Session title: Labour unions, marginalized citizens and neoliberal reforms: Towards a more textured understanding of the challenges facing social unionism.

Session organizers:
Suzanne Mills, Assistant Professor, Labour Studies, McMaster University
Robert Hickey, Assistant Professor, Queen’s School of Policy Studies

Contributed papers:

Robert Hickey, Assistant Professor, Queen’s School of Policy Studies
"Disability advocates, union activists and government reformers: Patterns of collaboration and conflict"

Aine Leadbetter, Ph.D. Candidate, Political Science, McMaster University
“Incoming Workers, Outgoing Protections: Understanding the Effect of Labour Migration on Marginalized Workers.”

Suzanne Mills, Assistant Professor, Labour Studies, McMaster University
Tyler McCreary, Ph.D. Candidate, Geography, York University
“The indigenization and neoliberalization of post-secondary education: how are public sector unions engaging with anticolonial reforms amidst workplace restructuring?”

Discussant:
Charlotte Yates, Dean of Faculty of Social Sciences, McMaster University

We propose a special session under theme 2 “Assessing the response of collective actors to wider changes at work and in their societies and the impact of different representative systems on their ability to respond to those issues.” The session will explore how workers and worker organizations have struggled with the challenges and contradictions that arise when policy changes to further the equality of a marginalized group are carried out through neoliberal workplace restructuring. We examine paradoxical cases where unions and workers have confronted policy reforms that advance the interests of one group while having negative consequences for workers or other marginalized groups. Specifically, we analyze union responses to neo-liberal initiatives that further the rights or equality of marginalized groups.

For example, Suzanne Mills and Tyler McCreary explore how two public sector union locals responded to the indigenization of a community college in northwestern British Columbia. This case stems from the increasing recognition of Aboriginal peoples’ rights to self-determination in Canadian courts and provincial and federal governments which has fostered greater Aboriginal control and influence over social services for Aboriginal populations. In post-secondary education, this shift was accompanied by the creation of Aboriginal designed and managed post-secondary institutions and Aboriginal directed programs and policies in non-Aboriginal
institutions. The transfer of some control over post-secondary education to Aboriginal peoples has, however, occurred amidst, and in some cases through, neoliberal reforms to post-secondary funding formulas in Canada which have had negative impacts on workers in the higher education sector. Union locals therefore needed to negotiate the tension between a desire to protect workers and a desire to support Aboriginal self-governing initiatives.

Robert Hickey explores the case of restructuring in Ontario’s developmental services sector. In March 2009, the provincial government closed the last three state-run institutions for individuals with intellectual disabilities. Self-advocates and families in the disability rights movement have struggled to end the policy of segregation of individuals in large state-run institutions. Disability rights advocates have sought inclusive policies which provide supports and services within the community. Governments have pursued restructuring and privatization of developmental services within the context of neo-liberal public management reforms which seek to constrain and reduce costs. Throughout North America, public sector unions representing workers at these institutions have struggled with these changes. Some unions have strongly opposed the closure of state-run institutions, while others have formed coalitions with family advocacy groups to shape new policy initiatives.

Aine Leadbetter examines the politics surrounding the protection of non-status workers in Portland, Oregon and Long Island, New York. This paper seeks to understand how changes in the composition of local labour markets have affected the furthering of rights, protections, and governmental resources for some groups of marginalized workers within communities to the disadvantage of others. Both neoliberal restructuring and the forces of globalization have increased the demand for and the flow of vulnerable workers to fill key gaps within labour markets. The introduction of increasingly more vulnerable groups such as non-status workers into communities has shifted focus and attention away from the more historically marginalized as both unions and advocacy groups struggle to address the needs of these new workers. Rather than advocate for all vulnerable workers and recognize related struggles, labour has been increasingly pitted against each other as new workers are seen as either threats to the status quo or workers deserving of protection. Similarly, the introduction of new groups of workers and the conflicts that emerge within society regarding their very presence draw greater governmental attention thus leaving traditionally vulnerable groups left behind in the policy making process. Likewise, this paper will explore how the issue of status has further complicated and fragmented labour solidarity and the collective representation of vulnerable workers.

Together, the papers in this session aim to explore these contradictory environments and to better understand the challenges facing union renewal efforts. This session seeks to challenge the overly simplistic prescriptions that forming coalitions with marginalized groups will bring about union renewal. The literature on marginalized identities and union renewal suggests that since structural changes in the economy and labour market have lead to union decline, engaging with marginalized groups who are over represented in non-standard workplaces will help to revitalize labour union practices and increase union membership. The papers in this session suggest that the present environment for union engagement with marginalized groups requires more than a desire to alter organizing practices so that they are more inclusive of different languages, cultural norms and workplace concerns. Instead, we suggest that it is necessary to understand the
complex ways that the concerns of particular groups have been articulated through neo-liberal frames.

In short, furthering the struggles of marginalized groups in and through more inclusive forms of collective representation is generally not a simple, straightforward process. Efforts to build social movement unions are at times enmeshed in contradictory interests. Lessons from these cases allow us to present examples and ideas of how employee representation regimes can either prevent the emergence or offer alternatives to the efforts of neo-liberal states to further the equality of marginalized groups.