



Labour Letter

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News from the CLC, Federations and Councils

Jobless workers are “badly hurt” by government delays in making needed improvements to Employment Insurance, said Canadian Labour Congress President Ken Georgetti June 17. Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Opposition Leader Michael Ignatieff said last month that they will set up a working group to meet over the summer and consider changes to EI. “We know what has to be done to fix EI. Putting off changes for months does not help unemployed workers or their communities,” he said. Georgetti said labour has been calling for improvements to EI for months and that the CLC’s recommendations have been supported by all opposition parties, including Ignatieff, several premiers, mayors and city councillors at the recent Federation of Canadian Municipalities convention. With only 46.8% of 1.55 million unemployed Canadians receiving EI benefits, he said, “Clearly we need changes now not next winter.”

Canadian Labour Congress and affiliated unions joined human rights, church and community organizations June 10th to protest against the Ottawa visit of Colombian president Alvaro Uribe and the proposed free trade agreement with Canada. “Colombia has a brutal human rights record and the highest rate of murders of trade unionists in the world,” said Hassan Yussuff, Canadian Labour Congress Secretary-Treasurer. “Uribe is here to whitewash his regime’s atrocities and to convince Canadians to adopt a free trade agreement with him. We say not before we can be certain that this deal will not make a bad situation worse.” He pointed out that the Harper government signed a trade deal with Columbia in 2008, but legislation needed to implement it has been temporarily withdrawn due to opposition from unions and other human rights groups.

International Labour News

Colombian and international trade unionists June 8 during meetings of the International Labour Organisation in Geneva condemned violence against workers in the Latin American country and said the government was not doing enough to stop it. Worker representatives at the United Nations agency’s committee on labour standards disagreed with a committee report that Columbia was “making progress.” “Because of the continuing violence one cannot speak of progress in comparison with the situation in other countries. Too much still remains to be done,” said Luc Cortebeck, president of the Belgian CSC union and spokesman for the workers’ group on the ILO labour standards committee. He said 96 percent of cases of violence against unionists go unpunished. Proposed U.S.-Colombia free-trade pact is held up in the U.S. Congress where some lawmakers want government to do more to end violence against labour unions.

National and Political News

Canadians now earn \$2,600 more in disposable income than they did in 2005, compared with a modest US\$1,300 increase per American in the same period. “There is little doubt that the reversal of fortune regard-

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ing growth in Canadian personal income versus the United States was largely linked to the recent surge in commodity prices in general, and energy prices in particular,” economist Benjamin Tal said in the report. “And the good news is that the post-recession economy will see this trend continue.” Average wages have gone up 10% in Canada since 2005, more than double the increase in the United States. Overall employment has also jumped 5.5% in Canada in the same period, while it has remained stagnant south of the border. Canadian’s disposable income grew faster than the U.S. despite far less taxation that Americans enjoy. Ratio of high-paying to low-paying jobs in the United States has dropped 10% while holding steady in Canada.

News from Canada’s Unions

With a roar of chain saws, about 2,500 forestry workers represented by the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union demonstrated in Ottawa June 2 to “wake up Stephen Harper” to the impact of the forestry crisis on families and communities across Canada. “The forest industry and forest workers have a future and we will not just fade away,” said CEP President Dave Coles. “We want a program of loan guarantees to stop bankruptcies and to make sure there is investment. Not a bail out, loans guaranteed at commercial rates to help an industry survive the economic crisis.” NDP Leader Jack Layton and Bloc Quebecois Leader Gilles Duceppe also addressed the rally. Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff was invited but declined.

Three Air Canada unions last month agreed to a pension fund moratorium and extension of current collective agreements. Under the deal, cash-strapped Air Canada will suspend pension payments over the next 21 months while the Canadian Auto Workers, International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers and Canadian Airline Dispatchers Association will receive in exchange a small equity interest amounting to less than 10% of the airline collectively. The three unions represent a combined total of 16,500 Air Canada workers, about 60% of the workforce. Unions’ decision came after Air Canada opened its books to them under a federally appointed mediator which revealed the carrier’s desperate financial situation. Airline must still reach a deal with two other unions, the Air Canada Pilots Association and Canadian Union of Public Employees, which represents flight attendants.

B.C. Council of Film Unions, which represents 10,000 behind-the-camera workers, ratified new three-year deal with U.S. producers that provides a 2 percent rate hike and new contributions to the unions health and welfare programs. New master agreement between the Canadian affiliates of the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers runs to March 2012. Previous collective agreement expired in April. Union members also ratified supplemental master agreement that deals with discounted tiers, which includes lower budgeted features, cable and syndicated TV production and Canadian film and TV production. Council member unions include International Association of Television and Stage Employees Locals 891 and 669, Teamsters Union Local 155. B.C. branch of the Canadian Film and Television Production Association also negotiated with the employers’ group.

Canadians still rank health care as the top government spending priority, edging out the economy, according to new poll commissioned by the Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions. When asked what the “top spending priority of government” should be during “these tough economic times,” 38 percent of respondents said health care, followed by 35.2 percent who said “the economy.” According to the poll results, significant majority of Canadians also would vote against a political party if they deemed it “did not properly fund health care.” “Governments must not repeat the mistake of the 1990s and use the economic downturn as an excuse to cut health care,” said CFNU Pres. Linda Silas. Union released poll results on the eve of its biennial convention held in Vancouver in June.

Some 2,000 workers and supporters marched June 12 in Windsor, Ontario on Friday, in the ninth week of a strike by city workers. Members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), more than 1,800 municipal workers are on strike, including waste disposal, maintenance, and city park workers. CUPE officials have called for the resumption of discussions, which broke off in mid-May. Windsor Mayor Eddie Francis announced that the city would resume negotiations. Union also has called for the city to agree to binding arbitration if negotiations fail. Mayor Francis so far has resisted arbitration on the grounds that arbitrators tend to favor workers and that a settlement will end up costing the city more.