Alberta Federation of Labour

FORGING OUR FUTURE

THE ALBERTA FEDERATION OF LABOUR 2005-2010

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS THE ROLE OF LABOUR CENTRALS?

Everyone knows what the job of a union is supposed to be. It negotiates terms of employment and represents workers in conflicts with management.

If that was all a union had to worry about, the job would be pretty straightforward. Not easy, but clear. If the world were that simple, the labour movement would look quite different.

But that is not all unions need to worry about. There are many other factors that affect what happens to workers, and unions ignore those factors at our peril. Trade unions have typically concerned themselves with four types of issues:

1. Compensation: Wages, benefits, pensions, safe working conditions, etc.

2. Regulation of work: limiting employers' ability to act unfairly or arbitrarily, discipline, promotions, training, work schedules, workloads, etc.

3. The role of the state: the social wage, (welfare, health care, public education, unemployment insurance), taxation policy, economic development, international trade, labour markets, labour laws and regulations.

4. Broader issues that effect workers as citizens: war and peace, the environment, consumption, public spaces and social and community institutions and facilities.

The first two categories are what most trade unions deal with on a day-to-day basis. However, individual unions have found it almost impossible to effectively deal with anything from the last two categories.

Individual locals and unions find it difficult to dedicate enough resources to effectively intervene in categories three and four. Nor do they have enough social or political or economic influence to intervene in public policy issues.

This is where Labour Centrals – such as the AFL – come in. The pooling of union energy, resources and experience into a common umbrella organization helps build the common voice and the amplified voice needed to ensure

workers' perspectives are heard in political and societal debate.

The principle is clear. Just as solidarity on the shop floor gives a trade union the strength to deal with employers, solidarity between unions gives labour centrals the strength to deal with governments and other large social and economic institutions.

So when people talk about the Alberta Federation of Labour being the 'voice of labour' in the province, they are giving the AFL the authority to speak for all unions. In order to speak for labour and to pursue labour's broader objectives, labour centrals must bring all cooperating unions together to reach consensus on strategies tactics and goals and objectives.

Once these separate unions are bound together in a democratically decided plan of action, the labour movement is born.

PART ONE: DEALING WITH CHANGING GROUND

It is one thing to *say* the labour movement *ought* to intervene effectively on workers' behalf on the broad social economic and political issues of the day – and quite another for a labour central to get the job done.

Historically, labour's demands on issues like healthcare, pensions, education, welfare, labour law, and taxation were delivered with the implicit accompanying message that labour would mobilize politically to achieve their goals. That is why political action has always been essential for labour centrals.

So long as government and the economic elite believed that the labour movement could mobilize its members and other working people, they were prepared to meet some of labour's demands.

However, the changing nature of work, society and the economy has undermined labour's mobilizing abilities in the past ten to twenty years.

Work and community have become disconnected. It is becoming harder to mobilize workers using traditional forms of solidarity and commonalities.

Add the increasing international demands for a more flexible workforce and the immense and constant downward pressure on workers' rights exerted by globalization, and you have a recipe for labour decline.

The past decade has been hard for the labour movement, not just in Canada, but globally. We are struggling to have our voice heard in government and in the broader political debate.

PART TWO: AIMING FOR RENEWAL

These broader changes manifest themselves in two distinct ways in Alberta. First, we see strains within the labour movement. Second, the political weight of labour is weakened – governments are less interested in what we have to say. While the cause for each of these problems is the same, the route to solve them differs.

Internal Challenges

There is no denying that the past decade has not been easy on organized labour in Alberta. Internal divisions, membership decline, and financial concerns have distracted and weakened us. As the number of issues affecting workers increases, our capacity to effectively respond has decreased. There are a number of reasons for this.

First, unions are experiencing a triple membership crunch. Union membership rates are stagnating, creating a financial squeeze. Second, organizing new workers has become far more difficult, in part due to changing labour market patterns (service sector jobs, part-time casual work, etc.) and in part to political difficulties (poor labour laws, ineffective Labour Relations Boards). Third, creating membership participation in the union has become more difficult.

The triple crunch forces unions to look more inward, using their increasingly limited resources on internal matters, leaving less energy, time and money for broader social and political goals.

Second, divisions within the labour movement make building solidarity difficult. The AFL represents less than one-half of unionized workers in Alberta. While the AFL has good working relationships with many independent and Building Trades unions, this division continues to weaken the labour movement's ability to collectively decide our priorities, and to speak with one voice. Raiding continues to plague our movement, wasting scarce resources.

Third, the services of a labour central are simultaneously demanding and intangible. When your job is to educate, advocate and lobby, it is difficult to effectively measure success.

At the same time, however, the range of issues the AFL is expected to work on has grown significantly. Quite appropriately, the membership is asking the AFL to take a leadership role in a whole range of new issues, from environment, to gender equality, to literacy, to health care and education policy.

One of the by-products has been the AFL has lost focus, and thus reduced its overall effectiveness. This has resulted in the AFL at times over-reaching, trying to do too many things and as a result setting itself up for failure.

An example of this is the mandate from the last convention. Since the 2003 convention, the AFL has sought affiliate financing for the new-style *Issues* political action campaign, Public Interest Alberta, and the fight against Bill 27. That is in addition to ongoing support for Alberta Labour History Institute, Aspen Institute, the Prairie Organizing Institute, and Parkland Institute. All of these organizations and activities were mandated by Convention. Also mandated were a province wide "living wage" campaign, and the establishment of Workers' Resource Centres throughout the province.

Many of the initiatives were either put on hold (fair wage campaign; Workers' Resource Centres); or failed to meet expectations (*Issues* campaign, Prairie Organizing Institute) because of insufficient available resources.

The combination of these factors has created a period of challenge for Alberta's labour movement. We need new ways of doing our old job.

The Shifting Sands of Politics

The other problem for labour is that our political voice has become a whisper. Governments have consistently ignored our issues and perspectives in the past decade. This bodes poorly for our members, and it sounds a dire bell for unions.

One reason is that we have not been successful in mobilizing our membership. Voting studies show that union members are only marginally more likely to vote NDP. Worse, working people are far less likely than other groups to vote AT ALL. The same pattern shows itself in other political activities.

Across the board, we have not succeeded in rallying the political energies of our members. And so this makes our political message nothing but an empty threat – one easily ignored by governments.

But aside from our own shortcomings, politics has taken a nastier turn in recent years. The hysteria of deficit elimination and tax-cut mania has made politics very inhospitable for workers and our issues.

The Alberta government has become openly anti-union. The recent decision around the Horizon Oil Sands Project is just the latest example. Bill 27, drug and alcohol testing, threatened attacks against "salting" and "merfing" are all ways in which the Conservatives are actively setting policy to undermine unions and make doing our work more difficult.

This makes advocating for workers are far more difficult proposition. There is no working with the government to affect positive change, but there is no immediate prospect of defeating them with a more labour friendly government. This is a quandary with no easy path.

Our political heft is on an Atkins-like crash diet. We need to find a way to bolster our political influence on Alberta politics.

PART THREE: WHAT IS TO BE DONE? A PROPOSED 5 YEAR PLAN

The work the AFL does – politics and education – remains as crucial today as it ever was. What has changed is the political environment and the capacity to perform the tasks effectively. The new era demands a new approach to the work of labour centrals – one that both accepts certain realities while pushing against others. The AFL needs to look both internally and externally at ways to revamp its work to become effective once again.

Overcoming Internal Challenges

Many of the solutions require the AFL to shore up the internal strength of the labour movement, to arouse new interest in working together and build upon individual union's success.

1. Finding New Members

Union density has stalled in Alberta. Unionization rates are insignificant in Alberta's fastest growing industries. Workers in these new industries are not easy to reach, and need to be given good reasons why they should look at unionizing. Labour also needs to adjust to reflect diversity among workers.

Less than 45% of applications made to the Board are successful. How many more fail to reach that bar? Fewer than 100 new certifications are made a year and most of those are in construction. Unions need to do a better job signing up new workers.

In many ways, this challenge is up to each of the affiliates to tackle. Each affiliate needs to commit to put more energy, more money and more training into good quality organizing. Each union knows its areas of strength and how to talk to people in its industry.

But we find that each union works in isolation. Alberta has some excellent organizers working for unions around the province. Due to their hectic schedules and to the structure of the labour movement, these organizers get very little opportunity to talk to one another.

Recently, the AFL attempted, in coordination with the Saskatchewan and Manitoba Federations of Labour, to establish the Prairie Organizing Institute (POI). Unfortunately, after only one school, it quickly ran aground. The infrastructure requirements and staff time commitment to keep the Institute running proved formidable. The interprovincial nature of POI also proved to be a handicap. In short, it was too ambitious for smaller provincial sections.

The AFL can play a clear role in building our collective organizing capacity by facilitating communication among organizers and by training new organizers.

Recommendation #1:
The AFL host an "Organizers Summit" to bring together Alberta's organizers to share information, and to talk about new strategies and possible cooperation between unions. Following the Summit, the AFL begin hosting small-scale workshops and courses to train organizers, possibly tailored to the needs of particular industries or unions.

Rationale:
The Organizers Summit provides a rare opportunity for Organizers to swap techniques and strategies, in an effort to increase cooperation among unions and to build the labour mvovement's collective organizing capacity. The resources created for the POI can still serve a useful purpose through smaller-scale workshops and courses. It is a way to continue training organizers without the struggles of costly infrastructure.

2. New Education Approaches

Education is one of the AFL's strengths. The Annual School is always popular and well-received. Workshops on particular topics are normally well-attended and praised by participants.

However, there are always ways to do better.

Recommendation #2:
The AFL offer a greater range of workshops and seminars tailored to specific issues or for particular affiliates. When possible, these workshops will travel to multiple centres around the province.

Rationale:
The School is effective, but expensive. This limits the number of union activists who can use this learning opportunity each year. From time-to-time, the AFL hosts topic-specific workshops or seminars. These seminars can often reach greater numbers of workers over the course of a few weeks or months.

There are two advantages to this approach to education. The first is cost – to both the AFL and the affiliates. By being smaller and shorter in duration, the costs are greatly reduced, allowing more workers to participate. Also, the AFL can prepare the workshop in-house. Overhead costs are low. Second, they are flexible. A workshop on a particular topic can be designed quickly and then tailored to meet the specific concerns of an affiliate.

The recent workshops on the new Occupational Health and Safety Code are a good example. 15 workshops were held around the province, involving more than 300 union activists in total. There were 7 different versions of the workshop delivered, each tailored for a specific industry or local.

3. Increasing Solidarity

The AFL represents less than ½ of unionized workers in Alberta. And of those 120,000 or so who are members of the AFL, only a small fraction take active involvement in their union. There are two problems here, each needing its own solution.

Recommendation #3:
The AFL develop an action plan to attract new affiliations, and actively pursue independent and unaffiliated unions with the advantages of joining the AFL.

Rationale:
While the labour movement talks a lot about the importance of making sure we are united, we do not do enough to make that happen. The AFL, if it wants to become a more important force in Alberta, needs the participation of as many unions as possible. And this means going out and selling the benefits of the AFL to unaffiliated unions.

This is not an easy task, for we must respect different union cultures and the democratic will of their memberships. However, unless the AFL sells itself, they won't come to us. But to do this, we need an action plan. There needs to be a concerted, planned effort to discuss affiliation with unaffiliated unions. And this action plan should include un-affiliated locals of AFL unions.

Recommendation #4:
The AFL design resources and workshops/courses for affiliates on how to build stronger union locals and how to engage members to become active in the union and in their community.

Rationale:
The problem of declining member participation is widespread across the labour movement. Many locals across the country are experimenting with new ways to engage their membership. Researchers are examining new models for mobilizing in an era of limited time and limitless options. The AFL is well-placed to gather these innovations and begin talking about mobilization with Alberta unions.

Re-invigorating Our Political Voice

Ultimately the central work of the AFL is politics, in the many forms it takes. The AFL's job is to address the broader social and political environment that affects unions and workers. In the words of Harvard professor Elaine Bernard, "unions cannot afford to ignore politics, because politics does not ignore unions."

For that reason it is imperative the AFL be effective at leading the labour movement in politics. This does not mean winning every issue we address. It is about making sure our voice is heard effectively and that we mobilize union members to act politically.

Currently there are two issues facing labour and politics. First, there is a lack of unity about political strategy. Each union will always have its particular approach to politics – some are partisan, others must remain electorally neutral, etc. – and the AFL must respect and honour that diversity of approach. However, within that approach, there is a need to coordinate and collaborate to maximize our political effect. Even if our specific approaches must differ, we can use the same songbook and pick the songs together.

Second, there is a perception among politicians and the media that we have no political weight. This is in part due to the lack of political mobilization among union members. But it also a problem of perception, that can be tackled by doing politics smarter.

Recommendation #5:
The AFL return to a "campaigns" approach to politics, where it selects certain issues and builds specific, goal-oriented campaigns around them. In addition, the AFL will continue its work with community groups and organizations.

Rationale:
The AFL has been at its most effective when it has a specific political goal, with a clearly identified issue. It garners the support and involvement of affiliates and is then able to mobilize a portion of the labour movement around a campaign or issue. It is easier to garner support, as the goal is specific and time-limited, and it provides opportunity for concrete action for members.

The AFL should return to this model of political action. What the best issue is, and what the goal should be, are subjects that cannot be answered in a policy paper. They require discussion among activists and leaders in the labour movement. Whatever the issue chosen, the AFL should draw up a campaign strategy, showing how it links to the interests of the labour movement, and work on implementing it with affiliates.

Our ongoing work with community organizations, like PIA, Parkland, Friends of Medicare and others meshes well with a campaign-style strategy. Our campaigns can and should reach out to groups outside the labour movement, and we should remain enthusiastic partners in campaigns organized by our friends.

Recommendation #6:
The AFL will improve its communication to AFL members about politics, AFL activities and issues facing Alberta. This must include a communications vehicle of some form produced by the AFL on a regular basis.

Rationale:
Part of the reason the labour movement is not able to mobilize its members politically is because it does not do a good enough job communicating our viewpoint to the members. Too many union members have no idea what the AFL does. If they don't know what we do, why should they pay attention to us when we ask them to phone their MLA?

Since the cessation of the Labour News, the AFL has not had a vehicle for communicating to AFL members about political issues, current events and AFL activities. This hole needs to be filled. Any communications tool will need to reflect financial realities of the AFL.

Recommendation #7:
The AFL host a Political Action Retreat for union leaders and key union political activists to discuss political strategy and to stake out common ground on politics, and that the results of the Retreat be used to build a coordinated strategy for the next provincial election.

Rationale:
Right now labour is not in accord on political strategies or tactics. Some endorse straightforward affiliation to the New Democratic Party. Others support a more American style "Reward your friends, punish your enemies" approach. Some want only third party "neutral" labour campaigns, while others want to start new *labour* or *socialist* parties. Direct action campaigns and alternate forms of collective action should also be considered.

This lack of unity on political action has demonstrably weakened the AFL's ability to pursue working peoples' interests in the political arena. We must take immediate steps to rebuild political unity in the labour movement.

The first step is to organize a retreat to discuss these issues thoroughly and find our common ground, so that we can begin to craft a way forward with a new strategy. The goal is not to make every affiliate move in lock-step with the same tactics. We must respect political diversity among our membership. The purpose is to find common ground and to coordinate our efforts so that they are complimentary and re-enforcing.

Recommendation #8:
The AFL co-host a conference with community and activist groups before the next provincial election to discuss a new agenda for Alberta and strategize about the election.

Rationale:
The need to coordinate and work together goes beyond labour. Once labour has found its starting point for political action going into the election, we need to take a leadership role in bringing together a wide variety of communities and groups who have a common interest in making progressive political change in Alberta, including defeating the Conservatives.

The conference can be seen as "The Big Think" – an opportunity to build something bigger than what our individual movements can do alone.

Recommendation #9:
The AFL and its affiliates spend energy and resources on mobilizing our own members and readying them for the next provincial election.

Rationale:
The tactic of telling members who to vote for, and then passively hoping they do it has not worked. What works is to give members a reason to become politically involved, and then help them find an avenue for their interest. The political involvement of our members cannot be assumed, it must be nurtured.

The AFL needs to spend more energy informing our members about political issues, labour's perspective on those issues and what they can do about it. Our job is to help them build a link between their own self-interest and their political choices.

We need to educate and inform, and also lead by example. The labour movement needs to make a real commitment to paying attention to what our members are saying about politics, and providing political activism as part of the union package. We readily train our Shop Stewards. We make sure bargaining committees have the resources they need to negotiate a good deal. We need to do the same for politics. Politics needs to become a "core business" of unions.

CONCLUSION

The Alberta labour movement has gone through some difficult times in recent years. The world is changing; the needs of our members are changing. Many write us off, saying we are relics of the past. Those critics are wrong. Unions are as important today as ever.

But we have many challenges before us. We have the ability to re-forge solidarity in Alberta, to improve upon our strong history and create a formidable movement in this province.

In particular, the AFL has experienced difficulty in the past few years. But now is the time to shake off that period and begin to rebuild. There is an opportunity in Alberta right now. Workers are unhappy as they see their wages stagnate while their employer collects record profits. There is disenchantment with the government, and malaise with traditional answers.

If we can grasp this opportunity, we can build a stronger labour movement in Alberta, one able to build a stronger province.

The plan starts here.

JF*cep1118:klw\mw*cope458 – April 12th, 2005
File: \events\2005conv\pp\final-forging our future policy paper