



150 YEARS OF WORKING FOR JUSTICE

January 2021

This year – 2021 – marks the 150th anniversary of the Toronto & York Region Labour Council. For a century and a half working people have organized collectively here around a vision of economic and social justice. That epic journey will be celebrated over the coming year as we share the stories of those who came before us, and the lessons of solidarity and struggle that guide our movement today.

From personal accounts and letters to video documentaries, from songs to photo exhibits, from statues and wall murals to podcasts... we will explore partnerships with a variety of public institutions and media formats across the region to bring labour's rich history to the widest possible audience.

We are in the “Dish with One Spoon Territory,” a treaty between the Anishinaabe, Mississaugas and Haudenosaunee. Our story began on the land of Indigenous communities, and it has been forged by those who have come from around the world as immigrants or refugees to build Canada's largest urban centre. Each generation learns that in order to have a fair share of the prosperity they create, people need collective representation. From the beginning our Council defined itself as a movement of social unionism, embracing broader goals than just workplace contracts. Our founders believed in the principle that “What we desire for ourselves, we wish for all”.

Dignity and respect for all is at the core of our work. In the early decades the Labour Council built campaigns for employment standards, sanitary conditions, shorter working hours and prohibiting child labour. The Council also called for equal pay for women, one of the first advocates for equality in Canada. There was a sweeping program for municipal ownership of the street railway system, telephone services, power, gas and the fire brigade. It lobbied for better public health measures, and a quality education system. Women were part of the labour movement from the earliest years and in dramatic events such as the 1907 Bell telephone strike.

Political power is essential to winning social gains. Labour has always worked to elect candidates to school boards and city council, including Jimmy Simpson who eventually became the first labour Mayor of Toronto. The creation of the Toronto Hydro Electric System was championed by William Hubbard, the first African-Canadian City Councillor. Labour led a plebiscite to create the publicly owned Toronto Transit Commission. In 1961 Toronto unions helped found the New Democratic Party.

In more recent years Labour Council has been deeply involved in struggles for community safety, for racial equality, for public services and for an education system that gives every student what they need to succeed. We have come to acknowledge that the realities of colonialism and systemic racism in our society require us to view our history through a different lens than in the past. We will find and relate previously untold stories of courage and resistance and add them to labour's storyline.

An essential part of our collective journey is the role of individual unions. We hope to feature affiliated local unions history on a common platform that includes a variety of media – video, digital images, photos, short stories and an anniversary book. The timeline will cover the decades starting in the 1870's, with a spotlight on significant dates: Black History month (February); the March 17th Hoggs Hollow disaster; August 12th when postal workers won paid maternity leave in 1981; December 12th 1973 when tens of thousands of teachers filled Maple Leaf Gardens demanding the right to collective bargaining, and there are many more. This October also marks the 25th anniversary of the Metro Days of Action.

Through exploring this rich heritage we hope to inspire a new generation of activists who will continue to lead these efforts in the decades to come. In the sweep of history working people in Toronto have been on a remarkable journey since 1871. Those who started 150 years ago – the equivalent of seven generations – laid a solid foundation for justice in Canada's largest urban centre. We honour their foresight and pledge to continue that legacy.

Labour Council adopts to undertake a comprehensive program to celebrate the 150th anniversary, as outlined above. We will also ask each affiliate to:

1. Prepare a brief recounting of the local union's story. When did people create the union, and what obstacles did they overcome to secure better conditions for members? What were the key achievements over the years? When did it join the Labour Council?
2. Locate photographs that best illustrate the efforts of members or significant spaces in local labour history, so they can be included in displays in public venues
3. Consider engaging cultural workers to celebrate the union – artists, videographers, musicians, writers, social media workers, actors...
4. Promote our shared history in each union's communications platforms, and encourage members to get involved
5. Make a generous contribution to the publication of our special 150 Anniversary book and social media platform. A sponsorship form will be provided in the near future.