

“FIVE YEARS AFTER THE GROUND SHOOK”

Thursday, September 5, 2013

Five years ago, the global economy was shaken by the most serious economic crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930's. As the crisis deepened in the fall of 2008, no one could predict how bad things might get. Some of the world's biggest banks collapsed and major manufacturers faced bankruptcy. Wealthy owners lined up for government bailouts. The dogma of “unleashing market forces” crashed in a spectacular failure. Deregulation, privatization, outsourcing and free trade had created massive profits for a wealthy few, then evaporated billions in savings and pensions of working people.

Anger at the excesses of unbridled capitalism was heard around the world. Influential voices argued for a return to Keynesian economics and restricting the behaviour of global finance. In Canada, the Harper regime was forced to abandon its initial response of cutbacks and create emergency investment in infrastructure projects to stabilize the economy. But the Conservatives soon picked up the cudgel of class war, winning agreement of world leaders at the G20 summit to choose austerity instead of regulating the disastrous excesses of finance capital.

Corporate interests adopted “shock doctrine” tactics to advance their interests around the world, while creating great hardship for working people. In the U.S. the billionaire-funded Tea Party diverted people's anger into a new wave of right-wing reaction. In every country, the “tighten your belts” austerity message from corporate politicians has been relentless. Public services are constantly being squeezed, pensions are under attack, and concession bargaining and two-tier agreements are making life harder – especially for young workers. More and more workers exist on low paid, part-time work. Those already struggling before the crisis have suffered the most. Entire communities, especially aboriginal and racialized communities, are in crisis.

Labour's Response

Labour Council responded quickly to the crisis as it hit. In November 2008, The Good Jobs for All Summit was convened “to tackle the pressing issues of social equality and economic justice in the 21st century.” In May 2009, Labour Council organized its first-ever Stewards Assembly that brought together 1600 union activists, leaders and staff to discuss the crisis and *to affirm our commitment to fight shoulder-to-shoulder in defence of the hard-won gains of working people.*

A notable feature of the Assembly was a *Solidarity Checklist* to guide our efforts in difficult times:

- *Don't blame ourselves – or other workers*
- *Remember how the rules were changed*
- *Ask tough questions about “the big picture”*
- *Put fair rules in place*
- *Work hard to renew solidarity*
- *Stand together for what we believe in*

During the years that followed there have been many strikes and other hard-fought battles to protect jobs, collective agreements, public services and workers' rights. There have been defeats, but also significant struggles that resulted in the premiers of both Quebec and Ontario stepping down. It is clear that the wealthy elites have a vision for a Canada in which the playing field is tipped even further in their favour. They are advancing a comprehensive set of measures to make the working class insecure, fearful, divided, and willing to work for less. Conservative politicians, backed by corporate-funded think tanks, are focussing on weakening unions and dividing members on the issue of union dues. They are also pushing to ban union funding for coalition work and political action. The goal is to silence any opposition to a low wage economy.

Labour Council is committed to its role of organizing resistance to this attack. On March 2, we undertook a highly successful launch of the Workers' Rights Campaign. That campaign focuses on engaging tens of thousands of union members in a discussion about the value of unions in their workplace and in society. It can become a catalyst for **union renewal**, including a "new normal" of member engagement, more powerful local unions, a stronger culture of solidarity, and training union activists with a class outlook.

The spirit of the Good Jobs Summit, the Stewards' Assembly and the Workers' Rights Campaign are with us as we build power in our workplaces and in our communities. It has been a tough five years, but we can never stop working on the arduous process of shaping a more just society for future generations.