

Labor wants to fight back

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LONDON, Ont. — Rank-and-file worker delegates to the convention of the Ontario Federation of Labor demanded "action" from the 600,000-member labor body at the annual convention held here Nov. 3-5.

The 1,000 delegates, representing unionized workers in every industry in Ontario and ranging from construction laborers to government office employees, deliberated over a wide range of matters affecting labor.



Young Plumber delegate from Toronto impatient with the labor establishment.



Ironworker criticizing labor leadership over inactivity on Rand Report demonstration.

Formed in 1956

The Ontario Federation of Labour was formed in 1956 following the merger of the two national labor bodies, the Trades and Labor Congress and the Canadian Congress of Labor. The Canadian Labor Congress, the new national labor body, issued charters for the formation of provincial federations of labor because the mass of labor legislation and labor relations is under the jurisdiction of provincial governments.

Not all trade unions are affiliated to the Canadian Labor Congress or the Ontario Federation of Labour. There are a number of unions who have been prevented from affiliating to these central labor bodies because they do not conform to the constitutional requirements of affiliation. Unions prevented from joining range from those under communist influence to those accused of having corrupt leadership.

As is the case in many democratic federal organizations where the voting rights of large affiliates are greater than those for smaller ones, conventions of the OFL are usually controlled by the voting patterns of the three largest unions in Ontario — the United Steelworkers, the Canadian Union of Public Employees and the United Automobile Workers.

As in previous annual conventions of the OFL, it was evident at the recent one that many full-time union leaders were present to make sure that proceedings went smoothly and that the federation's policy did not become too radically active, as was the demand of many rank-and-filers. It was also in the full-timers interests to have the incumbent leadership elected for another term. However, there were many full-time union leaders present who did not reflect this attitude but instead gave full support to the large group of rank-and-file delegates who pressed for more militant action by the labor federation in light of recent attacks on labor by business and government.

The militancy expressed in the first day in rejecting wage controls as proposed by the federal Liberal government, set the mood of the three-day convention.

"No wage controls" was the cry of the labor delegates as they debated a resolution dealing with prime minister Pierre Trudeau's program of austerity. Delegate after delegate rose to condemn any attempt by governments to institute wage controls and called for "massive demonstrations to show both Ottawa and Queen's Park that we are not going to put up with wage controls."

The delegates voted unanimously against wage controls demanding "government action to curtail rising prices, rents and other costs which are occasioned by higher profits."

It was noted that corporation profits have increased so far this year by over 20 per cent while the average wage gain across the country has been only 7 per cent.

Leaders criticized

The labor delegates later in the first day took a tough stand on the issue of OHSIP and rejected a weak leadership resolution condemning the provincial government for misuse of federal government funds in not providing a low-cost medicare program.

The new medicare program launched recently by the Ontario government has premiums much higher than other provinces and only pays 90 per cent of the doctor's fees.

A delegate from the Oshawa Labor Council criticized the federation leadership for not standing out publicly against the new government plan. A rubberworker from the Firestone plant in Hamilton called for a general strike if Ontario did not change its policy on medicare.

With such a militant stand taken by the delegates the labor leaders were clearly embarrassed and a new resolution was later brought to the convention which called for a massive demonstration by the people of Ontario against the Ontario medicare plan. The resolution was adopted unanimously and the president of the federation, David Archer, announced that the Ontario Farmers Union had approached the federation to help organize such a demonstration.



Grape Worker Jessica Govea: "The Alberta sugar beet workers face the same problems as we do."

Grape boycott endorsed

In the second day the OFL endorsed the continued boycott of California grapes and at the noon recess the whole convention picketed the local Loblaws and A&P stores. Later in the day Jessica Govea, from the California United Farm Workers, gave a stirring speech to the delegates. While she thanked Canadian workers for their continued support of the California grape workers' strike (now in its fifth year) she drew the attention of the delegates to the equally bad plights of the Alberta sugar beet workers who, she said, work under wretched conditions and who must be organized if they are to be lifted from impoverishment. Most farm workers in both the United States and Canada still do not have the legal right to belong to a union, she said.

In the elections for a new OFL leadership and executive it was evident that the incumbents were not prepared to hand over the leadership to the militants who challenged them. However, one automobile worker delegate from St. Catharines, who had constantly challenged the inadequacies of the old leadership, polled 451 votes in the election for vice-president, showing to some degree the militancy of the workers present. Most of the top officers of the federation have held their positions for over 10 years.

The OFL executive again came under fire in the debate on labor legislation. In discussing the threat of government reports that threaten the right to strike and propose other restrictive measures, a delegate from the steel erectors union accused the OFL leaders of non-cooperation when construction unions organized mass demonstrations earlier this year in Hamilton and Toronto against the Rand Report. The delegate pointed out that none of the top officers of the federation were in attendance at the demonstrations and pointing to the top officers asked "where was Hamilton (the secretary-treasurer) when the chips were down on the Rand Report and the rank-and-file was taking action?"

No excuse for inactivity

Many delegates warned the leaders that it was their responsibility to provide leadership when it was needed. They said there was no excuse for inactivity when labor was being threatened with a legislative straitjacket. It was clear that many delegates rejected the oft-repeated slogan that "the only way to get good labor legislation is to elect an NDP government." Many demanded militant action by all organized labor now to put pressure on the government in power to change its policies.

In the discussion on political action, where a resolution for increased support to the NDP was adopted, a number of young workers took to the microphones.

One of them, an auto worker from Oshawa said; "the system has to be changed, labor cannot support a petty bourgeois party, we can't just patch up capitalism we have to have a socialist society."

The labor convention dealt with resolutions on housing, union education in schools and universities, pollution, welfare, Sunday store opening and the plight of hospital workers. Of particular importance was the resolution which opposed compulsory arbitration in contract negotiations for hospital workers. Delegates were told about the awful conditions under which hospital employees work. Over 40 per cent of the hospital workers in Ontario receive below poverty level wages.

The convention ended as it began with demands on the leadership that there be action in the coming year. If the labor leaders respond to the mood of their members then we can expect to hear of much more protest and action on the part of labour on matters that concern working people. If the leaders do not respond then we can expect that rank-and-file workers will take more action into their own hands. A restless mood is running through the factories, offices and building sites. Labor is on the move.



Autoworker from Oshawa: "Labor cannot support a petty bourgeois party, the NDP."