



Labour Letter

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News from the CLC, Federations and Councils

Canadian Labour Congress called for the federal government to “take bold and direct action aimed at creating jobs and helping the unemployed.” CLC noted latest unemployment statistics showed loss of more than 70,000 full-time jobs in December and net creation of just 7,100 full-time jobs for all of 2008. “The upcoming federal budget must focus on creating full-time jobs and fixing our broken Employment Insurance program. It can’t just focus on the needs of the banks and corporations that got us into this mess,” said CLC Pres. Ken Georgetti. Georgetti said “it’s just wrong” that unemployment benefits are “smaller than they used to be and do not last as long” at a time when people need it most. “Fixing this important program must be part of the government’s plan to help people get through what is now an economic recession,” he said.

Labour criticized membership of the Economic Advisory Council created by Finance Minister Jim Flaherty because “too many voices are missing.” Canadian Labour Congress said Flaherty’s new council, which will recommend economic recovery measure to include in federal budget, concentrates too much on compliant business leaders and one sympathetic economist. “There is also a distinct lack of anyone or any organization that has been critical of the Harper government’s current approach to the economic crisis,” CLC said. Labour group noted that U.S. President Obama selected “a broadly representative” panel for a similar economic recovery board that he created. “A government that deliberately limits itself to the advice of only a certain class and goes out of its way to exclude all others is the last thing we need,” CLC said.

Montreal Petro Canada refinery boycott has been called off after new settlement ended 13-month lockout, CLC announced Jan. 6. “We demonstrated the strength of the solidarity of the labor movement and I am certain the national boycott, and the support of our brothers and sisters internationally, played a role in this successful outcome,” said CLC head Georgetti. Represented by Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union Workers Local 175, workers accepted new 3-year collective agreement which provides for more than 14% in wage increases over the contract term, signing bonus and other improvements. “This epic struggle has preserved and strengthened national bargaining for energy workers across Canada,” said CEP President Dave Coles.

CLC called on Prime Minister Harper to condemn “the serious violations of humanitarian and international law” and support a negotiated end to the violence in the Middle East. “We support the United Nation’s efforts to end hostilities by both sides,” said CLC head Georgetti in a letter to Prime Minister Stephen Harper. He asked Harper to help strengthen UN efforts to bring about an immediate cease-fire between Israel and Palestine and “open the way” for a peace process in the region. CLC condemned actions of Hamas in launching rockets into Israel, ending a fragile six-month cease-fire, and Israel’s military offensive into Gaza in response. Georgetti said Canadian government could play “a leadership role” in urging Israel to reopen border crossings so that essential aid can reach the 1.5 million residents of Gaza.

Be Union--Buy Union

International Labour News

Four out of five major French labour unions and most employer groups, including the largest, MEDEF (Mouvement des Entreprises de France), agreed Dec. 15 to increase, from 50 percent to 60 percent, minimum compensation rate for salaried employees put on technical unemployment. In response, government will make labour regulations more flexible so that employers can layoff workers for longer periods without breaking work contracts. Government also will increase its contribution to the replacement income fund. Workers can now be “partially” unemployed for up to 800 hours a year from the current limit of 600 hours, and be compensated for lost income for a minimum of 60 percent of their salary. Agreement was pushed by French President Nicolas Sarkozy as an alternative to permanent layoffs.

National and Political News

With the economy shrinking and jobs disappearing, labor leaders expect a priority shift toward saving jobs in collective bargaining this year, according to news reports. “I’m anticipating a very difficult year of bargaining,” said Ken Lewenza, president of the Canadian Auto Workers. “Employers will try to extract as much as they can from workers during this time of a recession.” Public sector unions also expect to be hit by shrinking budgets. “I think everyone accepts that it’s going to be tougher,” said Canadian Union of Public Employees senior economist Toby Sange, adding that workers have scaled back wage expectations.

News from Canada’s Unions

Reflecting improved relationships over past tumult, UNITE HERE negotiated new contract with the Canadian Niagara Hotels that improves wages and working conditions for some 450 workers. They are employed at Sheraton on the Falls, Crowne Plaza Niagara Falls-Fallsvue and Skyline Inn. “Our relationship with this hotel has been not very positive, so having a peaceful, positive, productive resolution to a new contract is a change for the parties and something we’re really pleased with,” said Alex Dagg, Canadian co-director of UNITE HERE. Union has had a bitter history with the hotels. In early 2008, for example, actor Danny Glover was fined \$100 for trespassing at the Sheraton on the Falls while there supporting a worker’s union labor rally. Current pact was concluded without arbitration or dispute.

Canadian Auto Workers union Local 1285 members ended three-week blockade of SKD Automotive in Brampton after judge issued court-order to force workers to stand down. Injunction gives General Motors permission to remove \$1 million in auto parts equipment. Union officials expect SKD to file for temporary protection from creditors which will give company time to seek potential buyers for the plant’s assets and possibly keep it open. Workers blocked the plant after GM scrapped its contracts with the firm. They feared they would be left with no financial compensation if the company suddenly closed. “We couldn’t win this legally,” CAW staff representative Paulo Ribeiro said.

Ottawa transit strike continued after workers Jan. 9 rejected city’s latest offer by 75% vote. Some 2,300 bus drivers, mechanics and dispatchers workers, represented by Amalgamated Transit Union Local 279, struck city’s Transpo system Dec. 10 over work scheduling, route assignment, hours of work and working conditions. “Despite their personal sacrifices they are clearly saying we want a fair collective agreement,” said Local 279 president André Cornellier. Union accused the city of spending “thousands of taxpayers’ dollars” on a media campaign which “only hampered the bargaining process and has spread misinformation.”

With York University’s school year on verge of being lost, government refused to recall Ontario legislature to order an end to the strike by 3,300 faculty members which began Nov. 6. Spokesman for Premier Dalton McGuinty said government preferred the two sides reach a negotiated settlement. Strike by contract faculty, teaching assistants and graduate assistants at the Toronto university, Canada’s third largest, has shut down classes for 50,000 full-time students. Workers are represented by Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 3903 in three bargaining units. York University Faculty Association, meanwhile, continued “to support its striking co-workers,” president Arthur Hilliker said Jan. 17. Union represents full-time professors who are not on strike. According to news reports, number of Ontario high school students applying to York University for next September is down nearly 15 per cent over this time last year.