

***Opening Comments from NSFL President Rick Clarke
Off-Year Conference, Sydney, Saturday, November 20, 2004***

Sisters and Brothers,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to this very important off year conference of the NSFL "Building A Stronger Movement - Our Province Our Future"

I believe that the outcome of this weekend will be far more than "I attended the off year conference" - this conference will define and strengthen us as a movement and will help set the course of future campaigns and actions; in the on-going struggle for Justice, Equality and Dignity for All.

The Agenda of this conference is a busy one and this will definitely be a working conference - with you - Sisters and Brothers making a major contribution to the out-come.

This is indeed an organizing Conference - we will be discussing such crucial issues as:

- ensuring the relevancy of unions
- organizing the unorganized
- the fight for free collective bargaining
- organizing the organized and
- social change and community solidarity.

The format of the conference will have a plenary speaker for each topic after which you will go to your respective workshop for each session to discuss what you have heard and to answer questions which will help formulate future directions as we move forward with a people's agenda.

On each of these very important topics the vast majority of time is allotted for you, sisters and brothers, to discuss these matters and to forward the results of your deliberations.

This format follows closely that of the CLC Mid-Term Conference and it seemed to be a very timely focus for us to take. The CLC Mid-Conference helped develop a plan of action that was discussed and approved by the CLC Executive Council in March.

The outcome of which is a desire or intent to create - in the labour movement - a new culture of organizing. Of organizing as a movement.

CLC polling that tell us that working people see and appreciate the role the labour movement plays as their forceful advocate in social, political and economic debates in this country. But the polling also tells us that there is a lot of fear... that there is a lot of reluctance... .. and that there is a serious lack of information that keeps people from identifying with us or from joining us.

We can overcome the fear, this reluctance and this lack of information.

But we cannot do it separately - each local union on its own. Or each affiliate on its own. We can only do it as a movement.

There are a lot of good and diverse unions in this province and country - Unions that represent their members well - but alone they are not a movement - We, Sisters and Brothers - collectively working together to a common goal are that movement. And we must work to ensure that every worker, unionized or not, feels some ownership of this movement. What we desire for ourselves, we wish for all.

And as we all know - to get what we want, we must organize - we must work together to the common goal. It will not be an easy task - progressive change has never come easy. But - what is worth having - is worth fighting for and worth fighting to keep.

We in this province have been vigilant and determined in the face of governments that refuse to understand and acknowledge that the right to belong to a union is a basic human right protected by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

In terms of political and social organizing, we have made great strides and have enjoyed some sweet victories; and yes we should celebrate these gains. Celebrate them for the benefits seen and celebrate them as stepping-stones for where we can go through greater organizing and commitment.

These are good foundations to build upon at this conference and in the future.

Brothers and Sisters, without the contributions unions and unionized workers make, our society, our country and - indeed - the whole world would be poorer, more mean-spirited and even more undemocratic than it is already.

Unions make the world a better place. And to protect what we have accomplished and to make the improvements we want, we - working men and women - must organize to set the political agenda. It is the only way we will defeat the attacks on everything we stand for.

Yes, we can defeat the relentless attacks on everything we value. These attacks are relentless and sometimes sneaky. Look at our public medicare system. How many times have we fought, defeated or delayed or pushed back government attempts to bring down our public medicare?

But... they come back and are trying again!

Every other day, we hear the absurd notion that commercial health care is cheaper and more efficient than the publicly-funded, and publicly-administered system we have developed.

Absurd notion, because it's been proven so many times to be wrong.

But sadly many of our generation are taking public Medicare for granted, we have forgotten that the reason we have public Medicare is because the commercial system has failed.

Absurd notion, because you and I know - from speaking to our unionized Sisters and Brothers in the U.S. - how much of their collective agreements are tied-up in private health insurance costs.

Brothers and Sisters, I believe we can and should stand proud of the efforts and successes to repel these attacks.

In varying intensity you can see the same agenda, pushed by the same greedy corporate interests, at play in every region of the country.

And everywhere working men and women and their families are saying: enough is enough.

In the media they call it "labour unrest!"

Call it as the like as long as they listen. The value of organizing is also political.

The benefit in Political organizing is that it will win better laws and better governments.

We need to make governments listen to workers' concerns.

In just the same way that we formed unions to make employers listen to workers' concerns in the workplace.

Never before has it been more important for all unions in this labour movement to be more active.

And to be seen to be more active, in order to prevail.

We have to be clear about our needs, our issues and our vision of the world we want to pass on to the next generation.

That's why it is so important that we are organized as a movement.

Organizing is not just getting a fellow worker to sign a union card... organizing means that you bring that fellow worker to join in our labour movement, to belong, to participate, as a member and as a citizen!

Organizing also means getting the public, the politicians and the governments to focus on what is important - important to workers, - not just bosses.

After all - by far the majority of the citizens of Canada are workers.

Focusing on what is important to workers, therefore means focusing on the issues that are relevant to the vast majority of citizens.

And that should be the priority of any democratic government, no matter which party is elected.

Sadly, most governments have very misplaced priorities. They pursue a corporate agenda rather than a peoples agenda. It is because we want to change that - to refocus the direction - the Canadian Labour Congress launched our Campaign for a Better Choice in the run-up to the federal elections.

This is the first time for trying something like this. In 17 areas across Canada, over 60 radio stations are featuring ads that we have paid for about the issues that matter to workers. Like accessible health care, pensions, job creation, employment insurance, job security and fair trade.

This campaign is the labour movement reminding everyone something that is so obvious, we take it for granted and we forget it!

This campaign is about reminding all workers, unionized or not, that they have power.

The power to decide what the issues are.

The power to vote... according to their own self-interest as workers and citizens.

The power to set the agenda.

The Labour Movement of Saskatchewan carried out a successful Issues Campaign prior to their most recent provincial election - seeing great success in setting the election agenda and in the election results. Our labour movement must do more of this.

We are hoping to launch an issues campaign for Nova Scotia prior to the next election - to make workers issues - election issues. To be successful it will take the support, commitment and resources of every Union in the Province - affiliated and non-affiliated.

Given the current balance in our government - I believe the opportunity is before us - to set the stage - to make some of the gains we have been seeking for so long now. The opportunity is there - we need only reach out and grab it.

As unions, we must raise and sharpen the political and economic knowledge of workers across the province. Workers have to make workplace issues into vote-determining issues so that no party can ignore them.

We hear so much in the media about gun control, military spending and corporate taxes - and these are important issues. But when do we hear anything about losses of industrial employment... or low wages... or employment insurance?

And that's wrong! - Just plain wrong!

We, the workers, we are the wealth, the health and the strength of this country.

Although we do not currently have the provincial break-down but - Did you know that along with you, the unionized workers of the Canadian Labour Congress provide Ottawa with \$22-billion a year in direct federal taxes. Twenty-two billion dollars!

The 3-million members of the Canadian Labour Congress contribute roughly 40 cents of every tax dollar collected in this country.

That should give us a say in the way things are run in this country!

And that, my friends, is why we have to organize, why we have to be politically active.

Together we must go out there and make our own issues the real political issues.

This is why I am telling you that it is not enough for people to see our labour movement as their voice and their advocate...

We have to make them feel it too.

And feel that it is their movement.

And make it easier for them to join.

Brothers and sisters, we owe it to those who struggled before us in this movement... and we owe it to our children to build a stronger movement that brings in the younger generation - that brings in more First Nations workers, more immigrant workers, more minority workers....

If we want to pass on to our children a country that believes in equality, in democracy, in improved quality of life..., we have to organize as a movement that they feel is their own.

We have to organize so that every worker, unionized or not, can say... this is my movement.

We have a very dedicated and committed Labour movement in Nova Scotia - that has proven time and time again of what we can accomplish when we pull together - and I am very excited of the opportunities that lie before us.

You have a busy agenda before you for the next day and a half - and we look forward to your deliberations and input as we organize for a new tomorrow -

I think our theme for this conference says it all "Building a Stronger Movement - Our Province Our Future"