

**Speech by**

**Michelle Laurie,**

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to the**

**Labour Appreciation Dinner,  
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So, we are here to celebrate Labour – which sounds quite broad - What is it that sets us apart, makes us “labour” with a big L? I mean everyone works at something, from the CEO of Nortel (yes, he did do something), to the guy at the corner of Hastings and Abbot seeking change to get him through another day on the street. Interesting or vital to those individuals as their endeavours may be, it isn’t what we come together to celebrate.

I think it is fair to say that most of us in the room understand that we are talking about our collective voice, about organized labour, about union folk. Now, like many of you, I’ve been to a couple of conventions in the last few weeks, listening to labour folk and community folk talk (a lot) and one central theme that keeps arising is our need to engage new and younger people in our endeavours.

We frequently boast that Labour understands how to organize, how to get people together to accomplish things. Indeed when we look at organized labour’s history, we can identify specific achievements that resulted from that mobilization – the weekend, the 8 hour day, paid vacations, health and safety regulations, training requirements and

on and on – all critical milestones, but already accomplished, and when we talk to our younger generations of members and those we hope will become members about these things, I am pretty sure it sounds like the speech about how we had to walk to school uphill both ways, in the snow, with no shoes...maybe true, maybe not, likely glorified just a tetch, but not particularly relevant to today's situation. The people we are trying to engage generally have shoes, get driven to school, have weekends, vacations, paid medical –so what is labour's relevance to them?

I recently read a quote that hit home to me –

*“If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people together to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.”*

*Antoine de Saint-Exupery  
(French pilot, writer and author of  
'The Little Prince')*

It struck a chord because it describes both what I see as the beauty and strength of our collective possibilities, as well as the barriers we create when we focus on the way forward instead of the ultimate vision of what work, community and society should look like.

The “endless immensity of the sea” that Saint-Exupery describes is for us a just and secure society, where our labour is rewarded with an equal share of the wealth, where our children are nurtured, where our elders are valued, and where every member

of our community is accepted, respected, and able to contribute. Where there is no homelessness or poverty or war.

As for the “ships” Saint-Exupery describes, we build them in our own communities, both geographic and workplace-based. First collective agreements are examples of those “ships”, and over time we add amenities, build extra decks, fancy up the staterooms – which is to say we negotiate increases in pay and benefits; – although in today’s economic and political climate, it often feels as though we are desperately trying to steer those ships we have so labouriously built to safe havens while we patch up torpedo damage.

I have been very privileged to have served the labour movement and the United Way, and one of the ships we built together is the Union Counselling program - a vehicle to connect our members with each other and with their communities, strengthening both in the process. In our communities we build social service agencies, centres for support to keep the members of the community attached, engaged and thriving.

To build our ships, we do come together to collect wood – to negotiate fair working conditions, to build, fund and operate social structures – health care, education, childcare, senior support, labour codes etc. These are huge tasks, complicated and full of hazards – who pays, who benefits, who operates, who regulates – that entangle us and shift our focus away from the sea, away from the whole community picture.

And when we try to engage new converts, too often we speak only about the mechanics – join me to fight for universal childcare, a living wage, public power - sign

this petition, make a donation, hold this sign in our rally – support our passion because it is good.

We can be leaders this way, we can say follow me and do this, but the more we say that, the more we ask others to follow, the more they will say in times of confusion –

“you lead me out of it, I followed you in. I am very busy, I have this bundle of wood that you told me to collect, I did the task you assigned and yet the ship isn’t built – I signed your petition, I donated to your agency, and I still can’t get childcare and my bills are rising and my wages aren’t and BC still has the highest child poverty rate in Canada, and global warming is going to kill us all. You fix this, you provide the solution. I want a hero. I don’t see the ocean”.

So, back to my original question – what is it that sets us - big L labour apart? We say that what we desire for ourselves, we wish for all – we know that there is a sea, we believe that a just society is possible. Knowing is the start - We need to talk again about that sea, we need to describe it, to long for it, to share our vision broadly of a just society, to paint the picture of what it looks like so that it becomes the ideal for everyone we engage. Then we don’t need anyone to follow us, they will be building ships right beside us, with a picture of the sea, a vision of the possibilities that are the future as their guide.

Evenings like this are an opportunity to celebrate those who do see the big picture, and have been building ships all their lives, knowing that one day we, the collective we, will experience the immensity of the sea.

Long for it, reach for it, describe it, and we will all come together to build the ships that will take us there.

Thank you.