



# FASTFACTS



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## THE BRANDON & DISTRICT LABOUR COUNCIL AT 50: A PROFOUND AND PERVASIVE ROLE IN CITY LIFE

This year is the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Canadian Labour Congress and many of its affiliated provincial federations of labour and local labour councils. The anniversary has been marked in many different ways by the various bodies.

The Brandon & District Labour Council (BDLC) marked the occasion by holding a commemorative banquet on October 14, 2006. Since 1906 also marked the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the first labour council in Brandon (the Brandon Trades and Labour Council), the BDLC decided to compile an illustrated history of the presence and impact of labour councils in the life of Brandon. The executive obtained grants (through the Manitoba Heritage Grants Program and the Winnipeg law firm of Myers Weinberg LLP Barristers and Solicitors) to cover the costs of researching and publishing the book.

Some 225 people attended the banquet on October 14<sup>th</sup>. The keynote speakers were: Canadian Labour Congress President Ken Georgetti; Manitoba Federation of Labour President Darlene Dzewit; and Ross Martin, Brandon and District Labour Council President from 1979 to 1998 and Brandon City Councillor from 1980 to 1998. Everyone who attended the event received a copy of the BDLC history, *Strength in Solidarity: The Brandon and District Labour Council at 50*.

The book is important because it not only provides a rich history of the labour movement in Brandon and area, but also demonstrates that labour councils in Brandon, including the present one, have played an important role in shaping the life and times of the city and the local region. Indeed, even the long-time activists were surprised at how much they've achieved and how much they've contributed to the betterment of the city through their involvement in the labour council.

Unfortunately, the role of labour in general and labour councils in particular is obscured by the relative neglect of their activities by the media. This is true across the country; it is true of this province. The media never did have much time for labour. (The banquet and the publication of the book were ignored by the local print media, including the newspaper of record, the *Brandon Sun*.)

Newspapers are businesses and they have always taken their cue from business in their coverage of events and their analysis of issues. At one time, however, newspapers of note in Manitoba had people on the labour beat generating reports and commentary on union organizing, collective bargaining, industrial disputes and the political initiatives of local labour councils and the MFL. Coverage now, however, is pretty much restricted to issues that involve conflict and controversy. The shift in emphasis in recent decades has further accentuated



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the marginalization of labour in the media and in society.

This is not the place to try and remedy this situation. However, a brief summary of the main insights coming out of the research that was done for the BDLC book (insights that we believe probably apply to other labour councils in Manitoba and in other parts of the country), will give people some sense of what we are losing out on by our failure to incorporate a labour perspective in our discussions of the issues of the day and the longer-term direction of society.

First, labour councils in Brandon, including the present BDLC, have always got their inspiration and drive from a comparatively small group of volunteer activists committed to the values and vision of a cooperative commonwealth that puts community and societal interests ahead of self-interest and the maximization of personal gain. At the same time, however, without the participation of many other individuals the actions and initiatives of labour councils would have little impact.

Second, it is evident from the Brandon experience that labour councils are the backbone of the Canadian labour movement. The values, philosophy and agenda of the Manitoba Federation of Labour (MFL) and Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) are inspired and shaped by proposals and motions that originate at the local level and move upwards to provincial and federal levels. Also it is evident that the campaigns and initiatives of the MFL and CLC only succeed if labour councils are able to mobilize the resources required to move things forward.

Third, in Brandon there is a strong social democratic culture and tradition dating back to the beginnings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The heart of this culture and tradition is entrenched in the local labour movement and the BDLC and this, in turn, has resulted in strong links between labour activists in Brandon and social democratic political parties (the Brandon Labour Party, the Independent Labour Party, the CCF and the NDP).

Fourth, labour councils in Brandon have historically had a humanizing and civilizing influence on the

development of the city and the local community. This is as true now as it was in previous eras. The explanation for this is that the BDLC is the one organization in the community that speaks for and promotes a community interest. In contrast to business organizations that are preoccupied by property and self interests, and other organizations that represent particular segments of the community or have a single-issue agenda, the labour council is both in and of the community and understands and gives voice to the needs and aspirations of working people and the needs of the community.

And fifth, it seems that efforts to marginalize labour in Brandon and discredit labour involvement in local politics is a result of the recognition that the BDLC does speak for the community interest, and a fear on the part of business interests that the community will also recognize this and rally behind the BDLC when the actions and projects of business compromise the community interest.

What is to be concluded from this is that we should not only recognize the important role that labour has played in the development of our cities and province, but also actively encourage labour to become more vigorously involved in the discourse about the direction and future of our cities and our province.

- Errol Black

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