

MORE THAN WORDS ON PAPER
THURSDAY, APRIL 3, 2008

Our Labour Council has taken the initiative to launch the “Action Agenda – Building Labour Power in the 21st Century.” The reason is both simple and complex.

The simple reason is we wish to help stimulate a wide-ranging debate within the labour movement about our future, and how we can best represent the interests of working people in Canada. There’s no better time to have that discussion than when we are going into a CLC Convention. The convention is our “parliament”, where each of us can use our knowledge and experience to make it a success.

The complex answer is that labour’s opponents are driving an agenda that threatens all the gains made by working people in the past, but we don’t yet have a coherent plan to counter either their agenda or their power. South of the border, the U.S. economy is unravelling, with serious repercussions here.

Corporate globalization has resulted in massive lay-offs in the manufacturing and resource sectors, and a huge increase in outsourcing. What we don’t know is how to reverse it. We have managed to block some aspects of privatization despite relentless pressure. Business is continually re-inventing itself, yet we still operate with structures that were forged through struggles of the last century. How do we build the kind of power that moves beyond defensiveness – to actually shaping the future of Canada?

Union density matters.

For years, we have taken pride in the fact that the level of unionization in Canada has stayed far higher than in the U.S. or many other countries. But in the private sector, where over 80% of Canadians work, we are losing ground rapidly. It is not a simple feat to change internal culture to become “organizing unions”, but the longer we delay the harder it will be to turn things around. The American labour movement split over this issue, so there is a pressing need to figure it out.

Yes, there are serious disagreements about key issues – politics, styles of bargaining and organizing, and responding to the rapidly changing demographics of the workforce and society. Those differences should be debated, so that together we can learn how to uphold our principles while dealing with the pressures of the real world. But neither those differences nor our strong personalities can be allowed to divide our movement. Leaders have to constantly make judgement calls, but everyone should recognize that providing millions of Canadians with a union voice at work is our primary responsibility.

What will make the Action Agenda more than just words on paper?

That answer is framed by the slogan **Vision + Strategy + Organizing = Power**. As a movement, we have a common vision about the kind of society we want for all Canadians. Past convention papers have laid that out with exceptional clarity. But what is missing is the strategic ability to achieve it, or even to counter the worst elements of globalization and corporate greed. Twenty-five years ago the CLC led a collective “no concessions” policy. It was a bold move that allowed labour to hold its own in the face of intense employer pressure. But back then, most of our members worked in industries that enjoyed some form of protection.

... 2

Today the ground has shifted entirely, so resistance will take on different forms, including looking at how unions in the global south have survived in the face of much worse conditions. And on the political front, we need to think through the essential relationship with labour's electoral partner – the NDP.

But our greatest challenge lies in the word *organizing*. Not enough workers are being organized to keep pace with the changing economy, or to maintain union density. Political campaigns seldom reach their true potential. It is hard work talking one-on-one to members, winning their support and inspiring them to take extraordinary actions. Breakthroughs don't come easily, and are usually the product of relentless, focused effort even when many other issues demand attention.

To truly build power, we need to change how we operate.

Dedicating the resources, refocusing staff priorities, engaging our members both at work and in their communities – these tough choices will have to be made if we want to win in 2008 and beyond. But the tougher decision centres around how to share power. As unions merge and grow, they have become less dependent on central labour bodies, and less inclined to build collective campaigns. Yet regardless of size, no single union by itself can change Canadian politics.

How could our unions, many of which see themselves as general workers unions, commit to a common agenda of building power? In different parts of the world, labour has been trying to create new structures to respond to their changing reality. The proposed CLC Structural Review Task Force will create an opportunity to look at this vital issue, but only if the discussion permeates every level of our movement will we find the best answers.

It's time to develop a common definition of the word "mobilize". It means stretching ourselves to engage members in a direct, one-on-one dialogue about what they are willing to do to build union power. It means creating space for members who are not part of the traditional leadership stream to use their skills and knowledge, and be acknowledged for the role they play both in the workplace and the community. It means trying harder to do things that are different, *because people take notice when something different is happening*, whether it's lunchtime study sessions or house visits to activists. And it means building analysis and capacity while we do turnout for events and rallies.

On paper, the Action Agenda can seem like just another union document. What makes it different is the determination to drive a process of change. To challenge each and every one of us – local leaders, CLC officers, heads of unions – to think long and hard about how to do better. And, most essentially, to open a debate about how to implement the *strategy* and *organizing* components of building power. It may not be easy, but together we can discover how to provide the leadership that this tremendous movement deserves in the 21st century.

The Executive Board recommends that Labour Council:

1. endorse the Action Agenda – Building Labour Power for the 21st Century and invite others to support this initiative, and host the website www.labouraction.ca to provide information and a place to exchange views on how to best to build labour power in Canada.