Growing income inequality, especially in Alberta, is a threat to our democracy and economic well-being and must be opposed by unions.

If there was one theme that united most speakers at HSAA’s 2013 Annual General Meeting (AGM), this was it.

“If you look at what the real important development in Canada and in too much of the world has been in the last 20 years, it would have to be growing income inequality,” said Larry Brown, secretary-treasurer of the National Union of Public and General Employees (NUPGE), to which
HSAA is affiliated.

"Something fundamental has happened over that period of time. The wealthy have gotten extraordinarily more wealthy," he said at the AGM, held at the West Edmonton Mall’s Fantasyland Hotel in May. "The income for one year of the richest 100 people (in the world) would eliminate poverty in the world four times over. That’s just staggering."

This growing income inequality didn’t happen by accident, but was the result of a deliberate strategy, one that includes attacking unions. "As labour rights go down in any society, inequality goes up," he said.

Gil McGowan, president of the Alberta Federation of Labour (AFL), said attacks were being focused not just on unions, but on public-sector workers in particular.

"We are being framed," he said. "The provincial government, the federal government, or conservative groups like the Fraser Institute are in the process of framing public-sector workers." In Alberta, the media and much of the public are buying the story that we spend too much on quality public services including health care and education and cannot afford to maintain them, said McGowan.

"This argument that blames public-sector workers for the deficit we are facing right now, is hogwash," he said. "The reality is that the people who get paid the most in the Alberta economy are firmly in the private sector, first in the energy sector, then the construction sector, then management, both public and private sector, and technical people like engineers. They all get paid more than public-sector workers."

Meanwhile, the amount Alberta spends per person on public services is fifth among Canadian provinces, just behind New Brunswick. "So, we’re rich like Saudi Arabia, but we spend like New Brunswick on our public services. At the same time we have our leaders, including our premier, saying we cannot afford this."

McGowan said the labour movement in Alberta needed to change the conversation and said a coalition of organizations, including HSAA, would begin a new campaign in the fall.

This group, called Better Way Alberta (www.betterwayalberta.ca [1]), had success earlier this year with a creative ad campaign, but would be back with a new campaign aimed at changing the minds of people and politicians.

Bill Moore-Kilgannon, executive director of Public Interest Alberta (PIA), told AGM delegates: "The government made the choice to go after and cut public services rather than fix our revenue problem. We know that these cuts are real and are hurting people. So it is up to us to get out there and speak to people and challenge the direction this province is going."

Sandra Azocar, executive director of Friends of Medicare, said health-care cuts in Alberta were
hurting people.

?There are half as many (hospital) beds in Alberta as there was 20 years ago and there are a million more people. We have fewer health-care professionals who are actually doing the work. There is more private health care, more out-of-pocket spending. It has been shameful how this government has let our health-care system deteriorate to the point where it is now.?

Ricardo Acuña, executive director of the Parkland Institute at the University of Alberta, said Alberta was the most unequal province in Canada, with the fastest growing income inequality gap in the country.

?In Alberta, our taxation system ? is actually helping take money from those on the bottom of the income scale and further contribute to those at the very, very top of it ? is why our flat tax system (on personal incomes) is helping to increase income inequality in this province.?

Dr. Elaine Bernard, executive director of the Labour and Worklife Program at Harvard Law School, said unions in Canada and internationally have been under serious attack since the ?great recession? of 2008.

The near collapse of the financial system had been caused by three types of economic policies ? privatization, deregulation and free trade ? but, through sleight of hand, the blame has been laid on unions and public-sector workers by phony grass-roots right-wing groups, said Bernard, the keynote speaker at the AGM.

The financial crisis gave those groups an opportunity to further their agenda and try to ?privatize everything? and allow corporations to profit from public services.

?What we are seeing with this concentration of wealth and growth of corporate power is a diminishing of our democracy. ? The greater the inequality in a country, the less democratic it is,? she said.

Elisabeth Ballermann, HSAA president, told delegates: ?Strong unions are essential for strong democracies and are positively associated with a plethora of social indicators ? literacy, health, greater income equality, less crime, less teenage pregnancy, higher levels of education ? and the list goes on.?

The good news is that HSAA is stronger than ever, having grown from 7,000 members when she was first elected president in 1995 to more than 24,000 now.

?We need to advocate for public policies and legislation that will foster our work, whether it is in collective bargaining and contract enforcement or to protect and enhance public services and programs that are the very basis of your jobs,? she said.

?The work doesn?t get any easier. Indeed, it is expanding and it never ends. We need each and every one of you to be a part of it and to recruit other members to ensure that our members and the public will understand a