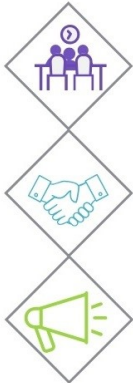




IN THE COMMUNITY

News and Views For NASA Members



AFL Affiliation— Why We’re Stronger Together

Brendan Van Alstine, NASA Communications Administrator

In 1912 the United Mineworkers of America (UMWA) District 18 invited Alberta's trade unions and the recently formed United Farmers of Alberta (UFA) to send delegates to a founding convention for a provincial labour organization. The result? In July 1912 the Alberta Federation of Labour came into being. According to the story in the Lethbridge Herald, the 34 delegates at that convention resolved to support each other, because they knew that they could rely on no one else. While the UFA did not join the AFL, the unity they forged at the convention helped the UFA to win the 1921 provincial election, after which it passed some of the most progressive labour legislation in Alberta's history.

“The AFL makes sure that labour has a voice in the broader social issues that affect unions, their members, and their families, and helps to provide a base of support, networks and connections to mobilize on issues of common interest.”

The Alberta Federation of Labour is now the largest and most influential labour affiliate organization in the province. The AFL makes sure that labour has a voice in the broader social issues that affect unions, their members, and their families, and helps to provide a base of support, networks, and connections to mobilize on issues of common interest. From the beginning, labour centrals like the AFL have brought union leaders and activists together to debate policies and take collective action, transforming often disparate groups of workers seeking specific gains into a labour movement capable of fighting for the welfare of all.

So what exactly does the AFL do? And what are the benefits to affiliation? At its most basic level the AFL is a common forum where members of the different unions and labour organizations that make up the labour movement can come together, meet, and discuss the current issues affecting them, as well as share their ideas, plans, and strategies. Affiliation gives NASA a seat at the table with representatives of other unions in the province, and ensures that NASA's priorities and issues are reflected in the priorities that the labour movement works on.

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One example was the missed opportunity to move non-academic post-secondary staff from the Public Service Employee Relations Act (PSERA) to the Alberta Labour Code. In 2017 the Provincial Government, with input from the AFL, amended the Labour Code, and also moved Academics, Graduate Students and Postdoctoral Fellows from the Post-Secondary Learning Act (PSLA) to that legislation. Unfortunately, because NASA did not have a seat at the table, and because we are governed by the PSERA rather than the PSLA, we were overlooked in those discussions. Because of this we continue to be governed by the PSERA, and are unable to take advantage of the new and improved provisions of the Labour Code. But that doesn’t mean it’s too late to be heard and be a positive voice for change – the AFL is still working on issues that matter to us and our members, including pensions, health and benefits, and labour laws. If we choose to affiliate we still have a chance to make sure our priorities are reflected in that work.

Affiliation would also allow us to exchange information, skills, experiences, research, and materials with other member organizations, and would provide us with new opportunities for learning, support and collaboration. NASA would also gain access to new training activities for members and more support for bargaining, organizing and during potential disputes. Perhaps most importantly though, the AFL provides its affiliates opportunities to find common ground on issues and to work toward mutual solutions. Because affiliating means a seat at the table with a diverse group of unions and labour organizations from across the province, it would not only allow us to make new allies with whom we can work on issues of mutual concern, but also provide us a stronger voice when advocating our position – there is strength in numbers. The AFL is made up of 29 unions representing 175,000 members across the province. Affiliation would amplify our efforts and provide us with a stronger voice when lobbying and advocating on issues that affect our members.

The Alberta Federation of Labour has also been a leader in advocating for worker health and safety. They established the Workers’ Health Centre, which aims to raise public awareness about workplace health and safety issues, promotes health and safety in the workplace, and provides workers, students, and the broader community with education and information to help them solve or prevent workplace health and safety problems. As part of Canadian Labour Congress, the AFL also helped to establish the National Day of Mourning, which has since spread to over 100 different countries. The Day of Mourning honours those who have been injured or lost their lives due to workplace tragedies, and also seeks to raise awareness and prevent further injuries through improved workplace health and safety.

What about the cost though? It was just last year that NASA revised our dues structure, and we know that members have no appetite to pay more. When the new dues structure came into being, the cost of AFL affiliation was factored in. The cost to affiliate is \$1.59 per full-time equivalent (FTE) dues-payer per month, with the total amount varying based on the number of FTE dues-payers each month (for example in April 2018 NASA had 5461 FTE dues-payers). Affiliating will not mean any new fees or costs for our members and will not result in higher dues; joining the AFL means more resources and support, but not more money out of your pocket.

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What does all this mean for NASA’s autonomy though? Are we still our own union? If the AFL decides to work on a particular campaign, does that mean NASA is obliged to? Affiliating is not the same as joining another, larger union. While affiliation means a seat at the table and the opportunity to collaborate with others in the labour movement, NASA will stay totally autonomous, and the decisions about what campaigns we support and which to sit out are completely up to us. Affiliation is also always voluntary, and the choice to stay or leave is up to the membership to decide; if the membership decides that AFL affiliation is not working for NASA, all it takes is another motion and vote to end our affiliation.

How The ‘House of Labour’ is Built

Scott Harris, NASA Political Action and Member Education Chair

For people who aren’t familiar with it, the alphabet soup of acronyms used in the labour movement and trying to keep straight how all the pieces fit together can be a daunting task. As NASA members decide whether or not to support affiliating to the Alberta Federation of Labour (AFL), here’s a short primer on the labour movement, and how unions, locals, and central labour bodies fit together.

At the centre of it all are the individual unions that workers form to bargain collectively and represent their collective interests. They can be unions like NASA, which represent specific workers who work for a specific employer (in our case, the University of Alberta), or they can be provincial or national unions made up of many union locals who bargain with one or a number of different employers.

For example, United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 401 represents Alberta workers at Safeway, Superstore, the Shaw Conference Centre, the Palace Casino, and many more. Local 401 is likewise part of the national UFCW union, which has locals across the country. In the public sector, the national Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) has members in locals across the country, including Local 30, which represents City of Edmonton outdoor workers. Some larger unions also have provincial bodies that locals can be involved in, for example CUPE Alberta, which brings together CUPE locals in the province. Each of these larger unions is structured somewhat differently, but a portion of member union dues goes to the local and to the national body to enable it to work on issues of importance to all the locals.

“Just like workers choose to come together in unions, unions have found that it’s often better to come together in larger coalitions to work on issues of mutual importance and to support one another.”

Just as workers choose to come together in unions, unions have found that it’s often better to come together in larger coalitions to work on issues of mutual importance and to support one another. This is where the idea of central labour bodies comes in. When a union chooses to join, or affiliate to a central labour body, it’s often referred to as joining “the House of Labour.”

In Canada, there are three levels of central labour bodies that unions can decide to affiliate to. At the national level, national unions (like UFCW or CUPE) affiliate to the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), which focuses on issues at the national level, such as federal labour law and Parliament. In each province there are federations that focus on provincial issues of labour law, employment standards, and other issues within provincial jurisdiction. In NASA’s case, the provincial body we are considering affiliating to is the Alberta Federation of Labour (AFL). There are likewise local or regional organizations that focus primarily on municipal issues, like the Edmonton and District Labour Council (EDLC).

Some larger unions are affiliated at all three levels. For example, members of CUPE Local 41, which represents workers at Covenant Health in Edmonton, are involved locally with the EDLC, CUPE Alberta has representation on the executive committee of the AFL, and the national CUPE president represents CUPE’s interests on the CLC executive council. A small portion of member dues goes to each central labour body, and in return, union members at all three levels are able to attend conventions, where the policy and leadership of each central labour body is determined, take part in education and training, and participate in campaigns.

In the case of NASA, because our members are most impacted by decisions and legislation at the provincial level, we are only looking at affiliation to the Alberta Federation of Labour (AFL). Most of what NASA does won’t change: we’ll still negotiate our collective agreements, still elect our executive and committee members, and still make all the decisions about how and when we want to participate in the broader labour movement. But affiliation would mean a seat at the AFL table—two seats, actually—the opportunity to set the direction of the labour movement in Alberta at conventions, access to training and educational opportunities offered by the AFL, and research and dispute support from the AFL and other affiliates.

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