

## Thoughts and Observations about the 2014 CLC Convention

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During the week of May 5th to 9th, I attended the 2014 Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) in Montreal as a delegate representing TEAM IFPTE Local 161. TEAM's membership in the CLC is through its affiliation with the IFPTE.

The convention participants came from every part of Canada to meet, share ideas, debate labour policy, and decide union action plans for the coming three years. Approximately 4.600 delegates attended this year, representing 3.3 million CLC unionized workers.

What I appreciated most was the opportunity to hear from and talk to many interesting people. Here are some of the things I heard, as well as some random thoughts:

- Strangers would call each other "Brother" and "Sister". The CLC is a fraternal organization, and the general mood was friendly and positive.
- Montreal is truly a bilingual City where people just want to communicate and don't have an axe to grind. Conversations flit back and forth between English and French and nobody bats an eyelash. It gave me the chance to practise my very poor French, and my victims all smiled and were patient with me.
- Denis Codere, the mayor of Montreal, welcomed us warmly and said the union movement is essential to the future of the City. It made me reflect how unlikely it would be to hear such a statement from our Mayor in Winnipeg. Codere noted in particular that he stood behind the postal workers in the fight to protect home delivery service for mail.
- Following comments by Ontario Conservative leader Tim Hudak in favour of "Right to Work" anti-labour legislation, outgoing CLC president Ken Georgetti and incoming President Hassan Yussuff both reacted, declaring there would be an immediate full response from labour if such a policy were to be enacted.
- For the coming three years the CLC will be sponsoring a public awareness campaign called "Fairness Works", promoting unionism, social justice, better pensions for all (not just union members), expansion of the Canada Pension Plan, curtailing of the Foreign Temporary Workers program and creation of a path to citizenship for foreign workers now working here, and reminders about the many benefits all Canadians enjoy because of the labour movement.
- From the outset of the convention it was apparent that many delegates felt the leadership was not sufficiently engaged at the Local level, and that there was not enough consultation in decision making. The depth of this sentiment became apparent on the fourth day of the convention when the delegates voted to elect a new president.

- Sharon Barron President of the Trade Unions Council for the United Kingdom spoke about the consequences of neo-liberal austerity policies currently in place in several European countries. Lower wages, higher unemployment, no benefits,, in short governments declaring war on their own workers has become the new normal. She said that the Canadian government's adherence to the austerity orthodoxy has resulted in an economy where 51% of Canadians say their incomes have fallen behind the cost of living, and 53% cannot save anything. Only a wealthy minority benefits. She concluded saying that labour is the voice of opposition and the voice of progress and that 73% Canadians agree that workplaces with unions are better workplaces, and that labour must aggressively organize and spearhead a new industrial revolution.
- On Tuesday I attended an evening forum on taxation policy, where the principal speaker was Alex Himmelfarb, former member of the Privy Council and author of "Tax is not a Four Letter Word". Himmelfarb points out that nobody likes paying income taxes, but they are essential to the working of a civil society. The anti-tax fetish of many conservatives and libertarians serves only to weaken the social fabric and widen the divide between the haves and have nots.
- Frank Graves from ECOS research outlined what he called the defining current social issue: the end of economic progress. He said that despite denials from right wing commentators that the public mood is pessimistic and belief in a better economic future is dwindling. The middle class knows that it is stagnating, and that the "1%" holds all the cards. He sees two possible paths. The first being a continued trend toward lower wages, no internal investment, and foreign imports, and the second being a long term strategy for expanded education programs, social and industrial investment and participation in a global economy that serves the citizens.
- Delegate comments "I never imagined that so many workers would be working full time yet living on the edge of poverty". "We have failed the younger generation ... we need a new vision for working class politics".
- The name Thomas Piketty, author of "Capital in the 21st Century" came up a number of times. Piketty's rigorously researched thesis is that unregulated capitalism leads to catastrophic social inequality, and that effective national and trans-national regulation of markets is essential to social stability.
- On Wednesday evening the delegates of TEAM IFPTE local 161, WAPSO IFPTE Local 162 (Winnipeg) and the Society of Energy Professionals IFPTE local 160, (Ontario), along with IFPTE staff and President Greg Juneman met for supper in downtown Montreal. We had a great discussion about our respective organizations and plans for the future.
- Paul Moist, CUPE president, spoke about taxation policy and said that the only rationale for corporate tax cuts should be job creation and record of local employment.
- A delegate from the Ontario Teachers Union talked about the culture of secrecy surrounding the current CETA negotiations (Canadian-European trade deal). Leaked text indicates that the terms, if ratified, will cost Canadians many jobs. Canadian governments will be forbidden to favour local industry when making purchasing decisions - no favoritism for Bombardier, for example. A delegate from UNIFOR said CETA is an example of radical right wing thinking, and labour needs to do a better job of explaining CETA to the public.

- Thursday was voting day, and it proved to be an unexpectedly exciting exercise in democracy. After five hours of balloting Hassan Yussuff was elected as the new CLC president, defeating incumbent Ken Georgetti who had been president for the past fifteen years. Marie Clark-Walker and Donald Lafleuer were elected as Vice Presidents, and Natalie Byers was elected secretary-treasurer. As it turned out, all the candidates favoured by the IFPTE were successful.
- There was an explosion of cat calls when one delegate came to the podium wearing a Boston Bruins jersey. He sheepishly promised to wear Montreal colours next time.

I could go on at some length to discuss the many resolutions which were debated on the floor, or the fascinating logistics of running a five-day meeting with over 4,000 people in one room (and seemingly only one bathroom). The conference opened my eyes to some new perspectives on economic and social issues, as well as some of the complex machinery of practical democracy. At the end of the week I was exhausted and happy to be heading home.