

Labor Council nominated two provincial candidates and came close to electing one, and the Hamilton Knights of Labor nominated a candidate who made a respectable showing. In 1886, there were provincial Labour candidates in Toronto, Hamilton, London and Montreal. In 1887, Toronto had a Labour candidate for the Dominion House of Commons and, in 1888, the Montreal Central Labor Council and the Knights of Labor actually elected their candidate in a Dominion by-election in Montreal East. Ottawa had a Labour candidate in the Dominion General Election of 1891.

For the most part, however, until 1906 the unions seem to have relied on meetings of the TLC or its provincial committees with Dominion and provincial Ministers, at which Labour presented its legislative proposals; and from the early 1890s, these meetings have been standard practice. However, by 1899, the Ontario Executive had decided that this was useless and that "the only way to get from the Government what is our right is to elect men in sympathy with the labor cause" In the same year, the Winnipeg Trades and Labor Council and the Winnipeg Labor Party nominated A. W. Puttee for the House of Commons; and the Congress, presided over by Ralph Smith, M.L.A. for Nanaimo, B.C., decided to ask its member organizations whether they favoured an independent Labour party and would back its candidates. The vote was 1,424 in favour to 167 against, with only three organizations out of 44 voting "no" The 1900 convention decided this was enough to justify the Congress in "taking such steps as it deemed advisable to further the progress of such action" It also asked the Nanaimo miners to nominate President Smith for the House of Commons. They did and both Smith and Puttee were elected, with another Labour candidate in Manitoba barely defeated. In 1903 a new Congress President, John Flett, was declaring that the meetings with the Dominion Government were useless and that Canadian Labour should follow the British example and elect Labour men to Parliament. In 1904 he reiterated this and for three years the annual interview was dropped and a parliamentary counsel was substituted to look after Congress interests full-time during the session. In 1903, 1904 and 1905 the conventions passed resolutions favouring independent Labour candidates wherever possible. In 1906, Alphonse Verville, President of the Congress, was elected to the House of Commons for Maisonneuve (Montreal) and declared he hoped for "at least a dozen" Labour members in the next Parliament. The convention responded by adopting what became the political action policy of the TLC for the remainder of its life. The Congress was to endorse sending Labour representatives to Parliament and the Legislatures; its provincial Executives were to summon provincial conventions of trade unionists and sympathizers to set up "the necessary associations"; and the Congress was then to step out of the picture, having "recommended" its own Platform of Principles as the platform for "this independent effort" The result of this was the foundation of a Canadian Labour Party in Ontario, Quebec, Manitoba, British Columbia and Nova Scotia. Though launched with considerable fanfare, its only substantial success was in Ontario in 1919, when eleven Labour candidates were elected and two Labour Ministers entered the Farmer-Labour coalition. A few surviving sections entered the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) in 1932 and 1933, along with the Independent Labour Party of Manitoba, which had elected two members to the House of Commons.

The CCL explicitly endorsed the CCF in 1943 and continued to do so throughout the remainder of its existence. It set up political action committees to implement this policy. Its efforts certainly helped the CCF to win power in Saskatchewan in 1944 and to retain it for 20 years; to maintain its position as the official Opposition in British Columbia for most of the past thirty years; to become briefly, although for the second time, the official Opposition in Ontario from 1948 to 1951; to win a few seats in the Nova Scotia Legislature; and to carry some industrial ridings in the House of Commons in the elections of 1945, 1949, 1953 and 1957. But on the whole the results were not what the Congress had hoped.

The CLC at its first convention adopted a compromise policy on political action, leaving its provincial Federations, its local Councils and, of course, its autonomous affiliated unions free to follow whatever line they saw fit and authorizing its Political Education Committee, under the guidance of the Executive Council, to initiate discussions