



MAY DAY STATE OF THE UNION

PRESIDENT'S REPORT

This past Friday (May 1st) marked what is known throughout most of the world as International Workers' Day, or May Day as we call it in Canada. May Day is not to be confused as an occasion merely appreciating workers for all that they do: the intent of May Day has always been a declaration by workers that society should be transformed to better redistribute wealth to those that create that wealth.

To be clear, May Day is our annual reminder that without our labour the world stands still: no wheel turns, no one is housed, no one is fed, and even the most powerful corporations and governments are paralyzed. Our task as a union at the forefront of the struggle for workers' empowerment has always been in raising the class consciousness of workers so that we may all understand our collective power and be willing to assert it.

This idea of workers understanding and asserting our collective power at the expense of governments and corporations may be an uncomfortable prospect for some. If anyone still has any doubts that there are two distinct classes with contradictory interests in our society, let us review our own experiences navigating the COVID-19 pandemic.

Based on their media statements, CPC has known since January 2020 that C19 was a serious problem and had supposedly instituted a pandemic plan. The truth is that Edmonton postal workers didn't see pandemic safety measures sufficiently

implemented until March 31st, after almost two weeks of collective push back from the work floors of Depot 2, EDDD, and Rosedale, plus mass threats of refusals of unsafe work.

Many can be excused for assuming that everyone, regardless of their class standing, would be pulling in the same direction during what will likely be the biggest public crisis of our generation. The facts, sadly, educate us otherwise. To this day, CPC has not properly implemented sanitation regimes and physical distancing measures, like staggered starts, in all of its facilities throughout the country. Unless pressured to do so, CPC is content with business as usual. In numerous media interviews, our Office made the case that unless CPC implements a standardized policy across the country, our facilities could become contagion points that undermine the broader containment strategy.

Perfect examples of this warning came to pass as outbreaks inflicted Amazon shipping warehouses throughout North America and the meat packing plants in southern Alberta. Cargill Meats and Amazon are among the largest corporations in the world that saw the pandemic as a business opportunity and were willing to sacrifice the health and lives of their workers for profits. The Amazon centre in Balzac, AB, now has five confirmed cases. As of last week, 921 out of 2000 Cargill workers out of High River, AB, are confirmed infected, with 12 hospitalized and 1 dead.

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Over 15% of all infection cases in Alberta stem directly from these corporations and the government wilfully ignoring the worker appeals that their conditions were not safe. Despite this, the Albertan government is backing Cargill to reopen the plant even though union safety recommendations have not been met.

In the coming weeks, you will hear business leaders and governments talk about the importance of 'reopening the economy'. This premature rush to get everything back to normal illustrates two essential points in raising our class consciousness: 1) Workers are wealth creators, not elites. An economy can't exist without the workers doing the actual labour. They need us, we don't need them; and 2) the powerful of this country will happily trade our health and lives in exchange for a chance to make money.

Some say that this virus does not discriminate. While technically true, it's not the rich and powerful that will be forced back into crowded workplaces to brave a likely second wave of outbreak. Although, theoretically, everyone can get infected, those hiding out in their second vacation home are drastically less likely to get sick than members of an immigrant family crammed together in a meat packing plant, logistics workers jostling in shipping warehouses, or the legions of underpaid retail and service workers forced to cater to non-essential consumer needs.

Much like in a war, the first casualties are never the people escalating the problem but the workers conscripted to be the fodder on the front lines.

If class consciousness is about internalizing these lessons to then develop strategies to fight back to improve our lives, some time should be given to detail what our union can better do to empower our

members moving forward. Today, we will be discussing the annual budget of our Local. Every year, this process is contentious because there are competing visions of what our Local should be investing in.

If the argument is that our Union is a bird that needs two strong wings in order to keep flying, what comprises these two wings? One wing is bureaucratic proceduralism: methods that rely on individual expertise and time such as grievances and route measurement. The other wing is grassroots organizing: methods that rely on the education and empowerment of our membership to collectively mobilize against the company. It's no coincidence that since our Local started deliberately investing more in organizing that more job actions are happening on our work floors, more members are coming to meetings, participating in educationals, and volunteering as Stewards, and other Locals are being inspired to do the same.

To give you the raw numbers, our Local only has the ability to move around 30% of your operating budget between different committees and initiatives. Of that 30%, 70% is historically committed to procedural methods (e.g., grievances, route measurement, and book-offs for other bureaucratic tasks). This year, the Executive is proposing to reduce procedural costs from 70% to 65% to allow for more organizing educationals as well as book-offs to have more




activists hold work floor meetings to keep our various facilities better updated and coordinated.

While the budget proposal endorsed by our Exec today is a small step in the right direction, this step, honestly speaking, is not nearly big enough if our goal is to properly prepare our membership to fight the inadequate arbitration being imposed on us as early as next month, or the inevitable back-to-work legislation waiting for us down the road. Have no illusions: individual proceduralism may help with the day-to-day running of our Union, but it can never be the means to collectively mobilize our members to meaningfully improve our lives and working conditions.

While I reluctantly support today's budget proposal, my hope is that another year of proving the efficacy of work floor organizing will convince those in our Local still prioritizing proceduralism over organizing that they need to better learn how to share our limited resources and that at least 50% of our resources should be put into educating and organizing our members to collectively mobilize.

Until both wings of our Union are of equal strength, we will not have the means to close the distance we need to in our flight.

Not only will we be navigating unfamiliar technology, but we must choose whether to fly currents long-neglected by our Union and the rest of the labour movement. Do we hide and pretend that the way we've been doing things for the past 40-years is working? Or do we internalize the class lessons of ongoing back-to-work legislation and the C19 pandemic to properly prepare our members to fight back?

Nothing moves and nothing is made without the willingness of the working class. Let's do our part in the struggle by embracing this reality. 

By Roland Schmidt, CUPW Local 730 President.