



Canadian Centre for  
Policy Alternatives  
Manitoba Office

# work *life*

## More than a Dream

**M**any of us have, like John Lennon, imagined a world without war, greed, hunger or possessions. There are those rare individuals who insist that we should settle for nothing less, that human kind true heart is to live in communities guided by understanding, compassion and social justice. This year May Works Festival of Labour and the Arts is dedicated to those individuals and organizations that have fought and continue to struggle for this ideal. They refuse to accept that social exclusion is inevitable. They name, and clearly understand the obstacles that keep society from realizing its full potential, and they challenge those boundaries and restrictions relentlessly.

As individuals, our greatest struggles often occur at our jobs; collectively that struggle turns into one of an entire class. Capital's boundaries appear in many forms, but the most easily understood is class. Everyone knows the difference between the boss and the employee and few employees don't feel at some point in their careers, fear of and/or resentment for 'the boss'. That your life can be so controlled by the whim of one person or of some faceless entity, known as 'management', is unsettling. How do you gain a sense of control over your work life, over your ability to make a living?

Workers who are lucky enough to belong to a union are better protected and are able to participate in a more democratic workplace than non-unionized workers. By bringing many voices together and allowing them to speak as one, the barrier set between employer and employee becomes more porous and flexible. The barrier may never collapse completely, but unions reduce its effectiveness, allowing for better wages and working conditions. Whether through our public

healthcare system, OAS, CPP or even such basic services as clean water and sanitation, unions have fought to tear down the barriers keeping all citizens from accessing essential services and programs. Unfortunately all these public services are now under attack by a powerful wave of privatization which is slowly but surely rebuilding the barriers unions fought so hard to tear down. The fight must never end until the dream is realized.

Non-unionized workers face higher obstacles than unionized workers, but they too have their champions. The dedicated people who work at organizations like the Workers Organizing Resource Centre (WORC), the Community Unemployed Help Centre (CUHC) and the MFL's Occupational Health Centre (OHC) offer resources, advice and advocacy services to all workers. Whether being unjustly denied Employment Insurance, requiring advice about workplace health and safety, including medical attention, or advising workers of their rights under Employment Standards or how to join a union, these organizations help workers understand their rights and support them as they fight to realize them.

The work these organizations do is in demand precisely because so many barriers exist between workers and the services they are supposed to have access to. All workers who pay EI should have easy access to funds if they lose their jobs, but the system has been changed over the past 25 years to the point where less than half of unemployed Canadians qualified for EI when the Great Recession hit in 2009. The CUHC advocates for workers who have been denied EI and it wins over 80 per cent of its cases, demonstrating

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ERROL BLACK CHAIR

**EBC**

IN LABOUR ISSUES

**“This May Day, let’s take a moment to recognize and celebrate all the organizations and individuals who refuse to accept social exclusion as inevitable, and who won’t let the dream die.”**

that the system is rigged to prevent workers from collecting what is rightfully theirs. Other workers, such as those facing unfair dismissal, can also find it difficult to fight for their rights and WORC is there to fight on their behalf. The OHC provides quick and specialized medical assessments for workers injured on the job, helping move their case through Workers Compensation. Without OHC’s assistance, many injured workers would be left on their own to negotiate an often hostile environment as they seek the help they need.

As important as the work of unions and worker advocacy organizations is, it is not enough to fuel a sustained attack against the barriers we all face, whether it be lack of access to our basic rights or exploitation on the job. We all need inspiration and information so we can understand how our world is changing and where to find allies. The United Jewish Peoples Order is dedicated to the philosophy of secular Jewishness. Inspired by the rich cultural influences found in secular Jewishness, this organization engages in dialogue and education around social justice issues such as economic disparity, elimination of racism, the Israeli – Palestinian conflict and Idle No More, to name a few. By stimulating informed debate, the UJPO helps Manitobans to understand these issues and inspires them to take action. It too reminds us that a better world is possible.

Another organization that reminds us that the status quo is not inevitable is the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives MB. (CCPA). This non-profit research institute’s mandate is captured in the words ‘policy alternatives’. Using a social justice, left-of-centre lens, the Centre delivers high-quality research

challenging Margaret Thatcher’s infamous declaration that ‘there is no alternative’. She was of course referring to the neo-liberal wave that swept across the developed world and which so effectively fortified and expanded class barriers. By providing accessible and reliable analyses of public policy, based on academic and community sources, CCPA challenges the status quo, whether it be through mainstream media, public consultations and presentations or its many publications. CCPA’s research feeds a wide audience, from government workers to community activists. It reminds us all that in fact, there is an alternative.

So much of the work done by all the organizations mentioned here would not be so effective were it not for a large group of fearless individuals – those activists who take their ideals and dreams to their work places, to their meeting halls and into the streets, who educate, who march, who organize, who push the envelope day after week after month and into years. Some of them have left us, but so strong was their voice that we fight on in their names: Joe Zuken, J.S. Woodworth, Nellie McClung and more recently, Nick Ternette and Errol Black. Even now a new generation of warriors steps forward; young, mature, Aboriginal, non-Aboriginal, trade unionists, men and women from all sexual orientations who like their predecessors, refuse to settle for anything less than a just and peaceful world.

This May Day, let’s take a moment to recognize and celebrate all the organizations and individuals who refuse to accept social exclusion as inevitable, and who won’t let the dream die.

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