

## **REPORT OF THE AFL HUMAN RIGHTS & INT'L. SOLIDARITY COMMITTEE**

The Human Rights & International Solidarity Committee had an active 2003 – 2005 term. The following is a brief outline of some of our activities:

- Members of the committee have met with the EDLC, City Council and our Civic Unions to push for procurement procedures that address the issue of sweatshops and child labour.
- Letters were sent to the federal government urging economic relief for Africa and help from the pharmaceutical companies to make treatment of AIDS affordable.
- Information packages were sent to affiliates on Ryerson University MA Program and the Quebec Native Women's petition calling for recognition of women's rights under the Indian Act.
- A letter was sent to the Minister of Health requesting health coverage for migrant workers.
- Two Building Bridges & Sharing Struggles workshops held, one on April 30, 2004 in Hobemma and the second on April 15, 2005 in Siksika.
- Worked in partnership with NGO's, Change for Children, Parkland Institute and University of Alberta International Week to present workshops on Walmart and globalization.
- Met with representatives from Canadian Friendship Centre and Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women to discuss ways to address violence against aboriginal women.
- Plaque sent to the FAT acknowledging the AFL's commitment to work with international labour organizations.
- Monitored proceedings on Saskatchewan aboriginal rape case.
- Sent ND's ideas on bills and motions – anti scab legislation, first contract legislation, healthcare for migrant workers, and support of same sex marriage.
- Letters sent to HomeSense regarding racist advertising, support for CEP Journalist threatened with jail for withholding sources, support for increases to AISH support payments, condemning US actions in Iraq, support for South Korean workers, and to Roots and Gildan Activewear on human rights and labour violations.
- Attended Alberta Committee for Citizens with Disabilities AGM.
- Worked with Edmonton Pride organization to ensure our participation in their events like Gay Pride Parade.
- Held three raffles as start up money for International Solidarity Fund.
- Completed the CLC's MORE Campaign questionnaire.
- Met with labour leader Jorge Anaya a member of CUT union of Colombia.

- Set up display table at the Cari-West Festival.
- Met with Education Committee to add human rights module to courses at AFL School.
- Continued our memberships with the Northern Alberta Race Relations Association and Amnesty International.

The following are areas of the Committee's work that we would like to highlight:

## **INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY**

In the two years since our last Convention the work of the Committee was done under rapidly changing circumstances. We saw the full scale war on Iraq initiated by the U.S. under the pretense of weapons of mass destruction and to democratize Iraq.

Billion of dollars have been spent and thousands of lives have been lost, only to discover that the much publicized weapons of mass destruction were non-existent. This has put the entire Middle East, and the world for that matter, under an extreme fragility. If we add the situation in Palestine and Afghanistan we have an entire region in a very precarious state with peace being very elusive. This is a cause for concern not only for people in the region but for the whole of humanity. Of particular concern is the never ending struggle of the Palestinian people for their freedom and the right to self-determination within their own state.

Peace will continue to be very fragile in light of the Bush re-election in the USA. The progressive forces around the

world need to continue to actively pursue peace and stability. We need to create a worldwide humanity chain to denounce the escalation of violence and war to dominate the world which has been actively developed by the Bush administration.

At the same time that war has become more dominant again, the forces of globalization continue to pursue their agenda of exploiting workers and the environment through free trade agreements. The upside to this is that more resistance and better organization has led to the point where there has not been much movement in this area particularly with the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA).

But we must not have the illusion that they will stop, on the contrary they will develop new strategies to move forward and impose a model that translate into the loss of sovereignty, impoverishment, degradation of the environment, further cornering of indigenous people because their remaining territory is being pursued by multinational corporations to exploit the remaining natural resources that still are under indigenous control, and further privatization of public services.

These are some of the main reasons why unions and their members need to be concerned and actively getting involved in the bigger picture. We all know that to negotiate collective agreements nowadays includes understanding the big picture, especially important is that corporations will always go after reducing labour costs and in today's world they can easily move where labour is cheaper.

As a result of wars and the economic agenda of the multinational corporations we live in a meaner society where not only peace is under constant threat but the daily life relationship is also suffering. The overall concept of basic solidarity has been undermined and there is an urgent need to reverse this trend. In particular we need to not only bolster labour solidarity but expand it to include the rest of society.

Our so called competitiveness over the years has seen extraordinary surpluses at both levels of governments yet they have failed to allocate those surpluses where they are most needed: education, healthcare, affordable housing, social programs, etc. This shows that governments do not care about their ordinary citizens. Even in the response to the Tsunami disaster in Southeast Asia the USA, British and Canadian governments did not respond adequately from the start. Only pressure from ordinary citizens forced them to be more generous.

The world responded to the Tsunami, but what about the economic tsunami that has been attacking countries and their ordinary citizens for years now. The capitalist global agenda with its Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) have been imposed on entire continents. Countries in Africa spend more money servicing the external debt (as a result of imposition by the IMF and the World Bank) than on education and health altogether. This is a threat to justice and equality and therefore to peace. We see the devastation caused by HIV in Africa and the leaders of the world do very little to acknowledge this crisis and provide relief to people here who die by the thousands.

Another example of the meaner society and especially after September 11, 2001 is the increase in racial profiling whether in the regular police force or at security in airports or ports of entry.

Governments have passed legislation that threatens civil liberties and basic human rights. We have seen illegal detention, torture and surveillance of people from Arab descent. In reality these new security measures put the very security of individuals at risk. It creates a whole sense of insecurity especially for people of colour.

### **WALMART: IS IT IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST?**

The Human Rights and International Solidarity Committee worked with community partners: the Parkland Institute and Change for Children to present two workshops on the effects Walmart has on communities with their aggressive marketing, big box stores, cheap prices, poor human resources records and cut throat procurement strategies. Walmart was founded in 1962, expanded into 5 states in 1971, developed the Walmart Cheer in 1975, started the people greeters program in 1985 and by 1985 had 882 stores with 8.4 billion in sales. That was just the beginning, by 1991 the first international stores was opened in Mexico, in 1994 the first Canadian store, and by 1995 they had 96.3 billion in sales. Walmart continues to aggressively grow and has only met resistance in some of European countries. Walmart sales are greater than the Gross Domestic Product of 161 nations and they are the largest employer in the world.

Walmart comes to town offering one stop family shopping, everyday low

prices, 35 departments to serve all consumer needs as well as the promise of jobs, jobs, jobs. The actual facts paint a different picture. Walmart workers average only 28 hours per week and only 38 per cent of workers have health insurance. Nationwide in the US 50% of workers have insurance. The average Walmart worker makes a few thousand dollars less than the poverty line. Furthermore most of Wal-Mart's pension plan is invested in stocks which are vulnerable. Walmart creates jobs but for every 2 jobs created in the community 3 jobs are lost as small businesses that often paid a fair wage go out of business. In the state of Iowa alone 7,326 small town businesses have closed since the Walmart invasion. The jobs Walmart creates are mostly part time, low paying and without benefits.

Walmart mirrors the trends we are fighting in the global economy, the assault on workers. Walmart workers are forced to work part time, have poor if any benefits, and are not allowed to unionize. Stores that do attempt to organize are routinely closed. Walmart is leading the race to the bottom as other retailer's layoff staff and decrease service in an attempt to compete. Walmart plays loose with labour laws and has thousands of lawsuits for labour violations. These include firing a white woman for dating a black man, selling fake Tommy Hilfiger apparel, a poor record of promoting women and destroying documents that contained evidence needed for sexual harassment, abduction and theft cases.

People shop at Walmart for the low prices, but let's look at the cost of paying less. Although Walmart claims to buy locally it is the largest importer

of Chinese goods. In 2000 Master Lock lost 250 union jobs when Walmart started buying locks off shore. Walmart not only has put many North American workers out of work with it's buy at the lowest possible cost policy is now pitting poor countries against each other to maintain the lowest prices. Walmart has closed factories in Honduras and other countries because they could buy cheaper elsewhere. Walmart does not allow independent unannounced inspections of their contractor's facilities and does not exclude forced overtime, locked bathrooms, starvation wages, pregnancy tests and frequent firings in its agreements with foreign contractors. Walmart affects retailers in any area where they open stores. In southern California the 3 major grocery chains increased their profits by 91% in the last five years yet workers had to strike to maintain health care benefits. The reason given is the stores must compete with Walmart.

Walmart and the global strategy of free trade threaten wages, health care benefits and workers lives not only in Canada but around the world. Walmart's race to the bottom for wages and benefits disregards laws, suppresses workers rights and stomps on our sense of fairness. This is a fight of values it pits the rich and privileged who want to increase their profits against the hard working employees who fight for a decent wage, affordable health care and a voice on the job. We must remember that protecting workers rights strengthens the community, leads to a stable work environment which in turn creates more jobs. The argument is often used that any job is better than no job but in poor countries if the job does

not supply enough to meet your basic needs then how can it benefit the community.

We must consider the cost in terms of money moving out of the community, poverty wages and poor or no benefits when we shop for the cheapest prices. The Walmart effect is global and indeed part of the global strategy of multinational companies to increase profits for the shareholders while paying little attention to our communities, our environment or the rights of workers.

There are 1 billion people living in poverty around the world yet the developed countries continue to impose trade barriers that could lift many of these workers out of poverty. A one percent increase in exports from Africa, South Asia and Latin America would lift 128 million people out of poverty. We must learn where and under what conditions the goods we buy are made and we must demand that workers around the world are treated with dignity, fair labour laws and are paid a living wage. The Walmart Globalization effect must be reversed so communities are enriched with a clean environment, social programs and proud workers.

## **INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY FUND**

What do you get when you cross a crocheting committee member with too many commercials for the then upcoming Olympics? If that member has something of a warped sense of humour, you get an idea for raising money for the International Solidarity Fund.

The member proposed a raffle with a twist. As International Solidarity is seen as a very serious thing, we needed to take a light hearted look to get people's attention – the prizes would be based on the names of countries. So the member donated the first prize – the afghan she had crocheted (Afghanistan) and suggested other possibilities: a slow cooker with a killer chili recipe (Chile), an oil change and lube job (Greece), a mismatched set of dishes (China), and so on.

The member wasn't too sure how the committee would take the idea. But after their initial silence, they jumped in with more ideas and the Unraffle with a twist was born. The first round raised \$705.00 and prizes were drawn at the Membership Forum. Round two raised an additional \$505.00 and the draw took place at the Federation's Christmas open house. And round three is now upon us, so see any member of the committee for tickets.

## **GLBT ISSUES**

At the 2003 Convention, the committee was rightly criticized for its lack of attention to Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered (GLBT) issues. This criticism was taken back to the new committee and was discussed. Although we had good intentions, there was no one on the committee to provide direction. We resolved to participate in Pride events, but got the information too late to follow through.

GLBT members have had to fight for recognition and rights, such as pension and same-sex marriage, through court challenges. These rights should have been theirs from the start.

Homophobia is rampant within society, and to be honest, within the labour movement as well. The labour movement has always prided itself on fighting for the underdog and trying to right wrongs. However there has been a noticeable silence when it comes to GLBT issues.

Unless they self-identify, these people lack visibility. The political climate in the province makes it hard for these communities and members may be reluctant to self-identify because of that. Who wants to be on the receiving end of verbal and physical attacks?

We need to take a good look at ourselves and see where we can start to make a difference. We need to eliminate barriers and create a safe environment for all of our Sisters and Brothers to participate.

## **STOLEN SISTERS**

On December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2004 the Committee welcomed guest speakers from the Edmonton Canadian Friendship Centre, Dean Brown and Marilyn Wellf and from the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women, Muriel Stanley Venne to speak on the Stolen Sisters.

Amnesty International has joined with Indigenous families across Canada in urging immediate government action to ensure the safety of Indigenous women in Canadian cities. In Edmonton alone, police are currently investigating 18 unsolved murders of women in the last two decades. Women's organizations in the city estimate that a disproportionate number of the women are Indigenous. In Alberta, the number of missing or

murdered women is 38. Across Canada, the National Women's Action Committee estimates that over the last twenty years more than 500 hundred Indigenous women may have been murdered or gone missing in circumstances that suggest violence. These reports include only those case studies in which the families were willing and prepared to tell their stories publicly.

It is Amnesty International's view that the role of discrimination is fuelling this violence. In denying Indigenous women the protection they deserve or in allowing the perpetrators to escape justice are critical parts of the threat faced by Indigenous women. Further, recommendations from high level government commissions have gone unimplemented allowing the social and economic marginalization of Indigenous women and girls to continue in Canadian Society.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Committee had a number of significant achievements over the last two years, particularly with our efforts to connect with the aboriginal community. Our three Building Bridges and Sharing Struggles workshops have set the direction labour needs to pursue in order to be a positive vehicle for aboriginal workers. The demographics continue to note that the bulk of our workforce over the coming years will be from the aboriginal community. For this reason it is essential that the Alberta Federation of Labour give this work a high priority.

Another achievement has been our partnership with NGOs. We have

worked with Change for Children, the Parkland Institute and the University of Alberta International Week to present workshops on Walmart and globalization. These workshops were open to delegates from the unorganized sector. This type of partnership helps to advertise the fact that labour is active and involved in the broader community.

Our committee consisted of a group of dedicated members from all sectors of the labour movement. We would particularly like to highlight that we had members from the aboriginal

community, the disabled community, people of colour, as well as an equal representation of sisters and brothers. And it was through this commitment from such a diverse group that we were able to achieve the mandates presented to us from the 2003 Convention. We would strongly encourage locals to consider sending members of equity seeking groups when considering representatives for this committee for the next term. The Committee would also like to thank the officers, executive council and staff of the Federation for their support and assistance.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of the Committee,

**AFL HUMAN RIGHTS & INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY COMMITTEE,  
2003 – 2005**

Linda Robinson, Chair	COPE 458
Keith Dottin, Secretary	UFCW 401
Alan Besecker	UNA
Linda Joyce	CUPE/Wrk of Colour
Terry Lyons	PSAC 30015
Aloma Mitchell	CDLC
Marjorie Shewchuk	TWU
Shona Stewart	CUPW-Edm.
Jody Trotman	ATU 583
Ramon Antipan	AFL Liaison/CUPW
Kerry Barrett	AFL

Committee members who completed a partial term:

Barb Ames	CUPE 38
Pablo Cardozo	BCTGM 252
Mario Pailamilla	CUPE 474
Michael Desautels	CLC

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