



'The Fight of Our Lives'/Stand up for Fairness CLC Political Action Conference Toronto March 22-24, 2013



The IAM held a one day political action conference on March 22 in advance of the CLC political action conference. 'The Fight of Our Lives, Machinists take a Stand', the conference focussed on the threat posed to both our members and the Canadian middle class by the Harper Conservative government and the Global Corporate agenda. IAM identified what needs to be done and what the Canadian Regions needs to do in the coming months to support fairness, equality and values/rights.

The conference proceeded with Bro. Ritchie sharing the fact made by the affiliated members of the CLC that Unions must work together and in solidarity to turn back the deterioration of human rights, worker distinction and basic Canadian values like fairness and social justice. He advised that he will shortly be tasking one of his staff with taking on a full time political action portfolio to enable the Machinists to take a leading role in this fight.

Bro. Matt Mckinnon of Washington, DC then made a presentation on the present state of the IAM and the Labour movement in the USA. His statistics and the shocking details presented by form of a video 'Wealth Inequality in America' provided a warning account on where the Conservative agenda will take Canadian society if unchecked. So called 'right to work' states in the USA where there is no automatic dues collection such as Canada has under the Rand formula have lower wages, more poverty, lower education and higher infant mortality than states with a stronger Union movement. Unions are weakened defending those who are not required to pay any dues and in an even more grossly unfair turn these 'freeloaders' can file a duty of fair representation charge if they feel the Union has not adequately defended them. Primarily focussed in the southern states, the attack on the Union movement has recently moved north into the industrial and manufacturing bases of the US economy. The Labour movement is under attack and Union members do not vote in their own economic interest the middle class is disappearing and the only ones to benefit are the super rich '1%'.

The IAM conference then turned to discussion on the issues faced by the IAM and labour in Canada, effective Communications by means of Practical Measures and Tools, by Bros. Frank Saptel and Erlichman. There was a town hall discussion where delegates raised their concerns and shared their experiences.

The meeting finished with another speech by Bro. Ritchie in which he reiterate his commitment to having a dedicated political action staff member and strongly urged the members to go back and engage every local to educate members on the importance of political action and voting in their own economic best interests. Don't risk and make the mistake of being silent because it's a fight for your life.



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The CLC convention opened that evening with welcoming remarks by Bro. Hassan Yussaf, ST of the CLC. Guest speaker Tom Walkom of the Toronto Star spoke about how in the 1930-40's the threat of communism gave rise to a compromise between unions and capitalists saw the development of the CBAs at a time where businesses had wealth to spare. By the 60's business and governments accepted unions, but more recently there has been a push to lower wages, make access to welfare and EI difficult, and young workers today face part time jobs, no pensions, low wages and precarious work. From there he turned his attention to the current crisis faced by workers in America, where the right wing agenda has hijacked language with the so-called 'right to work' which is a deliberate assault on unions, defunding them through the drain on defending workers who are dues dodgers.

In Canada, changes in the economy have allowed the right wing in Ontario to broach this topic and to suggest discarding the Rand formula which has supported the Canadian middle class all these years. He closed by identifying the 'enemy' of unions as the Harper Conservatives, the Ontario Conservatives and the BC Liberals and how labour's failure to keep pace with events has opened the door to the right wing agenda. Unions need to stay relevant and to work with allies and the broader community in Canada to fend off the attack on the middle class.

Bro. Tim Lyons, Assistant General Secretary of the Australian Council of Trade Unions outlined the recent experience of labour in Australia, where John Howard's government brought in many of the same changes that Harper has or has proposed. The labour movement rallied together in an impressive show of solidarity. The Unions agreed to work together to counter the government in a campaign called 'Your Rights at Work'. The ACTU identified member apathy and limited understanding of labour's role in society by the public as their two main challenges. By the end of their campaign they had raised public awareness of the importance of a healthy labour movement to the existence of a solid middle class and defeated the Howard government in the next election, winning repeals of the destructive laws that had been passed.

March 23 opened with an address by Bro. Ken Georgetti of the CLC. He began by reminding delegates that Steven Harper was a member of the right wing anti-Union National Citizen's Coalition prior to becoming PM, and that they share an agenda with the misleadingly named Workplace Democracy Institute, an anti-Rand Formula group headed by Catherine Swift. The 3 jobs Labour must do now to overcome the right wing strategies, to reconnect with our members, to get our message and our members out to reengage with the Canadian public, and to shift public perception of unions and all we do, also educating people on the link between free collective bargaining and union density and a healthy middle class in Canada. Our members need to view the labour movement not as *'the Union'*, but as *'My Union'*.



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There was a panel discussion on 'Reconnecting with our members', featuring James Carvin from USW who outlined just how the so-called 'right to work' exhausts a union's resources so they have no power to operate politically, and how Unions in the US are the only organizations required by law to provide a service for free. He bluntly stated the endgame for this strategy is to provide a mechanism for business to take advantage of workers.

Stephanie Beattie of Strategic Communications spoke on messaging around ADC (automatic dues collection) and the Rand formula and how members need to understand the benefits of Union density, more job security, benefits, safety and how Unions raise the bar for everyone. US 'free-riders' who do not pay dues weaken Unions and the middle class, create conflict in the workplace, and that it is essential to stop and reverse the erosion of gains made by the union movement in Canada and that to do this unions need to communicate more effectively.

Jan Schaffer of the AFL-CIO detailed how 'right to work' was turned back in New Hampshire and Maine and that member to member communication and mobilization was the key to these successes.

Delegates then broke into workgroups to hear speakers on chosen topics and to have small group discussion on the different topics available. The afternoon wrapped with an address by Tom Mulcair, Leader of the Official Opposition and the NDP. He spoke on how Harper's policies are changing Canada, making us less progressive and giving more power to corporations, how this comes at the expense of average Canadians and the risk the Conservative agenda poses to the middle class. He also spoke on what the NDP is doing to counter the right wing agenda and the need to look ahead to the next election and the critical need to ensure Harper does not retain a second majority.

Sunday opened with another panel on Labour's image, community and political engagement. Trish Hennessy of the CCPA spoke about the corporate agenda that pits workers against workers and the importance of not retreating, avoiding defensiveness and weakness. Outlined the importance of defining the threat if unions are weakened, and balancing that with aspiration, to protect the middle class, and that to do this the labour movement must be more inclusive and 'grow the tent'.

Marie Della Mattia, Now communications spoke on using the media effectively, that not everyone wants to join a union but people want to hear what we have to say, how tax cuts are the only way people are getting a raise if 80% of Canadians are making less today than years ago and that using more anecdotal stories will get the message across best.



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Christian Quenneville of TAXI reminded the delegates that most Canadians agree with most labour policy positions but that the perceptions remain negative. He also bluntly outlined that if 35% of Canadians are progressive, 20% are conservative and 37% switch depending on the frame that the focus must be on the 37% who are undecided. 'Unions make fairness happen'.

Jennifer Huang of the Toronto and York Labour council spoke on how assumptions by the public on how unions work are not always flattering and how her group has focussed on outreach to those who do not speak English or French as a first language.

Kathleen Monk of the Broadbent Institute finished up by advising the message discipline is hard but everyone must remember what is at stake. Labour must be heard, cut through the noise and right wing rhetoric.

There followed more workshops. They ranged from utilizing the media to connecting with members, to talking politics with members, engaging young workers and women, getting active and mobilizing. The US where union density is less than 10% and living standards for 99% of people have been degraded provided a stark backdrop and leant urgency to the message. The experience of the Australian Labour movement and the success that is possible with united, concerted action fuelled many of the discussions.

The conference concluded with closing remarks by CLC ST Hassan Yussaf. He stated that to defeat the right Labour must have one campaign, one message and absolute discipline. There have been 100 pieces of legislation in the last 10 years that limit or undermine worker's rights in Canada and that Harper's extension of OAS to 67 years will take \$6000.00 from each person. He also spoke on the travesty of Harper and Flaherty transferring \$52 billion from EI to General Revenue, when it was paid for by workers and businesses and was not government money, and then making it harder for workers to access EI. There are no short cuts to the work ahead.

In Solidarity,

**John Vincent, Communicator
Local Lodge 16, IAM & AW**