

Speaking notes for CAW-CEP “A Moment of Truth Workshop”

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So I guess you know you have the entire labour movement talking about you and your bold plans. I congratulate you for having a plan, a vision. (Richard Cashin used to call this “lighting a match to a blasty bough”!)

This conversation is good. The critical analysis is good. The statement that we can’t go on as we have been is good. The willingness to do something about it is good.

As my 10-year-old says: “Mom, it’s all good!!!”

I also want to thank you for the opportunity to be part of this conversation – this bold, reflective, critical and profoundly necessary conversation about our movement, about how we push back and fight back, how we build again, how we work together, how we define ourselves and our values, how we reach out, how we talk to and with our members, how we attract new members, how we can do things better, how we redefine and build solidarity, how we challenge power and the crazy, unsustainable economic system known as disaster capitalism that has taken over our world. How we build a better world.

(Piece of cake!! We should be done by 4.)

I don’t need to tell you that we are engaged in a war. A class war, yes, but also a battle for the hearts and the minds of our members and of the entire working class. As Warren Buffett, one of the richest men in the world, has said: we’re not winning that class war; he is.

And yet we find ourselves in a battle for relevancy – at a time when unions as a progressive force, as a catalyst for change in society, have never been more necessary as a counterbalance to corporate power and anti-worker governments.

We have so many magnificent targets. Stunning corporate greed, skyrocketing inequality, crappy jobs, and the most egregious right-wing federal government in our nation’s modern history.

And yet we must thank the Occupy movement – for sharing their oxygen. For mobilizing. For capitalizing on a gigantic window of opportunity. 20 years ago that voice, that action, would have been the labour movement. At the same time, the labour movement is fighting back on a

whole host of levels. The challenge is how we package those fightbacks into a larger resistance; a co-ordinated resistance – a co-ordinated voice that articulates our vision of a different world.

The question for our panel “what can the labour movement do better or differently” implies that we can; that there is hope; that we can be and still are a force of progressive change in our country, for our members and indeed for all workers. That means we must have an alternative economic vision for our country something that I hope will be at the heart of your new union and should be at the heart of what labour centrals are fighting for.

This is ultimately about values. And those values should shape OUR MESSAGE.

But if our values are to mean anything, if they are to be actualized, this will require political will, champions in our movement, bold (extremely bold) leadership and yes soul-searching. It means a willingness to change, not just to talk about change.

And here I would suggest the labour movement’s recent restructuring discussions did not achieve the goals of renewal that many of us wanted or envisioned.

Perhaps this is a symptom of our bigger challenge; where our structures, turf wars and power struggles are holding us back.

This desire you have expressed to build something new will require courage and a clear vision of what you wish to achieve and how you will get there. It will mean pissing off some and inspiring others. But most importantly you are saying the status quo is no longer ok and we’re going to do something about it.

You are fairly critical of labour centrals in your discussion document A Moment of Truth; referring to paralysis and dysfunction.

I did not take the criticism personally. Instead it caused me to think about our movement (and labour centrals) in a way that I haven’t. If two of Canada’s most progressive private sector unions consider labour centrals dysfunctional than we have a very big problem. This statement is a reflection upon all of us.

So you forced me to reflect on what I do as a Federation President, what we could do better and what are some of the key challenges I and our federation and all labour centrals face. It made me think about how labour centrals work (or don’t work) together in our regions.

When I was elected President 3.5 years ago, I started a process of reinventing our Federation. I envisioned a more activist federation in every sense of the word. I wanted our affiliates to have high expectations of their Federation.

I wanted a federation that carried out sustained campaigns; one that worked in a different way with our collective of affiliates and one that worked one on one with affiliates on their issues.

I wanted a Federation with a new media presence – one built on credibility on issues, on challenging the status quo, but also one that presented alternatives and ideas.

From the first, I believed our role was not just to react, but to reframe, to rethink, and to be proactive, to look for windows of opportunity to push for change for working people. To get people thinking about us in a new light, but also to deliver victories – like a 67% increase in minimum wage over five-year period.

I wanted our Federation to have a bigger voice, to be relevant, to be smart about what we did, to build relationships with activists, with government bureaucrats, with politicians (where possible), with the media.

I wanted a federation that was strengthened by our relationships with our social partners. Where they knew they could count on us and we could count on them. It is about building political power; building a movement.

We have done this in many areas, with our work on offshore safety, minimum wage, labour relations and globalization, child care and how we share the wealth from our booming oil economy. We have been trying to present a different vision for our economy.

As a voice of working people in our province it was and is necessary that we were the voice of the economy for working people, that we had a clear understanding of what was happening in our economy and that we were putting forward a vision of an economy that worked for all citizens – not one where 30% of our GDP is siphoned off into corporate profits. (You will see that Gil McGowan, President of AFL, is doing something similar (and big) in his province.)

I wanted a Federation that talked about principles like sharing the wealth while tapping into what we understood were values held by the vast majority of people in our province – values like caring and sharing and supporting each other. These are not just NL values. They are Canadian values. They are labour movement values.

I hope in your “big union” discussions you CONSIDER the kind of presence you want to have and the role you want to play not just nationally, but provincially and in our communities. I hope you will think about the kind of role you want to play in central labour bodies.

You know the labour movement and our progressive sister organizations are filled with brilliant minds. In fact, most days I am in awe of the brilliance we employ. We have experts on everything from the economy, to trade agreements, to collective bargaining and labour law, to arbitrations, to MNCs, to oil and gas, to mining, to health care, to child care, to pay equity, to Employment Insurance. You name it, we’ve got it.

And we need a plan to harness and more effectively use this battalion of intelligence. How do we share the brilliance? This is crucial in our battle to winning the idea (and media) war.

When you consider the job ahead of us, you already know that renewal starts on the ground; in our workplaces, in our communities, in our provinces. Talking with our members.

The stronger we are in our communities, in our workplaces, in our provinces, the stronger our national unions and central labour bodies will be.

And as affiliates you have to want labour centrals to be stronger. And if you have expectations you must let those expectations be known. Let's all raise the bar a little.

Our members and in particular our activists need to see that we are leading this battle. That we have a plan. That we are not paralyzed by these attacks.

That we are not always on the defensive. That we are fighting back, capitalizing on windows of opportunity.

That we are not going from one fire to another, but that we are actually setting a fire of our own every now and then.

The first thing we can do better as a movement is stop being so defensive. About who we are. About why we exist. About our role in the world. For too long we have allowed others to define us. We must do the defining. By our actions. With our hearts. With our values and our principles. With our passion. With an alternative economic and social plan for our country. And with a message that speaks to our members, but NOT only to our members.

We must stop marginalizing parts of our movement. We have to be quicker off the mark when moments of opportunity arise. We must more effectively use our experts. We must communicate, communicate, communicate. We must be in the media game in a very real and big way. (Caterpillar example; CAW won the media war here.)

And perhaps as some have suggested we should consider our own media. Technology makes this possible. Social media is a brilliant tool for connecting with our activists and public opinion makers. We must embrace it. Just ask Dave Coles.

You know, sisters and brothers, some of this just comes down to leadership (the kind you are showing here today), to having a vision and to just going for it.

How do we build labour unity? We know this is critical to waging a powerful offense against Mr. Harper and corporate power. This must be at the core of what labour centrals do. But I have to tell you it is not for the faint of heart. Solidarity is not a natural phenomena. Because it is more natural to compete, to build silos, territories, turfs.

So we build labour unity by engaging our affiliates and our members, by cajoling, by relationship building, by encouraging, by asking, by demanding, by doing, by acting, by pleading, by leading and by inspiring. By not assuming that it is just there.

We build unity through our actions, by our hard work, by reaching out, by being there for each other. It starts by understanding that it is on the to-do list, not the done list.

And we must work at it every single day.

Labour centrals can be the places where we can and should develop our collective fightback strategies, where we bring together our ideas, where we plan, where we mobilize our members, where we share the great things happening within our unions, where we inspire each other. Labour centrals must politicize our movement. Labour centrals should be the glue – where we can be more than the sum of our parts. Where we create that alternative vision for our communities, our provinces, our nation. But you have to want that.

Labour centrals can be anything YOU want them to be. But YOU have to want them to be something.

We are a big glorious movement. We are a movement of amazing activists who want to change the world.

Today everything we believe in is under attack - and we need a bold offensive. We need a spark. We can't worry about controlling every little detail of how we fight back. The more acts of democracy, of civil disobedience, the better. After all, it is about building resistance and arming our members with that alternative vision. It's about giving them hope and something to fight for.

What you are doing here today is history in the making. (No pressure.)

Fundamentally, this bold course you have embarked on is about the future of our movement, but it is so much bigger than that. It is about the kind of world we want.

As Cesar Chavez said "We cannot seek achievement for ourselves and forget about progress and prosperity for our community... Our ambitions must be broad enough to include the aspirations and needs of others, for their sakes and for our own."

This defines my labour movement. And quite clearly, your actions say it defines your movement too. Thank you.