



# **Alberta Federation of Labour**

## **ACTION PLAN**



# Yes, UNIONS can!

## AFL Action Plan for Building Union Power

Many unions in Alberta are signing good agreements for their members. Some are enjoying record growth in membership. Working collectively, we've even been able to force debate on a number of important issues that the ruling Conservatives and their friends in the business community would rather have ignored – like 12-year-olds at work, health care privatization, temporary foreign workers and the government's lack of a plan to stop oil sands jobs from being “shipped down the pipeline.”

But when it comes to consistently and effectively influencing the broader economic and political agendas in Alberta, the results of the last provincial election clearly show that we have a long way to go. We may represent thousands and thousands of working people – and we may have significant resources at our disposal. But we still haven't figured out how to live up to our potential. In particular, we haven't yet come up with the right formula for transforming the labour movement into a real force to be reckoned with on Alberta's economic and political stage.

That's why we're proposing the “**AFL Action Plan for Building Union Power.**” If our goal is for the labour movement to play a bigger role in influencing the direction of our province, then we need to build on our existing strengths in four key areas: **organizing, education, communication and democracy.**

For each of these four “pillars of union power,” this action plan commits the AFL to a focused and manageable number of “deliverable” actions and outcomes that will help make the AFL and its affiliates stronger, more effective and more influential in the broader community.

### I. **Organizing**

In an effort to “grow” the labour movement and bring the benefits of union membership to the tens of thousands of Albertans who don't currently belong to a union, the AFL will work with its affiliates and through its newly formed Organizing Committee to:

- a. Develop a more well-defined **intake system** to handle requests for organizing assistance.

- b. Develop an **organizing institute** to meet affiliates' needs for training and energizing organizers.
- c. Continue to pursue mechanisms and strategies aimed at reaching the unorganized, such as exploring the merits of "**associate membership**" programs like the AFL-CIO's "Working America" program and the Australian Council of Trade Union's (ACTU) "Unions Australia" program.
- d. Sponsor "**best practices**" **workshops** to highlight effective new approaches to organizing from unions across the country and around the world.
- e. Budget permitting, sponsor a province-wide **advertising blitz** aimed at promoting the value of unions; underlining the important role unions play in society and the economy; and encouraging the unorganized to consider seeking out membership. This campaign will be financed from the existing AFL budget plus any additional funds raised from interested affiliates.

## 2. Communication

The real strength of the labour movement lies not in our bank accounts, but in our people, our members. Unfortunately, we don't always do a good job of keeping in touch with them. As a result, we lose opportunities to get our members thinking about issues from a labour perspective. This is bad news for both individual unions and the broader labour movement. In an effort to help affiliates more effectively capitalize on their biggest "asset" (their members), the AFL will:

- a. Develop a presentation or workshop for affiliates explaining the importance of increased communication with members and introducing them to the latest tools and systems for **member contact**.
- b. Assist affiliates by maintaining a **referral list** of communications service vendors that offer database, polling and e-mail, telephone and other contact services.
- c. Investigate possibilities for developing our own **database and communication tools** that could be made available to interested affiliates.
- d. Encourage all affiliates – and provide them with the necessary support – to develop "Lightning Lists" of their members. These "**Lightning Lists**" would be e-mail and phone lists of all of a union or local's members that could be used for quick contact. The lists would reside

with the local or union (not the AFL) and could be used for internal union purposes or for issue- or election-related campaigns.

- e. Investigate the possibility of establishing a **union call centre** – similar to the ones used by unions in Australia – that unions could use to keep in regular contact with their members and which the AFL and affiliates could use for member contact during issue campaigns and elections.

### 3. Education

The AFL and its affiliates have always recognized the importance of education as a tool for engaging new members, grooming leaders and preparing ourselves to face emerging challenges. However, as a result of the impending wave of retirements that is about to sweep through Canada and the labour movement, the need for top-notch education that unions can have confidence in has never been greater. In an effort to help prepare current and future labour leaders with the tools they need to face the challenges that lie ahead, and to provide a useful supplement to affiliates' internal education efforts, the AFL will:

- a. Begin work on a **“labour leadership” certificate** program with a recognized post-secondary institute. The program will provide high-quality courses for the people who unions want to groom for positions of responsibility within their organizations.
- b. Make a commitment to develop and deliver more **advanced courses** and workshops on current issues of interest to affiliates. The focus would be on providing cutting-edge information to leaders and activists who have progressed beyond the introductory and intermediate course offered at AFL-CLC schools – and which may not be offered by the affiliates themselves.

### 4. Democracy

Most labour leaders and activists recognize that we ignore politics at our own peril. As the old saying goes: “anything that we can win at the bargaining table can be taken away in the Legislature” (or in Parliament or City Hall or town council for that matter).

That's why there is broad consensus in the Canadian labour movement that unions need to be involved in the democratic process. Unfortunately, as the recent provincial election demonstrated, we are not nearly as effective or influential on the political stage as we could be (or need to be in order to advance the interests of our members).

In an effort to strengthen this core pillar of union power, the AFL will launch a “Democracy Project” aimed at developing the labour movement’s internal capacity to make its presence felt on the political stage. The project will have four main components:

- a. A **Democracy School** to train and maintain a large and growing group of trained campaign managers, canvassers, strategists and potential candidates.
- b. A **Democracy Corps** which would include all the leaders and activists who had taken courses through the Democracy School. A detailed database of graduates will be maintained to keep track of trained activists so they can be quickly mobilized for municipal, provincial, federal and issue-based campaigns (depending on their interests, skills and the preferences of their unions).
- c. A **Democracy Fund** to which interested affiliates will make annual contributions. This fund will be used to finance our work in the political arena, including covering the costs of mobilizing the Democracy Corps.
- d. A **Democracy Committee** composed of unions that contribute to the Democracy Fund. The committee will make decisions about how and when to spend money from the Fund.