

Canadian Labour Congress as an international actor

by John Clark

"The important thing in the international arena is to follow through on the rhetoric, because the international arena is largely rhetoric."

A lot of people might not agree with that assessment of world diplomacy by Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) President Dennis McDermott. A lot more might not agree with his belief that the CLC has itself taken the step and evolved beyond the rhetoric in its own international affairs activities. Romeo Maione, at the non-governmental organization directorate of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), is, however, one person who does agree. "The trade unions," he says, "are moving from what I would call a 'romantic international solidarity' rhetoric... into a much more realistic kind of internationalism based on hard economic facts." The CIDA official speaks from first-hand knowledge. He was, at one point, international affairs director at the CLC.

In fact, Canada's unions have been active internationally for many years. For example, the CLC and its predecessors, the Canadian Congress of Labour and the Trades and Labour Congress, have been participating in the International Labour Organization (ILO) since 1919. But to many observers, the CLC's international activities have taken on added substance in the past two or three years. For one thing, it is offering alternative policies for the resolution of the world's problems—policies that do not always correspond with the view expressed by official Ottawa.

At a time when the business press reports the stock markets' favorable response to war rumours, Canada's largest labour federation offers urgent pleas for disarmament. While governments around the world preach policies of restraint, the CLC argues that fighting inflation at the expense of employment will produce "nothing but compounding economic disaster." As government institutions increasingly pay heed to human and trade union rights around the world, the CLC is an old hand in the area. This last factor may help to explain the enhanced relationship with the federal government.

The primary task of the CLC international affairs department is to get the Department of External Affairs to realize the indispensibility of the congress in

achieving a real understanding of social and political developments outside Canada, says its director John Harker. External Affairs seemed to take at least some recognition of this argument about a year ago when it entered into an agreement for an exchange of personnel with the CLC. Under the agreement, Bruce Gillies, a foreign service office who had dealings with the ILO in Geneva, has been seconded to the CLC to serve as assistant international affairs director. He is to remain in the position for two years before returning to the federal bureaucracy. When he returns, he will bring with him greater knowledge of the international trade union movement and a newly developed area of expertise. So far, the CLC has not fulfilled its part of the exchange, a fact blamed on a lack of resources. But it hopes to send someone to External Affairs within a year.

Personnel exchange

The personnel exchange is only one part of the intensified relationship between the labour congress and the federal government. CIDA is contributing over \$500,000 dollars this year to assist the CLC in implementing international education programs where experienced Canadian trade union leaders impart their knowledge to help speed development of trade unions in the Third World. CIDA feels its investment is in the national interest because the only way the world can survive today is "by assuring that everybody is developing... justly," said Maione. External Affairs has slightly different reasons for its cooperation with the CLC. It has publicly declared its interest in the greater expertise it will obtain from the personnel exchange program, but more interesting insights can be obtained in private background briefings with departmental officials. Some officials are somewhat nonplussed by the new relationship with the CLC, which they consider to be a lobby group like all the other, but just a little bigger than most.

External Affairs has observed what it perceives as an apparent anti-American stance by the CLC. It feels there has been a growth of Canadian unions away from

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