

## Speaking notes for CAW-CEP - A Moment of Truth Workshop

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*February 25, 2012*

### COMMUNITY POWER AND POLITICAL BARGAINING

- Since its start, our movement has undertaken two kinds of bargaining – collective bargaining to determine terms and conditions in the workplace; and political bargaining to determine the conditions of life both inside and outside the workplace
- The Canadian labour movement has fundamentally defined itself as a social union movement, guided by the slogan “What we wish for ourselves, we also wish for others”.
- That has led to us taking a stance from the earliest days to speak out for public education, universal healthcare, public pensions, unemployment insurance, public transit, affordable housing and wide variety of social services
- Those have been achieved through a combination of building mass popular movements and formal political action – the US experience serves as a sobering reminder of how narrow the political window can be without the existence of a social democratic party with labour roots, as we have with the NDP and PQ, despite their shortcomings
- What are the parallels between workplace power and community power
- We know what brings us workplace power – it starts with members engaged, educated, and playing a pro-active role in their union’s relationships with the employer
- It then extends to a series of alliances – with workers employed by the same company; with others in the sector, sometimes with workers elsewhere in the supply chain or transporting the product
- In the best examples, those alliances not only help win better contracts, they also held open up organizing opportunities
- What does that mean? It means bargaining strategies that include organizing objectives, such as demanding union recognition or employer neutrality in other locations, or requiring suppliers or related operations be unionized
- In the globalized economy of today, alliances through global union federations have taken on new importance. But they are only as effective as our real power on the ground

### BUILDING COMMUNITY POWER

- What are the parallels in building community power?

- In Toronto, as in many other cities across the country, labour has been active in broader social justice efforts for many years
- The primary vehicle for this has been the Labour Council, which brings together local union activists and leaders to work collectively on key issues
- For a local union, the first alliance outside of its own structure should be the labour council in the region
- The broader alliances are through specific coalitions in the community
- Sometime we initiate those coalitions, other times civil society groups come to us for support and finances
- The difference of whether these become powerful coalitions is often the degree to which unions commit the resources necessary to make them enduring coalitions, and whether our members become involved
- In Toronto, as a city of immigrants, people live in both geographic communities, but also in ethnic or ethno-racial communities
- Building community power is most effective when we can tap into the strength of our membership both by neighbourhood and through the other links that they share
- Often those links are cultural, but they can also take the form of particular interests as parents, social justice advocates, transit riders, environmentalists, and so on
- But we start where people live, asking our unions to break down their membership by postal codes into political wards and ridings so they can be called on to vote for pro-labour candidates or influence politicians from every level of government right at the constituency level
- In nearly every campaign we have been involved in, it is the pressure on politicians from their own constituents that has made a difference
- Sometimes it has been the members themselves, other times it is their knowledge of who has influence with the politician that provides the breakthrough
- Ten years ago our Labour Council challenged our affiliates to engage their members not just in the workplace but also where they live
- We took on a test of a school board by-election, and many unions that had nothing to do with the school board reached out and involved their members. The result was a majority at the Toronto school board whose strategy of defiance, combined with Ottawa and Hamilton, triggered a political crisis for the Harris regime. Their stance was made possible by a strong community campaign that called on governments to *give students what they need to succeed*
- At our most effective, we have networks on the ground working with elected politicians on a strategic issue
- That is how we won the fight against water privatization, the Made In Canada Matters fight for locally-built transit vehicles, how we stopped Wal-Mart from invading Toronto's film district, and how we defeated some of the cuts being proposed by the Rob Ford regime

- That is also how we won the most recent round of political bargaining - the \$10 minimum wage in Ontario. A private members bill by my newly elected MPP Cheri DiNovo, with a coalition led by Labour Council consisting of students, immigrant groups, anti-poverty community activists, journalists and New Democrats hammering away at the McGuinty government
- The result – a 28% wage increase over three years for hundreds of thousands of low-wage workers – was simply incredible
- When our allies looked at what labour had done – investing time and resources into a fight that affected very few union members – we won real appreciation for helping their constituencies in a way that truly mattered
- Many of those same allies joined us in launching the Good Jobs for All coalition, which has led fights on EI reform and green jobs for all
- How do community allies help unions? We turn to them for support in tough fights – think of who was on the stage in London at the rally against Caterpillar
- There are a number of victories where union jobs were either saved or created with the help of our allies – from fights against privatization, to procurement policies, to solid waste diversion, to raising standards of low wage workers such as the Hotel Workers Rising campaign
- Let's look at where they can help us organize. In Toronto the Steelworkers Area Council has built a strong relationship with the Tamil community, to the point when Tamil-Canadian workers want to form a union they know who to phone. Some years ago, the Painters Union broke through in the stucco industry by working with Imams in the Turkish community. The CEP has organized all three Chinese language daily newspapers in Toronto and created a bargaining manual in Chinese. The UFCW's commitment to migrant workers has helped build the capacity to involve new immigrants in organizing drives. PSAC and other unions have developed a consistent approach to first nations in the north that has paid off in new certifications. All of these are examples of community unionism, and contribute to building community power
- The point is that investing in community power - both through our members and through coalitions - is essential in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

#### WHAT WOULD A NEW UNION DO BETTER?

I would suggest that if your new union is to help change the dynamics of Canadian labour, it will have a number of key features:

- In every city and town, it will be a driving force of a unified labour movement that is at the centre of key community coalitions
- Local unions will be mandated to assign activists to building community power. These will be more than token positions – they should be located within the Local power structure, perhaps through a designated place on the local Executive Board
- Local unions will be mandated to review organizing opportunities in their community, and will be rewarded for assisting in organizing drives

- The union will adopt and embrace a comprehensive equity agenda, ensuring that women, aboriginal workers and workers of colour are to be found at all levels of decision making and leadership. At a regional level, the union will create networks of members from specific communities that represent the actual demographics of the workforce
- The union's organizing department will recruit activists from diverse communities to inform and assist in developing organizing campaigns, including in various languages
- The union's education department will create training regimes for activists that include actual involvement in community campaigns
- The union will create database capacity, either at the local or higher level to track member contact information including involvement in campaigns, affinity groups, etc.
- In each significant round of bargaining, the staff and committee consider what role community allies could play in the lead-up or in case of a strike or lock-out. As well, they will consider if there are organizing goals that need to be woven into the contract demands or bargaining approach

#### THINKING GLOBALLY, ACTING LOCALLY

Our unions were first created by people who started talking to each other about improving their working life. Those conversations seldom took place in workplace lunchroom – they were overwhelmingly done in neighbourhood bars, in ethnic meeting halls, or at kitchen tables. It is worth remembering that very few of our current members ever chose a union – they got a job at a unionized workplace and at most had a few minutes orientation from the local steward.

In this globalized economy we need to go back to the grass roots to find the strength to prevail against powerful corporations and their political servants. As fewer of our members work in giant factories or mills which once dominated the culture of their community, we need to find new ways to build working class power. I believe we do that best by looking to our roots – the patient, tough, sustained work that was done by those who first built our unions. Those future conversations at kitchen tables - about the kind of future we want for our families, our neighbours and our world - will be the key to our success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*In 2008, Labour Council initiated a discussion on the future of Canadian labour in the lead-up to the CLC Convention. The material, much of which is relevant to the project of a new Canadian union, can be found at [labouraction.ca](http://labouraction.ca)*