OUR BACKS.

"Structural Adjustment"

- A term more familiar from Third World
- But get ready for it in Canada
- Their plan: hit us hard, while people are scared and confused
 - ram through changes that they couldn't win in "normal" times
- Blame workers/Devalue work/Give more power to bosses/Gut contracts
- Autos/airlines/forestry/resources
- Public sector won't be far behind

Labour's Economic "To-Do" List

1. Explain where this crisis came from
 - It wasn't cause by workers
 - It was caused by finance
 - It wasn't a random accident
 - It will happen again, if rules aren't changed
2. Reclaim the value & legitimacy of real work and production
3. Resist attempts to make us pay
4. Demand an alternative economic vision that puts production ahead of finance

LABOUR NEEDS TO FIGHT BACK AND TELL OUR OWN STORY.

HERE'S HOW.





Abdul Samad — Steelworker

I paid my CPP, my taxes and I paid into the EI system. I thought if it's needed, I would be using it. Six months ago when I lost my job, I was told I couldn't collect EI until my severance ran out. There are six thousand five hundred steelworkers who have lost their jobs in recent years. I participated in many of the EI campaign events, because I believe that this fight is winnable. We need to seize this opportunity and move now. We need to take it to the workplace, to churches, to our communities to mobilize the people. Don't sit idly by. Urge everyone to take action!



Pearl Almeida — Bell Canada worker

I have been offered severance pay or a job with a 50% pay cut. It's not enough to pay a mortgage, pay bills or raise a family. Any job that is done at a computer workstation can now be done anywhere in the world by low paid workers. Where there were once well-paying jobs, there are now low paying jobs. Canadian workers are left searching for answers as their jobs leave the country. I can't understand how profitable companies, iconic Canadian champions of business, can be allowed to put profits over people and basic human values time and time again.

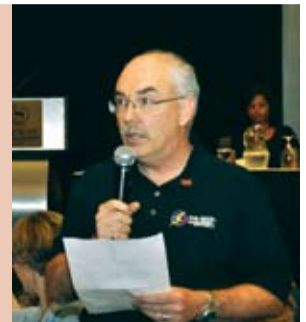
Impact ▲

RANK & FILE VOICES

▼ How We Win

John Cameron — Society of Energy Professionals

In 2005, our local walked the picket line for 105 days to protect the wages, benefits and pensions of new workers. If we hadn't, the employer would have created second class employees with every new hire. When we started, 99% of workers were complacent. By the time we took the strike vote, 97% voted in favour of a strike and not a single member crossed the picket line. In 2005 we had a cause and we were able to mobilize around that cause. In 2009, with the labour collective we have a new cause. We need to get out the message that this is not our crisis and it doesn't need to be solved on our backs.



Mahen Krishnamoorthy — Hotel Worker

We can't just be unions any more, we have to be a union movement. I left Sri Lanka to flee the violence there. In Canada, I found a second chance and a second life. I have hope. This is the real opportunity that Canada gives to immigrant workers. We hope and fight together as workers from all over the world. There is something here we need to do. We have to change ourselves. As fellow stewards, we need to change how we think about what we do on a daily basis. Shop stewards are leaders, not just grievance handlers. I prefer to be on the offensive. Now I spend my days talking to my coworkers about how we can fight and win together. Let us be the ones who hope, who fight and who design what tomorrow looks like.



Judy Duncan — ACORN

ACORN is a grass-roots organization of low and moderate income people. Instead of the workplace, we organize in the community. In 2006, we made fighting for a \$10 minimum wage our priority, alongside the Labour Council and social justice groups. We eventually won a 28% increase in the minimum wage over three years. This was a huge victory. It laid the groundwork for a community-labour alliance to fight collectively around other issues and increase pressure on the government. That's what it takes to win change.



WE STAND TOGETHER IN A TIME OF CRISIS

The current economic crisis is having a serious impact on many Canadians. The same people who created this financial mess, and got very rich in the process, say that workers must be the first to sacrifice. We reject that because it is not a solution. Employers need to know that they cannot go after wages, benefits or working conditions without a fight. Politicians need to know that we want action to protect jobs and repair the social safety net for working families.

It's not that we are afraid of change – **we don't want their version of change.** We want Canada, and the world, to have a sustainable economy which provides good jobs and a decent quality of life for all.

SOLIDARITY CHECKLIST

 **DON'T BLAME OURSELVES – OR
OTHER WORKERS**

We didn't create this crisis. We weren't the ones making million dollar bonuses, outsourcing production, or designing immoral speculation schemes. Over the last two decades, real wages have

 **PUT FAIR RULES IN PLACE**

Whether it is fair wage policies, card-check certification, or employment standards - business needs to be governed by clear, enforceable rules of conduct. Strong laws at the local national and

fallen behind increases in productivity and the cost of living.

REMEMBER HOW THE RULES WERE CHANGED

It was corporate lobbyists who called for deregulation and cuts. Only a few years ago, over 80% of the jobless were able to get unemployment insurance benefits. Today it is less than a third. Someone changed the rules. The same is true with trade deals that allow companies to shift production away with no penalties. Or when governments spend millions on goods that aren't made in Canada.

international level are required to counter the reckless greed of global capital.

WORK HARD TO RENEW SOLIDARITY

Just looking after our own members will not be enough to get us through these difficult times. Wage standards, benefits, pensions – when they are taken away from anyone we are all at risk. Helping each other in key struggles will be essential if we want to uphold the quality of life in greater Toronto. And helping other workers organize into unions will make us all stronger.

ASK TOUGH QUESTIONS ABOUT "THE BIG PICTURE"

When the wealthy tell us "there is no alternative" to cuts or concessions, they are not being honest. Choices are made every day – like making corporate tax cuts instead of investing in public services. Deregulation, privatization and free trade deals were all part of the corporate agenda – along with weakening workers rights. They told us that prosperity was ensured, and the social safety net could be slashed without risk.

STAND TOGETHER FOR WHAT WE BELIEVE IN!

Generations before us sacrificed to build unions and decent working conditions. Powerful voices often told them not to. The labour movement in Canada has a solid vision for the kind of society we want. It is about more than just defending what we have, it includes defending each other and rejecting anything that can divide us. We want an economy that provides good jobs and a decent quality of life for all. To get there, we will all need to stand together for what we believe in.

STAND TOGETHER PLEDGE



Leaders from locals, provincial and national unions pledged to stand together through this time of economic crisis.

Energy Professionals – Rod Sheppard

CEP – Kim Ginter

CUPW – Irwin Nanda

Firefighters – Scott Eyers

Machinists – Gary Hynes

Teamsters – John Hull

CAW – Ken Lewenza

CUPE – Fred Hahn

Teachers – Mike Platt

SEIU – Cathy Carroll

Nurses – Andy Summers

OPSEU – Smokey Thomas

USW – Ken Neumann

UNITE HERE – Cecily Phillips

Construction Trades – Steve Martin

PSAC – Gerry Halabecki

UFCW – Kevin Corporon

IATSE – Paul Taylor

Other national labour leaders at the Stewards Assembly included Hassan Yussuff and Marie Clarke Walker of the Canadian Labour Congress, Terry Downey of the Ontario Federation of Labour, CEP President Dave Coles, CUPW President Denis Lemelin, and IFPTE International President Greg Junemann. As well, Gilles Paquette and Daniel Champagne of the Quebec Federation of Labour were in attendance.

Toronto Mayor David Miller

“The first thing we have to fight for is good, decent Canadian jobs that pay people properly. People have the right to organize and we support their right to employment. That’s why we’re buying our streetcars and our subway cars in Thunder Bay. Stimulus is about creating manufacturing jobs and retooling the manufacturing industry right here in Ontario. That’s what we’re fighting for. But as well, the treatment of workers in this province with respect to Employment Insurance is wrong. It’s a disgrace and we have to stand up and say so.”



Canadian Labour Congress President Ken Georgetti



“Working people built this country. That’s who owns this country. The government has stolen \$54 billion for employment insurance from a fund that we built as workers. Working people want their EI money back today Mr. Finance Minister. We want our pensions back as well. If the government can bail the banks out, why can’t they backstop our pensions too?”

Fighting for Good Jobs for All

The Stewards Assembly included a report from the Good Jobs for All Coalition, a broad-based alliance of 38 labour, environmental, youth, community and social justice organizations. Last November, over 1,000 people attended a historic Summit to develop an action plan and ratify a Declaration on Good Jobs for All.

“The Coalition’s goal is to raise the living and working standards for people in the Greater Toronto Area,” Labour Council organizer Judy Vashti Persad told the Stewards Assembly. “The declaration presents a shared vision on which to build a better economy. That vision includes the ability to have full-time stable employment, the enforcement of legal employment standards, work that is safe and healthy, the right to have a union, the recognition of diverse skills, and equitable access to work, training and advancement.”



For long-time activist Winnie Ng, the Coalition has been a deeper way of building solidarity. “This is solidarity that comes from a recognition that our rank and file members are also parents, hockey moms, or baseball coaches, congregations of different faith and religious organizations, volunteers for United Way and for shelters and, above all, we are part of the community.”

“The power of our movement comes when our members switch from saying I to WE,” added Ng, “and when we can collectively say that we can build a community where no one needs to stand alone and where no one is left behind. We are here to re-imagine and re-build a movement of hope, justice and solidarity.”



Labour Council Executive members Jenny Ahn and Carolyn Egan co-chaired the Stewards Assembly.



Labour Council presentation to Society of Energy Professionals thanking them for financial support for the assembly.

What you said...

The reports from the roundtable discussions reflected practical ideas around putting the Solidarity Checklist into practice. Here is a small sample of the suggestions:

WRITE A LETTER TO YOUR LOCAL PAPER
ABOUT THE EFFECTS AND CAUSES OF THIS
DOWNTURN IN THE ECONOMY

LUNCH + LEARNS EDUCATE OUR
OWN MEMBERS

Get members out to the June 13th rally



- Reconnect union to members - use bulletin boards, newsletters, meet face-to-face
- Rebuild activist networks between locals - area councils, Labour Council affiliation etc.
- Build concrete action agenda between unions - take it to the street

WE NEED TO GET BACK ON OFFENSIVE
FOR JOB PROTECTION, PENSION PROTECTION

INVOLVE YOUNG GENERATION IN
LABOUR POLITICS AND LABOUR LAWS



- Ensure that there are consistent messages (talking points) and an organized strategy that includes all partners across the GTA
- Utilize resources from the CLC to educate our students, neighbours, family members about the issues and strategies to help our country and its workers
- Build an understanding of what's happening to the parents of children in our classrooms and the impact it is having on their education
- Don't blame (dump on) other unions and work to prevent members from doing it

HOLD INDIVIDUAL MEETINGS IN SMALL GROUPS

GIVE NEW MEMBERS WELCOME PACKAGES

More meetings like tonight's Stewards Assembly

- Flying squad – support workers in struggle, not just our own
- EI petitions in the workplace

GET BUY-IN FROM GRASS-ROOTS MEMBERS – COMMUNICATE OUR STORY, EXPLAIN “ECONOMICS 101”

Fit into people’s real lives – takes a lot of effort



- Huge marches and rallies (like the Tamils)



- Report on this Stewards Assembly at our general membership meeting
- Put messages up on our website
- Create our own story – give people a language to talk about what’s happening

PMP Workers: Standing in Solidarity

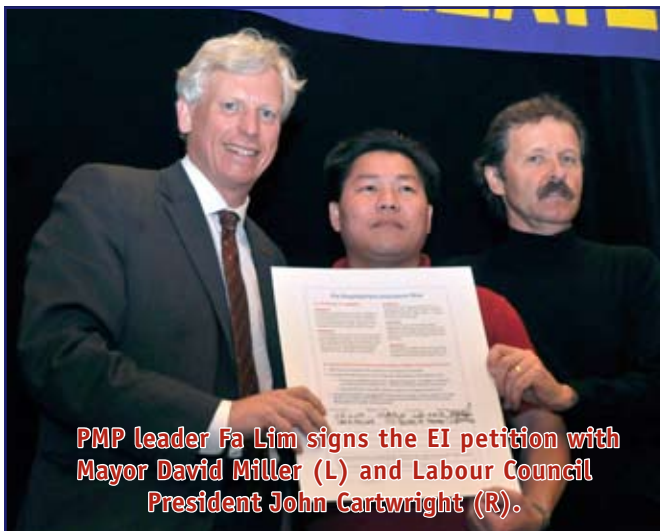
When auto parts manufacturer Progressive Moulded Products (PMP) went bankrupt in June 2008, 2400 non-unionized workers were thrown out onto the street. During their 16-day blockade of the plant to stop assets from leaving the premises, these mainly immigrant workers were joined on the picket line by union activists from across the GTA. With the economic downturn that followed, the workers have continued to struggle.

Fa Lim, a PMP ad hoc leader, told the Stewards Assembly that most PMP workers are running out of Employment Insurance and borrowing money from VISA and Money Mart to survive.

“We are proud, hardworking people who want a secure job to make a better life. It’s a Canadian dream. We would rather work than stress out over the shortcomings of the EI system. But we need EI improvements just to get through these rough times.”

“We are victims, but we are fighters for our rights. PMP now stands for “Politimize and mobilize for the power of the people,” said Lim. “Whether you are unionized or non-unionized, whether you are employed or unemployed, we need to come together to fight for change. Your action in this campaign is the best solidarity we could ever ask for.”

Lim joined Toronto Mayor David Miller to sign the ‘Fix Employment Insurance Now’ petition. It calls on the federal government to increase the benefit duration of EI and increase benefits to at least 60% of normal earnings using workers’ 12 best weeks.



PMP leader Fa Lim signs the EI petition with Mayor David Miller (L) and Labour Council President John Cartwright (R).



SHAPING THE FUTURE

Thank you to everyone who helped make the first ever Stewards Assembly such a resounding success. We were overwhelmed by the turnout – over one thousand six hundred stewards, staff and leaders jammed the Sheraton’s grand ballroom for this historic event.

The turnout reflects a strong desire to develop a common response to the economic crisis that is still unfolding. Business is using this crisis to undermine working conditions, wages, and pensions in both the private and public sectors. By coming together and naming the real problem, we have taken the first step towards challenging their agenda.

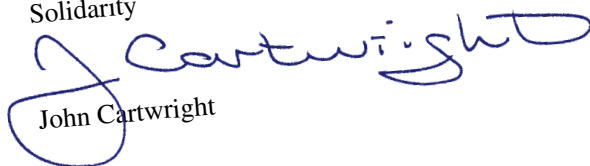
We know that divisions created between workers hurt us in the past. Having every union pledge to stand together through these difficult times is another important step for our movement. For while some of our unions might be able to get through the worst of this by themselves, none will prosper without the collective strength of the entire union movement.

We can’t be satisfied with just accepting what is offered by those who created this crisis. Instead, we need to go on the offensive, and demand the kind of economy we want – with good jobs for all, built on solid foundations of equity and sustainability. We need to raise our level of political bargaining.

To achieve that requires real labour power, where every union engages and mobilizes their members. We need to be involved in formal politics, as well as strengthening our alliances with community organizations that share our values. We need to organize workers who don’t have a voice at work, and force governments to enact new laws to recognize their inherent rights. And as a first priority, we must fix the broken Employment Insurance system.

We created history on May 7th. Let’s take the spirit of that event back into our workplaces and talk about how to implement the Solidarity Checklist. Let’s commit ourselves to the challenging, but essential, task of building a truly powerful labour movement in Canada’s largest urban centre.

Solidarity


John Cartwright

