



DRAFT DISCUSSION PAPER

June 4, 2011

Achieving a “State of Readiness” in our unions

INTRODUCTION

Labour and our allies have shown time and time again that we can effectively mobilize the membership and work in coalitions to fight-off our adversaries. But attacks by employers and governments are more aggressive than anything we have seen in living memory, and often come with very little warning. The battles in Wisconsin and elsewhere in the United States are demonstrating that there are no longer any limits when it comes to the goals of anti-labour forces, and their tactics are increasingly ruthless.

Although many union members are demonstrating remarkable willingness to fight, labour is finding it increasingly hard to win. This calls for a re-assessment of the tools we use to engage in key struggles. The Labour Council is developing the concept of achieving a “state of readiness” in our unions in response to these challenges.

DEFINITION OF A STATE OF READINESS

A union in a state of readiness is prepared to respond effectively, on short notice, to a major attack or labour dispute. Taking stock of what may be required to win a future strike, lockout or other campaign provides insight into what is required for achieving a state of readiness.

In planning for a state of readiness, we are asking ourselves, “When we wake up one morning and find that we are facing a major attack, perhaps the fight of our lives, what are all the things we wish we’d done in preparation?”

The suggestions listed below apply directly to local unions although they may prove useful to other labour bodies. The term “local union” is used in this article although such bodies have various names and roles in different unions. Plans to establish a state of readiness will, of course, vary greatly from local to local.

Hopefully, each local union has the benefit of effective strategic direction and co-ordination, as well as resources, from the senior bodies of its union and from central labour bodies. If not, securing that support becomes part of the process of achieving a state of readiness.

Much detail has been omitted from this document in the interests of keeping it brief. Some locals are already doing much of what is suggested below or more. The suggestions below are drawn from their example. Hopefully, a critical discussion of this document will improve it.

BUILD A STATE OF READINESS – *Challenge denial*

1. Raise the bar, at all levels in our movement, in terms of our awareness of the scale of the assault on us and in terms of the strategies and tactics being used against us. Overcoming denial is always a challenge and unfortunately is a huge obstacle today.

BUILD A STATE OF READINESS – *Shift attention and resources*

2. Shift leadership attention and union resources – less preoccupation with the familiar day-to-day maintenance functions of our unions and more focus and commitment of resources to meeting the attack. Political action committees and local activists alone cannot meet the challenge. All leaders, from the most senior leaders in central labour bodies through union stewards in the workplace must make resistance to the attack their number one priority. To use an old saying, let's not spend the next five years "rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic".

BUILD A STATE OF READINESS – *Comprehensive planning by the Local Executive Board is key* (The names and roles of such bodies vary from union to union.)

Consider these steps:

3. Create a safe environment in which strategic discussions can take place and differences can be aired respectfully. If a safe environment cannot be established, things are likely to get dysfunctional and ineffective in the crunch.

4. Take the time to fully assess the situation in which the local finds itself. Survey the terrain. Identify and reflect on forces working for and against the interests of the local. (The stronger our political analysis of the forces impacting us, the stronger the foundation of our campaigns.) Identify both threats and opportunities.

5. Reflect on the extent to which the fate of the local is tied to the fate of other working people. Determine what the local can contribute to building a stronger labour movement and to building the political power of labour.
6. Study all aspects of your employer's operations, financing, customers/clients, suppliers etc.
7. Develop an in-depth, up-to-date knowledge of the sector/community in which the members of the local work. Become "a player" in the sector/community where possible. Weigh in on the public debate on issues related to the sector/community.
8. Take on the responsibility of developing a comprehensive plan to win. Develop a shared assessment of the threats facing the local and a shared resolve to defend the membership.
9. Reflect on the viability of the local – does it have the size, the bargaining power and the resources to win? Is co-ordinated bargaining, a merger or restructuring in order?
10. Plan to achieve an appropriate level of self-reliance so that the local can function in the crunch. Demands on the local often soar in the crunch and at the very time when staff resources are sometimes stretched thin.

BUILD A STATE OF READINESS – *Win support within the local*

Consider these steps:

11. Discuss the Local Executive Board's strategic assessment and its plans with the steward body, union committees and local activists. Make it clear that the local Executive Board cannot overcome the unfolding attacks without the active support of the steward body, activists and members. Engage them in defining what a state of readiness in their local should look like and win them to playing a role in achieving it.
12. Lead by example. When members of the local Executive Board and members of the Steward Body are engaged in campaigns, they can bring members with them.
13. Develop a union structure (in the workplace where possible) which connects with members through two-way personal contact, not just via print and electronic communications. Ongoing personal contact with members is key to overcoming member disconnect and engaging them in union campaigns.

- 14.** Identify systemic barriers, such as racism, which are obstacles to members in the union and/or in the workplace and work to overcome these barriers.
- 15.** Put the local in a perpetual campaign mode in which it is always engaged in a campaign, either directed at the employer or the government. (It is very hard to mount resistance from a standing start.) Participate in the campaigns of our allies.
- 16.** Identify battles being fought by others which have strategic importance. (Determine where “the front” is.) Provide active, ongoing support.
- 17.** Review the local’s allocation of attention and resources. Ensure that routine functions which generate little gain (including interactions with the employer) receive no more attention and resources than absolutely necessary. Ensure that the work of achieving a state of readiness receives the full attention of the union leadership and every possible resource.
- 18.** Study the tactics of the employer that are designed to distract and pre-occupy union leaders and divide them from their membership – and develop counter measures.
- 19.** Study tactics of the employer that are designed to win the hearts and minds of the members – and develop counter measures.
- 20.** Develop an assessment of the value of the work of the members of the local and their contribution to the community, in preparation for public campaigns. Develop materials which communicate the value of their work to the public, especially in the public sector. (A backgrounder which summarizes the union’s position can be very useful to draw on in the crunch.)
- 21.** Determine how to take and maintain the high moral ground. In the public sector in particular, act as visible, credible champions of the public interest in the sector in which we work.
- 22.** Win the membership to the importance of maintaining the high moral ground. Explain the terrible cost of losing it. The union cannot win strikes and other campaigns with tactics that are driven by anger alone. We must win members to fighting smart - avoiding tactics which offend/inflame the public.
- 23.** Identify ways in which our employer or even our union may be failing members of the community because measures to promote equity are inadequate. Work to overcome deficiencies.

BUILD A STATE OF READINESS – *Win the support of senior bodies in your union*

Consider these steps:

24. Win support for the local's plans from senior bodies of your union

25. Engage senior union bodies in preparing for campaigns which extend beyond the local. Corporate campaigns (in the private sector) and broad campaigns to defend public services require extensive research and co-ordination – much more than can be provided by a local union.

BUILD A STATE OF READINESS – *Political action*

Consider these steps:

26. Ensure that the local's closest allies in government are kept informed of the union's concerns. Protect the local's relationship with its political allies as much as possible - even when there is public disagreement with them.

27. Provide active support to the local's political allies.

28. Build and maintain relationships with the political centre, with a long term goal of winning a measure of support from them and a short term goal of making them less dangerous to the local. Avoid political isolation.

29. Lobby even the local's opponents in government, with the goal of reducing their hostility to the local.

30. Establish a practice of watching political developments relevant to the local and getting out in front of issues whenever possible.

31. Recognize the limits of the power of persuasion. Commit to organizing on the job and in our communities to build power.

BUILD A STATE OF READINESS – *Allies and coalitions*

Consider these steps:

- 32.** Identify the local's allies (organizations and individuals) in the labour movement, in social movements and in community organizations. There is always a spectrum of allies – from our closest, most reliable labour allies to allies with whom we have less common interest and history.
- 33.** Strengthen central labour bodies. They are labour's primary coalition (of unions from both the public and private sectors) and often work with community groups. Ensure that the local has sought diverse allies in diverse communities.
- 34.** Develop and maintain relationships with the local's allies and provide support to them. Develop allies by supporting them when they need support. If we wait until crunch time to look for allies, it is too late.
- 35.** Establish/join coalitions which address issues relevant to the local. Strengthening ongoing campaigns beyond the local (such as corporate campaigns and public services campaigns) is valuable "readiness" preparation.

BUILD A STATE OF READINESS – *Secondary targets*

NOTE: Secondary targets are people who are not allies but are people with whom we have some influence and are people who have influence with our opponents. For example, unions fighting electricity privatization warned business owners about the cost of private power and encouraged them to speak out against privatization. Business owners are not labour allies, but the unions were able to get them to act in a way that strengthened the unions' efforts. Secondary targets can be very important because they broaden the sources of pressure on a target.

Consider this step:

- 36.** Identify, research and where appropriate make contact with secondary targets who might be players in a future *engagement*.

BUILD A STATE OF READINESS – *Prepare for known threats*

Consider this step:

37. Prepare fully for known threats/challenges. In preparation for collective bargaining, for example, get the local into a full state of readiness for a strike (even if a strike seems unlikely). Conducting comprehensive strike planning (getting the members fully on board, establishing picket teams, preparing the community for a possible strike, etc.) strengthens the local at the bargaining table, makes a strike less likely and, in the event that a strike is necessary, makes the strike much stronger.

BUILD A STATE OF READINESS – *Research*

Consider this step:

38. Determine what research the local will need in the crunch and secure it. Research can play an important role in many aspect of union work. Research can be very time consuming and can be hard to get in a hurry. That's why it is important to be in a state of readiness regarding research.

BUILD A STATE OF READINESS – *Training*

Consider this step:

39. Ensure that there is adequate *relevant* training for union officers and activists, training that is designed to advance the local's plans.

BUILD A STATE OF READINESS – *Resources*

Consider this step:

40. Identify and secure the resources (financial and other) needed to support the local's efforts. It may be necessary to revisit the union's spending priorities.

BUILD A STATE OF READINESS – *Campaign materials*

Consider this step:

41. Develop draft messaging and materials in advance so that they can be finalized and issued at short notice.

BUILD A STATE OF READINESS – *Mode of operation*

Consider this step:

42. Develop a mode of operation (a way of operating) in which the local engages in an inclusive cycle of planning, implementation and evaluation.

IN CONCLUSION

The Labour Council welcomes comments on this document. Please address your comments to rfairley@labourcouncil.ca

“Planning for a state of readiness” seminars are available through the Labour Education Centre.

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