

CANADIAN LABOUR CONGRESS

28TH Constitutional Convention

May 7 – 12, 2017

Delegate Report by Mary Williamson

Last month I had the privilege to attend the 2017 Canadian Labour Congress 28th Constitutional Convention in Toronto as a delegate from IBEW Local 37. With over 3000 union members from across Canada in attendance (including over 40 delegates from 13 different IBEW Locals. The Convention theme was: “Together for a Fair Future” – which focused on four key pillars: Fairness, Equity, Green Jobs, and Organizing.

The Convention program in terms of presentation topics, panel discussions, debates, and elections were exemplary. There were many passionate appeals made to support indigenous rights, Palestinian rights, LGBTQ rights, as well as other important causes and struggles. Several delegates and unions advocated for support of mental health, safety, education, and environmental, social, and economic justice.

Over the five days, there were also many inspiring speakers from across the globe sharing research, experience, victories, and strategies around the four pillars mentioned above: fairness, equity, green jobs, and organizing. For the sake of brevity, I’ve chosen to highlight some of the standout presentations that aligned very well with the four pillars.

1. FAIRNESS

International Labour Organization Director General, Guy Ryder, shared his belief that despite being “in a world that seems to be moving away from the ideals of social justice”, he is hopeful that fairness in Canada can be won with the support and strength of the Canadian labour movement. Ryder described a fair future as being inclusive, offering opportunity and equity for all, and sustainable. A quote from his presentation that resonated: “Fairness will not be gifted. Fairness will be won.”

He used the refugee crisis as an example of how when so many countries are turning their back on these helpless people, Canada has been an exception and commended our country’s honourable response.

Comedian and mental health activist, Mary Walsh, spoke about the unfairness experienced by those with mental illness, and how our system is failing them. She stressed the importance of working to improve access to proper care and to improve the mental health care system as a whole. She believes our current system doesn’t serve the people it was designed to serve. As a result, people who should be receiving treatment end up in the prison system instead. She said, “Canada’s unions can help change the system. We have a voice and we must be loud.”

Following Walsh's presentation, The CLC announced that it has developed an online mental health resource centre to help support members, unions and the public with respect to mental health at work. To access it visit: <http://canadianlabour.ca/labour-education/mental-health-work>.

2. EQUITY

I was very pleased to see the chair of the Equity panel discussion was a New Brunswicker – Beth Lyons from the New Brunswick Women's Council. The all-female panel included representatives from the National Council of Canadian Muslims, Quebec Inclusif, and Magnet (a non-profit collaborative addressing unemployment and under-employment of Canadians). Panelists discussed their vision is for an equitable future and strategies to get there.

There was consensus on the belief that unions must continue to step in, step up, and speak out when it comes to racism and discrimination and to promote more inclusive and diverse workplaces. It was suggested that another way unions can help is to ensure there is diversity within their own leadership.

Also discussed was the opportunity for unions to help bridge the gaps that exist with other groups like government, institutions, NGOs and the media to work toward mobilizing and solving equity problems together.

3. GREEN JOBS

Matt Wayland, IBEW's political strategist participated on the panel on Green Jobs and also helped write the CLC's Green Jobs policy paper. He shared that unions need to be part of the conversations around climate change and be directly involved in helping workers transition from old jobs to new ones. Wayland also took the opportunity to share how the IBEW is working with NETCO to develop green energy training for members.

The key message was that success will come not by criticizing, but with lots of dialogue and by proposing smart solutions to challenges- for example, more mass transit and retrofitting buildings.

4. ORGANIZING

Organizing remains a key goal and challenge for all unions. Building union density is paramount to helping protect workers. In an interesting presentation "State of Unions: Opportunities and Threats" from Frank Graves of EKOS Research we learned that the largest segments of our population who are open to joining a union are likely under 35, have a household income under \$50,000, disabled, indigenous, and/or a member of a visible minority. According to his research, their top priorities were fairness at work and schedule stability.

There was also a panel discussion on organizing asking participants to share their observations and strategies when it comes to organizing. Panelists shared that one of the biggest issues for people is not having the access to the benefits they should have work.

Another issue that was identified through research is that many young workers are having trouble relating to unions. They want unions to “get to know them”. They want to see people from the union, e.g., stewards, union reps. And there is a feeling that union activities/meetings are too formal and structured - where you have to know rules of order, talk into microphones, propose amendments etc. – they are “sick of this” and just “want to be able to talk the way we want to say if we like something or are unhappy.”

Other Convention Highlights:

- Election of CLC Executive: Hassan Yussuff, President (acclaimed); Marie Clarke Walker, Secretary Treasurer; Donald Lafleur, Executive Vice-President; and Larry Rousseau, Executive Vice-President
- Performance piece dedicated to missing and murdered indigenous women and girls – this is a link to the performance (at another event)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q_vqIzJofo0
- Dedication and tribute to the memory of Bob White (“celebrated as a giant in the labour movement and true working class hero”) and President of the CLC from 1992-1999 and founding president of the Canadian Auto Workers.
- 25th anniversary tribute to the Westray Mine Disaster

I would like to thank IBEW Local 37 for the opportunity to be a delegate to the CLC Convention. It was an incredible experience to network, learn, and be a part of setting priorities for the future of the CLC and the Canadian labour movement. The Convention made it very clear that unions must continue to champion these important issues – they have the ability, passion, experience and to work “Together for a Fair Future”.