

BULLETIN

Three cheers for the labour movement

August 29, 2006



By James Clancy, President

There is a point during the Canadian summer when one starts to think of the fall. It's mid-August and the garden has just peaked. Kids are complaining that they are bored. You can hear the crickets at night. It's a classic Canadian summer.

As the fall approaches my thoughts naturally start turning to the return to the normal work week - funny how after all this time out of school the fall still seems like the start of the new year.

As a trade unionist my thoughts also turn to the approach of Labour Day. It's practical concerns about school clothes for the kids but also, in mid August, labour unions and trade unionists start preparing to celebrate collective victories and losses - their very existence - on the first Monday in September.

Labour Day is a statutory holiday enjoyed by all - unionists and non-unionists. It was fought for and eventually passed into law by earlier generations of Canadians who recognized that it is a human right to join, belong to and be active in a trade union. They also recognized that the union as a collective had rights that were important.

Those generations of Canadians recognized that unions and the groups they support are an integral part of a democratic society. Not a commodity or service to purchase, but rather a real expression of a set of values and principles. At its best the labour movement is about sharing and caring and hard work.

Today, unions and unionists are struggling for air. It's a critical situation for all democrats. Successive governments in Canada and abroad have step by step gutted, denied or at best infringed upon the rights of workers and their unions over the past few decades.

In Canada, since 1982, federal and provincial governments have passed 180 pieces of legislation that govern labour relations. Of these laws, 175 adopted were intended to gut, deny, suspend or infringe upon the rights of workers. Yes, 98% of every labour relations law passed over the past 20 years has been against unions and unionists.

A country's treatment of the labour movement is often a strong indication of the status of its democracy. The old analogy of the canary in the mine is apt here - if the canary falls off its perch then everyone in the mine is in deep trouble - the canary is first to experience the effects of no air - no oxygen - it falls. When the labour movement feels its rights being choked off everyone is in deep trouble.

There is a powerful poem attributed to Pastor Martin Niemöller about the need to stay vigilant in defending democratic rights:

When the Nazis came for the communists,
I remained silent;
I was not a communist,

When they locked up the social democrats,
I remained silent;
I was not a social democrat.

When they came for the trade unionists,
I did not speak out;
I was not a trade unionist.

When they came for the Jews,
I did not speak out;
I was not a Jew.

When they came for me,
there was no one left to speak out.

I think it's reasonable to argue that the democracy that we cherish is in peril.

As democratic rights are attacked, many unions are starved of the "oxygen" they need and will wither on the vine. If our trade union movement is "choked off" the impact is not simply felt by the members of unions, there are other victims.

Among those victims are the thousands of individuals and groups that the labour movement supports. Without the assistance of the trade union movement countless community based organizations will falter and die. Local democracy suffers. Capital 'D' Democracy will be finished.

Some may not like, respect or know unions, yet in a modern democratic society no one can deny that unions indeed play a central role in civil discourse. A modern democratic society needs unions and trade unionists.

That's why I hope this Labour Day all organizations that receive support from labour unions issue a celebratory statement in support of unions and restate the fact that labour rights are human rights.

But why stop there? What about federal and provincial governments? When will a government in power, regardless of political stripe, step up and acknowledge that labour rights are human rights?

And then there are all the local school and community service boards and, heaven forbid, the board rooms of the nation?

They should demonstrate that they understand that labour rights are human rights.

As citizens we cannot allow ourselves to be either lulled into complacency - or intimidated into silence. We can respond to today's threats and at the same time open the windows to the fresh air of human rights.

Let's hear you Canada - breathe deep - three cheers for labour rights - three cheers for the labour movement.

Type:

[Bulletins](#)

Topic:

[Issues, Campaigns and Government Relations](#)

- [Print](#)
- [PDF](#)

180 East Columbia
New Westminster, BC V3L 0G7

Website
www.hsabc.org

Telephone 604-517-0994
1-800-663-2017