Back in the ballroom of the Hotel Beauséjour in Moncton in 2011, it is almost one hundred years since the founding of the Federation of Labour. The delegates are sitting at their tables as President Michel Boudreau continues his report. He addresses the latest fallout from the global economic crisis and the continual rise in unemployment and underemployment in New Brunswick. Conditions are urgent in places such as the Miramichi, Bathurst, and Dalhousie, where major pulp and paper mills have closed and are being demolished. Many communities dependent on the forest industry are facing an uncertain future, and delegates do not need to be reminded of the struggles to stop shutdowns at Edmundston and Nackawic and to prevent
the confiscation of workers’ pensions by runaway corporations. The issue of reinvestment in the local economy is as old as the beginning of merchant capitalism in the fur trade and the fisheries in the seventeenth century, and the forest industry is the latest example of a staple resource whose returns have failed to bring the province long-term stability and prosperity. The same is true in a more general way for the workers who have invested their labour in developing the provincial economy and building communities only to find that too many employers and too few government policies are prepared to make the same investment in provincial society. As closures multiply in the industrial sector — the levelling of the historic shipyards in Saint John, to enable the Irvings to focus their attention on Halifax, is one of the latest clearances in the urban landscape — too many of the young, skilled, and educated workers of the province are going down the road in search of new opportunities.

Little of this needs to be spelled out, and Boudreau goes on to call for more investment in the province’s future, better access to employment insurance and skills training, and stronger protection for workers’ incomes and pensions. He discusses recent labour disputes and the Federation’s continuing work for first contract legislation and higher minimum wages. He thanks delegates on the Education, Youth, Political Education, and Health, Safety and Environment Committees. He singles out the Women’s Committee and the Coalition for Pay Equity, whose twenty years of effort have achieved an updated law extending pay equity principles to more workers — although it still fails to cover most women employees in the province. He also reminds delegates of the Federation’s part in the “NB Power Is Not for Sale Coalition,” a popular mobilization that was chaired by Tom Mann, a vice-president representing one of the newer affiliates; their campaign helped stop the sale of a major public utility owned by the people of the province: “It was a very sweet victory that demonstrated the importance of people coming together to make a difference in our province.”

Boudreau adds that public services, including health care and education and even water supplies, remain under threat, and that the Federation is working with allies such as the Common Front for Social Justice, which is
co-chaired by John Gagnon of the Bathurst labour council. “There are two competing visions of the economy,” Boudreau tells delegates, and his message seems to echo John Davidson’s old observation that workers understand the economy in ways that put human needs ahead of market efficiencies. The vision favoured by business, says Boudreau, focuses on reducing public services, weakening regulations, and removing taxes. The one championed by labour and our supporters, he says, is based on fairness and dignity and ensuring that all citizens are able to meet their basic needs.¹

In the course of his report, the Federation president also congratulates delegates and supporters on a recent court decision. It is a case that started more than ten years ago with an appeal by the unions to the International Labour Organization and then led to hearings in the New Brunswick Court of Queen’s Bench in 2006 and 2007. The judge’s decision in 2009 forced the province to amend the law in order to recognize public sector “casual workers” as employees who are entitled to union representation, benefits, seniority, and other rights on the same basis as other workers. This was an important case for New Brunswick workers, and it was also notable because the outcome was influenced by a Supreme Court of Canada decision in 2007 that collective bargaining is protected by the provision for freedom of association in section 2(d) of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. In these cases the courts were overturning earlier interpretations and recognizing that the rights of labour in Canada are historical ones, activated and acquired by workers in the course of a long progress of social reform. As the Supreme Court put it, collective bargaining has become “a fundamental aspect of Canadian society,” and union rights are “the culmination of an historical movement.”²

The story of the New Brunswick Federation of Labour is one part of that “historical movement” to establish the rights of workers. But history always produces new challenges, and much of the news in the first decade of the twenty-first century was raising questions about the relevance of unions. Some critics claimed that unions were too powerful, while others worried that they had lost their sense of social purpose. Union officers sometimes wondered whether unions had given up too much of their independence in return for an
industrial relations system biased in favour of employers. Meanwhile, management strategies such as casualization, privatization, and contracting out undermined existing employment standards, and more part-time, seasonal, and temporary work made the workplace more precarious for workers and more difficult for unions to organize. The province’s labour laws continued to resist reforms to promote union certification and first contracts, and there were few successes in organizing in the new call centres, or in the information technology sector and the tourist trade, that were often presented as the province’s salvation. Once rising prices were taken into account, real wages had not increased since the struggles against wage controls in the 1970s, and the real minimum wage had fallen about one-third, deepening the poverty of the working poor. With the forces of free trade and globalization on the rise, it often seemed that New Brunswick workers were being pushed to join a competitive “race to the bottom.”

There was a general belief too that unions were becoming less important within the provincial economy. Downsizing and shutdowns had reduced employment in the core industrial and resource sectors that once provided most of the union membership. By 2010, this had produced a contrast between public sector employment, where two-thirds of workers had the benefit of union representation, and the private sector, where a combination of closures and cutbacks and the “Wal-martization” of labour relations had reduced union membership to less than 15 percent of the labour force. Even fewer part-time workers belonged to unions. There was also a troubling generation gap, as union membership was less than 7 percent among workers under twenty-five years of age. Among the provincial population there was even some resentment of the “union advantage” achieved by workers with steady jobs, collective agreements, benefits, and pensions. This inequity was readily exploited by politicians and employers, although many workers also recognized that unions helped to drive up wages and improve conditions even in workplaces where they were not present. In the face of all this, however, New Brunswickers were not giving up on unions. The number of union members in the province increased from 73,600 in 1997 to 85,400 in 2010. Although it was several
points lower than in the 1970s and 1980s, as it was in most provinces, the rate of union density remained relatively stable at 27.9 percent in 1997 and 27.4 percent in 2010, only slightly below the national rate of 29.6 percent. The Federation of Labour itself was less successful in weathering the storms, and the appeal of provincial solidarities seemed to be dropping at the turn of the century. By 2004, Federation membership had fallen to 29,337 members, a loss of almost 10,000 in ten years and the lowest number in more than thirty years. The Federation now had few friends in government, and the once-influential Department of Labour had been renamed the Department of Training and Employment Development. In shoring up the embattled house of labour, members would have to show the same determination that had brought them through difficult times in the past. At the 1998 Federation convention, President Tom Steep hopefully assured delegates that the provincial mood would soon be shifting, and he urged the Federation to remain true to its traditions of promoting social justice and seeking alternatives to the corporate agenda.

When Steep, who was president of the provincial highway workers union, CUPE Local 1190, did not stand for re-election at the end of his two-year term in 1999, delegates picked a well-known labour leader from Bathurst to serve as president. Blair Doucet had started work at Brunswick Mines in 1966, before his eighteenth birthday, and later served as president of Local 5385 of the United Steelworkers for fifteen years, leading the long strike there in the early 1990s. As a veteran of the mining operations in the north, Doucet had firsthand knowledge of the extreme conditions that unregulated capitalism was capable of imposing. He remembered a year when five of his fellow workers were killed in a rash of fatalities, and he devoted much of his energy as a union leader to improving health and safety standards in the workplace and establishing the legal right to refuse unsafe work. Doucet’s view of unions was that they must speak for the people who cannot or will not speak for themselves. His version of labour history was concise but accurate: “History shows that it is possible to make advancements when unions come together in solidarity and workers decide it’s time for action.”
The political landscape in the province produced few encouraging results for organized labour. The end of the McKenna era in 1997 was followed by a two-year interval when Raymond Frenette and then Camille Thériault held office as Liberal premiers. When the election came in 1999, the province voted heavily for a change. Bernard Lord’s Progressive Conservative administration, however, did not improve the province’s labour policies. There would be no progress on anti-scab laws, pay equity, or first contract legislation, and when the ILO issued its ruling on the recognition of casual workers in 2001, Premier Lord took no action. During the election, NDP leader Elizabeth Weir, who was returned as her party’s only member, had already quipped that when she saw Bernard Lord’s lips moving, she still heard Frank McKenna speaking.  

The impression was confirmed when hospital workers went out on a legal strike in March 2001, leaving more than half their members on the job to provide essential services as required. Within hours, Lord called an emergency session of the legislature to impose back-to-work laws and a final settlement that included new classifications and regulations. Rather than submit to an imposed agreement, the New Brunswick Council of Hospital Unions accepted a settlement that was only narrowly approved by the frustrated membership. The province’s neglect of the Workplace Health, Safety and Compensation Commission also remained a source of frustration. McKenna’s drastic reforms to the system would not be undone, but the government even failed to act on a series of minor improvements requested by the commission’s board of directors. At the 2003 convention, delegates approved an emergency resolution authorizing the withdrawal of Federation...
representatives from the commission and urging the Building Trades Council and the Nurses Union to join the boycott, which did not end until after the Lord government was defeated in 2006.\(^\text{10}\)

The Federation continued to identify the NDP as the preferred party of labour — and took pride in their working alliance with party leader Weir. She was invited to executive meetings, and the Federation was given representation on the NDP provincial executive. In election campaigns, the Federation promoted issues such as first contract arbitration, anti-scab laws, and pay equity, as well as health care, education, pensions, public automobile insurance, and child care, all of which were also among the themes in the NDP platform. Nonetheless, in 2003 the Lord government was returned with a bare majority over the revived Liberals; the NDP vote edged up to 9.7 percent, but Weir was again the only successful candidate. Her decision to leave provincial politics before the next election was a disappointment to Federation leaders, who recognized how ably she had held the fort through four successful campaigns. There had been a strain on the relationship in 2003, when Weir refused to overturn the nomination of a local candidate to whom the Federation objected, but there was no shortage of tributes when she retired from active politics in 2004. “She has been a special friend of labour during all these years,” stated Doucet. “For labour, Elizabeth Weir will always be a giant and icon in the New Brunswick history of labour. Thank you Elizabeth.”\(^\text{11}\)

The eventual defeat of the Lord government in 2006 was in part due to the weakness of the NDP vote in that election. Weir’s own seat went to a Liberal, and her successor as party leader, Allison Brewer, was not able to maintain the party’s earlier level of support. With the NDP vote falling by almost half, the Liberals, under Shawn Graham, won a three-seat majority. The youthful Liberal leader’s admiration for the legacy of Premier Robichaud in the 1960s was somewhat reassuring to labour, and his government proved sympathetic to renewal of the Workplace Health, Safety and Compensation Commission and, later, action on pay equity and the status of casual workers. He also added community college seats and nursing home beds, raised welfare rates and removed offensive regulations. However, Graham was unable
to reconcile his own liberal instincts with the enduring neoliberal influence of McKenna, which led him to pursue quixotic aims such as “self-sufficiency” and the “energy hub” as solutions to provincial underdevelopment. With large numbers of citizens objecting to an unexpected plan to sell NB Power to Hydro-Québec, the 2010 election was a rout for the Liberals. There were few political benefits for the NDP, however. The new leader Roger Duguay, a former priest influenced by traditions of Catholic social activism, made a strong second-place showing in Tracadie–Sheila, but no members were elected. Some labour supporters even wondered whether the NDP campaign slogan—“The Voice of the Middle Class”—was calculated to distance the party from organized labour. The NDP made a modest recovery, achieving 10.4 percent of the vote, but the little-known Progressive Conservative leader David Alward, a former Lord cabinet minister, had no trouble securing a large majority.  

In 2011 there seemed to be more promise for the NDP in the federal election results. Since addressing the Federation meetings soon after his election as federal party leader in 2003, Jack Layton, on his mother’s side a descendant of a New Brunswick Father of Confederation, had visited the province regularly. The party’s success story in New Brunswick in 2011 continued to be Yvon Godin, who was re-elected for his fifth term as the MP for Acadie-Bathurst with almost 70 percent of the vote, a remarkable achievement in any part of the country. NDP candidates, including several Federation activists and allies, placed second in six of the nine other constituencies (Saint John, Miramichi, Fundy–Royal, Fredericton, New Brunswick Southwest, Tobique–Mactaquac) with votes ranging from 19 to 30 percent of the total. It remained to be seen whether this would begin a lasting shift in political behaviour. For optimists, the election of an NDP government in Nova Scotia in 2009 seemed to confirm that Maritimers could be persuaded to invest in the political options of a social democratic party.  

Throughout these developments, the Federation continued to look ahead. The convention themes set the tone: in 1998 it was “More Action — More Solidarity”; in 1999, “Our Vision — Our Fight.” Then it was “Green Jobs
for the New Millennium” (2000), “Action — Visibility — Solidarity” (2001), “Organizing Our Future” (2002), and “Our Federation, Our Future” (2003). A restructuring plan in 2003 broadened the executive council by giving direct representation to the affiliated unions and the labour councils, and also provided that the principal executive positions must include both women and francophone officers. It was also decided to hold regular conventions every second year, reserving the alternate year for a mid-term conference on a specialized theme that would strengthen the delegates’ knowledge of the issues facing organized labour. Another decision, often discussed in the past, was to appoint the elected president as a full-time employee. It had been clear for a long time that the presidency was in effect a full-time job, subsidized in many ways by the president’s home union and taking up innumerable hours travelling the province to lobby politicians and participate in public events. Doucet would not be standing for re-election and spoke strongly in favour of the change.

The diminished size of the house of labour remained one of Doucet’s constant concerns throughout his presidency. He appealed to member unions to promote the Federation among their locals, and like his predecessors, he called on the Canadian Labour Congress to make membership in the provincial federations mandatory for the local unions of CLC affiliates. He also met regularly with potential members, such as the New Brunswick Nurses Union, to discuss the advantages of joining the Federation. “Our ranks are nowhere near what they should be,” he told delegates in 2005. “Your Federation, Brothers and Sisters, must have more members, more revenue, if we ever expect to have enough clout with government to force our politicians to respect and act on our demands for fair labour laws and for social and economic justice for all New Brunswickers.”

One step in that direction was the formation of a New Brunswick Coalition of Unions, which was launched in February 2004. They warned that the provincial government must not continue down the road of restricting and removing labour rights: “The democratic right to join a union and to bargain better working conditions did not come easily. But because of past struggles
all workers today have a better standard of living.”

The most remarkable fact about the coalition was that it brought together labour organizations representing 65,000 workers, the great majority of the unions and more than 75 percent of the organized workers in the province. This alliance hinted at possibilities for renewal of the Federation. By the time Doucet completed his third term as president, the tide was beginning to turn, and Secretary-Treasurer Terry Carter was able to report 35,085 members in 2005. He concluded that “the potential to build NBFL membership to 50,000 is excellent provided we all do our part to make it happen.”

A major step in that direction was delivered by a union that originated in 1954 as a relatively weak staff association, the Civil Service Association of New Brunswick. When labour laws were under revision in the 1960s, the CSA supported the introduction of collective bargaining but considered the right to strike unnecessary. The transition from “civil servant” to “public employee” was marked by a name change in 1968, to the New Brunswick Public Employees Association. And in a time of “voluntary” controls and other restrictions on labour standards, the association took stronger stands on workplace and economic issues. When the NBPEA, in 1986, decided not to affiliate to what was then called the National Union of Provincial Government Employees, several units left and formed the New Brunswick Government Employees Union. Despite their rivalries with each other, and with CUPE, all of these groups participated in the Coalition of Public Employees during the confrontations of the early 1990s. By the end of the decade, under the presidency of their first woman leader, Debbie Lacelle, the NBPEA was ready to cooperate with other unions on a more permanent basis. They voted in 2003 to join the National Union of Public and General Employees, one of the largest unions in the Canadian Labour Congress. Following amalgamation between the NBPEA and NBGEU in 2004, they also agreed to a new name, the New Brunswick Union of Public and Private Employees, a step that marked symbolically the transition from “association” to “union.” The New Brunswick Union, as it is commonly known, includes a wide range of members, from professional educators and community college employees to highway,
natural resources, clerical and engineering staff, laboratory and medical workers, and technical inspectors; moreover, there are private sector workers at nursing homes, hotels, and Moosehead Breweries. Like other modern unions, the NBU endorses the ideal of activism among members; their executive director, Tom Mann, was often heard speaking on social issues and public policy. Old rivalries had to be set aside for this to happen, but by 2007 the NBU was ready, as Mann put it, “to take its place within the house of labour.” Several NBU delegates attended the Federation meetings in 2007, and by 2009 they had joined in strength, adding 7,000 members to the Federation.

Later the same year, another major provincial union also decided to join the Federation, in this case a union made up almost entirely of women workers. The New Brunswick Association of Registered Nurses traced its origins back to 1916, but it was during the 1960s that the nurses began to take concerted action to improve wages and working conditions. When the Robichaud government rejected salary increases for nurses in 1964, they established a Social and Economic Welfare Committee and requested the right to collective bargaining. This was achieved under the Public Service Labour Relations Act, but in negotiating contracts the nurses still faced the patriarchal expectation that skilled women workers would perform professional responsibilities for wages well below those of other workers with similar training and experience — and of nurses in other provinces. In 1975 they protested poor contracts by booking off work in large numbers in a protest known as the “blue flu.” The old Association gave
way to the New Brunswick Nurses Union in 1978, and in 1980 the union conducted an effective campaign for public support under the slogan “The Nurse Is Worth It.” In these actions the nurses, like women in other sectors of the economy, were redefining the value of women’s work by stressing the skill and professionalism of their occupation as well as the older ideals of service and dedication. Although they pursued their own path, the nurses were aware of the benefits of collaboration with other unions and also participated in the campaign against wage freezes in the early 1990s. Interestingly, many nurses among the new generation after the 1960s were familiar with unions, having grown up in labour towns and union families; Marilyn Quinn, a Saint John nurse who became president of the union in 2004, was the daughter of a CN brakeman and conductor in Newfoundland. Attending the Federation meetings initially as guests and observers, the Nurses Union voted at their 2009 annual meeting to join the Federation of Labour. This decision added more than 6,300 members by the time of the Federation’s 2011 convention.²⁰

These developments reversed the membership decline in the Federation. In 2009 the number of affiliated members was up to 39,473, and in 2011 Secretary-Treasurer Danny King was able to report 47,163 members. This was a benchmark, as it once again established the Federation’s claim to represent a majority, albeit a small one, of the province’s more than 85,000 unionized workers. Moreover, it was also notable that the province’s 45,400 women union members now made up a small majority of the total union membership in the province.²¹ Most of the new Federation members worked in the public sector. At the 2011 meetings, the largest single delegation (67 delegates) came from CUPE; the other largest delegations came from the new affiliates, the NBNU (31) and the NBU (23). The largest private sector delegation was from the CEP, a union that had suffered some of the biggest setbacks over the previous two decades. Overall, delegates from the public sector unions outnumbered those from the private sector about three to one, although not all reports recognized that some members of public sector unions were employed in privately operated workplaces.²² Although the Federation had yet to elect a woman president, the lists of voting delegates also showed that
the Federation was no longer dominated by male workers. The women outnumbered the men — by two. Moreover, the participation of francophone delegates remained strong, accounting for slightly more than one-third of the delegates. 

Meanwhile, in the face of a changing economy, there would be no substitute for organizing. With more than 300,000 workers in the provincial labour force, there was plenty of scope. At an earlier stage in provincial history, the public sector unions themselves had emerged as a response to the changing shape of employment and expectations of workers. The logic of history is that just as the organizing waves that created craft and industrial unionism in earlier days were followed by similar waves of unionization in the public sector, we are likely to see new initiatives, perhaps even new forms of labour organization, in the future. In meeting the challenges of the new century, unions will be drawing on their experience and exploring new kinds of multi-occupational and community-based organizing that take into account the diverse and often fluid class identities within the provincial economy. As they learn about the next generation of workers and their needs, established unions are in a position to share resources and knowledge in preparing the way for the next “new unionism” of the twenty-first century. In a time of transition, the house of labour is able to provide a form of social and cultural capital for working people in the province. As in the past, the Federation of Labour represents a tradition of continuity in maintaining standards, protecting rights, and sharing values.

In the history of social reform, the unions are one of the more successful examples of how working-class citizens have found ways to establish durable organizations of opposition to the shortcomings of the existing economic system. “We suffer from a deficit of memory when it comes to working people and their achievements,” writes political economist Thom Workman. “Forgetfulness about working-class achievements seems to be a sort of default setting for capitalist society.” In the daily reports of unemployment rates, labour disputes, and economic uncertainty, it is too easy to forget that labour organizations occupy a special place in the social order because
they directly address the principal contradiction within the capitalist economy, namely the inequitable control and distribution of wealth. This position offers the unions far-reaching responsibilities. They may choose to protect the interests of a small number of fellow workers in their own place of work, and they may even turn a deaf ear to the appeals of other workers; but they are also in a position to build more inclusive solidarities and respond to the need for alternative forms of social and economic organization, both at home and abroad.

Returning to the early years of the twentieth century, we might consider the views of a veteran labour radical who grew up in Saint John and was still in school at the time the Federation of Labour was making its first appearance in history. After working in the sugar refinery and at other jobs, he went on down the road, first to the shipyards in Halifax and then to western Canada, where he joined the One Big Union during its heyday, and then to California where he joined the Industrial Workers of the World. Living in Chicago for much of his life, Fred Thompson became a custodian of the hopes and memories of his early days. “The labour union movement is an institutional development with indirect historical consequences of even greater importance than its direct bargaining achievements,” wrote Thompson. “To accomplish its wage and related objectives, it is steadily impelled to push against managerial prerogatives. It is my expectation that it will continue to do this, and by doing this become the major institution for coordinating and directing our economic activities in a post-capitalist society.”

MICHEL BOUDREAU  When the Federation president addressed a conference on labour history and public policy in 2009, Michel Boudreau underlined the achievements of organized labour in the past as well as the challenges facing workers today: “All citizens should know the part that organized labour has played in the history of our country and our province.” Source: Courtesy of Oliver Flecknell.
This kind of radical prediction was not likely to be endorsed by delegates to the conventions of the New Brunswick Federation of Labour. Practical utopias must find their roots in actually existing social movements, and the Federation has generally presented itself as a moderate organization that defends the affiliated members and advances the general interests of workers in the province. This has been described as a form of “social unionism” that has broader commitments than does “business unionism” but is not as fully committed to militancy as “mobilization unionism” or as dedicated to social change as “social movement unionism.” In a variety of circumstances over its history, the Federation of Labour has reflected all four of these visions of labour activism, but it has always been mindful that the house of labour cannot stand without the participation of its members and that its goals cannot be achieved without the support of allies. In recruiting and educating new members, including those who do not have the experience of breaking new ground and building a union from the bottom up, labour will need to draw on the experience of the past. The Federation itself originated and evolved in order to achieve greater social and economic rights for workers, and its leaders emerged from within their own ranks. Over the course of its history, the Federation has had some measurable success in achieving a better balance of power between workers and employers, and also in reforming provincial society in the direction of greater democracy. But as long as work and wages remain part of the human condition, their mission will not be completed, and it will often need to be defended.

As the Federation approaches its second century, the delegates are wearing buttons that convey basic messages learned over the course of more than one hundred years of provincial labour history. Some are single words with a general appeal —“Respect” and “Equity” and “Solidarity.” Others deliver messages about harassment, scabs, racism, and campaigns for fair taxation and labour legislation. Still others spell out longer statements, such as “Non à l’eau pour le profit,” “L’équité salariale, une question de justice,” “Unions — The Folks That Brought You the Weekend” and “Unions — The Anti-Theft Device for Working People.” Leaving that convention hall and returning to
their workplaces and communities, union members will be carrying these ideas with them, and they will continue to show the same “stubborn strength” that brought their Federation through the first century of its history.

In the years ahead there will be changes in the structure of the economy, in the practices of employers, and in the policies of governments, but workers will continue to organize and support unions. They will do this in order to achieve and maintain secure employment, fair pay, and safe conditions in the workplace — and because they cannot depend on employers or governments to do this. As individual workers they will also hope, in ways both modest and ambitious, to achieve greater satisfaction and recognition in their working lives. And as citizens of the province they will work to defend the causes of social and economic democracy within the community and to win a better distribution of the rewards of life and work for all. Over the course of the century, unions have become part of the Canadian way of life and their Federation has helped to write a history of solidarity among the province’s workers. As members look back through the history of labour in New Brunswick, they have every reason to know that the Federation of Labour will continue to be there to build the solidarities of the future.