

## ***Why is advocacy or social action important?***

***Prepared for Thunder Bay – Panel on Social Action***

***Cathy Crowe, June 2, 2006***

In a healthy community, social action promotes the values of social justice and human rights.

Individual and systemic advocacy are the tools and the means for social action – that is activism. Activists, as individuals and as part of organized movements, have always led social change.

The idea that it is wrong to discriminate against someone based on the colour of their skin is now common sense, but it was a fight that took well over 300 years and that fight continues. The idea that it is wrong to discriminate against women is also common sense, but that fight took well over 100 years and that fight continues. The idea that it is wrong to discriminate against someone based on their poverty or their circumstance is no less an equally common sense idea, but recent history would suggest that we could be losing that fight.

### ***Why is advocacy often treated with suspicion and mistrust?***

Advocacy has become a dirty word and activism an even dirtier one. For the powers that be, any kind of advocacy can be dangerous. Social change is always contrary to status quo interests.

This is exemplified by the example of Karen Silkwood, who discovered health hazards at one of Kerr-McGee's nuclear materials plants. When management tried to conceal the facts, she was forced to go outside the plant to union and government officials for help. She later died under highly suspicious circumstances.

The nurses who spoke out about the high number of pediatric cardiac deaths at a Winnipeg hospital were also brave whistleblowers. There are now numerous

examples of whistle blowing clauses in collective agreements for health care practitioners.

If we are going to talk about social action, I think it's important that we acknowledge that we are recovering from a period that damaged a lot of people. I believe it was Ursula Franklin that referred to the period as one where an occupying army waged war on the majority of the population. She was referring to the Harris years, but I would add 'the Eves years', 'the Lastman years' and I could name a few too many more, but I will leave that to your own sensibilities.

Recent political history, which for me starts in 1993 with the end of our national housing program, has done a lot to stifle critical thinking, critical actions, truth telling, and constituent advocacy – all of which I'm sure Jane Jacobs would say are essential to the life and the health of a community. The regimes of our recent past have reshaped and in many cases cancelled our social programs, and reinforced the notion that it was okay to leave people homeless, hungry and in poverty.

It has been, and to some extent it continues to be, a period of time when many front-line workers are silenced and activists targeted, by politicians, the media and the police.

Politicians, the media and the police often label social action, which includes both activists and advocacy, as 'special interests'. But I don't see anything special about needing to - or at the very least wanting to and trying to, feed the hungry and house the homeless. Social action, at its root, is about fighting for and ensuring the most basic of human rights for **all** people. This is why we are here today.

### ***Recovering from an occupying army***

We, as activists, have been under attack. Activism is often penalized or prohibited, when instead I suggest to you that it should be rewarded. We should be holding our elected officials accountable for the damage to human life that their policies or lack of policies are causing.

Social Action is about promoting the values of social justice and human rights. We should be proud of it. We should be funding it. We should participate in it and we should do everything we can to protect it and make sure those values survive.

### ***Moving forward on social action....***

There are sympathetic politicians, bureaucrats and decision makers, but they work in a milieu that has shifted towards privatization, maximum profit, costs versus care, and they are heavily influenced by polls. We are in a new federal regime that is receiving the message that we like what they are doing and we have to change that.

We have to start asking basic questions, like do we want housing or war. My friend and a brilliant strategist Beric German has just written an article that was published internationally, called "Spring Offensive". He writes: "*A "spring offensive" is when war really heats up and belligerents emerge to face off in countries that have cold and formidable winters, like Afghanistan. Or Canada. In both countries, the Spring Offensive has begun.*"

He goes on to make the case that Canada should not be extending its effort in Afghanistan, despite the six-hour debate and a close vote in the House of Commons. Instead, we should be pressing for a 'Spring Offensive' at home and abroad against social problems, including homelessness, inequities in education and wealth, and the poverty and discrimination against First Nations people, immigrants and refugees.

Social action and ultimately social change is all about mobilizing our social movements, our faith communities, our labour organizations, bringing all kinds of people together, united in **the** common cause, which are the values of social justice and human rights.

*Check with delivery*