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**Abstract**

The author is a union leader and his article calls for a more egalitarian economic agenda plus a social agenda concerned with the distribution of wealth. This is part of creating a caring community in which discrimination on any basis is not countenanced. Consequently he calls for inclusion in schools and in the workplace and asserts that these are issues which the labour movement must support. **Keyword: Community Development**



# Labour and Community Living: New Coalitions for Change

by Bob White

**T**HIS IS A TIME of great uncertainty in Canada. On the one hand, we see unemployment levels at over 10 per cent. We see the destruction of many manufacturing sectors and social service agencies overwhelmed with demands for assistance. We see food banks becoming a way of life in our major cities and thousands of children dependent on welfare. On the other hand, we have witnessed another round of constitutional discussions that influence how we relate to each other, how we address Native concerns, and ultimately whether or not the country will stay together. These situations are linked — because it is much more difficult to establish a mood of generosity and tolerance when people are worried about their very survival.

There are fundamentally different political, economic and social agendas that must be debated in this country. There is the agenda currently followed by the government in Ottawa, which has, as its architects, the giant multinational-controlled Business Council on National Issues. That agenda sees free trade, privatization, deregulation, open skies, elimination of all trade barriers and the absolute free market as the way of the future. Using the term "competitiveness," that agenda envisages a society with less control on corporations, less public enterprise, less concern for our fellow citizens and more concern for corporate bottom lines. It assumes that anything and everything which impedes competitiveness — from wages and social programs to trade policies, affirmative action and pay equity — must be changed, rolled back or moved aside. From that perspective, the U.K. and the United States are examples of success. Yet in the United States, 37 million people are without health care and child poverty is at an all-time high while hundreds of

millionaires live in the lap of luxury behind security walls.

But there is another agenda; it is one which I believe in. I believe that we *cannot* and *will not* stay together as a country if the only yardstick we use is the bottom line of competitiveness at any cost. I believe Canada is not a corporation and the parliament is not a board of directors. Just because something may not be as efficient as we would like, we cannot shut it down and we cannot cut it off.

In addition to an economic agenda we must have a social agenda that asks not only how do we create wealth, but also how do we distribute it? We must ask ourselves not how do we make it more difficult for the less privileged to become full members of our human family, but how do we make it easier for them? This social agenda recognizes that private enterprise is important, but so is public enterprise. It recognizes that, if driven only

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Bob White (left) with Denis Laroche, President of People First of Canada.

by the corporate bottom line, international capital will go where it can get the best returns including, in many cases, countries with few or no labour laws, human rights or decent conditions for workers.

I believe in a society where our government must play a role in delivering services, and in shaping attitudes that eliminate discrimination on the basis of race, sex, or physical or intellectual disability. In other words, we must not throw aside but improve our commitment to building a productive, fulfilling and caring society.

The base of membership of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) union works in the auto assembly and auto parts manufacturing facilities in Ontario and Quebec. However, it is much more than an auto union. It represents thousands of workers in airlines, aerospace, telecommunications, rail, the fishing

industry, food and beverage and many other areas. As such, it is involved not only in collective bargaining but in the ongoing political struggles to better the standard of living of working Canadians and to ensure that we not only maintain our social programs but, indeed, improve them substantially.

When we debated free trade with the United States a few years ago, we anticipated the effects of deeper integration with the U.S. We anticipated its stress on our social

agenda. For that reason we joined with other groups — women's groups, Native groups, anti-poverty, disability — in coalition-building to fight, not against change, but against the corporate agenda and the proposed change.

We are not afraid of change. CAW used to be an American-based union. We left and formed a smaller independent Canadian union. We have changed tremendously, as I explained earlier, from an auto union to a truly diverse national union.

The community living movement has also changed significantly over the past few years. You have thrown off the limits of negative labels and seek to participate fully in all aspects of society — both as individuals and collectively. It strikes me that it is now up to the rest of us to change our own views and understanding of your situation.

As you know, changing attitudes is not easy. Sometimes fighting for justice means moving

mountains but move them we must. In our union, we have just passed an affirmative action program that will affect our internal operations. We looked at the profile of women and minorities in our union and are trying to grapple with the barriers that block their full participation in our organization. As you can imagine, the challenges are many — from physical accessibility to the provision of child care to combatting racism and sexism. But the delegates to our recent national convention said they were prepared to face the issue and engage in a struggle that will empower the membership and build our union by acknowledging our differences.

So when I think about how our union can help include people with an mental handicap in all aspects of life, I am hopeful that educational programs and attempts to sensitize our members to your particular concerns will be successful. It does mean our membership must acknowledge that some of our current practice does not encourage acceptance of those with special or different needs. Our membership must recognize that we do not always achieve the open structures we might like. Striving to

be the best is a big part of union culture. In fact, we are beginning to examine if "the best" is always appropriate, or if the definition of "best" can be different for different people. We are looking at our own internal practices to see if they sometimes mean the cards are stacked against those groups which are differently abled.

At some point in the future we would like, for example, to have a member of the community living association speak to our leadership about the aspirations and struggles of persons labelled mentally handicapped. This would inform union members about the situation of people so labelled. Then if there are specific campaigns around minimum wage, we could more easily work together.

Another outgrowth of such education for our membership would concern the integration of children with disabilities in our school system. Our union held a successful conference in 1992 where members debated the pros and cons of our school system. We

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are attempting to arrive at a policy that will advocate large-scale change to the current system — to replace it with a system that is worker-friendly, democratic, and encourages the broadest possible involvement of the community in a child's learning. Certainly an argument for integrated schooling would be compatible with our goals.

Collective bargaining is another area where we can certainly make improvements. We have been able to negotiate "reasonable accommodation" of job functions for those with disabilities in some of our contracts. Most frequently, however, those positions are for workers injured on the job. Recent statistics suggest that 94.4 per cent of collective agreements in this country have no provision for affirmative action. And 37.1 per cent have no provision for anti-discrimination. Sixty-two per cent have no provision for disabled workers. Clearly, there is room for improvement and my hope is that, as we make changes internally and educate members on these issues, we will be able to make headway at the bargaining table. Fighting for employers to support the notion of reasonable accommodation of work functions for those with disabilities *not already in the workforce* is something we must tackle at the bargaining table.

Workplace integration is another issue for legislation. The Ontario government intends to bring in ground-breaking employment equity legislation in the near future. Our union strongly supports this initiative. Our experience has clearly shown that mandatory measures are required if real progress is to be made.

A different issue, and one that has caused some controversy for public sector unions, is deinstitutionalization. It is my understanding that a recently formed committee of the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) plans to call for a Royal Commission into the issue of long-term care. Our union intends to participate in the OFL committee and we recognize that unions with large numbers of workers employed in these institutions are concerned about their job security and about maintaining their standard of living. Obviously this is

a complex issue, since jobs in the community tend to pay less (by as much as 25 per cent) and have fewer benefits than those in the institutions. Nonetheless, I believe there must be a way to resolve this in a humane fashion, that takes into account both the needs of people in institutions and their care-givers. Certainly, our union would be willing to work on this issue through the OFL and attempt to reach a solution that balances the rights of both groups.

Finally, what can your association do to protect the rights of workers? I think attempts to get people out of sheltered workshops and into the workforce is

an admirable goal. Winning the right to minimum wage in all situations is equally important. Community living associations have called for more centralized bargaining for the employees of member associations across the country. In my own experience with collective bargaining in many different sectors, centralized bargaining has been on the increase. And it has often been to the benefit of workers and, sometimes, of employers. I would encourage you to look seriously at this practice as a way of dealing with issues on

a systematic basis, in a way that avoids a piece-meal approach to the concerns of a broad group of people.

I look forward to our increased understanding, between the labour movement and the community living movement, of one another's goals and needs. It is only by joining together, by exercising the power we possess and by fighting for progressive change, that we achieve justice. ●

At the time of writing, Bob White was President of the Canadian Auto Workers Union. He is now the President of the Canadian Labour Congress.

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