

## REPORT OF THE AFL HUMAN RIGHTS AND INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY COMMITTEE

Over the last two years the Committee functioned very well until the middle of 2006 when we had a series of set backs. Some members resigned and others could not get time off to attend. In any case, the work of the Human Rights and International Solidarity Committee always goes hand in hand with the rest of our the union work because, and at the risk of sounding cliché, workers' rights are human rights.

The overall picture of human rights does not appear to be flourishing right now. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are the worst violators of human rights. The labour movement needs to be concerned because after all those who fight these wars, either for or against, are the sons and daughters of the working class. And those who die everyday they are the sons and daughters of the working class. That is why the labour movement is calling for peace and the immediate withdrawal of Canadian troops in the Middle East.

The other consequences of these wars are the cases of racial profiling that are increasing, particularly against those who are identified as Muslims. Anti-terrorist legislation has been introduced everywhere, restricting the mobility of particular ethnic groups. Immigration regulations have been also tightens up. However, the persistence and perseverance of peace groups, unions, progressive sectors of different churches, social justice organizations, women and youth organizations, who are struggling for peace and democracy have scored important victories. One such victory is the Mahar Arar case. Without Mahar and his family's tenacity plus the real support from these progressive organizations this victory would not have been possible. The labour movement played a crucial role. That is why

we urge you, brothers and sisters from all different unions to never surrender our fundamental freedoms and human rights. This case in turn highlighted international solidarity as well because there was a lot of international support.

The other important victory to highlight in our struggle for human rights is the decision of the Ontario Supreme Court on the definition of terrorism. Justice Douglas Rutherford ruled that the definition of terrorist activity in the Anti-terrorism Act contradicts constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion, expression and association contained in the Charter. Right now this legislation appears to target Muslims, but it could have broader application against any number of beliefs and convictions that could affect environmentalist or trade unionists.

At the 2005 Convention we passed a resolution condemning the use of Security Certificates. Recently, the Supreme Court of Canada by unanimous vote struck down the Security Certificate Process, this procedure has been used to indefinitely hold and deport suspected terrorist. The Supreme Court ruled that this process will be suspended for a one year period so the federal government will have time to draft new security procedures that provide the rights of detainees to see the evidence against them and prepare their defense.

Although these are important victories from a judicial and legal point of view we cannot rest in the struggle to preserve and advance human rights.

On the international scene we continue to see the spread of violence and brutal repression against indigenous people and against trade unionists, particularly in Iraq and Colombia.

Colombia continues to have one of the most repressive governments. Trade unionists continue to be killed for the simple reason of wanting to have a union and fair collective agreements.

Here at home the picture has not gotten any better since the last Convention. We are still seeing the poor treatment to our aboriginal population, the disregard of the governments for the most disadvantaged, and the federal government cutting funds to women's organizations. In Alberta despite the booming economy, workers do not see or enjoy the full benefit of this booming economy. Employers, with the help of governments, and the so-called labour shortage, continue to pit worker against worker as in the case temporary foreign workers. However those who are coming here do not get the full benefits as other workers and are treated as third class human beings. The labour movement has a responsibility and role to play in defending the rights of these workers that greedy employers take advantage of.

Another sad development for Alberta is the provincial government's decision which introduced child labour legislation by forcing 12 years old boys and girls to work for a living instead of enjoying their life as a child. Further, in the most draconian action yet they had decided that 12 years old could work in bars. But thanks to the actions of the AFL this decision had a short life.

It is appalling how Alberta's labour legislation tramples worker's rights to form a union or negotiate collective agreement freely. Employers are taking full advantage and try to quash workers when they try to exercise their rights as is in the case of the Palace Casino workers who by the time of this Convention if they are still on strike will have close to 250 days on the picket line. So much for human rights!

Brothers and Sisters, this is only a very small picture of the state of human rights and the reality under which unions have to stage our

fight for workers' rights. We hope that every union member realizes that unless we fight for and achieve full human rights the struggle will not be over.

The Committee focused on six main areas:

- Leonard Peltier
- Sensitivity Training
- Building Bridges & Sharing Struggles Workshop
- Africa/Venezuela/Colombia
- Website
- Self identification

## LEONARD PELTIER

Leonard Peltier (born [September 12, 1944](#)) is a [Native American](#) activist and member of the [American Indian Movement](#). On February 6<sup>th</sup>, 1976, Leonard Peltier was arrested in Alberta, Canada at the request of the American Government. In 1977 he was convicted and sentenced to two consecutive terms of life imprisonment for the murders of two [FBI](#) Agents who died during a 1975 shoot-out on the [Pine Ridge Indian Reservation](#). The information given to Canadian officials as reason for extradition has subsequently been proven false. In fact, the prosecutor for the US government has admitted they do not know who killed the two FBI agents.

There has been considerable debate over Peltier's guilt and the fairness of his trial. Some supporters and organizations, including [Amnesty International](#), consider him to be a [political prisoner](#). Numerous appeals have been filed on his behalf; however, none have ruled in his favor. Peltier is currently incarcerated at the United States Penitentiary in [Lewisburg, Pennsylvania](#).

Some of our actions around Leonard Peltier were: letters to President George W. Bush, the Canadian Justice Minister and the US Leonard Peltier Defense Committee (LPDC) requesting action to secure Leonard's immediate release; the purchase of 100 Leonard Peltier Defense Committee T-shirts as a

fundraising effort and behalf of the LPDC and an action component at the Building Bridges Workshop.

In the words of Leonard Peltier: *“If you avoid breaking laws and do what you’re told and ignore the poor, the oppressed and the downtrodden – you probably won’t be bothered. If you try to right what is wrong, however, you will surely meet great opposition and run the risk of imprisonment and death.”*

## **SENSITIVITY TRAINING**

There are still many racist attitudes in today’s society. Sensitivity training is designed to help understand the cultural and spiritual differences of minority groups from main stream cultures. It is designed to help authority figures like national and local police forces identify discriminatory behaviours towards visible minorities. Although it is generally intended for those in power positions it is something that everyone can benefit from.

The Committee does not intend to offer this kind of training but to enter into discussions with the RCMP, EPS and CPS to gain knowledge around who does their training, when is it offered, do female officers receive different training from male officers and to discuss issues around racism and picket line protocols.

Our Committee will continue to work with like-minded organizations such as: NAARR (Northern Alberta Alliance of Race Relations), ECAWR (Edmonton Coalition against War and Racism) and the Fort McMurray Multicultural Association on this issue. Labour needs to be a part of this, more upfront and more numbers.

## **BUILDING BRIDGES & SHARING STRUGGLES WORKSHOP**

The concept of building bridges is spreading throughout the country many other labour organizations are now holding building bridges events.

The 2006 Workshop was held March 21<sup>st</sup> (the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination) at the Canadian Native Friendship Centre in Edmonton. The fundamental concept of these workshops has been to bring the development of issues to the front line of society in dealing with fairness of people in the work place and within main stream society.

Even though the numbers were low we still felt that the conference was a success. One of the issues that was brought to the table was the fact there are many acts of discrimination in the work place. Another point that was made was the glass ceiling effect in relation to aboriginal people. There are still limitations to how high up the economic and the employment ladder they can go.

Two actions that were presented at the workshop were on Leonard Peltier and the Stolen Sisters. The Stolen Sisters Campaign has two main goals; that the federal government institute measures to ensure that police thoroughly investigate all reports of missing women and girls; and that they provide adequate, stable funding to the frontline organizations that provide culturally-appropriate services such as shelter, support and counselling to help Indigenous women and girls escape from harm’s way. The Leonard Peltier Defense Committee wants the all-important public education efforts on Leonard’s behalf to continue. Keep writing Congress about FBI misconduct in Indian Country and urge the members of the House and Senate Judiciary Committees to hold hearings on the Pine Ridge "Reign of Terror".

It was stressed this type of workshop is more of a tool than an employment opportunity. We need to promote it as the liaison between workers and the workplace. Other suggestions to increase awareness were to promote the workshop at annual aboriginal events; student union events and employment fairs.

For a variety of reasons, not the least of which was lack of quorum, we had to postpone this year's workshop, however, we plan to continue in 2008.

## **AFRICA/VENEZUELA/COLOMBIA**

The focus on Africa was AIDS/HIV. We attempted to establish contact with union-based organizations in South Africa such as the ICFTU-AFRO, SACTUCC and OTUWA. It was very difficult connecting with the right person but this work is ongoing.

The Executive Council approved our request for a donation to the Hands Off Venezuela group as well as sending information to the affiliates asking them to get involved. There will be a speaker from Venezuela at this convention

The actions regarding Colombia were to identify groups we want to partner with for a more formal connection, capture what different unions are doing on the issues and focus on the killing of trade union leaders in that country. Many CUPW locals have written letters, however, the President of the postal workers in Colombia had to go into hiding because of death threats and it is expected that communication will get harder. Many union activists and leaders in Colombia disappear or are found dead.

The Committee will continue to focus on these areas.

## **WEBSITE**

This work is still in progress. Once the Committee has determined what we actually want on the website, AFL staff can begin developing it. Some of the campaigns we will focus on for the website are: December 6<sup>th</sup> and Stolen Sisters; March 21<sup>st</sup> – International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination; and December 10<sup>th</sup> – International Human Rights Day.

## **SELF-IDENTIFICATION**

A questionnaire was developed and used for the first time at the 2007 School. It will be used at all future AFL events. This tool will help understand the social stratification of events that the AFL sponsors.

## **SWEAT FREE POLICY**

The Committee's work on procurement policies for the City of Edmonton and the University of Alberta is ongoing.

A letter was sent to the International Olympic Committee and the Canadian Olympic Committee on the issue of sweat free clothing for Olympic and Paralympic athletes. At the 2006 Olympics a large number of clothing items were made in sweatshops in China.

We are also involved with the Justice Garments organization. They are working to eliminate maquiladoras in Central America and establish a co-op where workers can produce union made clothing under decent working conditions and pay.

Some of the other organizations that the Human Rights and International Solidarity Committee supports and/or works in partnership with are:

- Alberta Committee for Citizens with Disabilities
- Maquila Solidarity Network
- Change for Children.
- Students Taking Action in Chiapas (STAC)
- Canadian Peace Alliance
- Amnesty International.
- Nelson Mandela Children's Fund (Canada).
- Red Wire Magazine

Respectfully submitted on behalf of the Committee,

**Human Rights & International  
Solidarity Committee, 2005 – 2007**

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