

Workers Conference on Nation-Building

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Introduction by Rolf Gerstenberger

Many of you here today are members of trade unions that had their formative years following the Second World War. Local 1005 had its great strike in 1946 and during the following decades gained victories such as the defined benefit pension in 1956. Canadians were moving into the cities and many refugees from war seeking a better life began to arrive in large numbers. A sense existed during those years that nation building was on the agenda. Manufacturing was part of that nation building and so were investments in social programs such as healthcare for all and a rapid expansion of public education and the creation of a social safety net.

But the Canadian working class made a serious mistake during those years. Excited and somewhat seduced with the prospects of the social contract and a sense of nation building as the country became urbanised and expanded mass industrial production, the working class gave up its independent thinking and politics. Workers gave away and entrusted to others, mostly members of the middle strata allied with owners of capital, the role of being political representatives of the working class. Politically the trade union movement became an extra-Parliamentary force activated occasionally during a downturn in the business cycle or when Pearson or Trudeau went too far such as Wage and Price Controls in 1975.

This lack of independent working class thinking, politics and organization became our greatest enemy when owners of capital unilaterally declared the social contract dead and launched their anti-social offensive and dictate in the 1980s. Wave after wave of attacks have crashed down on us with impunity from Mulroney's free trade and GST, soon to become an even more onerous HST, to the Ontario Rae Days, the Harris cutbacks and privatizations, to Chretien and Harper turning the entire country over to the global monopolies and the U.S. war machine. Today, nation wrecking is the order of the day; worker concessions, destruction of social programs and public services such as Canada Post, attacks on our defined benefit pensions, increased individual taxation and corporate tax cuts are all considered solutions to the problems of the monopolies, solutions which objectively transfer more and more of the wealth produced by the working class to owners of capital. Canadian workers have been relegated to a position lower than machinery, as a hateful cost on the balance sheets of the rich and their monopolies.

This direct experience of the danger of giving up our independent working class thinking, politics and organization can become our greatest strength. A negative can be transformed consciously into a positive because we workers have brains. We are thinking human beings, members of a modern working class that has the numbers and vital position within the socialized economy to enforce our economic and political demands for a pro-social alternative, for manufacturing, social programs to defend the rights of all and control over the direction of the economy.

During the Stelco bankruptcy fraud from 2004 to 2006, several active and retired Local 1005 members raised a simple question. Why is it that Stelco steelworkers and others in manufacturing and services have no control over the economy yet they are the actual

producers and depend on the socialized economy for their well-being and security? They launched the slogans: Whose economy? Our economy! Who decides? We decide! Steel, Not Steal! and many others. Those slogans gave us confidence and a sense of purpose and dignity. We are the producers of social product and providers of services. Why is it that we do not have any control over our own economy? Why is it that a handful of owners of capital and executives of U.S. Steel can decide in Pittsburgh to shut down Stelco's two mills, throw thousands out of work and deny a region in another country hundreds of millions of dollars of social product? Why is it that someone in Berlin can decide to close the perfectly good Siemens turbine factory in Hamilton? Why is it owners of capital in St. Louis and Brussels can decide to close a perfectly good Lakeport brewery in Hamilton and destroy 143 livelihoods and millions of dollars in annual social product?

They can do these terrible things because workers have not yet organized a powerful enough Opposition that can say No! with authority, a Workers' Opposition that can say No! to nation wrecking with the authority of our numbers and crucial position within the socialized economy, with the authority of being political ourselves with tens of thousands of worker politicians both inside and outside the political institutions. Canadian workers with social consciousness, their own thinking and political program, and a firm grasp of what is necessary for nation building and to serve the general interests of society and with an equally firm grasp of what is destructive to nation building and the socialized economy will oppose any blocking of their right to participate in the economic and political affairs of the country to the same extent they are the actual producers of social product and providers of services.

It is the right and duty of workers to live in a society where governments are accountable to the public and what is public actually benefits the public. The issue of upholding public right by opposing making private interests so-called public, has become central to nation building today. To this end, everyone is invited to this conference on nation building to discuss the problems we face within our sector and concrete reality and share experiences on how we are tackling them.

Central to this battle for nation building and the development of a Workers' Opposition is the capacity to analyze events from a working class perspective. Every day the *Hamilton Spectator*, *Globe and Mail* and commentators on television tell us what to think and give us ready made analyses, if you can call them that. At 1005 we have made a concerted effort to stop the bad habit of just repeating what we read and hear in the mass media and the misconceptions of the past that have been driven into our heads. We have started a habit of thinking for ourselves and coming up with analyses of the present conditions and programs that serve us as workers and serve our community and nation building.

Can you imagine? Every day we read, hear and see in the mass media the plans, projects and aims of the owners of capital that attack us, that consider us little more than disposable slaves who cost too much, and yet we are supposed to just nod our head in docile agreement and say that wiser and more powerful men have spoken and we must agree and not oppose them. Constantly, we read, hear and see that workers must make concessions so that the monopolies both foreign and domestic can compete globally and expand their wealth and power. We never hear that the rich and their monopolies must make concessions to save us workers from ruin, to save our communities from ruin, to save public education, healthcare and our pensions from ruin, to save our socialised economy. No, we only hear how we must save the rich and their monopolies. At 1005 we simply turn those wiseacres off, discuss the

situation before our eyes from our own perspective, and prepare our own analysis and program of action. We have been meeting consistently every Thursday for over seven years for discussion, debate, analysis and the organising of actions, and we have not only become quite good at seeing the trees for the forest but we have achieved the creation of a calm atmosphere which I think is the most important of all. We have defeated the Chicken Little effect, the hysteria that the sky is falling so start running in all directions and accept whatever the monopolies and their political representatives throw at us because otherwise we are doomed. Some of us have even begun to write for our own *Information Bulletin*. Nothing that the owners of capital say or do can cause us to lose our bearings and stop defending the rights of all or stop organizing and campaigning for a pro-social alternative.

Let me discuss U.S. Steel for a minute. It shut down both Stelco mills for a time and Lake Erie Works for an entire year. For what? What problem did the owners of capital solve? Have they magically fixed the business cycle so the economy is guaranteed not to go into another collapse? Nothing of the sort; they believe their failed system will recover by destroying wealth and attacking workers and that is what they have done. They destroyed actual and potential wealth, social product that is sorely needed by our communities; they have put active and retired members of Local 1005 and 8782 through very trying times. Did they fix the Stelco pension plans so that the 10,000 pensioners and those soon to retire can in their final years have the security of mind that their standard of living will not be crushed? No. Instead, they forced a concession on steelworkers at Lake Erie Works demanding new hires accept a savings plan instead of a defined benefit pension plan and declared self-righteously that now U.S. Steel can better compete and expand its global empire. What has this wrecking and concession solved for the Canadian people and their steel industry? Nothing. It transfers a few more million dollars of steel product out of our pockets and community and down south to the U.S. owners of capital. Some solution indeed! The owners of U.S. Steel capital feel no shame for having broken their contracted and signed promise with Investment Canada to keep production and employment at an agreed level and not to attack our defined benefit pension plan. They cannot be trusted and we need all our active and retired members of Local 1005 to be united and determined to defend our rights and to participate actively with your executive during these negotiations for a collective agreement.

We don't need or want this grief and insecurity that the monopolies are forcing on us. Canadian workers could organize an economy that is more rational, more just, more consciously planned and productive, an economy that is self-reliant and not dependent on the global economy or subject to the periodic collapse, failure and chaos of the business cycle. Local 1005 suggested a nation building project for the steel industry when Stelco was in its bankruptcy fraud. This was before the latest economic crisis and many workers thought our plan should at least have been discussed broadly in the mass media and in the political institutions, as it would have saved us from U.S. Steel seizing Stelco and passing the burden of the economic crisis onto us but our plan was ignored. Instead of selling out Stelco to a foreign monopoly, we suggested to transform Stelco into a public enterprise as the base of a Canadian-owned and controlled steel industry that could spread across the country to serve nation building. We also proposed to institute public control over the steel wholesale market so that Canadian steel demand could be met first with Canadian production and that steel market prices would reflect their prices of production, which most often they do not causing problems. Our proposal was blocked from any wide discussion by the privileged elite who control the economy, mass media and political institutions. This caused us to question why the actual producers, who have a direct stake in the economy such as autoworkers, brewery

workers and others are deliberately blocked from solving problems. Why is it that a privileged few rich and their monopolies dominate the economy, politics and mass media and say they are solving problems when in reality they are wrecking manufacturing and attacking the working class and social programs. They are not solving our problems, our communities' problems, our nation's problems; they are solving their own problems of protecting and expanding their global empires and personal fortunes. That is a problem workers have to solve. How do we stop the rich and their monopolies from blocking us from solving the problems of nation building? That is a problem and challenge we have to discuss and resolve. It requires our own independent thinking, organization, politics and politicians. This is what we mean when we talk about a Workers' Opposition from coast to coast. Nothing is stopping us from taking up this challenge except reluctance that stems from being stuck in the old ways of not thinking for ourselves and not being political. But that is a simple matter to overcome. It just requires a first step. Many have taken that first step by joining with us in the May Day march and rally and at the conference on nation building. Workers have to show in practice their determination to transform their strength of numbers and vital position within the economy into economic and political power. We have the right to say No! to nation wrecking. We have the right to participate in nation building and to control the direction of the socialized economy. Let's get on with the task!

**Whose economy? Our economy!
Who decides? We decide!
Manufacturing Yes! Nation-Wrecking No!**