

CEC Bulletin

(January, 2007)

CEC Speaks to Conference of Ministers of Labour

Ministers of Labour Conference, Fredericton, New Brunswick, Jan. 25-26, 2007

Andrew Finlay, on behalf of the CEC, spoke to Ministers of Labour from all provinces and Territories at the annual Ministers of Labour Conference held this year in Fredericton, New Brunswick. The CEC was invited to the January 25-26 event following the success of the Canada Labour Congress (CLC) / CEC session with the Deputy Ministers last Fall.

Finlay was joined by Barbara Byers, EVP of the CLC, and Worker Representative on the ILO's Governing Body. Also on the Panel was Tony Giles, Director General of HRSDC's International and Interprovincial Labour Policy Department. The theme was Canada's International Labour Activities. Minister Jean Pierre Blackburn hosted the event, and Chaired the session.

In her remarks, Byers highlighted the high number of complaints made to the ILO about Canadian Provinces, and pressed for ratification of Core Conventions, the Minimum Age Convention, and the Tripartism Convention.

Finlay outlined three broad perspectives on business interests. He started by pointing to the impact of the ILO and international standards on Canada, and the impact of activities at the ILO and hemispherically on Canadian public policy. He pointed to the pressures caused to provinces when they are subjected to complaints at the ILO, at the same time expressing wonder at how British Columbia finds itself between Azerbaijan and Burma as a result of treating Ferry Service as an essential service, thanks to the CLC complaints. Finlay queried whether ratifying more conventions would give the CLC a broader array of platforms from which to embarrass provinces.

While the domestic influence can be negative, it can be positive in many respects. Debates can unfold in Geneva that contributes to discussions in Canada. Finlay pointed out that the Canadian Government had considerable influence at the ILO, and is able to shape what happens there.

The second perspective was on business as a beneficiary of what is happening in developing countries. Canadian business is heavily invested in developing economies. We sell to, operate in, buy from and invest in countries, and look for stability, competent and ethical public administration, and economic growth. The ILO and IACML (Inter-American Conference of Ministers of Labour) offer mechanisms for supporting these countries in developing the capacity for good governance and economic growth. Thus, business has a great interest in what happens in this regard. Finlay pointed out that Provincial Governments in Canada have some of the best public labour administration systems in the world, and have in the past worked with some of these developing countries through the federal government. Currently, Ontario and Quebec have a joint initiative with Chile building mediation expertise.

The third perspective was more macro level socio-economic, and rested on a line of thought recently articulated by Brian Burkett. In summary, Finlay painted the picture of the changing focus at the multi-lateral level from trade to labour and the social dimension. Large multi-lateral trade initiatives have not progressed well, so a shift to a social focus has been witnessed by the development and strengthening of institutions like the IACML, and Labour Cooperation Agreements. Today, the planet is paying more attention to how we are creating wealth, and not just on wealth creation. This makes attention to international labour policy more important to business.

The Ministers were attentive and engaged. They asked questions of all panelists, and appeared to enjoy the session, which was informative and included a little friendly debate (between the CEC and CLC). The Ontario Minister, Jim Peters suggested there be a section like this at every meeting, possibly focusing on one or two conventions or specific topics.

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