



Conference News

2010 HUMAN RIGHTS CONFERENCE: EVERY DAY EVERY PERSON EVERY RIGHT—A WORK IN PROGRESS

Keynote Address:

A call for union pride and engagement

Standing up with union pride counteracts the frequent message that federal employees do not feel the pain of other Canadians, said Barbara Byers, executive vice-president of the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), in her keynote address Friday morning. When asked what they do for a living over the next year, she challenged participants to first identify themselves as a member of National Component of the Public Service Alliance of Canada.

“People will start to see there is a connection. The union makes us strong and makes our community strong,” she said.

Union pride will also help combat the “onslaught of the Harper government.” She noted that progressive advocacy groups in communities all over the country have had their funding cut and their work compromised by recent



Noel Starblanket and Barbara Byers

government policies, and the impact has been severe.

“We can’t replace all the money, but we can work with our allies,” she said. “We need to be present when our allies come to us looking for support.”

Byers, who joined the CLC after 14 years as president of the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour (SFL), said she was a union member for eight years before becoming actively engaged.

A union sister told her she could expand her work on social issues through union channels. Her first response was: “I don’t know anything about unions and I’m not sure I like them.” Her colleague persisted, and Byers went on to years of involvement including founding the ongoing SFL Summer Camp for Youth.

Byers said members must have faith in each other and encourage more union engagement by looking at members’ interests, such as food banks and shelters, or Aboriginal issues. She endorsed Conference Chair Karoline Klüg’s statement that this weekend’s theme underlines the ongoing struggle of fighting for human rights.

ROUND TABLE DISCUSSIONS

Friday’s round table discussions provided a unique opportunity for delegates to “speed date” with facilitators as they presented numerous topics including water, indigenous sovereignty, LGBT issues, and Métis and Aboriginal elders. Delegates participated in a series of 15-minute interactive discussions, gaining knowledge and sharing opinions.

Water

“With over 97% of the world’s water supply unsuitable for human consumption, as responsible Canadians

we must help people change their attitudes and activities relating to the use of precious, life-sustaining water,” Jim Elliott, chair of the Council of Canadian’s Regina chapter, challenged delegates during the round table discussion on water.

The Council of the Federation meeting of provincial premiers recently called for a national water charter and the United Nations (UN) declared access to clean, safe water a basic human right. Elliott identified two problems with these developments—water should not be

treated as a natural resource and the Canadian UN delegate abstained from the water resolution vote.

Delegates discussed issues arising from the commoditization of water, including ever-expanding bottled water use and Canada’s inability to prevent commercialized water product export due to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Delegates expressed concerns about systemic water quality issues in Canadian Aboriginal

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communities, local aquifer depletion by non-resident water-bottling companies, and the slow adoption of conservation strategies and alternative methods of collecting, distributing, and using rain water.

“There are solutions out there. It’s all about changing attitudes, making people aware, and creating a conservation mentality,” said an Edmonton delegate. He said the Earthship concept of using home-based, self-contained water systems that collect rain water for household uses has proved viable in other countries and could work in Canada.

Noting bottled water’s devastating impact on society, another delegate challenged all those at the table to immediately stop buying any bottled water products.

Métis heritage reclaimed

The Métis people are beginning to regain their traditions and language, despite a tradition of discrimination and residential school experiences that have caused large numbers to deny their heritage, said Nora Cummings at a round table discussion of Métis issues. Many are responding to the opportunity to self-identify for a national registry and those already established within the Métis nation are learning to accept returning members.

“As Métis people, we now finally have an opportunity to voice our opinions,” Cummings said. Elders are helping young people regain lost traditions and language, although more support is needed to battle drugs, alcohol, and other destructive influences.

Nora Cummings described herself as a “mother of 10, grandmother of 28, and great-grandmother of 36,” saying she is proud of her family.

Participants listened to her story of leadership beginning with her position as the first Aboriginal candidate for city council in her home city of Saskatoon and demonstrated by her decision to run in the 1973 race despite receiving hate mail.

In 1971, when her youngest child turned seven, Cummings was offered a field worker position for the brand new organization, the Métis Society of Saskatchewan. A shy young woman at the time, she went back to school to finish her high school education. She was appointed a Senator of the Métis Nation—Saskatchewan in 1993 and has chaired this Senate since 1995.

“We’ve had struggles, but things are starting to go better now,” said Cummings.

Local human rights officer a necessity

Every local should have a human rights officer, said facilitator Suzanne Cadieux at a round table discussion of the position. She urged locals to review the 10 reasons for establishing this post listed in the participants’ guidebook distributed at the conference.

Of the 48 participants circulating through the round table, nine participant’s locals did not have a human rights officer. About one third of the round table participants held the human rights officer position for their locals.

Cadieux referred to a sample job description from a Nova Scotia local in the guidebook and encouraged participants to make it part of their by-laws.

Cadieux told participants to look for ways to bridge management and union,

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such as joining the employer's employment equity or diversity committee, a component of the human resource plan.

"Ask when the committee meets and who is on the committee, then ask to participate, either as an observer or to offer to help," she said. She gave an example of building awareness through special equity days throughout the year, some of which are listed in the guidebook.

One participant said they use National Film Board films for lunch-and-learn activities. Another said the local organized a diversity dinner. One participant's local held an Aboriginal Awareness Week. "We had displays with arts and handicrafts. We held a fish fry. There was a bannock-making contest. We had fiddlers. It brings us all together. We honour and respect the individual, but this is a chance to do more."

Indigenous sovereignty an issue for all Canadians

Indigenous sovereignty is one of Canada's longest running grievances, awaiting resolution for over 200 years, said facilitator Michael Desautels at a round table on the issue. Treaties remain an issue for all Canadians, and not only First Nations.

Treaties between Canada's First Nations and the government are like collective bargaining agreements struck between employer and unions, said Desautels. In both cases justice is swift when a worker—or First Nation—violates the agreement's conditions, and resolution is slow and arduous when the employer—or government—refuses to acknowledge the agreement's terms.

Desautels said First Nations have endured years of government refusal to adhere to the legally binding terms of treaties that date back to 1863. Centuries of diplomacy, discussions, and court rulings have gone unrecognized, leading to an environment in which First Nations are now employing militant action to retain their land and their rights.

Participants discussed the Canadian government's refusal to recognize treaties. Some suggested the government assumes that political backlash amongst First Nation communities is nonexistent, and others said First Nation policies and programs have historically been underwritten by a goal of assimilation.

Participants agreed that First Nation treaties and sovereignty are issues that should concern every Canadian. All Canadians have benefitted from the exploitation of Aboriginal lands and people and therefore, all Canadians bear the responsibility to educate themselves and their communities about the history of First Nations issues and to help resolve these issues for future generations.

Aboriginal communities remain hopeful for the future

Despite major challenges that continue to face Canada's First Nations, Noel Starblanket expressed hope for collaboration, reconciliation, and forgiveness amongst all people at a round table discussion of Aboriginal issues.



"Did you know that before 1951, an Indian woman was someone other than a person in the Indian Act?" asked Starblanket. He noted that First Nation people are still defined by this Act—it is "inflicted upon us from cradle to grave."

Treaties written in the ornate language of the 1800s are unclear and create confusion in today's society. Although these rights have become part of the Canadian Constitution, the government often cannot delineate these rights to First Nations, as the treaty terms have not been defined. "So we live in a kind of limbo," said Starblanket.

He cited the impact of colonization as another major issue facing First Nation people. Newcomers who wanted the land and resources also wanted to detribalize—to "knock the Indian out of the Indian." They penalized those who continued to perform traditional ceremonies or use their own language.

The colonizers' promise to educate Aboriginal people resulted in years of

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IN THE HALLS

What do you hope to get out of the conference this weekend?

“As a person with MS and hearing impairment, I am keenly interested in the discussions on human rights issues related to people with disabilities. Our Centre has lost five staff members to breast cancer, and in that context, the treatment of people with disabilities is a real strong issue with us.”

-Jocelyn Bigras, Amethyst Women’s Addiction Centre, Ottawa

“To understand the union’s role when it comes to human rights issues across the country, and what our role is individually in helping that cause. It has been very interesting—I’ve learned a lot about the different things the union does beyond just the labour movement, such as the advancement of women’s and Aboriginal rights.

-Gillian Shimmons, Passport Canada, Calgary

“Knowledge and awareness of the human rights issues throughout Saskatchewan and other regions; more networking—how to get locals involved with having a human rights rep for their local; and getting more information on issues like duty to accommodate, water, and other issues”

-Janette Husak, Indian and Northern Affairs, Regina

“To see people that I’ve met at previous conferences and to meet new people; participate in some new workshops. Today, the round tables were fabulous, and the facilitators were great!”

-Donna Fedon, Statistics Canada, Winnipeg



Jennifer Ho—Showing proudly National Component colours

Resolutions

After the complexities of Robert’s Rules of Order and the workings of the PSAC Triennial Convention resolutions process were explained to delegates during the resolutions session, they proceeded to work through the numbered resolutions late yesterday.

After Resolutions 1 and 2 were adopted, the delegates were given some time to familiarize themselves with the other upcoming resolutions. When the session resumed, the delegates defeated Resolution 3; voted to split Resolution 4 into 4 (a) and 4 (b), both of which were passed; and passed Resolutions 5 and 6.

The approved Resolutions will be passed along to the National Executive for consideration by the Resolutions Committees for the National Component Triennial Convention.

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abuse at residential schools, and other excesses. First Nation people “did not agree to having our rights abused,” said Starblanket.

Starblanket said he remains optimistic. “We still have a lot of hope because we still have our traditions,” and well-meaning people, like PSAC, who want to connect with us and create a better future. “It’ll be a beautiful world.”

Administrative Notes

Office: Cypress Room.

Hours: ½ hour before the day starts, through ½ hour after day ends and over the lunch.

Hotel room issues: see Isabelle Beaudoin.

Breakfast is being provided all three mornings, lunch and dinner on Saturday, and lunch on Sunday.

Sunday morning, Christine Sanders will collect expense claims and answer any financial questions.

Saturday’s field trip to Batoche: the buses will be parked on Spadina Crescent outside the front doors at 4:45 PM. Snacks consisting of a muffin, fruit, and juice will be provided. Please advise Isabelle Beaudoin of any special dietary requirements. We will tour the National Historic site from 6:00 to 7:30. The return buses will leave at 8:30 (after dinner) and arrive at the hotel at 9:30.

Hospitality suite: Vice Regal suite, 3rd floor, room 343.

Hours: Thursday night after the reception; Friday night at 8:00; Saturday night after the trip to Batoche; Sunday night at 8:00.