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Merger creates strong new union

Almost 200 Canadian delegates travelled to Chicago in early July to attend the founding convention of a dynamic new labour union: UNITE HERE. Representatives of the former unions UNITE and HERE came from as far away as British Columbia and Quebec, where they joined 1,800 union delegates from across the United States.

The two unions held separate conventions to approve the merger, then met together for two more days in order to plan their future. They pledged to combine their organizations to form a bigger, stronger union that is committed to fighting for the right to organize and for justice in the workplace.

The combined union, known as UNITE HERE, will number 440,000 members in the apparel, hotel, laundry, distribution, gaming, manufacturing, social services, airport and other industries. In Canada, 50,000 members belong to the new union, now called UNITE HERE Canada, with concentrations of members in Ontario, Quebec and British Columbia, in addition to Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

UNITE HERE Canada has two directors: Alexandra Dagg of UNITE and Nick Worhaug of HERE. In addition, Dagg will serve as an Executive Vice-President on the board of the international union. The international leaders of UNITE HERE are Presidents Bruce Raynor of UNITE and John Wilhelm of HERE.

Two unions will join forces to organize

The two new leaders of UNITE HERE Canada are anxious to get on with the job of merging their two organizations to create a solid new organizing union.

Alexandra Dagg says, "This merger is all about giving us more resources and combining our strength to continue expansion," especially by new organizing in low-wage industries.

"Both of our unions were born to fight 19th century working conditions, and we see the merger as helping us fight for underpaid workers in the 21st century," says Nick Worhaug. "Here in Canada it's going to make a huge difference to us. We'll have access to more resources, more organizers, and we'll have more time to focus on growth in our key sectors."

New website for UNITE HERE Canada

No sooner had UNITE and HERE merged their organizations in July than two new web sites quickly appeared, one for the Canadian union and one for the international:

- **www.unitehere.ca** is the new site for UNITE HERE Canada. It offers basic information about the merger, convention photos, plus electronic versions of the new union logo and photos of the leaders. As the new union gets rolling, it will provide up-to-minute information on campaigns and organizing drives.
- **www.unitehere.org** is the new site for UNITE HERE International. It contains a wealth of background information about the union and its campaigns, plus a handy tool for buying union-made products and finding unionized hotels.



1 Alex Dagg and 2 Nick Worhaug, UNITE HERE Canada Directors
3 Quebec delegates celebrate at merger convention 4 Canadian Labour Congress President Ken Georgetti 5 HERE delegates at the demonstration 6 HERE delegate plays a drum in celebration of the merger 7 B.C. HERE delegates wave the Canadian flag 8 International Presidents John Wilhelm (left) and Bruce Raynor (right) sign the merger agreement creating UNITE HERE

'We've been civil way too long'

Bill Pearson, president of the 10,000-member HERE Local 40 in B.C., came away "energized" by the Chicago merger convention. "A big part of the experience was being exposed to the energy of the UNITE people," he says. "It was so empowering for our 15 delegates, and they're going to take that back to their workplaces."

How will the merger make a difference in B.C.? "We've been civil for way too long," says Pearson. "UNITE HERE will cure us of that." In concrete terms, he expects the merger to strengthen the union's hand in negotiating with multinational employers like Compass food services. "The merger will allow us to coordinate bargaining with Compass across the continent, and we'll be looking for master agreements," he says.

Pearson concludes: "I came away thinking the merger was the best thing we could have done."

We let them know UNITE HERE has arrived

Two busloads of delegates from the UNITE Ontario Council and HERE Local 75 travelled together to the historic UNITE HERE merger convention in Chicago.

The UNITE members voted to merge on July 8, then celebrated the event by marching over to the Sheraton Hotel to join the HERE delegates. Although the march had been deemed "illegal" by the Chicago Police Department, it went ahead anyway.

The route was eventually halted by police buses blocking the road, the tactical squad, police dogs, and police on horseback. But we let the people of Chicago, as well as the rest of America and Canada, know that UNITE HERE had arrived!

The Quebec presence in Chicago

Over 35 Quebec delegates from the UNITE Montreal and Quebec Joint Boards travelled together to attend the UNITE HERE founding convention. All members were proud to be part of such an event that recognized Quebec's importance to our union.

Quebec delegates made sure that the entire delegation was aware of their presence when René Roy, secretary general of the Quebec Federation of Labour, spoke. With blue balloons and flags in hand, all delegates showed their pride and solidarity as they made enough noise to fill the convention hall!

Luc Larose and Pierre Joseph Ogaus spoke in favour of the merger with HERE, as they recognized that it is only in joining our forces that our union will be strong enough to fight to improve the lives of our members. All delegates – after three long days of listening to the convention through simultaneous translation – left Chicago feeling inspired that the merger will benefit our whole membership.

– Lina Aristeo

A new way of looking at organizing

UNITE delegates from Manitoba were very excited to attend and participate in the merger convention. For us, the merger with HERE was a natural fit. The comments made by a number of American labour leaders about developing a new way of looking at organizing and growing the worker's movement struck home with us.

When we arrived back in Winnipeg we immediately got back to work. In the spirit of the merger, we set about planning our up-and-coming organizing campaigns.

– Joy Santos, UNITE HERE Manitoba



Mariza Reyes (right) and Marites Africa (left), two members from a recently organized laundry in Ontario, addressed the convention

UNITE HERE Canada will lead new union

The first time I met our brothers and sisters in UNITE was in September 2003, when thousands of workers came from all over New England to support striking HERE and SEIU workers at Yale University in Connecticut. On July 10, I was so proud to stand in the streets with UNITE members once again – this time, in Chicago, and with my own red shirt on.

One moment of the merger convention stands out in particular. On our first day as UNITE HERE, President Raynor turned to the Canadian members with a challenge: "Will UNITE HERE Canada organize? Will there be an even greater proportion of Canadian delegates at the next convention?"

Everyone rose to their feet and answered with a resounding "Yes!" One brother jumped up on the table and waved a Canadian flag. The response was clear: UNITE HERE Canada is prepared to take leadership in our fledgling union.

– J.J. Fueser

My favourite convention moment

■ "I have never been in a demonstration like the one we were in on Thursday, when we joined with HERE. As a Canadian, I was a bit concerned as to how the police would treat us. However, on Saturday when we took to the streets again to show support towards our brothers and sisters at the Congress Plaza Hotel it all seemed like a piece of cake!"

– Steve Murray, UNITE Local 717T

■ "This is the first union convention I have ever attended, so everything was new to me. The best thing that happened was when our two unions met on the streets on Thursday. Two great and separate unions met and physically merged into one. I felt like I was part of a bigger family."

– Randy Volzke, HERE Local 75

■ "I met this sister from Mississippi on Saturday. She was telling me about how difficult it was to organize in the right-to-work states in the American deep south. I was quite moved by her dedication to the union movement. This convention has really charged me up. I want to do some volunteer organizing."

– Shannon Thomas, UNITE Local 222

■ "I have been a member of UNITE for 38 years and an executive board member of the Ontario Council for 20 years. I have attended many meetings and conventions but I have never seen anything quite like this merger convention. The atmosphere was electric. Saturday's speakers from Buzz Hargrove of the CAW to Andy Stern of the SEIU had the place a hoppin'. I take nothing for granted, but with a membership of 440,000 we're on the move."

– James Deane, Local 210C,
UNITE Ontario Council President