

UFCW Canada Sponsors Sri Lanka Peace Conference

In November 2002, UFCW Canada sponsored the very successful Sri Lanka Peace and Democracy Conference at the University of Toronto. The Conference brought together leading human rights activists, trade unionists and peace advocates from Sri Lankan diaspora communities around the world. Participants came from Sri Lanka, Canada, the United States, France and England. The main objective of the Conference was to build a grassroots movement to get the voices of civil society into the ongoing peace process in Sri Lanka.

In addition to supporting the peace talks between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the Conference called on the two parties to immediately work towards implementing human rights guarantees and economic justice in the war-torn areas of Sri Lanka. Many people in Sri Lanka and around the world have been concerned that crucial issues such as women's rights, human security and political openness have been largely excluded from the peace talks. While the Conference welcomed the peace process unconditionally, participants reported that the human rights situation in Sri Lanka remains desperate. Political killings, arbitrary imprisonment, torture, child recruitment and extortion continue to plague many communities in Sri Lanka.

The Conference was jointly sponsored by UFCW Canada, the Anglican Church of Canada, the Elementary Teachers of Toronto, Lines Magazine and the Sri Lanka Democracy Forum. Observers from Non Governmental Organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch also attended the Conference. Rather than an academic or policy conference, this gathering was very much about Organizing – organizing solidarity programs in Sri Lanka and across diaspora communities to support the voices of civil society in the peace process.

As a result of the Sri Lanka Peace and Democracy Conference, numerous community projects in Sri Lankan diaspora communities are now starting, focusing on peace-building, human rights, alternative media, women's rights and youth. Canada has the world's largest Sri Lankan diaspora community. Members of UFCW Canada who are interested in participating in these exciting new programs can contact UFCW Canada Local 175 Union Rep Kevin Shimmin: 1-800-565-8329 (extension 233).

Following is the Mission Statement drafted by the Conference participants.

Sri Lanka Democracy Forum: Mission Statement

We are a community that shares a commitment to a democratic and pluralistic vision of Sri Lanka. We recognize that in addition to the loss of lives, the costs of war also entailed the erosion of democracy, the demobilization of pluralistic and independent social movements, and the further victimization of marginalized communities. In that context, we believe that movement towards a just and sustainable peace must be accompanied by the reconstruction of a democratic community that protects and promotes social justice, and the individual and collective rights and freedoms of all communities in Sri Lanka. We are in solidarity with, and have a commitment to support the efforts of marginalized communities to address past injustices, whether such injustice was based on the suppression of dissent, economic disempowerment, and/or on ethnic, gender or caste discrimination at the national or regional level. Among other efforts, we seek to proactively support grass roots movements that seek to expand and revitalize conditions for a vibrant, pluralistic and independent civil society that nurtures freedom of conscious, diverse political affiliations and an independent media. Thus, we believe that the terrain for engagement is not merely macro-political policy, but also economic decision-making, cultural production, and diverse local struggles furthering democratization in all spheres of life.