

TOGETHER - FAIRNESS WORKS

The Canadian Labour Congress is launching a major effort to highlight the values of the union movement under the banner “Together Fairness Works”. Labour Day celebrations will take place in cities and towns across the country, some of which have not had a Labour Day event in many years. In the fall, the CLC will roll out an extensive ad campaign, and special meetings of union leaders in 17 cities.

This is an ambitious program. It builds on lessons learned by unions in the U.S. and Australia – that labour must be pro-active in framing its role in society, before anti-union forces enact legislation to weaken labour rights. It also builds on the success of the Labour Council’s Workers’ Rights campaign, which has trained hundreds of campaigners to engage union members in the workplace.

One important aspect of the Together Fairness Works is defining a common vocabulary for unions to use in describing what we do and how our goals match those of the majority of Canadians. Instead of saying “unions gave you the weekend”, the narrative becomes:

“When workers get together and stand up for fairness, they get results. Together, working people have won decent wages, safer workplaces, fair treatment and benefits like paid vacation time, job training, and insurance coverage for things that keep them healthy and productive.

They didn’t stop there. What they got at work, they got for everybody else through political action. That’s how we all got some of the things most of us take for granted today – minimum wages, statutory holidays, paid_vacation time, public health insurance, public pensions, and weekends. Together, working people created a country with fairness as one of its fundamental values.”

It’s not just the general public that needs to be reminded of these facts. Many union members do not appreciate the role of their own union, or the union movement, in improving the quality of life for working families.

This reinforces the need for one-on-one discussion with members. So far, about one third of affiliates have undertaken workplace discussions; one third have people trained but not yet put them into work locations, and one third have not really started to tackle this issue. Labour Council will continue to work with affiliates to assist planning and implementing this massive undertaking.

It is also important to connect the Conservative’s attack on workers’ rights with the rest of their agenda for a low-wage economy.

- The massive cuts to EI, including loss of hiring hall protection;
- Abuse of the Foreign Temporary Worker Program;

- Bad trade deals and refusal to protect Canadians from predatory corporate behaviour
- Attacks on employee pension plans
- Reduced Old Age Security coverage
- Cut to public services

These are all part of the plan to “discipline the workforce” and reduce expectations of Canadian workers. Unions must be at the forefront of the fight against exploitation of any worker in this globalized economy.

Whether it is Mayor Ford’s outsourcing to low-wage contractors or Finance Minister Flaherty’s claim that there is no such thing as a bad job, we must confront CEOs and politicians with the demand that a job should lift someone out of poverty, not keep them in it. Before unionization gave workers collective strength, many occupations were poverty wage jobs. What is at stake in the coming months is the ability to maintain that strength and discover new power within our membership.

July 2013