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“Retirement Security for Everyone” Campaign “Labour Day to Whitehorse and Beyond”

On Labour Day 2009, the CLC kicked off its “Retirement Security for Everyone” campaign. We asked labour councils, affiliates and federations of labour to move the message of “Retirement Security for Everyone” into their Labour Day activities, websites and communication material. At the time, the issue of retirement security was bubbling but this issue did not have a degree of profile on the public radar screen. Our solutions to the pension issue did however have a large degree of support (CLC Stratcom polling) among our members and the public.

Our job since Labour Day was identified in the objectives laid out to the CLC Executive Councils. They were to:

1. work towards a National Pension Summit to promote labour’s pension agenda.
2. ensure that the pension issue became part of the union and public dialogue.
3. ensure that our pension position is known at the Finance Ministers Meeting in Whitehorse and that our position has champions in the room.

A targeted communications strategy was developed which included media talking points, information to assist affiliates to publicize the issue on their websites, fact sheets and an “oped” strategy. This strategy was supported by dozens of Labour Day picnics, parades and meetings across the country to ensure our message was heard loud and clear in a concentrated way. The CLC’s pension message appeared in 72 print and radio stories on Labour Day across Canada.

Five thousand activist books were printed and distributed to the affiliates. In early September, CLC researchers fanned out across the country to provide training sessions for potential lobbyists on the pension issue. Over 350 trade unionists attended these sessions and these activists would be the base of people who would meet with targeted MPs on our issues.

A list of targeted MPs was developed and labour council activists and affiliates were asked to talk to MPs from 5 Parliamentary Committees that had some connection with the pension issue.

From October through to December, 101 MPs were contacted and lobbied (43% of MPs outside of Quebec) and 56% of targeted MPs were visited by teams of activists (26 of 46).

In addition, the CLC decided that the Premiers would be an important target of this pension lobby. CLC President Ken Georgetti, Secretary-Treasurer Hassan Yussuff and many of the provincial Federation of Labour Presidents visited and spoke to the Premiers and Finance Ministers about the CLC's 3 proposals and getting them onto the Whitehorse meeting table. This work paid off and as we went into the Whitehorse meeting we had the support of Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, Ontario and Manitoba.

To increase our activist base from the training sessions, the Federations of Labour held either community forums or forums at their fall conventions on the issue. We had very successful forums in Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan and New Westminster, British Columbia. Hundreds of activists joined the CLC campaign out of these forums and have pledged to talk to their MP and provincial representative.

Meanwhile, a number of affiliates have been lobbying MPs, educating their members and holding rallies on this issue. In addition, the highly publicized problems of the Nortel workers, with their rally on Parliament Hill and the problems with the Abitibi workers, lent credibility and timing to the demands of our campaign.

All three opposition Parties asked countless questions in the House of Commons about the plight of seniors and the lack of adequate pensions for retirees. Finance Minister Flaherty had to acknowledge that pensions had become an important issue of the day. Even the Conservatives moved to introduce some minor measures in October which would increase the threshold by which plans can be in a surplus by 10% to 25%. This move gave acknowledgement that there was a problem with the pension system.

On December 18th, the provincial Finance Ministers met with the federal government in Whitehorse to discuss Canada's retirement security challenges. The good news to report is that the meeting was unanimous on the issue of providing much needed national reform to our pension system. Several options, including the CLC's, was committed to study and for public consultation leading up to the next Finance Ministers meeting in May, 2010. Our plan to double CPP benefits, eliminate senior poverty (through a 15% increase to GIS) and to introduce a federal pension insurance system is on the table. This means we will have to double our efforts, to educate and get more of our activists and members to speak out, contact their politicians and build

coalitions with seniors groups, anti-poverty and other like-minded organizations.

At the Whitehorse meeting, the Finance Ministers also reiterated the line that our “retirement system is in good shape”, and that Canada needed targeted improvements for certain disadvantaged groups. This is on the advice of two pension industry experts, one of whom thinks that “the status quo is an options”.

Our work is cut out for us. The status quo and tinkering with the system is not an option:

- x 11 million Canadians don't have a work plan pension.
- x 1.6 million seniors qualify for GIS benefits (and therefore earn less than \$11,300 per year).
- x Employers use bankruptcy courts to shirk their pension obligations.
- x Bank and mutual fund administration fees gouge 1/3 of RRSP earnings over the life of the RRSP.

In the coming weeks, the CLC will be planning the next phase of the campaign. We know the banks and mutual fund industry will be working to ensure they don't lose out to an expanded public system. We will need every affiliated union and activist to play a large role in the fight to ensure retirement security for everyone.

On behalf of the CLC, thank-you for all your efforts to date.