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Open Letter

February 22, 2008

Honourable Stephen Harper M.P.
Prime Minister
House of Commons
Government of Canada
80 Wellington Street
Ottawa, On K1A OA2

Dear Prime Minister:

The Ontario Division of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, representing over 200,000 workers, condemns the decision by the Canadian government to boycott the United Nations 2009 World Conference Against Racism (WCAR), otherwise known as Durban II.

We might not always agree with the decisions and actions of the United Nations, but it is the only world body that brings together all the countries of the globe to discuss issues of mutual concern. Indeed, it is a world structure that Canada has always supported and helped to build.

In that tradition, one would expect that the Canadian government would work to help strengthen Durban II if it deemed that the conference planning is flawed. In the documents adopted by the 2001 Durban conference, Canada played a central role in ensuring the language was balanced and respectful of all peoples. This was a role that Canada played effectively, especially after the United States decided to withdraw its delegation.

Durban II is being planned under the auspices of the UN Human Rights Commissioner, the internationally respected Canadian Louise Arbour. We should be supporting this courageous Canadian for her continued commitment to follow through on the declarations made at the first conference.

Instead, your government has chosen to undermine Arbour's initiative. Canada has lived through the shame, abuse, and violence of residential schools for native children and has learned from that experience. We have a lot to offer the world in participating in a conference that will seek to find ways of combating racism. This is a planet replete with past and current instances of racial hatred leading to untold hardship, misery and violence. Anyone who has ever participated in an anti-racism workshop or conference will know this topic is very emotional and causes discomfort. None of this should dissuade any of us from dialoguing and searching for common solutions to these issues.

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Patrick (Sid) Ryan
President

ONE STRONG VOICE

Fred Hahn
Secretary-Treasurer

African descendants, refugees, migrant workers, HIV/AIDS, religious/ethnic/linguistic minorities, women, gypsies, Roma, Arab, Jewish, Muslim, Palestinians and the indigenous, along with those representing poverty, globalization, social exclusion, marginalization and underdevelopment, are just some of the groups and issues that were the focus of the 2001 Durban conference. So how did this conference get reduced to simply the Palestinian and Israeli issue? I believe the answer lies in the attack on the World Trade Centre: 9/11. The first Durban conference ended just days before the 9/11 bombing. The impact of 9/11 caused the hard work of WCAR to be poisoned and to be seen through the eyes of revisionist history. We have experienced first-hand in Canada that 9/11 spawned unprecedented levels of Islamophobia and racial profiling.

The wealth and diversity of the human experience that happened in Durban South Africa in 2001 during the World Conference Against Racism was tragically buried under the violence, militarization and hate that have sprung from 9/11. You are shamefully allowing that violence and hate to continue with your inactions regarding Durban II.

While you advance a policy of continued military occupation in Afghanistan, you withdraw from conferences aimed at peaceful solutions to centuries-old conflicts. The olive branch offered in terms of a Holocaust education task force is no replacement for a *world* conference. Our Jewish brothers and sisters are not the only group that suffers the horrors of racial discrimination and bigotry. Canada is a multicultural country and your task as government is to bring people together, but your actions are dividing people. Minister Jason Kenney, Secretary of State for Multiculturalism and Canadian Identity, would not support the boycott of Durban II without your full sanction. Durban remains our best bet at societal/racial integration and mutual understanding.

Mr. Harper, nothing is solved from boycotting a world conference against racism. Many communities in Canada have felt the biting pain of racism. If your government refuses to rescind its decision, this will indeed become a defining issue for your government and one which the voters of this country are likely to remember.

Yours sincerely,



Patrick (Sid) Ryan
President

C: Jason Kenney Minister of State; Paul Moist CUPE National President, Claude G n reux, CUPE National Secretary-Treasurer; CUPE Ontario Executive Board; Ken Georgetti Canadian Labour Congress; Wayne Samuelson Ontario Federation of Labour