

Mel Myers Labour Conference Report – March 14 & 15, 2013

Stephen Gillies, Board Member

Following an invitation to members, TEAM sent a delegation of eight representatives to the 2012 Mel Myers Labour Convention held on March 14 and 15 at the Victoria Inn in Winnipeg. The event was well attended, with approximately 800 delegates from Manitoba unions participating.

As in previous years, discussions focused of current issues in labour law, including case studies in labour-management disputes, updates on federal and provincial legislation, recent judicial decisions, and political developments affecting workers.

As an example, one of the seminars was about Whistleblower law. If an employee discovers wrongdoing on the job, either by the employer or by another employee and discloses the discovery, is the employee automatically protected from reprimand or dismissal? The answer may be "No", depending on the facts and circumstances. It is always important that wrongdoing be reported, but get advice from your union first about what may be disclosed and to whom.

Another seminar looked at the Pension Benefits Act and the administration of pensions by Pension Committees. These volunteer Committees, made up of employer and union representatives, work behind the scenes impartially overseeing the administration of pension funds. Pension Committees do not create the terms and conditions of Pension Plans - that is the employer's role - but they do ensure that all revenues and disbursements are collected and paid properly. TEAM members interested in serving on the Committee are welcome to apply to TEAM.

A seminar on communication strategy emphasized the importance of written communication in resolving disputes. In arbitrations, the evidence of written records, including letters, notes and emails is generally more important to the arbitrator's decision than the spoken testimony of witnesses. Get it in writing.

Other seminars examined organizing and negotiating, as well as an Introduction to Unions for new brothers and sisters.

On the final day of the convention Ken Giorgetti, President of the Canadian Labour Congress, spoke in a plenary session about the challenges facing Canadian unions. He spoke passionately about the urgent need for unions to improve their public image and to fight more effectively for what he referred to as the Battle of Ideas. The opponents of labour have enjoyed great success by reframing formerly unpopular ideas and casting them in new language that has won a considerable degree of support from those who do not understand the full intent of the framing.

As an example, in a 1946 arbitration decision concerning Ford workers, Canadian Supreme Court Justice Ivan Rand found that all who benefit from a collective agreement should pay union dues. That principle that has been upheld and supported since then. During the past 20 years, though, anti-union advocates have been very successful in swaying public opinion in the United States by recasting the issue as

being a simple question of choice, a "Right to Work". The effect has been catastrophic for unions in the USA, as Republican legislators backed by business interests have imposed Right to Work laws in many States, with considerable public support. Few employees will pay dues if identical benefits and representation is available for free, just as few citizens would pay income taxes if they were voluntary. This issue is gaining momentum in Ontario, where Tim Hudak has vowed to introduce the first such legislation in Canada if his Conservatives are elected. Georgetti said that the union movement must fight back by framing its arguments more effectively to win greater public support for unions and foster understanding that "Right to Work" is not a benign question of free choice.

TEAM members who would like to attend next year's convention, to be held in March 2014, should notify TEAM.
