

**BUILDING**

**THE**

**CONGRESS OF UNION**

**RETIREEES OF CANADA**



**October 15-17, 2007**

The Congress of Union Retirees of Canada (CURC) which was formed in 1993 set forth its objectives in its constitution:

**Section 1:**

To unite chapters or clubs of retired members from unions affiliated with the Canadian Labour Congress, and other organizations representing retired officers and staff of affiliated unions and the Canadian Labour Congress, and to monitor collective bargaining trends, social, economic, educational, legislative and political events of interest to retired union members and their spouses.

**Section 2:**

To petition legislators for the introduction and enactment of legislation on measures to improve the health and welfare of all retired persons, consistent with the policies of the Canadian Labour Congress.

**Section 3:**

To fight for the rights of all retired persons to have an equitable standard of living.

**Section 4:**

To cooperate with other organizations, with similar objectives and on mutual campaigns for long term goals.

Since its founding, CURC has sought to pursue these objectives. It has formed provincial organizations in most provinces. It has lobbied government in Ottawa and in ridings on issues of concern to both the union movement and retired union members.

CURC's role is to lobby all three levels of government to promote the interests of retired union members and their families. It can only do so if it has strong viable organizations at all three levels. To be successful, this requires that the affiliated unions have strong viable structures. Much has been done but more needs to be done if we are to meet our goals.

# **BUILDING A STRONG VIABLE VOICE FOR RETIRED UNION MEMBERS**

## **CURC's Challenge**

The next decade will be a challenging time for both the labour movement in general and its retirees in particular. Many of the benefits negotiated such as defined benefit pension plans and drug programs are under attack. Social legislation like Medicare that the union movement played a leading role in achieving is also under attack from right-wing governments and spokespeople for private enterprise providers.

One million union members will retire over the next 10 years. One in six workers will be a retiree and by 2025 that ratio will be reduced to 1 in 5. The challenge for us is to organize them and get them involved. If we don't, they may well be seduced by right-wing politicians who promise lower taxes but then cut social programs that underpin the good life that unions have helped establish. The key challenge is how do we broaden our reach to build retirees' chapters and bring more members in CURC, and support and sustain CURC financially.

**At the CLC Convention in June 2005, the delegates passed resolution CS-30 calling on the CLC to bring together its affiliated unions to promote the organization of their union retirees and the CURC. This document lays out those discussions with a framework to take a report back to the Executive Council of the CLC and/or Convention in 2008.**

## **Strengthening CURC at the National Level**

CURC plays an active role at the national level. Its President sits on the CLC Executive Council. It exercises its right to have a representative on pertinent CLC Committees including those dealing with Pensions, Women's Rights and Political Action. It makes presentations to government committees and commissions. It is active on the Canadian Health Coalition board. It has its own website and produces a newsletter three times a year that is sent to its members.

The successful strengthening of CURC must be based on the building of effective retiree organizations in each union. Working together on campaigns like Pharmacare can build both CURC area councils and affiliate chapters in local areas.

However, CURC has very limited finances to undertake activities. It has paid for the cost of its Executive Council to attend meetings but adding more people to twice yearly meetings is a financial challenge.

Because CURC's finances are limited, consideration needs to be given to hold regular conference call meetings in order to extend our activities. There is however a need for at least one annual face-to-face meeting of the Executive Council.

The composition of CURC officers should reflect the broad scope of union retirees. While in the past the CURC Executive has been balanced in its gender make-up, it is not currently. The CURC Executive also lacks representatives of workers of colour. The constitution of CURC will be amended at its October 2007 Convention to deal with these considerations.

In order to ensure the participation of the major sectors and the input of the regions, it is recommended that the constitution be reviewed to see how best to ensure that all sectors of the labour movement are represented. Vice-Presidents should not only represent their union and sector twice a year but also play an active role in building local area councils of CURC. Representation should also reflect affiliation levels and financial support of the affiliate.

### **Strengthening CURC at the Provincial Level**

Affiliate representatives will be expected to play an active role in getting their retirees to participate in building the provincial federations of retirees. The goal is to have effective federations of retirees in all provinces by the end of 2008.

It was suggested that CURC adopt a set of model by-laws for provincial federations of retirees to guide the renewal process.

### **Strengthening CURC's Area and Regional Councils**

This is the most important area for the long-run viability of CURC. Area and Regional Councils of CURC need to be tied into district labour councils with the President of each attending the meetings of the other. CLC staff must play an active role in support of this process.

The identifying of all retirees especially recent retirees to work as volunteers in their area is essential if we are to organize and maintain area councils. This will be accomplished quicker when we have more CLC affiliates actively organizing and developing their own retiree organization.

### **Financing Action**

CURC began operations on the basis of direct financial support from the office of the CLC Secretary-Treasurer. The Congress subsidized the formation with a cash expenditure of \$20,000 per year in the early 1990's. This support enabled CURC to organize at the national and provincial levels. In addition, CLC also provided an office with basic support for CURC to operate.

CURC's affiliation fees were set at a modest level as most retiree organizations have only limited funds. It also has individual memberships of \$15 of which 30% goes to both relevant provincial federation of retirees and area council.

With its income, CURC finances its bi-annual Executive meetings for which it pays the costs of each officer from across the country to attend. These costs include travel, hotel and per diem. A portion of the CURC Convention costs are also financed this way. CURC also solicits funds from outside organizations such as the generic drug manufacturers with which we have common cause against the extension of patent protection. Funds such as these also help to defray the convention costs.

The CLC has continued to provide valuable assistance to enable CURC to function. Each year, it provides an operating grant of \$10,000. In addition, CLC provides "in-kind" office space with telephone and computer, mailing and translation. The most needed and intermittent – secretarial assistance.

**It is now time to move CURC to the next level of effectiveness.** The first step was the 2005 CLC Convention which gave a positive reception to Resolution C-30 in which it was resolved that "the CLC call a meeting of all its affiliates to promote the organization of their union retirees with a view to expanding the CLC's political activities." It also resolved that "a method of financing the activities of retirees' organizations also be on the agenda." The CLC held a meeting on March 24, 2006 in Toronto with affiliate representatives to follow-up on that resolution. As a result, a number of affiliates have now started the process to organize their retirees for which CURC has offered assistance.

The second step was a proposal entitled “Rebuilding Strategy” that CURC presented to the CLC Executive Council in November 2006 for support over a three year period to expand its activities. The proposal was adopted. We then canvassed the CLC affiliates to provide for three years funding on a sliding scale. This money is allocated to program funding of which CURC’s main tasks have been to lobby and build area councils. Most major unions have responded positively. As important as the money sought from the affiliates in the proposal was the request for CLC affiliates to assign staff who would work with CURC. This was formalized in the setting up of the CLC – CURC Political Strategy Committee. The Committee is comprised of the CLC Secretary Treasurer, the CLC Director of Political Action and Campaigns, the representatives of affiliates, CURC table officers and its key volunteer staff.

The CLC - CURC Political Strategy Committee will meet at least twice a year. Indeed the committee has already met twice this spring. The second meeting followed a meeting of a subcommittee which was established to study CURC’s role and how to reach its objectives. A third meeting is set for November.

The Committee took a serious look at building the structure of retirees within each affiliate as well as that of CURC. At its first meeting, there was a presentation by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Union which has a very successful program that involves their retirees in the USA. One of the conclusions from reviewing their success was the importance of the larger unions having a specific department or section of the union to assist in the organizing of retirees. The financial viability of their local chapters has also been enhanced by the fact that they have in many cases negotiated check-off of annual dues from pension cheques.

Another important factor in building membership in retiree organizations is to approach members before they retire by offering pre-retirement courses with the assistance of the union’s retirees. CURC should be the catalyst for this program.

The CLC – CURC Political Strategy Committee continues to work towards finding solutions for the long-term financing of retiree organizations. The financing of retiree organizations has two distinct facets, both of which are priorities. The first is financing of CURC; the second is the financing of the retiree organization of each union. The national organization should be the financial obligation of the CLC and its affiliates. Sustained financing requires payments based on the size of each organization.

At the CLC – CURC Political Strategy Committee on June 26, 2007 the CLC committed to provide the needed support for CURC to operate. In addition to the \$10,000 annual grant the CLC also provides:

1. Administrative and secretarial help to assist with the work of CURC
2. Office rental
3. Office telephone
4. Four conference calls a year
5. Production and mailing of newsletter three times a year
6. Translation
7. New computer
8. Miscellaneous office costs such as photocopying, telephone and regular mail
9. The assistance of the Political Action Department and the CLC regional staff

It is also important that retirees play a role in the financing of their own organizations. Two ways that this could be accomplished are a fund negotiated with the employer and/or the union, or dues paid by the individual retiree. A good example of the negotiated fund is what the Autoworkers have with the Big Three auto companies where three cents an hour per employee is used to finance a retirees department and expenses of local chapters.

A number of unions fund their retirees organizations with an annual fee usually twenty dollars or less.

There is also a possibility of a form of “check-off” in the future. It is likely that if individuals are approached through a pre-retirement course that a high percentage would sign up for a membership of \$5 a month when they retire as this amount would be far less than their current dues. On the other hand, it would be seen as a way of providing both social occasions and political action on issues like pensions and benefits. If the right to check-off could be negotiated then the take-up would be higher.

If a check-off of \$5 became widespread within a union, it could finance the local chapter of the affiliate and its national and provincial structures. If \$15 of each annual dues collected through check-off were sent via each national or international union office to CURC, it could finance the national, provincial and local organizations of CURC. For other unions, a negotiated sum from which the CURC \$15 fee would be paid could be the solution to financing CURC.

This situation is not going to be achieved in the near term so the Committee will need to struggle with this issue. It should be noted that, as our activity increases so too will our operating costs.

## **Implementation**

The building of viable structure for retirees will proceed at a different pace by both union and region. We cannot build the local and area organizations everywhere overnight. Targets must be set. Evaluation must be part of every effort.

The first phase is 2007 – 2010 for which the affiliates have committed funding for CURC. Within this time period, specific goals will be set for each year both by CURC and each union. The CLC – CURC Political Strategy Committee will evaluate this at each of their meetings. A report from these meetings will be presented to the CLC Executive Council.

Four aspects will be monitored in each phase:

1. Organization of retirees within each affiliate
2. Effectiveness of each Provincial Federation of Retirees
3. Effectiveness of Local Chapters
4. Progress on primary CURC issues

Each affiliate must decide:

- how best to include within its national structure the responsibility for retirees
- how best to involve the participation of retirees within their union
- how best to offer pre-retirement courses to their members and thereby recruit members in the retirees' organization

Each provincial federation of retirees must pursue:

- the links at the provincial level with the federation of labour and other appropriate bodies such as health coalitions
- to recruit more affiliations of local chapters
- to promote and work with local or regional councils of retirees
- to make the voice of retirees heard at a provincial level

Each local or regional chapter must:

- arrange a working relationship with the local labour council(s)
- set up the basis of effective lobbying of local MPs, provincial members, and municipal politicians

CLC will in addition to the assistance noted earlier assure that its field staff promote the formation of local or regional councils of CURC and their relationship with labour councils.

CURC has committed itself:

- to develop generic pre-retirement course based on materials provided by those unions with existing courses and programs
- to develop an effective lobby strategy on the basis of its priority issues of Pharmacare and Pensions
- to work with provincial federations retirees to improve their ability to carry-out their mandate to establish local or regional councils of retirees
- to work with affiliates to establish their retiree organizations

The CLC-CURC Political Strategy Committee will continue to evaluate and set the goals for each phase. Our goal is to ensure stable financing for CURC from 2010 and beyond. It is vitally important that this convention follow-up on the commitment made by a number of affiliates of the CLC to fund CURC from 2007 to 2010.

This Convention is another step moving forward to help build CURC and its affiliates into an effective organization that works on behalf of retirees and working people.

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