

EXCALIBUR INTERVIEW

With Grace Hartman

Grace Hartman is president of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). CUPE is one of Canada's largest unions and one of the first to support the Canadian Labour Congress' (CLC) Day of Protest on October 14.

Hartman will be speaking at York today in CLH-L at 3:00 p.m.

She spoke with Excalibur on Monday from her Ottawa office about: the day of protest, inflation, students and labour and, the NDP among other things.



By MICHAEL HOLLETT

EXCALIBUR: What is the historical significance of the October 14 day of protest?

HARTMAN: I suppose it's the first really large political activity or political action of the Canadian trade union movement in a number of years because while we have had lots of strikes against employers for contract negotiations, we've never really taken this kind of mass political action to dissent against legislation imposed by the federal government.

EXCALIBUR: Do you regard the day of protest as a political act not just based on economic considerations? Is it also to oppose the concept of government interfering with collective bargaining?

HARTMAN: Yes because the whole program, while the government said it was for economic reasons, is certainly eroding our right to bargain freely and collectively. Because once you reach an agreement with an employer that should be it. And sometimes we have reached those agreements after lengthy strikes, several weeks, several months, and then just by the stroke of the pen a third party intervenes and wipes out some of those gains.

It makes it very difficult to improve the lot of workers and especially in an organization like ours, where we still

have a lot of really low paid workers, we have a lot of workers who I suppose would be considered the working poor. It's a very frustrating experience. And I suppose the day is also designed to dissent and I think that is a pretty important democratic right that we should fight to maintain.

EXCALIBUR: Do you think employers are bargaining with the AIB in the backs of their minds? Are they settling somewhat higher than you think they might and counting on the AIB to roll back?

all across the country. We had the big march on parliament hill on March 22. So, we've sort of taken it one step at a time.

The ballot box will soon be something we will have to be looking for when elections come up for the federal government. And it would seem to me that if we are prepared to take a day off, lose the day's pay, whatever, surely when it comes time to vote for a new federal government they're not going to put back in power the government, the party, they were protesting against on October 14.

EXCALIBUR: What do you think discussion, I think even Munro mentioned it, of penalizing workers who protest on the fourteenth is anti-democratic?

HARTMAN: Yes, I think it is. They are not directing their protest against their employer. It's against government and government legislation. The protest is, as I say, our right to dissent. I don't think action should be taken nor do I really think it will be taken.

EXCALIBUR: Is the tactic of a one day work stoppage, a one shot tactic or is it possible that it could be tried again?

HARTMAN: Everything at this point is possible because we have to see what happens as a result of our protest, our indication to the government of our dissatisfaction. And if it's more than the labour movement, if there are poverty groups, senior citizen groups, students groups; if it is more than the labour movement, if it is a sort of common front of working people in Canada, protesting against bad legislation, it has to be even more effective than if it is just the labour movement.

EXCALIBUR: Do you think it is possible the government might drop the controls if the day of protest is big enough?

HARTMAN: I understand the prime minister is already saying he is ready to review them in March. I think as you know, most of the provincial governments opted into the program for only 18 months, so he may be forced to review it even before then. There is probably going to be a movement of some kind on his part. I have great fear about whether he ever will drop the controls, because apart from his message of last Thanksgiving you remember there was a Christmas message, talking about a "New Society". This is his "Just society" that we are getting now, and, you know, I very much fear what his "New Society" will be.

EXCALIBUR: How do you feel about the media's coverage of the day of protest?

HARTMAN: I think it has been absolutely dreadful. I think they've had a whole campaign to discredit it, to downplay, to discredit people that are actively participating. I think it has just been incredible. I don't know why all these columnists and editorial writers are so bound and determined to make it a failure if they can.

EXCALIBUR: How do you feel about other sectors of society supporting the day of protest?

HARTMAN: I think that it is to their advantage because it is not just organized workers. As a matter of fact

organized workers have a little better opportunity to at least gain the minimums established under the guidelines, but I am concerned about the unorganized, I am concerned about the senior citizens and the people on welfare, the students who are having their educational budgets cutback and who will be going out into this job market and this atmosphere before very long, and the over 750,000 unemployed.

You know, that should be everybody's concern. To see that something is done by the government to put people back to work instead of increasing the number of unemployed, or taking the attitude, well there is not much we can do about it. We will have to settle for a large unemployed group and that really concerns me, that callous attitude about it.

EXCALIBUR: So labour wants student support?

HARTMAN: Oh yes!

EXCALIBUR: Do you support the idea of students working with labour to defend their mutual rights, or do you see their problems as exclusive?

HARTMAN: No, I think they should be working with them. Because what we are trying to do is clear up some of the problems that are going to be there when the students go into in the workforce. And we are having great difficulties because tied in with the federal government programme, are all these provincial cutback programmes. I see that really effecting our educational system. I see it becoming more and more difficult for working class kids to go to university. And that is a failing. Everybody should have the right to university education.

EXCALIBUR: Do you support the goal which the NDP has on paper of free tuition?

HARTMAN: Yes I do. And CUPE has gone on record, apart from the NDP, CUPE itself has gone on record as being in favour of that.

EXCALIBUR: Does CUPE oppose social service cutbacks?

HARTMAN: We certainly do. Because we are seeing some terrible cutbacks that are really affecting people who can't really speak up for themselves, the people in nursing homes, homes for the aged, hospitals, schools, and daycare centres.

EXCALIBUR: So do you think that labour should try to speak for those people who have no one to speak for them, people on welfare and unorganized workers?

HARTMAN: Right. I hope that when I speak people understand that I am trying to speak for those people who cannot speak for themselves.

EXCALIBUR: Some people bring up the argument that there is one giant pie and everyone is arguing for slices. You don't see it that way?

HARTMAN: No, I'm not just fighting for our slice of pie.

EXCALIBUR: What do you think of the government's advertising campaign to justify wage controls.

HARTMAN: I feel that if a programme is really as good as they say it is then they don't need to spend 1.2 million dollars to prove it. I think it is a