

Labour Day 2011 Statement

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75 years of unions working together to make a difference

This Labour Day, we celebrate 75 years of unions working together to make a difference in our province.

It was 1936 when a small group of trade union leaders recognized the need for a bigger voice for labour, an organization for all unions, to advance the cause of working people and to help build a better society for all citizens.

They understood that the power of the collective within their individual unions could be more effective if they worked together on common goals including pushing for laws that improved the lives of workers.

By October 1936 those forward-thinking trade unionists had formed a steering committee and less than a year later in July 1937 the founding convention of what is today the Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of Labour was held in Grand Falls.

At that convention delegates from 10 unions debated topics such as workers' compensation, minimum wages, hours of work, and the creation of a government employment bureau.

Seventy-five years later and many of these same economic justice issues are still debated at Federation of Labour conventions.

One of the people responsible for the creation of our Federation was Alphonsus Gregory Duggan, an experienced trade unionist who helped organize the union at the Grand Falls paper mill.

Mr. Duggan's vision for the Federation and trade unions in our province was that we would become a voice to fight for reforms for the entire working class. Mr. Duggan was elected the Federation's first president.

The early days of movement building were by no means easy. Resistance to unions by employers was strong – after all, a union would force employers to share more fairly with its workforce. As much as things have advanced in our province in the last 75 years, some things remain the same including the classic struggle of unions to share the wealth and bring democracy to our workplaces.

Today, I am so proud of the considerable privilege I have been given to hold up the principles these trade unionists fought for so many years ago and to add equality and social justice to our vision of a better world.

We are still fighting for legislative improvements in order to level the playing field and protect workers.

Recently our efforts have been to push for a powerful, independent safety agency for the offshore workers of our province - something that has been strongly recommended in two separate inquiry reports by retired Justice Robert Wells.

The federal government continues to drag its heels with respect to making the necessary changes to the law governing the offshore oil and gas industry. This is not unlike the cause of trade unionists 75 years ago when they fought for tougher mine inspections, a necessary action in the safety of working people, but resisted by the mine owners.

We continue to seek a modern set of labour laws that reflect the world in which we live – a global world with powerful and wealthy global corporations. The rise of multinational corporations and the erosion of labour laws have tipped the balance in power at the bargaining table – the balance required to ensure collective bargaining is fair and free.

The erosion of labour laws, since the time of the Wells Liberal government, has also made it tougher for workers to exercise their rights to belong to a union, rights guaranteed under our Charter.

With this fall's provincial election, our Federation will continue to act for change in the ways envisioned by our founders. The four issues to be advocated by our Federation reflect the values and principles we have long stood for: just and modern labour laws that recognize and temper the power and might of global capital and remove the barriers to freedom of association; a fair sharing of the province's economic wealth (far too much of our GDP goes to corporate profits – 2.5 times the national average); an early learning and child care system (long recognized as essential to advancing women's equality and critical to future economic growth); and retirement security.

This Labour Day, we reflect on the many victories of unions and their members working collectively for the kind of world we'd like for all.

This Labour Day, we celebrate 75 years of unions working together to make a difference.

In those 75 years our solidarity has been tested, but those tests have made us stronger. We can take pride in the fact that we have improved the lives and living standards of so many Newfoundlanders and Labradorians and their families. We have helped to build a better society, a better province.

For 75 years, we have tried to be the change we want to see in the world and this will continue to be our uninterrupted purpose.

On behalf of the executive council and 65,000 members of our Federation, I wish you a safe and happy Labour Day!