

In some respects, Canadian trade unionism has changed almost out of all recognition since the first Canadian Labor Congress was founded almost three-quarters of a century ago. In others, it has changed very little. Some proposals which figured prominently in the early years have completely disappeared, sometimes because they have been carried into law, and sometimes because circumstances have made them obsolete or the whole climate of opinion has changed. Other early demands still figure in the present Canadian Labour Congress' Platform of Principles.

Of the early proposals that have completely disappeared, perhaps the most conspicuous is temperance. The Congress of 1883 unanimously passed a resolution of "heartly approval" for "any practical legislation tending to reduce the consumption of intoxicating liquor". In 1886, this became "any practical effort". The 1888 convention reaffirmed this. The 1886 convention actually received a deputation from the Dominion Alliance and empowered the Congress Executive to co-operate with the Alliance. The 1889 and 1890 conventions called upon all labour organizations to use their influence to promote and encourage temperance. The 1890 convention defeated a resolution for total prohibition by only 30 votes to 23. The convention of 1898 tabled a motion for a plebiscite on prohibition.

Quite as surprisingly, until 1902, the Trades and Labor Congress consistently demanded compulsory arbitration of labour disputes, and passed several resolutions in favour of incorporation of unions, both now anathema to Labour. Henry George's Single Tax on land values was also a hardy annual till 1899, and a diluted form of it survived in the Platform of Principles at least as late as 1912. The initiative and referendum made their appearance as early as 1892, and were still in the Platform in 1913. In 1887, the Congress voted to abolish Lieutenant-Governorships and make the Governor General elective. The latter proposal was passed again in 1890, by 39 to 14. The convention of 1893 wanted to abolish the office of High Commissioner in London. Those of 1892 and 1893 wanted to have a popular vote on "maintenance of our present colonial status; Imperial Federation; Canadian Independence; Political Union with the United States". The conventions of 1886-1888 wanted to have the Government issue all money; that of 1893 wanted it to "demonetize both gold and silver". The convention of 1891 wanted to have the products of anti-union employers deprived of tariff protection; that of 1893 "pronounced in favor of free trade"; that of 1902 condemned any increase in the tariff; those of 1903 and 1905 condemned Mr. Chamberlain's protective tariff proposals for Britain. The conventions of 1907, 1908 and 1909 bluntly declared "that as the capitalists of the world create war, they should do their own fighting", and that of 1909 empowered the Executive to "take the lead in calling a convention of all peace-loving citizens in Canada" to protest against increases in military expenditures. The 1911 convention endorsed a general strike against war. The conventions of 1888-1890 and 1900 condemned manual training in the schools. The conventions of 1886-1889 wanted governments to stop making grants to universities and colleges and to transfer the money to the schools. The convention of 1909 "offered up a sincere prayer that the light of common sense may yet reach the Canadian Manufacturers' Association".

The early demands for one day of rest in seven, "anti-truck" laws, provincial and Dominion bureaus of labour statistics, a Labour Department, a separate Minister of Labour, Employer's Liability Acts, manhood suffrage, and woman suffrage (1891), have all, in one form or another, been won. The nine-hour day has become the six-hour day, and the early and violently restrictive resolutions on immigration (first anti-Chinese, then anti-Japanese also, then anti-Indian as well, and always anti-pauper) have become "planned immigration for full employment", with a representative National Advisory Committee to keep the Act, regulations and policy under constant review and to suggest changes. Early demands which still figure in the Canadian Labour Congress Platform include the abolition of the Senate, public ownership of banks and public utilities, a living minimum wage, free compulsory education and support for co-operatives.