

Nation building, not nation wrecking

By Maria Minna, MP

As Labour critic for the Official Opposition in Ottawa, I have been attending many townhall meetings and roundtables and have heard directly from workers, unions, and employers their visions on how we move forward through the restructuring of the global economy and the new environment in which Canada must now compete.

One such meeting was held in Hamilton, Ontario – arguably one of the hardest hit regions of Canada in recent years. The conference was organized by United Steel Workers of America Local 1005 and an entire day was spent on the theme: “Nation Building – Not Nation Wrecking”. I participated in the full day of discussions and was the only Member of Parliament in attendance.

The discussion centred on what is happening to Canada’s industrial base – from the loss of large Canadian-owned natural resources companies like Inco and Stelco, through foreign takeovers to the export of our raw materials and the loss of highly-skilled Canadian jobs and pensions.

Our manufacturing base has been hollowed out and is only a mere shell of what it once was. The industrial heartland is barren. Many of these industries have simply gone under, moved south, or been bought out by foreign owners.



As an example, Stelco in Hamilton was sold to a US company. After signing an agreement that the company would not close down Canadian operations, it did just that. This not only puts Canadians out of work, but also puts the pensions of 9,000 retirees at risk.

Inco was sold to Brazilian company Vale and is now in a ten-month long strike as the company attempts to lower wages, benefits and eliminate the defined benefit pension plan. All of this is being done while the price of metals remains high. The company is trying to pressure workers down to the lowest common denominator.

The picture painted by the participants at the conference in Hamilton was quite disturbing. The rush to build oil pipelines to bring more and more crude oil to the US and China (via Vancouver), where they are now building new refineries, will deprive

Canadians of jobs. This oil is not currently refined in Canada. If the oil was to be refined here, there is a fee that companies have to pay which, at present, they can avoid by simply shipping raw crude. Since the crude is refined in the US, the US gets these highly-skilled jobs, while all Canada gets is the pollution from the extraction of the oil sands.

It was pointed out that some of our refineries will shut down as more crude is diverted to the US with new pipelines heading straight south of the border. The more crude we ship to the US, the less control we have on our own supplies. Under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in an oil crisis the US would be entitled to receive Canadian crude oil while Ontario and Quebec may have to import oil from another country. This simply makes no sense.

Why are we funneling our valuable raw natural resources, including lumber and minerals out of the country instead of refining those resources here in Canada and creating jobs?

We already have allowed too many of our natural resource companies to fall under foreign ownership with no benefit to Canadians. We need to take stock and begin to harness our resources to employ Canadians. We need to do more research on energy policy, including a world leading environmental policy that will address climate change and create jobs for hundreds of thousands of Canadians. 66,000 green jobs have already been lost to the US.

This is all part of a broader industrial strategy which I believe is so desperately needed in Canada. The Conservative government is doing nothing to train and upgrade our labour force. They are allowing our natural resources to be bought up by foreign companies, and they are causing Canada to lose out on the new green jobs being created in other countries around the world today. Green jobs are not just the jobs of tomorrow, but the jobs of today.

The federal government has a positive role to play in re-training our labour force and helping our companies invest to create new jobs. That is why the Liberal Party of Canada proposes a cash advance on the Accelerated Capital Cost Allowance (ACCA) to help manufacturers purchase new equipment as well as introduce temporary financial incentives to hire young Canadians to reduce the highest level of youth unemployment in a generation.

The Liberal Party also believes that life-long learning and continued skills development through our working lives is critical to remaining competitive. We can do this through the establishment of an affordable national early learning and child care program, reward businesses that invest in training for their employees, reverse the Conservative government's cuts to literacy programs, help families save for post-secondary education, and many more.

The solutions to these issues facing Canada are readily available. All Canada needs is the political will and leadership to embark on this bold vision for Canada and make us the world leader in new, green technologies with the most highly-skilled labour force in the world.