

DEMOCRACY IS THE ESSENCE OF OUR MOVEMENT

MAY 6, 2021



The Toronto & York Region Labour Council has long played a role in the broader labour movement. From convening the first national union gathering, to organizing on key issues to CLC conventions, we have a strong tradition that values the role of local activism informing and powering national campaigns.

In the recent CLC Constitutional Review process, a number of national and international unions proposed a major change to Congress conventions, by having delegate credentials go to their central offices rather than to local unions. They point to inequities in representation at the CLC due to how different affiliates are structured – large locals versus networks of small locals, provincial unions versus national formations. They raise concerns about the number of potential delegates, and about the last two sets of officers' elections.

For good reason, their proposals were not recommended in the Commission Report - in fact the Report states: *"Unless and until the CLC decides that it wants to re-examine the fundamental objective of encouraging broad local participation at the Convention, the Commission can see no reason to change the current method of delegate credentialing."*

These proposals were never endorsed by the Canadian Council. But they will be coming forward to the CLC Convention as resolutions in June. To transform the CLC in such a radical way would have serious consequences. Anyone familiar with the U.S. labour movement understands that top-down decision-making at the AFL-CIO has been a contributing factor to their current state of affairs. Taking representation away from local unions would be a tragic mistake – and would never be reversed.

When the Canadian Labour Congress was formed in 1956, there was a conscious decision to have Delegates representing local unions as the basis of CLC conventions. That decision has served us well. As we debated our ambition as a movement, the experience of local struggles on the ground provided solid analysis of how to take on anti-union politicians and corporate bullies. Early health and safety activists highlighted the crucial issue of occupational disease. Rank and file activists and local union leaders led the efforts to transform our approach to equality for women, LGBT members and workers of colour.

There was a forceful attempt in the 1970's to adopt the AFL-CIO model of having delegates chosen by the top affiliate leaders. It was part of a backlash against the 1974 convention adoption of minimum standards of Canadian self-government. Building Trades unions led this drive to centralization, and when those efforts failed, they left the CLC in 1981. CLC leaders and the Labour Council President – Wally Majesky of the IBEW – framed this question passionately as one of union democracy. The trades came back a decade later, and the issue has been dormant ever since – until now.

There is no question that having the majority presence of local delegates, chosen by their members, has helped shape policies that reflect the lived experience of workplace leaders. It has been part of the essence of our movement, which differentiates us as Canadians. In an era of dramatic change that is shaking our world, Canada's labour movement needs to be more

grounded than ever to navigate these difficult times. Honouring the wisdom of those who face these challenges on the ground, in our workplaces and communities, is the vital ingredient to getting it right.

On May 6, 2021, the Labour Council resolved to:

1. Oppose amendments to the CLC Constitution which would deprive local unions the right to select Convention Delegates.
2. Communicate with affiliates and Labour Councils across the country on this vital issue.