

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

The Human Rights & International Solidarity Committee had an active 2007 – 2009 term. Over our two year mandate the work of the Committee continues to be a tremendous task and challenge. The state of human rights does not seem to improve substantially. Peace, economic, social, political and cultural rights continue to be threatened and violated around the world. This was especially noticeable in the second half of 2008 which posed new challenges and barriers for workers around the world due to the economic crisis that most governments did not want to admit to until very late. As well, it proved a particular challenge for migrant workers who had to leave their homes and countries in order to find jobs that will help them bring food to the table. In Canada we have seen an increase in the use and abuse of temporary foreign workers: first as a source of cheap labour; and then once the crisis deepened as disposable workers with no protection at all. Where are their basic human rights?

Peace continues to be elusive as war has taken centre stage in Iraq and Afghanistan. The beginning of this year saw the invasion of the Gaza Strip by the Israeli armed forces, killing over a thousand Palestinians. We also need to mention other wars that have created entire zones of people being displaced: Sri Lanka; Somalia; Sudan; and more lately in Madagascar. The United

Nations has been unable to put an end to these wars. In Latin America, the Colombian war has continued for about forty years now; thousands of trade unionists, peasants, indigenous people and human rights activists have been killed and no resolution is in sight.

The end of 2008 and the beginning of 2009 saw workers facing the worst economic crisis since the big depression of the 1920s and 30s. The capitalists of the financial sector have created this economic crisis and now they are crying for help. For decades they have tried to downsize governments and the role of the state but now they do not hesitate to ask for a bailout from the state with taxpayers' money. Where did the billions of dollars in profits go? In the meantime, millions of workers are losing their jobs around the world because of this crisis.

We still see people dying because of hunger and wars. Human rights activists continue to be put in jail and tortured. The biggest 'democracy', the USA and particularly under the Bush administration legitimized torture with such implementations as the "extraordinary rendition" programs. Under this program suspected terrorists are transferred to countries which are known to employ torture.

Here at home the situation is still challenging. Aboriginal people continue

to have the highest level of unemployment, resulting in malnutrition, addictions and marginalization. Land claims like the Lubicon Band in Northern Alberta have not been settled. The killing and disappearance of aboriginal women have not been resolved. Neither the federal nor the provincial government has taken any action as more than 500 aboriginal women have been killed in the last decades as reported by the Stolen Sisters campaign.

Workers rights, which are human rights, are not fully recognized as is the case of agricultural workers. They do not have the full right to organize into unions. The right to collective bargaining is not entrenched in our Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Big corporations such as Wal-Mart have the upper hand; and in the grossest fashion denied workers the right to form a union.

In simple terms these are the conditions we are facing today as workers. These conditions pose a constant challenge to the labour movement. Labour needs to come up with creative actions to continue to challenge this reality and change it for the betterment of society as a whole.

INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY

This Committee focused on a number of international solidarity issues. We signed two petitions in 2008. One was to pressure the Harper government into sending more money to Cuba for hurricane relief. Cubans were left in extreme devastation when the four hurricanes – Fay, Gustav, Hanna and Ike battered Cuba causing tremendous damage and destruction, the likes of

which Cuba had not seen in the last four decades. More than two and a half million people had to be evacuated and more than four hundred thousand homes were damaged. Plantations and farm lands were destroyed as well as power lines which were toppled.

All this has affected both the social and economic lives of the people of Cuba. The U.S. embargo will also interfere with Cuba's ability to bring in the supplies that it needs for recovery. The Government of Canada pledged only \$400,000 in aid through the Red Cross and the Red Crescent Societies for the reconstruction and redevelopment of Cuba. All concerned Canadians across Canada were campaigning for our government to pledge significant donations towards the Cuban Hurricane Relief efforts. The good news is that due to all this pressure the government has upped their figures to over a million dollars.

The second petition was for the repatriation of Omar Khadr to Canada from the U.S. military prison in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. His lawyer Dennis Edney of Edmonton has made several pleas to the Harper government to bring Khadr home and have him tried in Canada.

Omar Khadr is a child soldier and the only child in modern times to be charged with murder. He is a Canadian by birth but was taken to Afghanistan at the age of eleven by his parents. At fifteen he was working for a Libyan warlord in a military camp and shortly after that was caught in a firefight between armed Afghan militants and U.S. military forces. During this encounter he was struck by 500 pounds

of shrapnel, wounded and taken as a prisoner to the Bagram prison and later transferred to Guantanamo Bay where he was tortured and interrogated for more than two years. He was eventually charged with murder for killing a U.S. soldier during the firefight. His family's actions can be construed as child abuse and his actions in battle as that of a child soldier. He has now been in Guantanamo in solitary confinement and tortured for years by U.S. officials. His lawyer, D. Edney, would like to see Khadr back in Canada after the shut-down of Guantanamo Bay where he can be monitored closely until he is able to integrate back into Canadian society.

As well, the Committee, in conjunction with the Palestine Solidarity Network (PSN), helped sponsor Dr. Norman Finkelstein's lecture at the University of Alberta. The event was overall very positive and had to be moved to a larger venue due to the number of people who called to reserve a spot at the lecture. The PSN reported that the event "received an overwhelmingly positive response and led to wide public discussion about the state of affairs in the Middle East both on campus and in the community," which was precisely what the PSN hoped would happen. Although the issue is extremely divisive and controversial the long-standing Israeli/Palestinian conflict must be brought into the public arena in order to pressure world governments to demand that Israel immediately withdraw from the occupied territories and abide by resolutions issued by the United Nations.

HUMAN RIGHTS CONFERENCE

"Moving Forward: Challenges and Opportunities for a diverse workplace and community," was a one and one-half day conference held February 2009 which looked at a combination of issues facing today's workers. The conference saw participation from 75 delegates who represented 24 different locals and organizations. This was the first time the HR&IS Committee partnered with other standing committees of the AFL to host a Conference. The WOCAW Committee presented workshops on aboriginal workers and racism; the Pride and Solidarity (GLBT) Committee's workshop was entitled *Pride & Solidarity*; and the HR&IS Committee prepared a workshop around the issue of temporary foreign workers. Overall, the HR&IS Committee felt this sharing of resources, talent, solidarity and delegates not only led to a successful conference but was a cost-saving measure for the affiliates as well.

The Conference opened with three keynote speakers: Karl Flecker (CLC); Albert Johnson (UFCW 1118); and Cindy McCallum-Miller (CUPW). Each speaker's presentation related to one of the four workshop topics. The evening concluded with a social and performances by aboriginal drummers and dancers from Enoch; the Borneo Cultural Association lion dancers; an East Indian dancer; and the People's Poets.

On the second day of the conference, the participants rotated through two of the four workshops. During lunch, delegates viewed a newly-released video **"Our Land, My People"** which

outlines the struggle of the Lubicon Cree. This northern Alberta Band is still struggling to achieve the reserve they were promised back in the 1930s. The Lubicon lived a traditional lifestyle until major timber and oil corporations invaded their lands to reap these resources. Since then, the animals used for sustenance have disappeared; the number of miscarriages continues to increase; and the overall health of the Lubicon Cree has been greatly affected. For more than three decades the Lubicon have attempted to negotiate with the provincial and federal governments in three main areas: self-government; land claim settlement; and restitution. The HR&IS Committee will continue to work with the Friends of the Lubicon in an effort to achieve these demands.

Report backs at the closing plenary included:

1) Temporary Foreign Workers:

We need to ensure our unions are inclusive; that issues around layoff and housing needs for TFWs are addressed; offer ELS programs in the workplace; and lobby governments to ensure that these abuses are addressed.

2) Aboriginal Workers:

We need to educate our membership on cultural diversity; when comments are made in the workplace we must

speak out when it is not right and we need to unlearn our biases.

3) Racism:

The issues are complex and must be fair to everyone; activists can bring what was learned in the workshop back to the workplace and work to strength the union by enforcing human rights policies.

4) Pride & Solidarity:

We need to build tolerance in the workplace, whether gay or straight need to speak out against gay jokes, etc., and locals need to get involved in Pride activities.

Evaluations completed by the participants indicated the workshop materials and discussions were current, informative and provoked thoughtful dialogue. The only serious drawback was there was not enough time to cover all the materials presented during the workshops.

The HR&IS Committee is looking at expanding on this event. One area that was not addressed at the conference was persons with disabilities. The Committee intends to make this issue a part of the next event.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of the Committee,

**AFL HUMAN RIGHTS AND INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY COMMITTEE
2007 – 2009**

Christina Doktor, Chair	UNA
Ricardo de Menzes, Secretary	UFCW
Ramon Antipan, AFL Council Liaison	CUPW
Asma Burney	CUPW-Edm.
Betty Lockhurst	TWU
Linda Robinson	COPE
Tom Fuller	AFL
Alan Besecker (alternate)	UNA
Wray Hoffer (alternate)	CUPW-Edm.
Nancy Furlong (information)	AFL
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Committee members who served a partial term:

Mario Pailamilla	CUPE
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