

Manitoba Federation of Labour

Presentation to the

Manitoba Clean Environment Commission

On the proposed

Wuskwatim Generating Station and Transmission Project

Winnipeg, Manitoba

March 16, 2004

The Manitoba Federation of Labour (MFL) is pleased to present the Clean Environment Commission Hearing with our views and policies as they relate to the proposed Wuskwatim Generating Station and Transmission Project.

For those of you who may not be familiar with the MFL, we are the largest central labour body in Manitoba, representing more than 95 thousand union members in both the public and private sectors.

We support the proposed Wuskwatim project for the economic benefits it offers all Manitobans and in particular to those living in the north. Major developments like the Wuskwatim Generating Station and Transmission Project offer an unprecedented level of training opportunities and jobs for northern Aboriginal people. The number one issue facing northern Aboriginal people is poverty and the lack of opportunities to overcome it.

We have been working to address these and other issues with the establishment of the Aboriginal Workers Caucus in 1995. This was established, together with the Workers of Colour Caucus, in recognition of the needs of workers in these areas to have a structure to discuss issues of interest and to develop strategies to meet their needs. These two caucuses are represented on the MFL Executive Council by two vice-presidents.

By increasing work and training opportunities we are addressing the wider issue of poverty in northern communities. Northern Manitoba Aboriginal families are over represented in our poverty statistics and gaining the opportunity to acquire good paying jobs is the best route out of poverty for most people.

Poor families include poor children. Our future begins with our children and too many are locked in the hard scramble existence that poverty involves. Projects like Wuskwatim, which can generate long-term economic opportunities for employment, can help break

this cycle, by giving our children an opportunity to focus beyond their immediate struggle for survival.

The drive and determination to do well in school and make plans for a post graduation career can only take place where there is hope of gaining a good job that pays a living wage.

This point is not lost on Aboriginal leaders who want to offer their fast growing young population the prospect of a bright future.

With this in mind, the Environmental Impact Statements developed by the Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation and Manitoba Hydro have considered not only Wuskwatim's impact on the environment, but also the effects on people, including employment and training opportunities.

Jobs associated with construction projects are good paying jobs that provide real opportunities for an improved standard of living. In addition, the skills that are acquired on these projects can also be utilized in northern communities for residential house building as well as for other community developments.

The future of construction jobs in Manitoba is also promising.

There is potential for additional Hydro development projects including Conawapa and Gull-Keeyask as well as projects such as the Manitoba-Nunavut Road which is now being studied. There are also other large-scale projects being planned in southern Manitoba such as the Winnipeg Floodway Expansion project, the establishment of a new Manitoba Hydro head office building in downtown Winnipeg and the development of a new head office building for Credit Union Central, also in downtown Winnipeg. The demand for skilled construction workers in Manitoba will be growing and future employment prospects look good.

The Manitoba labour movement has embarked on several initiatives in recent years to train and upgrade skills for residents of northern, remote communities. Both the Carpenters' Union Training Institute and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers' Training Institute have conducted programs in Split Lake to develop apprentices in their respective trades. The MFL paid the travel and accommodation costs for one of these apprentices to compete in the annual provincial apprenticeship competition, sponsored by Skills Manitoba. The unions involved in these projects have gained valuable experience in the area of northern issues and these joint efforts benefited both labour and the northern communities.

The jobs created by Wuskwatim will be mostly unionized jobs through the Burntwood-Nelson Agreement between the Hydro Projects Management Association and the Allied Hydro Council, which is made up of unions in the Manitoba Building Trades Council who generally work on hydro projects.

The Burntwood-Nelson Agreement was first negotiated about 30 years ago. It exceeds the basics provided by the Construction Industry Wages Act and is now being renegotiated as part of the planning for the Wuskwatim project development.

These unionized jobs will pay a real living wage to construction workers on the project and offer tremendous long-term opportunities for northern Aboriginal people to acquire training and skills for the anticipated increase in the construction activity in the region over the next 10 years and beyond.

The Wuskwatim generation project would be constructed over six years, in two stages. Stage one involves the construction of the infrastructure, while stage two involves construction of the major works.

In the first two years of construction there will be close to 100 jobs created. Many of these jobs will be in non-designated trades and construction services, such as labourers, equipment operators, vehicle drivers, equipment servicemen, catering and clerical staff.

In the remaining four years designated trades, especially journeyman carpenters as well electricians, plumbers, pipe fitters, cement masons and iron workers will make up the bulk of the workforce.

We are especially pleased that apprenticeships will also be available over the six-year construction period, with Aboriginal people given priority for placements. Apprentices will first receive their training in the classroom and will have at least five years of work experience under the guidance of trained and qualified journeyed trades people.

Training Aboriginal people to take advantage of these opportunities is already underway. Over \$38 million dollars has already been committed to training NCN Members and other Aboriginal people in preparation for Wuskwatim. This training also includes a life skills component to prepare the newly-trained workers for the challenges employment will create.

We are also pleased to see that workplace health and safety will be given a high priority on the Wuskwatim project. The recent provincial government review of the Workplace Safety and Health Act identified young workers, new entrants to the workforce and workers who change jobs as being especially at risk for workplace injuries and deaths. Because of their lack of experience and inadequate training, these workers make up a disproportionate percentage of the injured workers statistics at the Workers' Compensation Board.

The Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation/Inter Group consultant group has been established to identify and find solutions to the unique occupational health and safety issues associated with construction projects in northern aboriginal communities. Preparing new construction workers to identify hazards and to eliminate or control those hazards is a learned skill that saves lives and limbs.

The MFL has seen the benefits of such efforts through the MFL Workers of Tomorrow program which this year will teach approximately 12,000 high school students these important skills. The Workers' Compensation Board of Manitoba also sees the value in this education by providing funding assistance to both the Workers of Tomorrow program and to the NCN/Inter Group Consultants for these valuable initiatives.

The Manitoba Federation of Labour commends Manitoba Hydro and NCN for considering the needs of workers in developing the construction plan and for their efforts to develop a partnership that will bring long and short-term economic opportunities to the north.

Construction projects like Wuskwatim offer hope to Aboriginal people that they too can enjoy the benefits other Canadian workers enjoy.

It is only with meaningful employment that we can hope to break the cycle of poverty that grips northern Manitoba communities. And addressing these issues can best be achieved with large-scale economic development and jobs.

Wuskwatim marks the beginning of a new era of developments in northern Manitoba. It is a model of how northern communities can work in partnership with developers like Hydro – allowing them to share in the profits and opportunities generated by the development.

This arrangement benefits all Manitobans, in addition to the profits Hydro will generate from a secure and stable supply of power that meets our needs well into the future.