

2001 REPORT of the HUMAN RIGHTS & INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY COMMITTEE

During the past two years, the International Solidarity and Human Rights Committee focused its work on resolutions from the previous Convention that pertain to human rights and international solidarity issues. We focused our attention in promoting education on human rights in our labour organizations as well as the community at large.

The committee supported the work done by the Workers of Colour and Aboriginal Workers Caucus, by keeping their issues on the agenda of the AFL and labour in general. During the last two AFL schools, meetings were arranged for workers of colour and aboriginal workers attending these schools. During those meetings, two points have been emphasized:

- a) The position of the AFL in providing space and support for the inclusion of workers of colour and aboriginal workers (WOCAW) in discussing issues of discrimination, racism and inclusiveness of unions, and
- b) The Report of the Anti-racism Task Force of the CLC entitled "Challenging Racism: Going Beyond Recommendations".

The Committee lobbied and convinced the Executive Council and the Finance Committee of the AFL to provide a budgetary line for the work of the WOCAW. This is an essential step in moving forward the work of these equity-seeking groups.

We have permanently maintained our presence by utilizing Labour News to present and promote issues of human rights and international solidarity. Members of the committee consistently have been writing articles for Labour News, which in turn is an excellent tool to educate ourselves and the community at large.

On the International Solidarity front, the Committee continuously promoted the need for the AFL and affiliated unions to engage more openly on this kind of work. Some examples are presentations that we made to the AFL Fall School. These presentations were very well received by the participants at these schools.

We promoted and supported the anti-sweatshops campaigns, both in Calgary and Edmonton. This past summer, demonstrations and leafleting were organized in front of Forzanis and Sport Check against NIKE, in Calgary and Edmonton. We hope to make this a yearly event.

We engaged in supporting the Campaign to Free Leonard Peltier, a native American imprisoned and accused of killing two FBI Agents in Wounded Knee, North Dakota, in 1974.

Other activities include:

1. Committee members participation in the Canadian Government consultation in preparation for the UN International Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, which will take place in August 2001 in South Africa.

2. Letter to the Government of Alberta, requesting the government to implement mandatory Human Rights Education in the public, private and separate school systems.
3. Committee recommended the AFL do research on the Economic Impact of Racism, which Sister Lydia Lanman has developed.
4. We organized the Labour Forum and participated in the Peoples Human Rights Conference in May 2000, in Edmonton.

There are many challenges that labour will continue to face in the human rights and international solidarity front. It is widely accepted that an increase of violence and intolerance, both verbal and physical at work places and the community at large has been taking place over the last several years. The Committee believes that some of the roots of the problem lies in the competitiveness that the corporate global agenda has imposed on us.

The neo-liberal economic policies and free trade agreements are pushing workers to the extreme, putting in danger all the gains that organized labour has achieved. This, in turn, challenges the essential rights of workers, such as the right to organize, the right to collective bargain, the right to a decent job and decent wages - all of which are human rights. So, labour, more than ever needs to continue the struggle to maintain and enhance those fundamental rights.

NAFTA, which is a "Bill of Rights" for multinational corporations, is eroding the social fabric of our society. The concept of "State Benefactor" no longer serves well the interests of the big capital, so that is why the tremendous attack on the role of governments and rules and regulations that protect the interests and rights of citizens in general and workers in particular. Citizens are facing not only an attack on their democratic rights, but also a quality of life that is suffering as a result of governments who put profit first.

There has been a constant attack on the environment, which, in the long run will have devastating effects. Multinational corporations are constantly looking for cheaper labour, thus exploiting children, women and all workers in general in countries of the south. The over-exploitation of natural resources is another serious blow to indigenous peoples across the world.

In essence what all these do or have as a result is the attack on human rights, abroad and at home.

It is in this order of things that labour organized and displays its struggle to defend the basic and fundamental human rights of workers in general.

Women

Over the past two years, a few victories have been achieved for women, albeit not without a struggle. The Public Service Alliance of Canada finally won pay equity after almost 14 years, paving the path for the implementation of progressive pay equity legislation in many provinces. Despite this victory, a gender wage gap continues to exist. Women continue to be employed in traditionally low wage, part-time, temporary and casual positions with no benefits. Women of colour and immigrant women face a double burden. Women remain the primary caregivers within families, caring for children and aging parents.

The federal government made changes to the Employment Insurance Act, including allowing for up to 52 weeks of benefits for new mothers. Despite the extensions, many women will not qualify or will not be able to live for an entire year on the benefits they earn. In February, Alberta announced changes to the Employment Standards Code that will match the federal changes, and allow for up to a year of job protected leave.

The World March of Women was an international campaign calling for an end to violence and poverty against women. The media chose to downplay many of the organized actions of the campaign. Lobbying efforts with the federal government were also made difficult. Despite these challenges, women were able to raise awareness and bring many issues into the public forum.

Education

Education has suffered over the past few years. Parents are having to deal with increasing school fees, and in turn, more classroom "fundraising." To meet funding needs, schools have had to turn to corporations for sponsorship. The decreased number of permanent, full-time and unionized school staff has impacted many education environments. Class sizes continue to increase and inner city schools are being shut down.

Few schools are undertaking and implementing progressive human rights education into their curriculums. Progress has been made in Calgary with the labour module, "The Missing Perspective."

Tuition fees for post-secondary education has risen to such levels, where education inaccessible. Training programs available to the unemployed and underemployed have also deteriorated, due to being less funded and under provincial jurisdiction. National standards for training have been abolished, with much of the training being privatized.

Disabled Workers

All workers face challenges, but disabled workers face a double-burden. Each disability has its own set of problems to contend with. The labour movement must take up the cause of these members to find ways to ensure their inclusion and participation.

At the last Convention, a motion was passed calling on the Federation and its affiliates to ensure events are accessible to all members. Letters were sent out encouraging unions to make a similar commitment to accessibility. It is hoped that the incoming Committee will survey the affiliates to see what progress has been in meeting this commitment.

The Committee has developed an accessibility form for use at all AFL events. This form allows members to identify their mobility, hearing and sight requirements. It ensures that all workers will be able to be active participants in the Federation.

The Committee feels that translation should be provided; whether it be sign language or Braille. Opposition to this has been based primarily on the costs such translation would involve. We find this argument to be weak - we would never allow our employers to use this argument. Just as employers and unions have a duty to accommodate in the workplace, we in the labour movement have a moral duty to accommodate disabled workers.

The work of the human rights and international solidarity committee continues to play an important role in the Federation. By educating members in human rights and international solidarity issues; by lobbying all levels of national and international governments for changes; by identifying current trends; and by recommending changes within the Federation and the labour movement, we hope that we are able to achieve progress in promoting solidarity, social justice and equity for all workers at home and abroad.

The struggle continues!

In Solidarity,

Respectfully submitted on behalf of the Committee,

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