



Labour Letter

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News from the CLC, Federations and Councils

Canadian Labour Congress, along with other union groups, participated in a rally Oct. 21 in Ottawa in support of the Nortel pensioners. CLC cited the impact of Nortel bankruptcy on pensioners, terminated and disabled employees as an example of the need “to rebuild and reform the pension system.” When Nortel Networks filed for bankruptcy protection in January, the way assets are divided means pensioners will receive less than 70 percent of the money they were promised while ex-Nortel employees entitled to severance payments and employees on long-term disability will get back just 10 per cent of the money they are owed. “Other bankrupt Canadian companies are anxiously waiting to see what the courts will decide before determining if they, in turn, will abandon their responsibilities to their retirees,” explained Robert Bouvier, President of Teamsters Canada which also is supporting the rally. “Nortel’s case is vital to the rights of Canadian retirees.”

Parliament should pass Bill C-50 to help long-tenured workers who have been laid off, but the Employment Insurance system is still in “desperate need” of more comprehensive reform to help people who have been thrown out of work, said the Canadian Labour Congress Oct. 8. “The EI program leaves far too many Canadians out in the cold,” said the CLC. “Let’s pass this legislation then get right back to work to introduce a uniform EI entrance requirement of 360 hours in all regions, and increase benefits for all unemployed workers. These people have to support themselves and their families while they search for new jobs.” According to the CLC, the federal government has collected \$57 billion more in EI premiums than it has paid out in benefits to unemployed Canadians. “Workers paid those premiums in the belief that EI was their protection against a rainy day,” said labor officials.

CLC President Ken Georgetti took part in international trade union meetings held during the recent G-20 summit in Pittsburgh and also met privately with Prime Minister Stephen Harper, the Canadian Labour Congress reported. “My message to Mr. Harper and other leaders was that we have a serious unemployment crisis that could derail the hoped-for economic recovery. We need continued global spending by governments to create jobs and maintain wages. Cutting government spending now could deepen the recession,” he said. “I was pleased that Prime Minister Harper went on record supporting continued stimulus measures.”

Canadian labour last month called on federal, provincial and territorial labour ministers to immediately ratify the International Labour Organization’s Convention 138 on Minimum Age which seeks to prevent conditions that foster child labour. CLC Executive Vice-President Barbara Byers noted that Canada has waited 12 years to ratify Convention 138. “It is embarrassing that Canada is in the company of countries like Afghanistan, Burma, India, Iran and Korea, who are well-known for their questionable child labour practices and have not yet ratified this convention,” she said. “We want all Canadian jurisdictions to take concrete steps toward immediate ratification.”

International Labour News

Mexican unionists and their political allies condemned President Felipe Calderon’s decision to liquidate the state-run Central Light and Power utility which threatens the continued existence of the Mexican

Be Union--Buy Union

Electricians Union. Up to 44,000 workers were fired at a time when Mexico is in a deep recession. Felipe is a member of the conservative, pro-business National Action Party and his actions are seen by many as an assault on organized labour. Workers from another state-owned power company were brought in under the protection of nearly 1,000 federal riot-control police to take over the electric grid. The electrician's union is among the most powerful of Mexico's left-wing labor groups which opposed Calderon's election in 2006.

National and Political News

NDP filibustered the Canada-Colombia Free Trade Agreement legislation last month in an effort to stop "bad" legislation. Bill C-23 implements the Free Trade Agreement between Canada and Colombia, which the government signed in Lima, Peru on Nov. 21, 2008 and is staunchly opposed by labour. Both the Bloc Québécois and the NDP also are against the bill. A majority of MPs must vote to put a time limit on debate and Government House Leader Jay Hill (Prince George-Peace River, B.C) admitted he didn't have enough support from opposition parties to do it. "We oppose that bill because we think it's bad legislation and that's legitimate. It's part of our democratic process in Parliament, representing Canadian people," said NDP House Leader Libby Davies (Vancouver East, B.C.) in response to criticism that they were "obstructing" the work of Parliament. Bill C-23 has had more than 30 hours of debate and it's still at second reading in the House.

News from Canada's Unions

Alberta's largest public sector unions Oct. 15 rejected Premier Ed Stelmach's call for a two-year voluntary wage freeze. Stelmach issued the demand during a television address Oct. 14 after announcing that he intended to freeze the salaries of civil service managers for two years. Stelmach said he wants to achieve the goal of a budget surplus in three years. "We have an agreement," said Carol Henderson, president of the 33,000-member Alberta Teachers' Association. "We signed it in good faith and we intend to be in the classroom." Health Sciences Association of Alberta, which represents 18,000 medical workers such as lab technicians and paramedics, also said it has no intention of renegotiating contracts. Union spokesman said government "has mismanaged one of the biggest economic booms seen around the world."

United Steelworkers lost a grievance with the Ontario Labour Relations Board which upheld the right of Vale Inco to use 50 members of Local 2020, representing office, clerical and technical workers, to do the work of striking mine and mill workers represented by Local 6500. "Compelling (Local) 2020 members to be replacement workers...demonstrates to the strikers that the union is powerless to stop these abuses and that the company has unlimited power to stop the strike," Steelworkers lawyer Rob Healey argued before the board. Local 6500's more than 3,000 unionized workers have been on strike since mid-July, along with Vale Inco workers in Port Colborne, Ont., and Voisey's Bay, N.L. In September, Vale Inco announced it would restart a mill and a mine in Sudbury using replacement workers.

B.C. Government and Service Employees' Union blasted the province's Liberal government's intention to privatize seniors' care "without warning or any consultation with residents and their families or staff." Vancouver Island Health Authority announced Oct. 14 plans to sell-off residential care homes on the lower island, including Oak Bay Lodge, to meet a \$45 million budget shortfall from the provincial government. "This is another unfortunate example of the BC Liberal government privatizing health care and putting profits before people," said BCGEU president Darryl Walker. "The RFP process, which VIHA says will take up to four years, guarantees ongoing uncertainty for residents and their families and the over 290 staff who work there, many long-term employees."

Canadian Auto Workers called on the Ontario and federal governments to ensure U.S. based Navistar trucks, which was given more than \$60 million in taxpayer support six years ago, maintains its manufacturing site in Chatham, Ontario. "Despite this funding, the company continues with its plan to eliminate products from the plant, which will mean the loss of hundreds of jobs," CAW President Ken Lewenza said in a statement. Negotiations between the CAW and the company broke off in June with no further talks planned. The plant has been idled and more than 1,000 CAW members remain on layoff from the plant which has operated in Chatham for more than 60 years.