

CLC 2014 Convention - COPE 491 Delegate Report
Respectful submitted by: Brian Edgecombe
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I was named a COPE 491 alternate delegate to the 27th Constitutional Convention of the Canadian Labour Congress held from Monday, May 5 to Friday, May 9 at the Palais des Congrès de Montréal.

The local requested (through Brother Steve) an additional delegate and, on arrival at convention, COPE Ontario passed me the delegate credential for COPE local 523, a composite local located in Kapuskasing, Ontario. This registration was an additional \$300 and I will be putting a request in for local 491 to consider reimbursing this cost.

The 2014 CLC convention was historic, and I was proud to be sitting with COPE sisters and brothers throughout the week. Our union represented itself well on many issues. This was the first convention to experience hotly contested elections for all CLC officer positions and active campaigning in advance of the convention itself. The catalyst for all this was the grassroots campaign of Brother Hassan Husseini who, campaigning under the slogan "Take Back the CLC", ran for president of the CLC. The incumbent, Brother Ken Georgetti also campaigned for the position, and Brother Hassan Yussuff challenged for the position as well.

I will say at the outset that my role at this convention was anything but conventional. As an active member of the "Take Back the CLC" campaign team, a good deal of my time was spent on this effort. I did make it to convention floor regularly and sat with the COPE delegation daily, but, with the exception of elections on Thursday, I spent about a half hour a day at my chair.

Creating a campaign and contested election at the CLC convention raised a number of crucial questions. First, is the CLC only a creation of the affiliated unions that belong to it, or does it belong directly to workers who are members of those affiliated unions (and their delegated representatives)? Second, what is the political program of the CLC and how is it implemented (are we a bottom-up, grassroots, boots on the ground, movement building labour movement or are we a top-down, bureaucratic, image and polling-based organization)? And, third, what should democracy look like at the CLC convention?

Over the course of the week, answers emerged. While the CLC is created by the affiliates, it belongs to the members and their delegated representative. Despite the efforts of some affiliates to instill discipline amongst their ranks, it failed. The very idea that delegates need the permission of their affiliate unions to engage was rejected. The 'Take Back' campaign – a campaign that did not have the permission of any affiliate – shook the CLC and opened up a space where many found their voices. The struggle delegates expect the CLC to lead cannot look like a top-down, poll-based branding exercise. We need 'boots on the ground'. Worker action and broad-based movement building are necessary to achieve our goals. And, let's hear it for a little democracy: an all-candidates debate on the floor of convention, lead-up campaigning and secret ballot voting stations all in one convention. Who would have thought!

Summary of activities for the week:

Saturday: arrival, office set-up, campaign strategy meeting, convention site inspection

Sunday: Numerous Caucuses/Forums including the labour councils forum, the Human Rights forum and the all-candidates forum on Equity (which the Georgetti slate did not attend).

Monday: COPE Caucus, Labour Councils caucus on adjournment, campaign materials distribution and campaign strategy meetings, Yussuff/Lafleur Open Forum

Tuesday: campaign materials distribution, Resolutions Strategy meeting, Campaign Caucuses, Campaign Core Team meeting, SEIU sponsored social

Wednesday: All candidates debate, Campaign caucus

Thursday: elections

Friday: Westray Memorial, departure

My voting record for the elections:

President – Brother Hassan Yussuff

Secretary-Treasurer – Sister Barb Byers

Executive Vice-Presidents – Sister Maria Clark Walker and Brother Donald Lafleur

I spoke to an emergency resolution (from a pro mic!) calling on the CLC to fight employer and government attacks on defined benefit pension plans. I argued that when workers strike or are locked-out trying to defend DB plans, the whole labour movement needs to join the fight. There are too many examples of workers fighting against two-tiered attacks on DB pension plans where alone, they are not strong enough to fight off these attacks. We must get to the picketlines in large numbers and we must transform crucial struggles at the picketline into broad social struggles.

This is the first opportunity I've really had to engage with COPE as a national union and I was thrilled with our unions' engagement on key issues. On the elections themselves, COPE was strongly in favour of change in leadership. We were overwhelmingly supporting either Hassan Husseini or Hassan Yussuff. At the CLC Canada Council, our national president was on the side of those fighting to ensure a democratic elections process (including secret balloting). And, Brother Casey Oraa, a COPE 343 delegate, was successfully elected from the LGBTQ caucus as their equity vice-president to the Canada Council.

The outcomes of this CLC convention will be historic. Decades from now, labour activists will talk about the 2014 convention and the Take Back movement. For the first time ever, an incumbent president of the CLC was defeated. Debates for elected offices were held on the floor of convention. Slate politics broke down. Young workers and social media are changing our movement.

I would be happy to answer any questions or provide further information, and I am grateful for the opportunity I had to represent COPE 491 members at this convention.

In Solidarity,



Brian Edgecombe