



Nova Scotia
Federation
of Labour, CLC

Thursday, August 30, 2007

A Labour Day Message from Rick Clarke, President of the Nova Scotia Federation of Labour

Halifax, N.S. - While it is extremely important that we gather and celebrate Labour Day and the many contributions and gains made by workers; it is equally important we commit ourselves to the ongoing struggle to protect and secure worker's rights; to maintain the gains made over the years by and for workers and to the continuing struggle to improve the overall working conditions and quality of life for all workers and their families.

Although, we may hear great accolades being bestowed from representatives of government, as well as from some employers and/or their organizations, on the valued contributions made by workers; we must be aware and remember that many of these comments are but hollow words; passed on because of the intent of the day and not to truly celebrate with us, for if they were sincere, we would not see the continued and ongoing attack on worker's rights and benefits

No clearer example of this crass and needless attack on workers' rights need or can be found than the MacDonald government's attack on the Collective Bargaining rights of the health care workers of this province; taking away their right to strike, under the guise of stabilizing health care, despite the fact this is an action rarely used -- three legal hospital strikes in 25 years.

We believe this initiative is employer driven and supported, in conjunction with and under the umbrella of the Nova Scotia Association of Health Organizations (NSAHO), with the sole purpose or intent of getting the upper hand at the bargaining table.

It doesn't seem that Premier MacDonald has thought this legislation through. Instead of creating an unnecessary conflict with nurses and health care workers, he should be focusing on things that will shorten wait times and stop ER closures. Taking away their rights will make it even more difficult for Nova Scotia to attract and retain the nurses and health care workers we need.

It is clear the government has no interest in an honest attempt to improve collective bargaining in the province. Evidence for this comes in part from the fact its discussion paper has two predetermined outcomes; essential services legislation, which even Environment and Labour Minister Mark Parent recently called unfair to workers, or compulsory arbitration.

The Coalition of seven Unions affected by this legislation has informed Premier MacDonald and Minister Parent that it will not consult with government while

these predetermined outcomes remain in place. If Mr. MacDonald decides he would like to enter into a genuine discussion of ways to improve bargaining in the province, he simply needs to take his predetermined outcomes off the table and the members of this Coalition would be happy to begin discussions.

Another clear reflection of the apparent disregard the MacDonald government has for workers' rights and benefits is seen in Labour Day itself. In October 2006, when the MacDonald government gave up the fight against Sunday shopping, they went a step further than any or most other Canadian jurisdictions; announcing that all stores can now be open 364 days a year, with the exception of Remembrance Day.

When Premier MacDonald became aware of the announcements that some malls and some big-box stores would be open on September 3rd, Labour Day, he made it clear he has no plans to force stores to close their doors on Labour Day stating, 'We've made our decision and we're standing by that decision'.

The public debate in 2006 had been over Sunday shopping and had not included a goal or push to undermine the few statutory holidays provided to workers of Nova Scotia; yet the MacDonald government threw them in anyway and now workers must work on their holiday – Labour Day.

Canada's manufacturing sector is in a crisis. High energy prices, a high dollar, and worsening trade deficits with Asia have caused many Canadian plants to reduce output, layoff workers or close altogether. Over the past five years, Canada's economy has lost over 300,000 of its best-paying jobs and continues to lose hundreds more every week. These were jobs with good salaries. They offered benefits that helped people raise healthy families and plan for a decent retirement. They came with incomes that supported local businesses and paid for social services that raised everyone's quality of life.

There are those who will, using statistics, attempt to explain away this crisis as nothing more than a natural evolution of the Canadian economy. New jobs are being created to replace those that are lost.

What they fail to mention is that those 300,000 jobs lost, over the past five years paid an average of \$20.68 per hour (plus benefits and pensions). At the same time, a disproportionate number of the new jobs being created pay much less, with few if any benefits, and very often are insecure, temporary, part-time or of the self-employed variety.

This crisis in manufacturing is not something that is happening somewhere else. Nova Scotians, as well as others in Atlantic Canada, are reeling from announcements of the loss of more and more manufacturing jobs, due to announced plant closures with the production being moved south of the border, to the US or Mexico.

Although there is much concern and anger being voiced over the announced closures and intent to move production elsewhere, to enhance the profit margin of the corporation; the real anger needs to be focused on the government policies that permit this to happen – the Free Trade Agreements. These agreements had been hatched in the backrooms, without benefit of public debate

and the results have been devastating to workers, their families, their communities and our economy in general.

Canadian workers, industry and business have the ability to compete with other manufacturing markets around the world. We have the skills and the people. What we lack is a plan.

Every country takes steps to protect its industries. Why isn't Canada doing the same? The staggering loss of manufacturing jobs – 100,000 this year alone! – is the result of our government's flawed pursuit of free trade agreements and their eagerness to please foreign trading partners at any cost. Vital sectors of our economy are being irrevocably damaged by this neglect. Still, government does nothing.

It is time for an open and public debate on what's really needed for sound economic recovery, to address and stop the haemorrhage of loss of our manufacturing capacity and the resulting out migration of our skilled labour and youth; and to rebuild our communities – a Made in Canada Jobs Strategy.

As a part of the CLC national campaign, we ask everyone to take the time over the next few weeks to contact their elected politicians – at all levels, municipal, provincial and federal – to tell them that there are measures they can adopt immediately to improve Canada's jobs situation. Most notably:

- Made in Canada purchasing policies by public institutions;
- Join with labour and business to look at what can be done to improve jobs in specific sectors of the economy or region of the country;
- Stabilize energy costs and adopt strategies to offset the impact of the high Canadian dollar; and
- Raise the minimum wage to \$10 per hour, which is just about the poverty line for a single person with no dependents.

It's time the collective voices of people who work for wages to be heard to remind our elected representatives who they really work for and what are the real priorities.

From time to time we still hear some ask 'what is the value of unions' and this question can never go unchallenged, simply by restating the obvious.

The goal of every union is to protect workers from exploitation, unfair wages and unsafe working conditions. Unionized workers earn an average of five dollars per hour more than non-union workers. They also enjoy benefits like pensions, health plans and disability insurance through the collective bargaining of their union in addition to higher job security, better protection from harassment and discrimination at work.

Where unions exist, everyone in the community reaps the rewards. Jobs that pay fair wages and give their workers benefits, a health plan and a pension not only

take care of a single person, they take care of entire families and support communities. When working people do well, business does well and Canada does well.

On behalf of the Executive Council, staff and the 70,000 affiliated members of the Nova Scotia Federation of Labour I would like to wish all an enjoyable and safe Labour Day weekend.

-30-

For more information, please contact Rick Clarke at 454.6735 (office) 434.5612 (home)

CAW Local 4005

3700 Kempt Rd., Suite 225, Halifax, N.S., B3K 4X8
phone 902.454.6735 **fax** 902.454.7671 **email** nsfl@ns.aliantzinc.ca **website** www.nsfl.ns.ca