

# Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) Convention Report

By: Katha Fortier. VP, CAW Local 229  
Vancouver BC  
June 10<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> 2002

Gary Muzyka, Glen Oram, Shawn Bishop and I had the privilege and pleasure of attending the CLC Convention last week. The Convention is held every three years and this is our first time attending as CAW delegates. For clarification the CLC is a federal umbrella organization of labour unions representing over 2 million Canadian workers. At the convention there are delegates from unions, labour councils, and provincial labour organizations (in Ontario known as the Ontario Federation of Labour or OFL). The CLC elects executives to run the organization, represents workers at a federal level, hires staff, runs several committees (ie. Human rights, women's, etc) lobbies governments, provides worker education, develops and provides material for education and campaigns, and deals with disputes between unions.

Speaking of disputes, many of you may recall that the CAW was sanctioned by the CLC and effectively kicked out for about a year and a half for the alleged 'raiding' of us, former SEIU members. A deal was finally struck between the parties about 1 year ago to finally end the dispute, but as you can well imagine, there are still some hard feelings remaining. Part of the incentive to end the dispute is that the CLC is run on per capita tax paid by national unions. When the per capita from the CAW was stopped, the CLC did experience some financial difficulties, so there was that added incentive to settle the dispute.

The convention was held at Canada Place on the Vancouver waterfront. This is one of the few places in Canada large enough to hold the over 3000 delegates who registered. Unions and Labour Councils submitted resolutions to the convention and they were put together in what looked like a phone book. Prior to the convention committees made up of the CLC executive grouped the resolutions into similar topics and then either combined, or made recommendations on them (ie. To concur or not to concur). At the convention we were given another binder with the committees reports in addition to emergency resolutions and a ton of other miscellaneous paper. The various committees gave reports and recommendations, which were then debated on the floor and voted on. The room was actually set up with 4 giant screens and 8 microphones throughout the floor (some marked pro and some marked con if you were speaking against a resolution) and if you wanted to speak to an issue you got in line early and hoped you got to the mike before someone called the question. (which would bring the matter to a vote if passed). Since I really don't want to make this report too long I will try to only report on the major and controversial resolutions and events.

The first controversial resolution came on Monday afternoon. The recommendation from the committee was to have a disputes mechanism in place, more similar to the format used in the Quebec Federation of Labour that would help eliminate the lengthy and costly dispute we went through with CAW and SEIU. (The off side of this resolution was, that at this point, it won't be an actual constitutional change, and could only be used if both unions had signed on to this in advance; some unions will, but many won't and will rely on the costly, and ineffective justification process in the constitution. But it was agreed by the CAW caucus and other like-minded unions that this was a good start). Unions such as Service Employee's International Union (their current leader Sharleen Stewart talked about "when I was raided", making it clear she still doesn't get just who the union really is), United Food and Commercial Workers Union, Steel Workers union and even Ontario Public Service Union all spoke against the resolution and were very clear that they did not support union members changing unions for any reason, even though it was hard to deny that the current justification process is inadequate. Paul Forder the head of CAW organizing (you may remember he spoke at our steward training in April) spoke in favour of the resolution, as did some other progressive labour leaders including Judy Darcy of CUPE. Our National President Buzz Hargrove took the stand to an unbelievably rude round of booing from the SEIU/UFCW/Steel Workers groups. You all would have been proud, as we were, of how well he handled himself and how well he spoke about what we had gone through and what unions must do to become legitimate and accountable organizations for working people. Sister Nancy Riche, the now retired CLC Secretary Treasurer of the CLC was chairing the meeting at the time, and handled the situation beautifully with a few brief words about respect. Not very long afterwards, the question was called and the resolution passed with a very clear majority. (As Buzz waited at the mike for the booing to stop one creative CAW member behind him held up a "Buzz is great" handmade sign for the giant camera's to see. It was great!)

On Tuesday a resolution concerning support for the NDP was on the floor and some of you may have read in the Globe in Mail the headline about Buzz being booed on this topic. Believe me it was nothing compared to the booing he received on Monday! Anyways, Buzz was speaking in support of the resolution, but that the NDP now had a chance to rebuild the party with the leadership change and make itself more relevant for working people. He talked about how only 13% of union members belong to the NDP now, and that they need to move back to the political left and represent workers. He also commented on the NDP's move to be more representative of business, stating that business already had several political parties working for them. Buzz may have been booed by some, but he was cheered by many more. CAW members can make a lot of noise when they want to, and there are other unions that don't mind progress. Some other speakers felt that labour should support the NDP at any cost and in spite of any unfriendly labour policies they may bring about when in political power. There were some thinly veiled attacks on Buzz, but in the end this resolution passed too.

There was overwhelming support for resolutions to continue the fight to preserve and improve public medicare. On Wednesday afternoon the delegates marched to support medicare and the crowd was huge. A committee recommendation to water down some resolutions that would include specific seats for youth delegates at convention was sent back to the committee from the floor and major improvements were seen there before it was passed. I won't go into any more detail about resolutions, but if anyone has any questions or would like to see the material please let me know. I keep everything!

The CLC also recognized the retirement of two top executive members; VP Jean-Claude Parrot and Secretary-Treasurer Nancy Riche. I attended a Women's Gathering on the Monday evening and was quite sorry my brothers couldn't attend to see the wonderful tribute to Nancy. I had an opportunity to meet her a few years back in our old union days when I was on the CLC women's Committee and she was the Chair – what an amazing woman and trade unionist! And so funny; she told a story about a women's protest at a fancy hotel where the women had been roped off by the police. She told him to be careful as they were likely to break out – in song. It was an enjoyable evening with many unions giving tribute. I joined our CAW sisters in a singing/dancing tribute which was great!

Commissioner on the Future of Health Care in Canada, Roy Romanow spoke to the delegates. His message was to remind us to not let the heat up on the commission and to continue to remind him, and encourage our members to remind him at every opportunity about the value of our medicare system.

One of the most controversial and exciting events of the convention was the election. The CLC has 4 full time top officers; President (Ken Georgetti from the Steel Workers Union who was acclaimed for a second term), Secretary-Treasurer (Nancy Riche who resigned), and two Executive VP's; Hassan Yussuff (who ran this term for Secretary-Treasurer and won) and Jean-Claude Parrot (who also resigned). The National Union of Public Employee's (an umbrella group for some public sector unions) ran a candidate, James Clancy against Hassan for Secretary Treasurer. It was really interesting to watch, and to be a part of the campaigning to get Hassan elected. Some unions supported Clancy solely because Hassan is former CAW and there are those who hold a grudge. In the end, Hassan won with a large majority of the over 3000 ballots counted. There was some discussion as to whether the CAW would continue to be a part of the CAW if Hassan was not successful, but thankfully we didn't have to go there. Marie Clarke Walker of CUPE and Barb Byers of the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour were elected executive VP's.

I am amazed if you are still reading this report! It really was a remarkable experience. We had opportunities to connect with the more than 300 CAW delegates from across the country and to meet delegates from many unions and labour councils. Our National President Buzz Hargrove took the time to assure our group that having us as part of the union was well worth the controversy. It was a proud week to be a CAW member!