



Alberta Federation of Labour

MAKING GAINS FOR ALL: POLITICAL CHANGE DURING A BOOM

INTRODUCTION

Why is it that Alberta can have a surplus of billions of dollars, during what may be the biggest boom in history, and yet our government tries repeatedly to privatize our public health care system? It doesn't make sense. Instead of expanding Medicare, Albertans find themselves on the defensive – fighting a never-ending battle to prevent privatization.

That is not how politics is supposed to play out in Canada. Normally the major political gains for working people – public pensions, unemployment insurance, public health care, affordable education and so on – have come during times of economic prosperity. Booms are generally times when working people and their movements are able to secure broad political gains from governments to protect themselves against the inevitable downturn.

But that is not happening in Alberta in 2007. During this latest boom, we find Alberta's politics have become more conservative and anti-worker, not less. We are still fighting defensive battles, rather than challenging for new programs and ideas. Whether we look at the Alberta legislature or in communities around the province, there is little evidence of political momentum for stronger labour protections, more affordable housing, improved income security or better environmental protection. More visionary political debates elsewhere for greater democratization and creative solutions for social problems are absent in Alberta political culture.

The question is why? And what can the Alberta labour movement do about it? How can we lead a movement to create political gains for all Albertans while the economy is running hot and governments have viable options financially?

THE IMPORTANCE OF POLITICS

Some may ask why unions should care about politics or making political gains. Is it not enough to win good wages and working conditions for our own members? The lessons of history teach us that the tie between unions and politics is an integral one. As Harvard professor Elaine Bernard is famous for saying: "Unions cannot afford to ignore politics, because politics does not ignore unions."

Winning political gains, such as strengthening an employment law or winning better funding for education and health care, or creating new social programs to help Canadians living in poverty, is an act of generalizing the gains we make for our members at the bargaining table. It extends to other workers and their families the benefits we can enjoy through the strength of our collective union action.

In that respect, political action is a natural extension of union representation.

There are four reasons why unions need to pay attention to political issues. The first is for every issue we are successful at legislating or enacting in government policy, it is one less issue we need to bargain. If we improve health and safety laws for all workers, we also protect our members. If we achieve a pharmacare program, we don't need to include it in our benefits package, freeing up resources for other benefits. The logic is simple – if everyone receives a benefit, our members do too.

Second, some protections unions cannot provide their members directly. Unemployment Insurance is a perfect example. We need government programs to ensure income security for unemployed workers. We have a direct interest in ensuring certain public policies operate in the interests of workers.

Third, being active in political gains for all Canadians builds a stronger labour movement. Historically, labour movements that engage in politics and attempt to generalize policies in favour of workers have been the most resilient and vital labour movements. The contrasting approaches can be seen in the United States and Scandinavia. In the U.S. unions stuck to the “business” of bargaining and representing members - for the most part staying out of politics. The result is that today private sector unionization is in the single digits and most Americans find unions to be irrelevant. By contrast, in Scandinavia and other European nations unions, from the beginning, engaged in politics, fighting for social and economic policies that benefited workers. At times this meant trading off higher wage increases for their members, but over the long term it created a more solid and entrenched labour movement.

Fourth, engaging in politics is how we create the kind of society we want to live in. Our members don't just exist at work. What good is a great job if your community is in tatters? What good is a great health plan if your neighbour can't get the care they need? We are not islands of unionization. We use collective strength to benefit the collective both at work and in the community. That is how we build a society that values workers and working families.

Politics is part of Alberta's rich labour history – and if we are to remain strong in the future, it needs to continue to be that way.

THEN VERSUS NOW

Historically, times of economic prosperity and low unemployment have been the periods when workers have made gains – both at the workplace and in politics.

There have been three key periods of “boom” economic conditions in Canada since World War II. In each, the political conditions also aligned to allow workers to improve working conditions and implement progressive social and economic policy.

The first period was near the end and immediately following the war. With the return of soldiers and the transformation of industrial capacity to peacetime production, governments encouraged job creation and capital investment.

The results for workers were noticeable. This was when the great Fordist compromise was constructed - a period where employers agreed to offer living wages and stable employment in return for a degree of labour peace and productivity. At the government level, we witnessed the first wave of legislation aimed at improving conditions for workers.

1944 was a watershed year for the labour movement, for it was when Privy Council Order 1003 was passed, essentially constructing the modern industrial relations system in Canada by legalizing collective bargaining in the private sector and establishing clear rules and processes for certification, arbitration and adjudication.

In broader politics, historians consider the period 1940-1948 to be “the birth of the modern welfare system” in Canada¹. The mid-forties witnessed the creation of key pillars of what we have come to consider part of the Canadian social security net. During this period the federal government created Unemployment Insurance, Family Allowance, universal Old Age Security pensions, and initial steps toward public financing for health care.

These gains did not just happen by the good will of politicians and employers. Unions, progressive movements and Canadian workers agitated and organized for many years through the early 20th century to build to point when conditions combined to make victories possible.² In the heady days following the war, Canadian working people were able to translate a strong economy into real political and economic gains – gains we continue to reap today.

The second major historical period when working people made significant political headway was the mid-1960s. In labour law, this was the period of public sector unionism. Public sector workers – postal workers, health care workers and civil servants – stood up and demanded fairness. And they got it, earning the right to strike.

In the area of social programs, the mid-1960s were a marvel of advancement. It witnessed the creation of the Canada Pension Plan, the Guaranteed Income Supplement for low-income seniors, and the Canada Assistance Plan, which provided funding to the provinces for social assistance.

Of course, the 1960s were also the birth of Medicare. As is widely known, Saskatchewan under Tommy Douglas started public health care, and it quickly spread across to other provinces, culminating in the Medicare Act of 1966.

By the end of the 1960s, political debate had shifted toward what else was possible to advance the political interest of working people. Debate swirled around guaranteed annual income, worker ownership of industry and industrial strategies.

The third period of significance to Alberta workers is the mid and late 1970s – Alberta’s first oil boom. Even with a Conservative (Peter Lougheed) in power, working families were able to achieve a number of significant victories.

The Lougheed government of the late 1970s greatly expanded access to post-secondary education. Tuition was held low, and new spaces created.

During this period, Alberta was known for relatively fair welfare rates, a decent minimum wage and a focus on affordable housing. Alberta created the Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped program in 1979, Canada’s first disability-related income support program. Even in the area of labour, the 1970s were decent times. Alberta’s first Occupational Health and Safety Act was passed in 1976, with its own cabinet minister and stand-alone department. The Employment Standards Code was significantly improved around the same time.

The advances made by workers in that era came through a Conservative government and in the same political culture and dynamic that exists in Alberta today. There certainly are lessons we can learn from this success.

LESSONS FROM HISTORY

There are three reasons why the periods highlighted above were noteworthy for their progressive political change.

First employers and the government possessed a strong motivation to keep the booming economy humming. There was a shortage of workers and a surplus of profits to be made. The risk of labour disputes, discontented citizens and political discord was high enough to motivate them to make peace at a higher price than they would normally be willing to pay.

Second, money was flowing. Both governments and corporations had additional financial capacity to meet some of the demands coming from workers for social programs, benefits and other gains.

Third, the change was preceded by a period of agitation and worker militancy. Workers fought for every gain they earned. Without a group of citizens pushing and prodding for change, the politicians would have happily left their commitments at rhetoric. The strategies were varied – lobbying, protests, strikes, voting, research – but all aimed to achieve the same goal: shifting the tone and nature of political debate onto issues that matter for working people.

The lessons from history are not that these times were extra-ordinary, but that they arose out of a set of circumstances combining with the efforts of ordinary people to shift politics. That is the lesson we need to remember today.

TODAY

And what of the picture today? Most are well aware that current economic conditions easily meet any criteria for the classification of “boom”. Unemployment is at 3.3%, GDP is up by over 10% and oil prices – the primary driver of the boom – remain at record levels.

But what we are not seeing, unlike the past are generalized gains for workers. Wage increases are running at or below inflation. Unions are not succeeding at the bargaining table and so are not winning new and creative benefits and working conditions for their members.

And at the government level, we continue to struggle to have our voice heard. The last couple of years Alberta politics have been a series of defensive battles. The government's priorities have been to bolster industry – and the energy industry in particular – at the expense of working Albertans.

We can see it in many areas. In labour policy, the primary focus has been on the importing of temporary foreign workers, rather than on fixing Alberta's apprenticeship and training program. Temporary workers serve the interests of employers, not workers.

A much heralded review of Employment Standards – the first in 20 years – has stalled, mostly due to employer opposition to modest improvements to minimum protections for workers. The only changes to the Employment Standards were a small increase in the minimum wage, which at \$7.00 an hour now ranks 11th in the country (ahead of only New Brunswick and tied with Newfoundland), and a regressive move to allow 12-year olds to work in restaurants.

Alberta's health and safety laws continue to be the worst in the country, and our workplace accident and fatality rates are increasing. The disabling injury rate has increased 9% since 2003, and the number of fatalities has jumped over 40% in the same time period³. Despite a couple of bitter strikes and an AFL campaign for first-contract arbitration, the government refuses to consider any changes to the Labour Relations Code that might allow workers to exercise their democratic rights to join a union.

The government's track record on social policy is no better. Despite the rising cost of living, welfare rates remain among the lowest in the country. Alberta ranks second lowest in welfare income (ahead of only New Brunswick). We are second lowest in benefits for people with disabilities. This is a far cry from when AISH was first established. In some cases, social assistance income has dropped by over 50% since 1994.⁴

Housing prices are leaving thousands homeless and others struggling to meet mortgage payments, yet the government does nothing to either lower the cost of housing or increase the supply of affordable housing. Alberta continues to have inadequate funding for affordable child care spaces, leaving working parents constantly scrambling to find child care.

The Conservatives are not even putting a concerted effort into their traditionally favourite areas, such as infrastructure spending, particularly in areas such as transit, recreation and municipal infrastructure. By far the largest portion of new infrastructure spending in the past three years has gone to roads and highways, which does little to enhance communities or improve public services.

Funding to education remains inadequate. At the K-12 level, class sizes remain stubbornly large and school boards struggle to provide the quality of education our children deserve. At post-secondary, students are paying 300% more than they did 15 years ago to attend university. Alberta now has the second highest tuition rates in the country.⁵ The end result is most kids

receive lower quality education, and only those from well-to-do families can attend post-secondary.

The record in health care is all too famous. Rather than look at expanding the public health care umbrella to prescription drugs and homecare – which would offer real benefits to Albertans – the government attempted to embark on its latest strategy to privatize health care. The Third Way was, fortunately, defeated by the Friends of Medicare, the labour movement and thousands of Albertans voicing their opposition.

Rather than invest wisely in public services and infrastructure, Alberta's current prosperity is being squandered on rebate cheques, tax cuts and subsidies to corporations and industry.

Despite high employment and a shift in the usual labour market dynamics, Albertans have so far been unable to translate their new-found leverage into a shift in political climate. And as a result, for the first time in history, a boom is not being linked to a leap forward in progressive political ideas.

POLITICAL ANEMIA

It would be easy to blame the Conservative government for the lack of political gains in Alberta currently. And without question, the government of Ed Stelmach, just like 36 years of Conservatives before him, has no affinity for labour.

But governments, regardless of partisan stripe, can feel the pressure of public will. In the 1970s, the Conservative Peter Lougheed felt the need to invest in programs and policies that legitimately helped working people – not because he was ideologically disposed, but because he felt the weight of public opinion. The same is true with the federal Liberal government in the 1940s. Their labour and social policy was a direct and explicit response to the growing strength of the CCF (the pre-cursor to the NDP).

And when government's don't respond appropriately, such as Prime Minister Bennett in the great depression, a riled up public tosses them out.

But we are seeing neither a forceful articulation of public opinion pressuring Alberta politicians, and nor is there any clear evidence of a wave of discontent that will dislodge the Conservatives. The reason for this lack of public demand is complex. It is not within the scope of this paper to explore the myriad factors in Alberta's political malaise, from historical political culture, to strong neo-conservative institutions and tendencies to a short-term "boom" mentality among many Albertans.

However, the one factor most relevant for the labour movement is the measure of our own political capacity. An important cause of the lack of political gains in the province can be traced to labour's inability in recent years to make its collective voice heard in political debate.

In short, unions have become politically anemic in Alberta. Efforts by the AFL and other labour unions, in recent years to achieve progress on issues ranging from labour law, young workers,

health and safety, child care and temporary foreign workers have met with disinterest from provincial politicians.

The key question is why have we become political weaklings? There are four elements to the answer.

First, the labour movement is still reeling from the cuts and attacks of the 1990s. With Free Trade, the deficit, cutbacks, privatization, layoffs and neo-conservative policies, working people have waged defensive battles for the past 15 years. This has had two effects. We are drained from the effort of fighting just to keep what we won a generation ago. Also, our battling against cutbacks shifts our institutional priorities and political capacity into a defensive posture. We are quite skilled at trying to stop something bad, such as health care privatization, but it has been almost a generation since we experienced a campaign of building something new. That kind of thing takes practice.

Second, the political climate has lagged behind the economic climate. Politically the debate is still about the limits on government, rather than the potential of government. This is a hangover from the period of hysteria over debt and deficit. Shifting the terms of political debate takes time.

Third, social realities make it harder to mobilize citizens to political action. The progressive campaigns of the 1940s, 1960s and 1970s were fueled by thousands of volunteer activists. Citizens motivated to help change their community devoted hours upon hours to making that change happen. With the faster pace of life today, all popular organizations struggle to find volunteers. Families are working longer, working harder, and are more divided in their time than a generation ago. This makes progressive political organizing more difficult.

Fourth, despite the increased difficulties of mobilizing people today, unions have fallen out of practice at mobilizing our members. Two generations ago, the union hall was a place abuzz with political activity. Many unions aggressively engaged their members politically and encouraged them to use their collective strength to make political change.

Today, unions are more reluctant to engage their members politically. In part this is due to the strains within our unions due to cutbacks and aggressive anti-union strategies used by employers recently. We spend more of our resources today defending members and repelling attacks, leaving less for political campaigns.

However, we have also become somewhat complacent regarding politics. Some may even say we have joined other Canadians in becoming cynical about politics and the prospects for change.

When we do engage in political activity, we tend to use older methods of organizing and mobilizing, which may not have the same effectiveness today. Our practice of leader-driven campaigns, and mass communication strategies may not work in an era when every television can get 1,000 channels, and every activist has their own blog. New methods for reaching our members and encouraging their activism are required.

This is not the first time in our history that unions have been in the political wilderness. Before the 1930s, the labour movement was sidelined politically. We organized and strategized and before long became a potent political force in Canada. We can do it again.

The economic environment is in our favour in Alberta. But without political change, the economic prosperity we see will be shortlived for workers. Our collective challenge is to take the steps we need to find a way to take advantage of the boom and create some long-lasting political change. And it is to that challenge we now move.

POLITICAL CHANGE DURING BOOM TIMES

This policy paper contends that changing our political fortunes in Alberta depends upon two things. First we must change how the labour movement does politics. Second we must change the political debate in our province.

A. New Politics, New Strategies

When you are not getting results, the last thing you should do is what you have been doing all along. This suggests we need to examine how we engage in politics and determine what we should do differently.

Politics takes a number of dimensions. It ranges from local community activities to advocating for specific issues to lobbying to elections. Not all elements of politics are within the scope of this particular policy paper. It will remain silent on labour's role in partisan politics and election campaigns – as that is the subject of another debate within the labour movement.

Instead, it will look at how we can shift our tactics to achieve public policy goals in between elections. There are a number of innovations we can undertake to bulk up our political heft and allow us to make a bigger impact on political debate.

I. Set Longer Term Goals

In recent decades, the labour movement has narrowed our timelines for political campaigns. We select small targets with a hope of achieving some success in a year or two. This type of strategy has its role, especially when aiming for interim targets.

However, to make gains in broader, progressive social policy areas, such as expanding Medicare or revamping the labour code, we need a longer term horizon. We need to commit ourselves to pushing an idea for many years, to inserting the idea into political debate and shifting the overall ground of discussion about that policy area.

This is exactly what the neo-conservatives did over the 1970s and 1980s. When the Fraser Institute and others began talking about the deficit and smaller government, no one took them seriously. But they had a 25 year plan. And looking back today, it worked. The late 1980s and 1990s were a seismic shift in Canadian politics, due in large part to the ground work laid by the right wing lobby groups such as Canadian Federation of Independent Business, National Citizens' Coalition and others.

We need to adopt a similar approach. The strategy is not to necessarily win a specific legislative change, but to change the grounds of the debate. We want our opponents responding to our ideas, our issues. We want to frame the nature of political debate in Alberta.

As American political theorist George Lakoff says:

*“Reframing is **telling the truth as we see it** – telling it forcefully, straightforwardly, articulately, with moral conviction and without hesitation. The language must fit the conceptual reframing — a **reframing from the perspective of progressive morality**. It is not just a matter of words, though the right words do help evoke a progressive frame: paying their fair share, those who have received more, the infrastructure of wealth, and so on. Reframing requires a rewiring of the brain. That may take an investment of time, effort, and money. The conservatives have realized that. They made the investment and it is paying off. Moral: The truth alone will not set you free. It has to be framed correctly.”⁶.*

Achieving this takes two things: time and focus. So, our first shift needs to be to lengthen our campaign horizon and work to change the debate back to our strengths – and then we can win our victories.

2. Be More Visible

Activists in the labour movement tend to wear many hats and take on a number of important causes. Unions often find themselves juggling many challenges, leaving less time for any one particular issue. In many respects, this is a very positive thing; we are very good at handling a diversity of issues and problems. However, it has its downsides. One in particular is that we can be sporadic with our attention to political issues. When there is an immediate crisis we jump into action. When the immediate fear subsides we tend to slip into complacency.

A look at our opponents, once again, demonstrates a different model. The Merit Contractors Association has doggedly pursued a campaign for labour code amendments against “salting” (implanting organizers in an employer to help a drive) and “merfing” (using a special fund to help unionized contractors win competitive bids) in the construction sector. For the past five years, they have routinely visited MLAs, cabinet ministers and bureaucrats frequently and methodically. They address the same issues over and over again – reminding them of the problem and the value of their proposed solution. They have not yet succeeded in getting the amendments, but they have done two things effectively. First, they have forced the labour movement to respond defensively on their issue – taking us off our issues. Second, they have won key political allies and kept the issue relevant until the political opportunity strikes.

In contrast, we do a short campaign, and then move on. We need to adopt some of the strategies of our opponents and find a way to be more visible and more consistently present in the halls of power and on the streets. There are many ways to accomplish this goal, but first we must make it a clear goal.

3. Mobilize Rank and File

Forty years ago one of the great strengths of the labour movement was our capacity to mobilize workers to political action. Our solidarity could be translated into forms of political expression – rallies, strikes, campaigns. The will of working people could be expressed through the actions of union activists across the country.

That capacity has waned in the last generation. We attempt to mobilize our members to political causes less frequently, and we are less confident of those attempts being successful.

It was a different era. Political activism is harder today. It is harder to draw our members' attention and translate that into activism. Acknowledging the unique challenges the internet / television / multiple job era brings is not the same as saying it is impossible. We just need new methods.

First, we need to communicate in ways they will hear. We need a better internet presence – with interactive components familiar to a net-savvy population. We need to understand the power of new communications tools, such as blackberries, text messaging and blogs. Offering new space for feedback is equally necessary. Finding new ways to talk with our members will enhance our effectiveness with them.

Second, we need a more rank-and-file system of political mobilization. Studies have shown that our members remain willing to listen to their union on politics, and remain prepared to take action for a political issue. But we need to do it on a local-by-local basis.⁷ (Foster, 2003).

The trick is to engage members on things they care about, in their community, and on a scale that is manageable for them. Doing politics needs to become an integrated part of life in a local, and not just something done by senior leadership.

We need more political training courses, and more time devoted to politics at general membership meetings. We need more ideas for political actions to bubble up from below, rather than designed in head offices.

This is about shifting the political culture in unions – to both allow more space for members to chart a political direction and provide additional support to members who engage in politics. It is something that will not occur tomorrow, but we can make small changes right away – like changing the order of General meeting agendas, or establishing more political action committees at the local level, and then giving them more autonomy to choose political actions to champion.

The changes are not about tearing down what we have done, but about evolving to meet current realities and challenges.

B. A NEW ERA OF POLITICAL CHANGE

The second dimension to changing politics in Alberta is to change the nature of political debate in our province. Since the “Klein Revolution” in 1993, debate has focused around what

government CANNOT do and what Albertans must do without. This debate was catalyzed by concern over budget deficits and an overall sense of global powerlessness due to globalization.

If we are to step outside the defensive posture we find ourselves in, we need to shift the terms of political debate. The deficit was slayed quite easily 13 years ago. We have run surpluses each year since. Alberta has more financial capacity today than we have had in a generation. We need to use this new reality to shift what we talk about politically.

We do that by putting Conservatives on the defensive. We make the case for positive changes to make life better for Albertans. Make our opponents fight to stop our goals. That is how you shift political debate. If we do this in a smart and strategic fashion, by being well-researched, focused and unified in our campaign, we can change what Albertans talk about politically.

In short, it is time for the labour movement to be bold in what we demand – both at the bargaining table and in politics. It is time to start the work of creating a new era of progressive political change.

What might that new era look like? What should we be agitating for? The range of possibilities is quite long, but what follows is a partial list of programs and policies that the labour movement should be aggressively calling for. Each is practical and imminently do-able in the current economic climate. Our challenge is to make it do-able in the political debate.

THESE ARE NOT RECOMMENDATIONS, BUT SIMPLY FODDER FOR A DEBATE THAT NEEDS TO OCCUR WITHIN THE LABOUR MOVEMENT.

I. A New Kind of Labour Law

The labour movement has long advocated for improvements to the various pieces of legislation governing work. We need to continue to push for changes such as anti-scab, first contract arbitration, including farmworkers in basic employment protection, raising minimum wage and so on.

But it may be time to look at new ways of envisioning labour law. We should be advocating for programs and policies that encourage greater democracy at work – giving workers a more direct say over their work and the structure of the workplace. Many European nations have laws requiring Work Councils with worker control that make key workplace decisions.

We need to call for a program that helps workers buy out their workplace and turn it into a worker cooperative. Sweden has such a fund, paid by employers, that is used by workers to invest in their workplaces with the goal of taking ownership.

We need to emphasize changes to laws that improve quality of life for Alberta workers. We should advocate for a shorter work week, much like France, and for additional provisions for family care leave, allowing workers to look after loved ones. Workers should have access to guaranteed leaves to return to school or to upgrade skills without fear of losing their job.

We need to demand a new approach to unemployment, training and employment insurance. We need a model, similar to Denmark, which allows for flexibility in the employment relationship, but offers security to workers when they become unemployed. An aggressive, positive approach to re-training workers quickly to get them back to work is superior to our passive, punitive model of employment insurance.

2. A New Approach to Education

In Sweden, education is seen as a lifelong pursuit, paid by the government. We need to demand that post-secondary education be free to all Alberta citizens, so that finances are not a barrier to receiving an education.

We need to call for the creation of Worker Education Centres, where workers can take courses in the community in the evenings to improve their knowledge in a wide array of topics and areas. In countries with these Centres, workers are more engaged in politics and community life, and are able to improve their skills and knowledge while still earning a paycheque.

3. Completing Medicare

We need to demand that the Alberta government complete what Tommy Douglas started. Medicare works, and it is long overdue for expansion. Homecare and auxiliary care should be included under the Medicare umbrella, and available without charge to the individual.

We need to call for a pharmacare program so all Albertans have access to affordable prescription drugs.

And we need to advocate a Dentacare program, so that finally dental care is provided under a model similar to Medicare.

4. Income Security

In the 1960s, progressive activists talked about a Guaranteed Annual Income – where every individual was to be provided with a minimum income regardless of their circumstances. The idea was to replace the patchwork of income security programs – social assistance, disability pensions, old age pensions, unemployment insurance, etc. – with a single guarantee of a minimum income. If you earn above that level, it is taxed back. The idea was dropped in the deficit hysteria days. It may be time to resurrect it.

5. Housing and Child Care

A comprehensive, affordable child care program should be a given in today's economy. Quebec has made their \$5 a day child care plan work for a number of years. Alberta should follow suit quickly. The program would need to have two parts – funding to allow the creation of additional child care spaces to fill the growing demand, and then funding to allow child care centres to provide affordable, high quality care.

At one time governments provided funding to contractors to build affordable housing. At one time the government financially supported alternative housing structures, such as housing cooperatives. With the cost of housing skyrocketing, and the supply of rental accommodation shrinking (as developers shift to the more lucrative condo market), we need to once again return to a policy regime where the government takes an active role in ensuring an adequate supply of affordable housing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Clearly the labour movement cannot and will not tackle all the above ideas simultaneously. We need to start modest and as we build our new capacity take on more ambitious projects. However, we must start the work right away if we are to capitalize on the political opportunity provided to us by the boom.

Recommendation #1: The AFL prepare a “political mobilization” package which will assist local unions to more effectively mobilize their members politically.

Recommendation #2: The AFL will construct a long-term political strategy with the purpose of re-framing political debate in Alberta. The strategy will make use of shorter term issues, such as Oilsands Development, but will link those shorter term issues to a longer term political project.

CONCLUSION

Big ideas are just that – ideas. It takes work and commitment to turn them into action. This policy paper is proposing many big ideas to shift politics in Alberta and to increase the labour movement’s relevance in the political sphere.

Whether any of the ideas come to fruition depends upon the will of affiliates and upon the leadership role taken by the AFL.

The value of this paper is not necessarily in its pragmatic recommendations for actions, but for its clarion call for a new approach to politics. It is, we hope, a beacon for union activists to re-engage ourselves in the project of building a more just society. It is also a marker to indicate the beginnings of a new era for the labour movement.

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