



Forging Solidarity: Communities and unions come together

by Elizabeth Berman

Above: Council of Canadians National Chairperson Maude Barlow joined union and First Nation representatives in September 2011 to cross a police line and face arrest. Hundreds of people joined the action to show their opposition to the environmentally destructive tar sands and pipeline projects.

“Solidarity Forever” will celebrate its 100th birthday next year. The traditional labour union anthem never seems to go out of fashion, sung loudly and proudly on picket lines and at political protests.

But actual solidarity – “unity or agreement of feeling or action, especially among individuals with a common interest,” according to the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* – doesn’t just happen. Like anything worth having, it requires hard work to achieve and sustain.

One group of hard workers that are essential to forge solidarity with are labour unions. Unions have long been leaders when it comes to effecting positive social change. But in recent years they’ve been criticized both for being self-interested and for getting involved in issues beyond collective bargaining.

“There’s this notion that unions are just out for themselves and not for society,” Ken Georgetti, former president of the Canadian Labour Congress, told the *Globe and Mail*. “You get that label hung

on you, and you have to work to get rid of it.”

Meanwhile unions are under attack for exceeding their mandates to represent their members. Bill C-377, a federal private member's bill backed by the Conservative government, would require even the smallest union locals to disclose extremely detailed financial information. While the purported reason is to increase transparency, in actuality union opponents are looking for ammunition with which to accuse unions of mispending their members' dues.

As John Walkom wrote in the *Toronto Star* about testimony before a parliamentary committee studying C-377: “The organization REAL Women, for instance, told MPs that unions use their money improperly to support ‘left-wing causes’ such as abortion, feminism, homosexuality, Quebec separatism and Palestinians.”

So unions have to maintain a delicate balance: focus on the needs of their members while also working towards broader societal change. For many, that means working closely with civil society organizations.

“The key is to push back together,” said Larry Hubich, President of the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour, in his keynote address at the Council of Canadians' 2013 annual conference. “If we're only pushing back in our own individual silos, then we become marginalized.”

But how does a union representing tar sands workers collaborate with environmental organizations? How does a building trades union work with community groups opposing a megaproject that would create hundreds of construction jobs?

“Principled people and organizations can sometimes differ on certain issues – I call them sticky issues,” says Maude Barlow. “We need to respect those differences while focusing on what we have in common.”

“Forging solidarity” is the theme of this year's Council of Canadians' annual con-

ference. It will bring together activists of all kinds, including labour activists, to focus on the importance of working together and on how we can all learn from successful collaborative campaigns.

One example of a successful collaboration is the ongoing campaign to save public health care. As the federal government abdicates its role as a partner in medicare, reducing its share of funding and refusing to meet with the provinces to review and improve national standards, a movement is underway to build awareness and public support for a much stronger federal role. Activists are going door-to-door in key ridings to talk to their neighbours about the need for federal involvement and to ensure that health care is a ballot box issue in the next federal election.

“The Council of Canadians, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), provincial health coalitions, and national and provincial allies have been working together on a campaign that educates health care advocates on the federal government's move away from public health care,” wrote Adrienne Silnicki, the Council's then health care campaigner, in her blog. “It trains those advocates on how to canvass and coordinates canvassing across the ridings.”

A partnership between CUPE, a union representing public health care workers, and the Council, a social justice organization committed to protecting, expanding and strengthening public health care, might seem like a natural alliance. We've also worked with CUPE on many other issues over the years, including the Blue Communities Project to ensure that municipal water services stay in public hands and to expose the Canada-European Union Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement's threat to public services.

But what about trickier issues, like the endless jobs-versus-the-environment debate?

Enter the Green Economy Network. It counts among its members almost all of the leading labour and environ-

mental organizations in the country, including the Council of Canadians. The network's vision statement articulates: “We believe the time has come to chart a new model and direction for Canada's economy. This country can no longer afford an economic model that treats the natural environment and human beings as disposable goods.”

These groups have found common cause in that both the environment and workers are being treated as disposable goods under our current economic model. The debate about jobs versus the environment is a false dichotomy, and the groups have committed to working together to advocate for sustainable solutions that create good jobs while protecting our natural heritage.

Groups and union members came together in September 2011 in a strong showing of solidarity against the Keystone pipeline project, which would have led to further expansion of the environmentally destructive tar sands. Greenpeace, the Indigenous Environmental Network, the Polaris Institute, the former Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union (now Unifor) which represented tar sands workers, and the Council of Canadians organized a massive demonstration where group and union leaders and hundreds of others joined hands, crossed a police line, and were arrested while showing their opposition to this project.

Solidarity, though difficult to achieve, is well worth the effort. Through our collective power, we can take on those who would prefer our society to be unequal and unjust, and create the kind of future we want for our children.

“I truly believe that we will only defeat the Harper agenda if we work together and support one another's issues and campaigns,” says Maude Barlow.

May “Solidarity Forever” be sung for hundreds more years to come.

Elizabeth Berman is the Director of Communications for the Council of Canadians.