

“Step Up and Speak Out”

Earlier this year, we all mourned the hate-motivated deaths of six Canadian men in Quebec City. Labour Council pledged to respond to this tragedy by building powerful movements to challenge Islamophobia and all forms of discrimination. Recognizing the immense challenge ahead, we worked with the Urban Alliance on Race Relations to mark International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (IDERD) on March 21st. That night, Council Chambers at Toronto City Hall was packed with people demanding authorities do more to stop racism and Islamophobia, a first step in taking action.

Sowing the seeds of xenophobia is not new – it is part of a long history of hatred and division in this country. From our treatment of Indigenous peoples, to anti-semitism and anti-black racism, to today’s Islamophobia, the ongoing chronicle of displacement, turning away, and discriminating against group after group is as much Canada’s story as are other themes this country celebrates on its 150-plus anniversary.

Labour has often stood in solidarity with those who are oppressed, sometimes voluntarily and other times in response to pressure. In 1947 the Labour Council with the strength of its Jewish and black members created the Toronto Joint Labour Committee on Human Rights to combat anti-semitism and racism. Carrying on attempts by labour to learn about and challenge racism within the movement as well as in society, the OFL led a major public campaign in the 1980s entitled Racism Hurts Everyone. These fight backs had great impact in their day.

If left unchallenged, racist rhetoric and actions can stir up anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim and anti-Indigenous sentiment. In times of economic downturn and diminishing opportunity, the seeds of division are fertilized by the same sections of the corporate elite who seek to divide working people. We have seen how right-wing populism can take hold, especially when people are frustrated with economic injustice. History shows us that at its extreme, such populism can be incredibly destructive. Today, challenging this situation is more important than ever for working people.

As CLC leader Hassan Yussuff said to the IDERD assembly on March 21st, “Our country has a racist past but doesn’t have to have a racist future.” To counter the rise in intolerance and xenophobia, participants at the Toronto event endorsed five themes for action:

Step up and Speak Out– Challenge Islamophobia anywhere it appears. Call on the federal government to declare January 29th as National Day



of Remembrance and Action Against Islamophobia. Ask every public institution to develop a plan to counter all forms of bigotry, particularly anti-Black racism. Support the Charter for Inclusive Communities.

Shut down hate– Use every means possible to limit the reach of hate-spreading media outlets such as Rebel Media. Demand full prosecution of hate crimes by police services across the country.

Challenge the Conservative Party– Demand that those with financial and political influence in the Conservative Party act decisively to turn their party away from the politics of division and intolerance.

Challenge Corporate Canada– From the Board of Trade, the Council of Chief Executives, to the Mayor of Toronto, those with the most power in society must take a firm stand against discrimination and sever alliances with anyone who promotes intolerance or xenophobia.



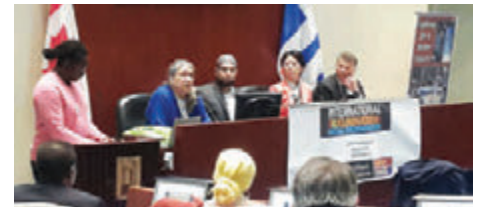
Build a sustainable economy with good jobs - for all instead of austerity. Recognize that right-wing populism thrives on people's frustration with economic injustice.

Labour Council is encouraged by both the number of participants at the event and the mandate they gave us to challenge xenophobia, hate and extremism in all its forms. A new movement towards inclusion including supporting the Truth and Reconciliation process with Indigenous communities has been kick-started. While we may point fingers at the hateful seeds that were watered and fertilized by the recent Trump election, we can and must take responsibility for action closer to home.

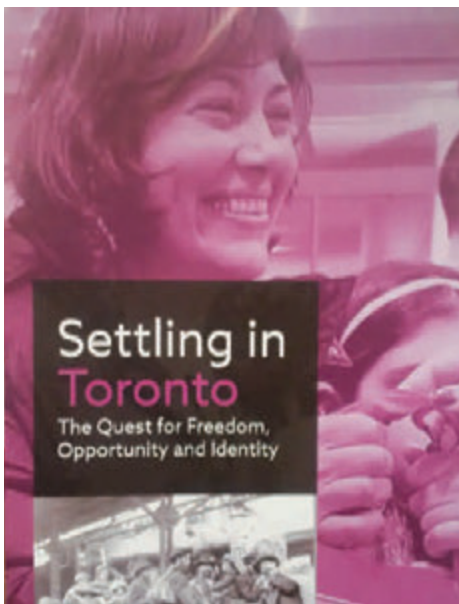
The Labour Council will:

- Endorse the five IDERD themes for action.

- Work in partnership with the Urban Alliance on Race Relations to organize further community meetings in York Region, Etobicoke and Scarborough, as well as other meetings as appropriate, giving a voice to those communities in shaping actions that will challenge hatred and division.
- Work with affiliates to create "flying squads," rapid response teams that can peacefully counter organized expressions of hate on short notice.
- Look for opportunities to partner with civil society, employers and governments to increase awareness and support of the need for equity.
- Work with affiliates to build an anti-racism movement that will challenge hatred at every level.



The Irish and the Fever Sheds



Settling in Toronto exhibit at the St. Lawrence Market Gallery

Conservative politicians are trying to stir up anxiety over the handful of refugees crossing the border from the U.S. in recent months. It's not the first time Canada is dealing with refugees – from the Vietnamese boat people to the Tamils fleeing violence in Sri Lanka, Toronto has seen huge numbers of desperate families arrive seeking shelter.

The biggest ever influx of refugees was in 1847. Toronto had a population of only 20,000, but in one year alone over 38,000 strangers arrived at our shore. They spoke a different dialect, had a different religion, huge families, and were rumoured to be prone to violence. They were the Irish - fleeing disease, poverty, and the potato famine that devastated their homeland.

Some were welcomed, but many were met with distrust and suspicion. It is recorded that 863 Irish immigrants died of typhus in the fever sheds erected by the Toronto Board of Health at the northwest corner of King and John Streets. Survivors were sent to the Convalescent Home at the corner of Bathurst and Front. Most of the dead were buried beside St. Paul's Roman Catholic Church at Queen and Power St.

Despite the overwhelming number of newcomers, Toronto somehow survived and prospered. Our history is worth remembering when someone starts trying to stir animosity to the next wave of newcomers trying to find a better life by becoming our neighbours.