

# Organizing in a Global City

## Priority #7: Build a Multi-Racial and Inclusive Labour Movement

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economic literacy for trade unionists and other activists. We used Stanford's book as a guide, but went far beyond it – with additional topics, reading material, and guest speakers.

By the end of our course we had 30 confident, capable activists who felt a lot better about taking on economic debates and talking to their co-workers and neighbours about economic issues and alternatives.

As one participant put it, "I've been waiting to have this conversation for 20 years."

That alone won't change the world, of course. But if we do more of it, we'll be better prepared ourselves to help change the world. Our participants found the discussion both interesting and useful. Indeed workers take to it instinctually. After all, when they realize what real economics is actually about – their daily lives – they understand that they already know a lot about it.

I think of political-economy training as a kind of "road map" for labour activists and socialists. Like any map, we need it for three things: to figure out where we are, where we want to go, and how to get there. I would like to see all unions, local labour councils and labour centrals step up their efforts on this front. We need to equip our leadership and activist base with a stronger critique of the current situation, and to arm them as citizens with a better understanding of the alternatives we can and must be fighting to win.

## ***Organizing in a Global City***

Priority #7: Build a Multi-Racial and Inclusive Labour Movement

### **John Cartwright**

Since the First Nations gave Toronto the name 'a gathering place' the city and region have been the destination of choice for generations of immigrants, who come with their skills and dreams of making a better life for themselves and their families. While many found those dreams fulfilled, opportunity and prosperity were never fully shared.

Many factors contributed to our quality of life: active government engagement; a strong industrial base with middle income union jobs; a well-funded education system; cohesive public services and social programs; the struggles of women, immigrants, and racialized communities for equality; the dedication of community activists for social justice; and a deep desire for environmental sustainability. However, the growth of inequality and environmental degradation challenges us all.

THESE WORDS INTRODUCE the *Declaration on Good Jobs for All*, endorsed by one thousand participants at an extraordinary and diverse gathering: the Good Jobs Summit in Toronto in November 2008. The Declaration, like the Summit itself, was the product of months of planning and consultation. Thousands of activists were engaged in an extensive pre-Summit dialogue about the need for good jobs – both today and for the next generation.

The process of bringing together one of the most multi-racial gatherings of labour and community activists in Canadian history did not happen by chance. It is one part of a long journey undertaken by labour and social justice movements in Toronto. While “social unionism” is practised in cities and towns across the country, in Toronto it is the equity focus that makes this journey unique. To do otherwise would be to ignore the multi-racial reality of the working class in Canada’s largest urban centre.

Individually and collectively, activists and leaders at all levels have worked for inclusion and equity, and to build solid links in the diverse communities across greater Toronto. Going back many decades, workers of colour led the fight against racism and discrimination. That was never easy, and there were disappointments and hard lessons as well as victories along the way.

Starting in 2003 the annual Aboriginal/Workers of Colour Conferences (sponsored by the Toronto and York Region Labour Council) have created a space that is crucial in connecting activists of colour, and linking local struggles with global efforts for social justice. The first one called for recording the legacy of labour’s anti-racist work. The creation of that – a booklet and video *Breaking Barriers, Linking Struggles* – has been an important educational tool for the entire movement.

Then, with the 2005 release of its longer-run strategy document, “*A Million Reasons to Take Action*,” the Labour Council made it clear that it saw its mandate as helping to raise the standards of one million workers in the region, mostly non-union, whose work was underpaid and undervalued. That served as a framework for specific campaigns in varied sectors – hotel workers, manufacturing, and social services. In each of those efforts, new lessons were learned, particularly about organizing among immigrant and newcomer communities. And new relationships, and new bonds of solidarity, were carefully built and nurtured between unions, anti-poverty and community groups, and a constellation of neighbourhood and ethnic organizations.

Some of those fights, such as the “Made In Canada Matters” struggle around government procurement, defended traditional high-wage union jobs. But other struggles, like the fight for a \$10 minimum wage (described elsewhere in this forum by Kristin Schwartz), also showed that labour is willing and able to fight for more than just its own members. That campaign, in essence, constituted “political bargaining”: demanding, in the political arena, a substantial increase in wages for the hundreds of thousands of Toronto-area workers who toil at, or near, the minimum wage. The campaign featured extensive grass-roots organizing – town hall meetings in ten low-income neighbourhoods, a mass petition campaign, and movement building combined with formal election work.

In the wake of these ongoing efforts to prepare the ground, when the Labour Council then invited 30 organizations to plan a summit on good jobs, the response was immediate and positive. Each group had its own substantial base of supporters, and a proven ability to mobilize. Each group also had an interest

in something more than just a one-day event. The outreach for the Summit involved presentations and discussions in scores of meetings, and a dozen different languages. The *Declaration on Good Jobs for All* evolved from those interactions, and went through numerous amendments.

The Summit was held on 22 November 2008. People who had never been in the same room before exchanged ideas and shared a determination to work together for a society that we could all be proud of. Presenters posed hard questions, and workshops buzzed. In the closing, Summit co-ordinator Judy Vashti Persad captured the spirit of the day with one word – magic.

The Good Jobs for All Coalition has continued to develop – planning joint campaigns and supporting each other's efforts. The Coalition is holding rallies to fight for improvements in Employment Insurance, supporting new regulations on temp agency work, demanding investment in social infrastructure, and advocating for a green economy with good local jobs. This coalition will no doubt face many challenges. But it represents an authentic expression of the changing working class in Toronto, and just may become a new model of community/labour organizing in the 21st century.

The demographic reality is that the clear majority of the future working class will come from communities of immigrants, aboriginal, and racialized workers. The labour movement must root itself, authentically and powerfully, in these communities if we are to have a base that is able to defend past gains and fight for new victories.

## **PMP Stands for “*Politicize, Mobilize, and Power*”**

Priority #8: Integrate Unemployed Workers (Union and Non-Union) into the Fightback

### **Winnie Ng**

ON JUNE 30, 2008, Progressive Moulded Products (PMP, the largest employer in Vaughan, Ont.) filed for bankruptcy protection and closed its eleven facilities. The company closed up shop owing its 2400 workers a total of over \$30 million in severance and termination pay. Ninety per cent of these non-union workers were born outside of Canada. The realization that they were used, abused, and now tossed aside like scrap metal, ironically on the Canada Day long weekend, completely shattered their notion of Canada as a society that upholds fairness and human rights. The resulting shock and sense of betrayal inspired the workers to stage a sixteen-day round-the-clock blockade to stop the company from removing heavy machinery from the main plant.

For these workers, predominantly workers of colour, turning rage into collective action and resistance was an extraordinary act of defiance. Their strength, courage, and sense of justice captured the support, respect, and