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Op-Eds

Labour Day 2015 - Greeting from Irene Lanzinger

Labour Day has a long and significant history in our country. And as people get ready to enjoy a day off with family or friends, it's import we don't lose sight of why we celebrate this day each year.

More than just a holiday, Labour Day is a reminder of the struggles and victories of working people across the country.

A quick history lesson reminds us that the first Labour Day in Canada is widely considered to be a mass demonstration that took place in Toronto in 1872, when the Toronto Printers Union took to the streets fighting for a 9-hour work day.

Today, we take such rights for granted.

Millions of Canadians – both union and non-union – go to work each day having reaped the benefits of past struggles. Every gain made by working people in Canada was hard fought, including the 8-hour work day, health and safety standards, overtime pay, benefits, and the weekend…to just name a few.

Unions and the labour movement played a vital role in these victories. And today, we continue to play an important role in protecting them.

Increasingly the rights of working people are being undermined in Canada.

Temporary and precarious jobs are on the rise, pensions are shrinking and retirement pushed back, basic employment standards have been whittled down and enforcement is almost non-existent. Many workers are unclear of their basic rights, and many others fear repercussion if they stand up when their rights have been violated.

The clock is being turned back on working people.

The Harper government in Ottawa has forgotten that working people keep our economy moving; opening the doors each morning for businesses both big and small, building our needed infrastructure and delivering vital services across every inch of this country.

In his haste to attack unions, the Prime Minister has forgotten that unions help bring stability to the economy – because when workers are paid well, are healthy and safe, and can support their families then our economy is strong and sustainable.

Simply put, unions make our country a more equal place.

Even the International Monetary Fund (IMF) acknowledges that declining rates of union density come with growing rates income inequality. And deep income inequality is bad for growth.

The income gap in Canada is at crisis levels, with more and more Canadians falling behind. Our economy is sputtering into recession. Clearly the Harper approach is not working.

It is time for change.

Right now the most important opportunity for change is upon us. This federal election is critical to the future of our country.

There are a number of issues at stake that affect every one of us – health care, childcare, retirement security, good jobs. These issues affect people, communities and our long-term economic stability.

They are not issues of right vs. left, but rather they speak to the values of what it means to be Canadian.

Working people need to be part of the democratic process. This election we need to vote for the party that shares our values and believes in building an economy that works for everyone.

This is our chance to elect a government that is committed to fair taxation, good public services, pensions, childcare, higher minimum wages. It’s an opportunity to elect a government that shares our commitment to increasing equality in our country.

These goals are achievable.

The labour movement has been at the forefront of improving the lives of working people for more than a century. And we will continue that fight.

And we will celebrate our victories at Labour Day events in the years ahead.

So this Labour Day, let’s remember where we came from – the mass demonstrations and strikes that resulted in the basic rights and employment standards that all Canadians enjoy today.

And let’s commit to electing a government that will respect and protect the rights we have fought so hard for.

IRENE LANZINGER
President, BC Federation of Labour