

The Council of Canadians in Windsor: A Worker's Response

Richard Harding

On January 11, 2005 the Council of Canadians held a forum in Windsor as part of its cross Canada initiative to discuss deeper integration with the United States. The Forum has gone under the titled *Crossing the Line: A Citizen's Inquiry on Canada-U.S. Relations*. Border issues were the central theme of the Windsor forum. It is no secret that Windsor is a major crossing point in the North American market and the Council was very interested in the impact this has had on workers in the city and surrounding areas.

The meeting was chaired by Maude Barlow who was accompanied by Howard Pawley, a former Manitoba premier (NDP), and Howard McCurdy, a former Windsor NDP MP. The early session saw presentations from Mary Ann Cuderman, of the Windsor West Community truck

watch whose focus has been the impact of truck traffic on the people of the area closest to the Ambassador Bridge. Bruce Campbell of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternative spoke about the big business driven agenda of a customs union, monetary union and a common North American market. The next two speakers presented reports that were quite disturbing about the new business agenda.

Hugh Benevides of the Canadian Environmental Law Association explained that in a meeting with members of the privy council he felt as if he was "speaking to aliens" on the issue of environmental regulation. While he believes the government has a public protection mandate to maintain regulatory regimes and enforce them, his impression was that this was not a focus of those in power today. Benevides' presentation was a cogent precursor to that of Michael Gilbertson, a retired scientist who worked with the International Joint Commission and author of the Gilbertson/Brophy report.

Gilbertson and Brophy discovered several disturbing trends in the Windsor area, as well as other communities in the Great Lakes region, including elevated levels of Cancer, heart abnormalities in children, excess hospitalizations, birth defects, and deaths. He linked this

to the high levels of pollutants in the air and water due to industry in the area. During his report Gilbertson explained that he "scared himself" working in Windsor and that despite his and Brophy's findings the government bureaucracies have been silent on the Great Lakes and that "environmental health has not been perceived as a necessity". NAFTA has done nothing to improve this situation as the spirit of the IJC, the mutual protection of shared bodies of water, has been ignored under the free trade regime.



This presentation led into the afternoon where citizens were given the opportunity to make their opinions known on the issue of the border and deeper integration with the US. Enver Villamazar of CPC-ML made an informative presentation on the SMART border plan which, among other things, spells out a plan to have American agents on the Canadian side of the border pre-clearing trucks in an 8km deep security zone.

Next up was yours truly. After listening to the previous speakers it was difficult to be composed. I explained that all the previously presented evidence convinced me that the time has come for workers in Windsor and throughout Canada to discuss the nature of the Canadian state. It was crucial, I explained, that we imagine a government that sees to our needs, as what currently holds sway certainly does not. Deeper integration with the US to a Canadian worker means constant insecurity, depressed wages, vicious anti-worker legislation, sickness and potential destitution. My evidence of this was not only what I heard during the day, but the practices of the state, especially at the provincial and federal levels, in the last decade or more of free trade. Under the auspices of 'harmonization' with the US Canadian workers have been subjected to attacks on

all the gains they have made the last one hundred years. I submitted that fear has been the prevailing feeling in the workplace. Fear of corporate pull-outs if we are too aggressive in our demands or if we simply fight for what we have. So called free trade has threatened us more than it has offered.

I lamented the fact that none of Windsor's labour leaders were in attendance and that the labour movement in general has been unable (and unwilling) to fight the issue of integration head on. The words of Ken Georgetti on North American integration in a recent speech to the CLC ("an egg is not easily unscrambled") were symptomatic of the malaise of Canadian labour regarding the issue. The statement of CAW president Buzz Hargrove regarding the environment in Windsor ("when I talk to workers their main priority is jobs, not the environment") during an alternative fuels vehicle conference flew in the face of the brutal reality Gilbertson and Brophy presented to Windsor. Economics alone has been the prevailing ideology of the Canadian labour movement, and workers often bear the terrible cost of this policy.

I have neglected the questions and opinions of the commissioners, who were all insightful and probing. McCurdy challenged Villamazar and I to outline what would happen to Windsor and Canada if we were to reject US demands regarding the border and Canadian policies in the economic and political realms. Howard Pawley solicited our

opinions on the state of Canadian universities, especially in regard to prevailing ideology. Discussion on these questions and others took place among the commissioners and everyone in attendance. The discussion displayed both the unity and the divisions among activists, on both sides of the border, as there were many Americans in attendance, on the issue of North American integration.

The event rapped up in the evening at the Capital Theatre where the commissioners summed up the day's discussions. Bruce Campbell made a presentation outlining what the corporate driven deep integration agenda entails and Barlow made an impassioned plea for those of us against it to keep fighting. There was no shortage of people willing to raise questions. If time permitted, the discussion would have went well into the early morning hours.

I could not help but be impressed by the Council's initiative and its attempt to reach out and listen to people, especially working people. The Council's position on North American integration and its strategy to combat it through dialogue with Canadians has been an important exercise in popular education. The Council of Canadians will prove to be a valuable ally in the fight for popular sovereignty in Canada and a potent obstacle to those who seek to subordinate all of our lives to the private accumulation of profit and power. **R**

Richard Harding is active in CAW in the Windsor area.



Confidential Task Force Document Reveals Business Agenda for Canada

A confidential document from the Task Force on the Future of North America confirms the worst fears of opponents of free trade and NAFTA: Canada's business elite are planning to push the country toward deeper integration with the United States, including abandoning protections for culture and fresh water.

The task force is a joint project of the Council of Foreign Relations (CFR) in the U.S., the Mexican Council of Foreign Relations (MCFR), and the Canadian Council of Chief Executives (CCCE). It is co-chaired by former Deputy Prime Minister John Manley and Tom d'Aquino, Chief Executive of the CCCE. The document, reported in today's Toronto Star, is a summary of the task force's first meeting, which took place in Toronto in October 2004. The task force has also met in New York and Monterrey, and is expected to release its recommendations in April 2005.

The Council of Canadians has just wrapped up cross-Canada hearings on Canada-U.S. relations. A final report from the hearings will be available in March 2005.

The Polaris Institute also held a major meeting of

civil society groups in Ottawa in mid-February, 2005, under the title 'Canadian Security Check!'. It is their view that the time has come for civil society groups in Canada — labour unions, environmental groups, public interest organizations, faith-justice networks, womens' associations, human rights groups, anti-poverty and peace organizations — to assemble for the purpose of developing a common analysis and response to the new political agenda that the task force is sponsoring. A new campaign might be expected to emerge from these quarters as well.

The confidential document is available on the Council of Canadians' web site at <http://www.canadians.org>.