

## **Steps Forward - Presentation on Behalf of UFCW Canada**

### **Labour Rights are Human Rights**

Ottawa, November 21, 2008

Good Morning.

Our National President Wayne Hanley could not be here and sends his sincere regrets.

#### **Introduction**

This conference and all of you have accomplished number things over the last three days. I want to touch on some of those. We have explored our role in the promotion of prosperity. We have attempted to dispel the myths of the inflexibility of trade unions in the economy. We have looked at how workers rights have been degraded by the state, ignoring international conventions, and how the courts have responded.

The attacks on unions in Canada and around the globe have severely impaired the labour movement's ability to effectively represent members and to organize the unorganized.

So now we have come to the point where we try to bring some of these factors together and look at the road ahead. An opportunity to give life to the principles we have analyzed. A common thread that has emerged over the past three days is a very strong need to build a campaign for working people.

Quoting Derek Fudge in the text "Collective Bargaining: Human Right or Canadian Illusion", "working people themselves must join together to claim and win the right for all Canadians to free collective bargaining, or the decline in quality of life will continue."

We think, the road ahead must be contextualized first by looking at where we have come from. This approach, I suggest, is useful in informing us on issues that are of primary importance in shaping our future as a union, as part of the house of labour, but most importantly as part of the fabric of Canadian society.

So the context I refer to is the Civil Rights movement in the US. The successes of the Civil Rights movement were not only victories for African Americans; they were victories for those such, as Unions, social justice groups, womens rights groups who also worked to end segregation in the school system. That campaign was often reciprocated in those days. On the day of his assassination, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was organizing sanitation workers in Memphis. It is that type of social justice based activism that we have revived at the UFCW Canada based on the lessons of the past

So a campaign is essential. But it cannot be a campaign of academics and lawyers - **In order to have a viable campaign** - one that is inclusive and reflective of the broader society, one that includes workers, average citizens and social justice and ethno-cultural based groups demonstrating for the principles we have articulated and displaying their preference for these principles at the ballot box, the road ahead must include an additional reallocation towards **Community Unionism** or Social Movement Unionism.

Quoting Derek Fudge again, he talks about union renewal and “our rights that need to be reclaimed in new and imaginative ways and in new and imaginative forms. As Derek so eloquently puts it: “the quality of life, the health and future of the people depend on it.”

### **Need for a Popular Campaign**

What we have expressed at this symposium is our analysis of the problems and touched upon possible further solutions predominantly from the courts. What of those problems that can't be fixed through the courts. There are those problems whose solutions lie only in public campaigns, lobbying, demonstrating and on Election Day. We need to put legs on the principles and problems that we have articulated.

Many of the concepts that are fundamental to a more progressive society for both our membership and individuals no doubt includes legislative changes and greater political will to move forward on issues important to trade unions. Political will is informed by the electorate.

There are certain things that we cannot win in the courts and only those elected in places like Ottawa, Victoria, Edmonton, and Toronto can effect the changes we require. I don't see a day when the SCC directs the Federal government to ratify an ILO convention it hasn't or to remove a certain sector from the list of essential services or to re-implement “card check.”

In order to get there and wage a practical campaign to have labour's voice heard in the legislative chambers we need the support of all workers and social justice based organizations. Not only for the purpose of achieving our objective, but also those of our partners on the left who have limited or no resources.

Through this mechanism we build our alliances across the country. It is through popular support of the members of our community partners in addition to our members that we are able to further our influence in the political realm. It is at the ballot box where we will get the greatest bang for our buck.

The American electorate will discover this to varying degrees over the next four years with their success in the election of Barack Obama. Think about that for a second. If the *Employee Free Choice Act* is signed into law in the US, our American brothers and sisters, potentially even in places like Alabama and Texas, may have to varying degrees more progressive labour laws with respect to organizing and accessing collective bargaining than we currently have in Ontario and Alberta.

## **Community Unionism**

There are fundamentally **two prongs to this approach of Community Unionism**.

**First**, we need join with like minded social justice organizations in order wage effective public campaigns to obtain tangible legislative outcomes.

This is a much needed attempt to integrate workers, trade unions and the labour movement into broader coalitions for social and economic justice. Thus, in principle, unions and other organizations support each other in what are mutually beneficial goals and not merely trade unions dictating the rules of engagement to community partners.

An example of this is our almost two decades long battle for the rights of some of the most vulnerable workers in our society – agricultural workers – many of whom are migrants from Mexico, Jamaica, the Philippines and Thailand. We are lucky in that we have not had to collect a cent in dues.

While we have criticized the inequities apparent in governments' approach to unions, the **second aspect of Community Unionism** relates to our own internal organizational inequities. Let's look in the mirror as well. If the courts are not always the way, then we should be relevant to the ever-changing Canadian workforce – the workforce that we can educate to effect the changes required through the ballot box and through public lobbying.

This is particularly graphic in light of the fact that by 2017, more than 1 in 5 people in this country shall be people of colour or racialized peoples. An even greater percent shall be new or first and second generation immigrants. 50% of the populations of Vancouver and Toronto have been racialized people for several years now. This does not even include the over 200,000 temporary foreign workers who are brought to Canada yearly to toil for two years and then are sent home when they are physically spent. Within 5 years there will be more TFWs in Canada than our yearly allotment of people who attain landed immigrant status.

There is a new Canadian workforce that is not emerging, it has emerged, and that workforce is going to be an immensely strong voice on the political landscape. The question we ask ourselves is “are we relevant to these newcomers”? Do we reflect their faces in our paid representative staff? - in our leadership? At this conference analyzing principles that will affect their lives?

If we are to have public campaigns, to give legs to the principles we have analyzed, to get the things we cant get in the courts, we must be relevant to all workers, from all backgrounds. Moreover, being more diverse unions importantly allows us to hinder the quantitative decline of the labour movement in Canada. Simply, we will be able to organize the unorganized and retain our existing membership.

Trade unions in Canada desperately need to be more inclusive and reflective organizations. Inclusive of those from historically oppressed groups who have not had a voice in the labour movement and not in its decision making process. Not just racialized people, but reflective of those from all equity seeking groups - women, people from aboriginal, disabled, Gay, Lesbian, Bi-Sexual, Transgendered groups, for instance.

**None, of this of course diminishes the importance that we place on the use of the Courts or other legal avenues,** but the courts are not are only card.

The Supreme Court and every appellant court below her can attest to the fact that the UFCW Canada is not adverse to litigation. However, the Courts are only one mechanism as part of an overall strategic initiative to grow trade unionism and spread the principles we discussed in so much detail.

As Paul Callvaluzzo put it yesterday, the courts should be a forum of last resort. Lobbying, the ballot box, mutually beneficial campaigns, demonstrating, engaging public sentiment, these are all part of an overall strategy to effect the outcomes required.

Community Unionism, as a part of our overall strategies, is a practical approach to giving life to the principles we have discussed here and revive the labour movement’s ability to effectively represent members and to organize the unorganized.

Thank You.