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BC Federation of Labour Convention 2016

What follows is a summary report on: select activities at the BC Federation of Labour Convention (“BCFL Convention”); the nature of the BCFL; and, the application of my participatory experience going forward. I write from the perspective of a PSAC delegate.

WHAT IS THE BCFL?

The labour movement is organized on national (i.e. Canadian Labour Congress), provincial (e.g. BCFL) and local levels (e.g. Vancouver District Labour Council). The BCFL is often described as the House of Labour in BC (i.e. the political arm of the BC labour movement). Affiliated unions (e.g. PSAC BC) and labour councils in BC may send delegates to the BCFL Convention which takes place every two years to vote on various motions designed to achieve a better and more just society by improving the social, political and economic well-being of workers in BC. A recent example is the BCFL’s support of the “Fight for 15” Campaign -- an initiative to pressure the provincial government to raise the minimum wage to \$15/hour in order to bring workers out of poverty. The government has since indexed the minimum wage to the cost of living and granted a rather modest increase in the wage itself. The campaign continues and is supported by PSAC.

ACTIVITIES

Public Platform. The Convention makes it possible for issues impacting the labour movement to make their way into the public domain. For example, the PSAC delegates were able to advise the Convention that, unbeknownst to the general public, for several years there was a disruption in the transmission of information from the CRA to Service Canada which is necessary to enable the accurate calculation of CPP benefits. The information transfer has since been restored but the federal government will, upon recalculation of benefits, recover overpayments from seniors but will not reimburse seniors for any underpayments -- unless asked to do so. The PSAC delegates provided this information through a motion requesting the federal government to proactively issue any underpayments arising from their system error. The motion (General Resolution 69) was unanimously passed and is contained in the Convention Book available for download from the internet. The Convention is itself the subject of media coverage which further broadens the message.

Innovative Ideas. The Community and Social Action Committee discussed the concept of a Workers' Centre. This is a place for non-unionized workers to receive support on workplace issues, training and referrals for issues outside the scope of the Centre. In addition, the Centre provides a social function enabling workers to network and build relationships. All of this makes it easier for workers to organize, campaign and lobby government. Such a facility is deserving of PSAC support. The Convention imposed a three minute time limit on delegate speakers and tracked it via a green, yellow or red light bar under the speaker's image on the jumbo screens above the dias. In addition, there was a limit on the number of speakers who could speak for and against the motion. This system is efficient and worth emulating at PSAC conferences.

Networking. Besides voting on motions, delegates could also attend Lunch and Learn sessions on various topics. I attended the one on mental health and found it most informative. The Canadian Mental Health Association website contains a wealth of resources that would be of interest to anyone involved in Occupational Health and Safety like myself. While attending this event, I got to meet Bob Kingston -- a PSAC member belonging to a different component. He is a walking encyclopedia on Occupational Health and Safety (OHS)! I now have a personal contact should I ever be stumped on an OHS matter. In addition, I discovered that the BCFL Health & Safety Centre provides training to both management and workers on various OHS topics (e.g. Incident Investigations) and that all courses include federal labour law content. These would be an excellent supplement to PSAC training.

Current Events. Often the media will ignore topics of direct interest to working people regardless of where they work or live. For example, Cindy Blackstock, Executive Director, First Nations Child & Family Caring Society of Canada (FNCFCSC) was the keynote speaker. She was incredibly inspiring, engaging, warm and intelligent. Her organization, among other things, provides scholarly resources to support First Nations communities to empower children, youth and families. In January 2016, the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal found that the federal government's inequitable provision of child welfare services and failure to properly implement Jordan's Principle was racially discriminatory against 163,000 First Nations children. FNCFCSC was instrumental in achieving this historic ruling through their research efforts. Jordan's Principle calls on the government of first contact to pay for the services and seek reimbursement later so the child does not get tragically caught in the middle of government red tape. To date, the federal government has failed to comply despite three legal orders from the Tribunal. This should offend all citizens given

that we are all expected to comply with the law and there shouldn't be a different standard for Mr. Trudeau and his cabinet ministers. Another topic that came up during the Convention was Christian Labour Association of Canada (CLAC). While motions were being made on the floor, various delegates informed the Convention that CLAC is an employer-friendly "union" that frequently undercuts trade unions in terms of industry-standard wages and working conditions that other unions struggled to improve. Interestingly, some delegates had previously worked at CLAC sites and noted the absence of shop stewards plus CLAC's willingness to accept less than provincial employment standards legislation allows in a non-union environment. Not surprisingly, this "union" is expanding into other industries and actually opposes anti-scab legislation making it the union of choice for employers seeking to undermine the interests of workers. It comes as no surprise that the labour movement across Canada is united in its desire to have such "unions" de-certified.

CONCLUSION

From OSH activities to networking to keeping informed about the latest developments and ideas, this Convention does have something for everyone. I recommend that union activists take the opportunity to attend at least once for a different "flavour" of convention. I intend to take back the knowledge I gained from the OSH activities to my Local's Health and Safety Committee. There is a serious knowledge gap that could be addressed by courses through the BCFL Health & Safety Centre and this would be a good investment for the employer to make for all committee members. In addition, the implementation of mental health principles contained on the CMHA website would go a long way towards addressing workplace issues. Finally, it's nice to make

friends in the labour movement (e.g. Bob Kingston) because you never know when you may need their expertise and solidarity makes us stronger!