

FORUM: REORGANIZING UNIONS SOLIDARITY FOREVER? TRENDS IN CANADIAN UNION DENSITY

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Introduction In October 2003, the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) held a major conference called *Building the Movement – Unions on the Move*. It focused on how to reverse an ongoing decline in union density; that is, a decline in the proportion of workers who are covered by collective agreements. While Canadian union strength is often favourably compared to that in other liberal labour markets, such as the US and the UK, the best available data suggest that density has fallen sharply — from a peak of about 40 percent in the mid-1980s to slightly more than 30 percent today.¹ Union density has fallen below 20 percent in the private sector, restructuring continues to take a toll on already unionized workplaces, and fewer than one percent of all nonunion workers are currently organized into unions each year. While Canadian union density is twice that of the US, and the absolute number of union members has, unlike the US, continued to increase, there is clearly no room for complacency. As CLC President Ken Georgetti stressed in his opening remarks, the labour movement must greatly expand its organizing efforts if it is to avoid marginalization and remain a major force in Canadian workplaces and Canadian society.

This paper summarizes some of the extensive background research prepared for the CLC conference, documenting trends in union density, union organizing efforts, and worker attitudes towards unions.² It makes a very summary assessment of the forces driving union density, and briefly flags some of the major agency, or union action issues, raised at the conference; issues that are discussed in other contributions to this forum, and which will be debated in the labour movement in the years ahead.

Studies in Political Economy

Why does Union Density Matter? Unions define, promote, and fight for the collective interests and individual rights of workers in the workplace and in the wider society. Without union representation, workers would have to negotiate the terms and conditions of employment (e.g., wages, benefits, hours of work, work schedules, conditions of work, discipline, etc.) as individuals, protected only by minimum legal standards, and they would lack a collective democratic voice and the collective power to influence economic outcomes and workplace governance. Labour movements, allied to wider social and political movements, advance working-class interests at the community and political level, and counter the power that flows from ownership of capital and control over production. As such, unions are a force for basic human rights and greater democracy within capitalist societies, as recognized in international human rights covenants and the core conventions of the International Labour Organization.

In collective bargaining, unions negotiate wages, benefits, hours of work, and working conditions with employers. In Canada, as elsewhere, unionized workers earn significantly higher wages and enjoy greater nonwage benefits than otherwise comparable nonunion workers.³ While there is some evidence of an eroding union wage premium since the mid-1980s, the benefit advantage has continued to widen. The union premium is typically greater for the relatively unskilled and those vulnerable to discrimination. By compressing wage and benefit differentials in unionized firms and sectors, and setting a wage floor, unions help equalize pay between women and men, and between workers of colour and other workers.⁴ In Canada, unions significantly reduce wage inequality among men, reduce the gender wage gap, and significantly reduce overall wage inequality and poverty.⁵

While wages and benefits of current members are obviously a key concern in bargaining, a key goal of labour movements must be to expand the range of collective bargaining and to increase union density to improve the working conditions of all workers, rather than raising the wages of a union elite. This is true for both ideological and pragmatic reasons. Beyond the values of solidarity and collective progress which can, and do, inspire social unionism, unions, as economic institutions, recognize that bargaining power is, in significant part, a function of union density at the relevant economic

level of the region, sector, or nation. High union coverage (and coordinated bargaining) provide the potential power to take wages out of competition between employers to the greatest extent possible, while low density and weak coordination make it very difficult to raise wages, benefits, and working conditions above prevailing market conditions. High union density and coordinated bargaining create the potential to equalize wages between higher and lower productivity sectors of the economy and to minimize wage inequality. A high union premium and low union density promote strong employer resistance to unions, as in the US. Widespread unionization, as in Scandinavia, is likely to promote acceptance and cooperation.

Countries with high levels of bargaining coverage have much more compressed earning distributions and much lower levels of relative low pay and poverty in work than do deregulated labour markets.⁶ The minimum earnings gap between the top and bottom 10 percent of workers is about two to one in the Scandinavian countries, compared to more than four to one in Canada. Approximately one in four (23.7 percent) full-time workers in Canada in the mid-1990s were low paid (defined as earning less than two-thirds of the median national full-time wage), compared to just one in twenty in the Scandinavian countries. Earnings inequality still differs profoundly between advanced capitalist countries because of institutional differences in the labour market, notwithstanding common exposure to the forces of globalization and technological and organizational change. Relative earnings equality, in turn, underpins much more egalitarian and inclusive societies, not least by reducing the redistributive burden on the welfare state. It is difficult to promote equality through taxes and transfers if the initial distribution of earnings is highly polarized.

Neoclassical economists see unions as almost exclusively concerned with raising the relative wages of members, distorting wages compared to free-market levels, and thus weakening economic performance. Recent authoritative surveys of the economic literature conclude, however, that there was no relationship between union density and the economic or employment performance of advanced capitalist countries through the 1990s.⁷ Some countries with very high rates of union coverage were able to achieve high levels of employment and strong economic growth rates in the 1990s.⁸

Studies in Political Economy

High union density is quite compatible with good economic performance because unions can bargain for jobs, not just for higher wages, at the firm, sectoral, and national levels, and because unions can be a positive force for the higher productivity and innovation needed to sustain high wages amid increased international competition. A collective voice,⁹ joint determination of workplace rules, and shared economic gains are important for productivity and quality because production is always a social and not just a technical process. Far from being inflexible, many unionized workplaces can and have implemented new technologies and new forms of work organization in a more effective way than nonunion workplaces.¹⁰ There is no fundamental incompatibility between unionism per se and advanced capitalism, which is not to deny that many features of the contemporary world — such as increased international competition, the shift to knowledge-based, postindustrial economies, and the decline of working-class solidarities — have put labour movements on the defensive.

Forces Driving Union Density For the purposes of this paper, the terms “union density,” “unionization,” and “union coverage” refer to the proportion of paid workers whose terms of employment are covered by a collective agreement.¹¹

At a mechanical level, given that Canadian union representation is achieved through workplace certification, changing density is a function of changes in employment in already certified workplaces as a result of closures, layoffs, and new hirings; changes in employment in nonunion workplaces, and the rate at which nonunion workplaces are certified. Unfortunately, it is impossible to fully separate out these factors.

At a broader level, the growth of union membership will be strongly influenced by structural change in the economy which influences the relative growth of employment by industrial sector, occupation, establishment size, and form of employment. This is especially true given that, as of the mid-1980s, initial union density in Canada was highly variable in terms of all of these dimensions (i.e., relatively concentrated among blue-collar, full-time workers in larger private sector firms in resources, manufacturing, transportation, and utilities, as well as in public and social services). Union density will also be influenced by the changing composition of the workforce —

especially by age, gender and race — which is overlaid upon the changing industrial and occupational mix.

Declining unionization has often been associated with the shift to a postindustrial economy with its shrinking share of male, blue-collar jobs, and rising share of services jobs (especially for women) in growing low-density sectors like business and consumer services, and high density public and social services. Structural change has brought into question the relevance of legal certification criteria and union servicing norms based on a Fordist norm of standard jobs in large industrial workplaces, as opposed to a new norm of more precarious forms of employment.

The theme of structural change also includes forces affecting the balance of power between labour and employers in workplaces and the job market, such as fiercer competition and squeezed profitability in the private sector as a result of globalization and deregulation, as well as restructuring of public and social services through privatization and contracting out to the private sector. Structural social and economic change also influences the balance of power between labour and employers at the political level, and, with it, the legal and regulatory climate that influences union strength. Studies of Canada-US density differences have often stressed the importance of facilitative labour legislation to new organizing, also apparent in the fact that high union-density provinces have tended to be those with labour-friendly parties in, or close to, power. Finally, density will clearly be influenced by the attitudes of individual workers towards unions, and by the capacity of unions and the labour movement to attract and mobilize the unorganized, as well as to retain the loyalties and commitment of the already organized.

The organization rate among nonunion workers can be estimated from (highly fragmentary) administrative data.¹² From the mid-1970s to the late 1990s, between 60,000 and 100,000 workers — or one to two percent of all nonunion workers — were organized through new certifications (minus decertifications) each year, with a downward trend apparent from the high point of the mid-1980s. By the late 1990s, the annual organization rate had slipped to less than one percent of all nonunion paid workers. The organization rate has been significantly higher than average in Quebec and, until recently, British Columbia, and has been far higher than the rate in the US where the absolute number of new workers organized into unions through

Studies in Political Economy

formal certifications each year in the 1990s has been only a little higher than in Canada.

Unfortunately, available data provide very incomplete information on where new organizing is concentrated. The average size of new bargaining units seems to be small: 50-70 members in Ontario since the mid-1990s; just 30-40 members in British Columbia, and the distribution of new bargaining units is heavily tilted to even smaller workplaces. There is evidence of relative success among women workers and workers of colour, and a heavy tilt in new organizing to services, especially health and welfare services.¹³ In British Columbia (where the data are most complete), 51,790 workers were organized into unions from 1997 to 2002, of whom one-fifth (10,228) worked in health and social services, and just one in six (8,853) worked in the resource and manufacturing sectors. Large private sector industrial unions, like the National Automobile, Aerospace, Transportation and General Workers Union of Canada (CAW-Canada) and the United Steelworkers of America (USWA), have continued to add new members alongside the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), the National Union of Public and Government Employees (NUPGE), and other public sector unions, but many of these new members have been in services rather than areas of traditional blue-collar industrial jurisdiction.

In most years from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, union growth from new certifications appears to have offset stagnant or declining union membership in already unionized workplaces, accounting for almost all absolute membership growth. Since the mid-1990s, union membership in already unionized workplaces seems to have grown. New organizing in Canada has been far from negligible and has made an important difference to density, but it has been a case of rowing against the tide of forces in the job market as a whole.

There is clear evidence that the organizing rate is low compared to the proportion of nonunion workers who would like to join unions. In line with other surveys, the Vector Poll for the CLC conference found that one in seven (14 percent) nonunion workers would "very likely" vote for a union tomorrow if they had the chance, and another 19 percent would be "somewhat likely" to vote yes, indicating probable one-third support even before any union

campaign for certification. Forty-three percent of nonunion workers would be likely to join a union (21 percent very likely and 22 percent somewhat likely) if there were no grounds for fear of employer reprisal. This suggests that victories could be gained in many workplaces. Likely support for unions (absent fear of reprisal) is higher than average among youth (52 percent), visible minorities (54 percent), and women (50 percent vs. 37 percent for men), suggesting that the shift to a new workforce is positive rather than negative for unions. This is underlined by the fact that union density among women has declined by much less than men, as detailed below, and that union coverage among workers of colour, while lower than average, rose from 19.7 percent to 21.3 percent between 1996 and 2001. Support is somewhat higher for workers from lower income households and those working in public services.

Interest in joining a union has been more or less constant since the mid-1980s, and indeed increased over the 1990s. In general, nonunion workers have positive perceptions of unions as vehicles for workplace representation and getting better job security, benefits, and pay, and support unions that are active in community issues. In order of importance, nonunion workers are attracted to unions as a vehicle for better nonwage benefits, pay, health, and safety, better prospects for advancement, and protection from discrimination and favouritism. Like many union members, however, they have concerns about the seniority principle and the degree of member control of unions, and are generally quite satisfied with their jobs across most dimensions. Only between one-quarter and one-third of nonunion workers are dissatisfied with current benefits and wages, and only about one-fifth are dissatisfied with pressure at work and prospects for advancement.

The idea that the declining rate of union density since the mid-1980s is strongly associated with the changing industrial and occupational composition of employment is superficially plausible given the presumed extent to which deindustrialization, privatization, and the growth of knowledge-based work have eroded bastions of union strength. However, as shown in Table 1, the total employment share of blue-collar men has slipped only slightly, from 38.2 percent to 35.4 percent of all men since the mid-1980s, in line with only modest relative employment declines in manufacturing, transportation and warehousing, and utilities. Direct public sector

Studies in Political Economy

employment (including hospitals, schools, colleges, and universities) has slipped from 26.1 percent to 22.2 percent of all employees, and public administration employment has relatively shrunk. However, the employment share of education, health care, and social assistance has risen, from 15.5 percent to 17.0 percent, and the proportion of all women working in (non-clerical) public and social services occupations has risen. This is significant because there is a strong union presence in the private (often not-for-profit) part of this large sector, especially among women.

Table 1
The Changing Structure of Employment
by Selected Industry and Occupation

Strong Union	1984	2002
	% Jobs	By Industry
Primary Industries	6.7%	3.9%
Manufacturing	16.9%	15.1%
Transportation, Warehousing, Utilities	6.2%	5.7%
Construction	5.4%	5.7%
Education, Health Care, Social Assistance	15.5%	17.0%
Public Administration	6.7%	5.0%
(Public Sector)	26.1%	22.2%
	% Jobs	By Occupation
Blue-collar men as % of male employment	38.2%	35.4%
Health, Social Sciences, Education occupations as % of women's employment	15.4%	16.6%
Weak Union	% Jobs	By Industry
Trade	16.3%	15.8%
Finance, Insurance, Real Estate	6.3%	5.8%
Accommodation, Food ^a	5.6%	6.5%
Business Services	5.5%	10.2%
(of which Professional, Scientific, Technical)	(3.4%)	(6.4%)
(Administrative and Support)	2.1%	3.8%
Information, Culture, Recreation	3.8%	4.6%
	% Jobs	By Occupation
Business, Finance, Administrative occupations		
Men	10.3%	9.8%
Women	31.9%	27.2%
(of which % Clerical)	(52.2%)	(56.0%)
Sales and Services		
Men	18.4%	19.7%
Women	32.0%	32.2%

Occupational data for 1987.

^a"Blue-collar" is Trades, Transport and Equipment Operating, plus Processing and Manufacturing.

Source: Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey CD-ROM.

A significant change in sectors of traditional union weakness is that jobs have shifted to business services, partly professional scientific and technical services which employ mainly higher skilled workers, and partly administrative and support services which include many fewer skilled occupations, from building cleaning and maintenance to security guards. This industrial sectoral shift has not been mirrored in a structural increase in business, finance, and administrative occupations, which have actually fallen a bit as a share of all jobs. Sales and services employment has remained constant, and the proportion of all women in clerical, sales, and services occupations combined, has slipped only slightly, from 48.7 percent to 47.4 percent. In services, there has been a shift from less to higher skilled occupations, but this seems to have been relatively concentrated in public and social services.

Without denying the long secular trend towards higher skilled jobs (at least as measured by education), or the emergence of new economy information technology occupations, it is difficult to see why occupational and industrial shifts within already very low union density private services should have had a big impact on overall union density. A technically sophisticated decomposition of the decline in union density, from 1984 to 1998,¹⁴ finds that shifts of employment by industry and by occupation, taken together, have had very little overall effect on the unionization rate, which is explained by downward shifts within industries and occupations. Although, clearly, unions must increasingly reach out to more highly skilled new economy workers, at the same time, there are still legions of unorganized workers in relatively low-skill and low-pay consumer services industries (e.g., retail, restaurants, hotels) and business support services (e.g., building cleaners, call centre workers, couriers, security guards, etc.).

It is also often believed that unions have become weaker because of the decline of large private sector workplaces. It is, indeed, very difficult to organize and represent small workplaces. High union density in private services in some northern European countries is made possible mainly by sector-wide agreements, at least at the community or regional level, rather than by North American-style decentralized certification and bargaining. Increasing competition among small businesses may have made it even harder to organize and gain leverage in bargaining. However, a shift from large to small workplaces

Studies in Political Economy

does not explain why union density has declined. In the late 1990s, as in the mid-1980s, about 40 percent of private sector workers were employed in very small workplaces with fewer than twenty workers, and about 29 percent were employed in establishments of more than 100 workers.¹⁵ Employment actually shifted marginally away from small workplaces from 1997 to 2002, although there is evidence of declining plant size in manufacturing. If anything, recent union organizing successes have been relatively concentrated in small rather than large establishments, and between 1997 and 2002, union density in small private sector workplaces actually rose — from 7.6 percent to 7.9 percent — while falling sharply — from 47.3 percent to 40.9 percent — in private sector workplaces with more than 500 employees.

Changes in the form of employment have also been modest and seem to have had little effect on density. Self-employment increased only from 13.9 percent to 15.2 percent of all jobs from 1984 to 2002. Part-time jobs rose from 16.9 percent to 18.7 percent of total employment, but union density in part-time employment has actually increased since the mid-1980s (from 23.4 percent in 1984 to 24.2 percent in 2002) and has risen in private sector part-time jobs since 1997 (from 12.9 percent to 13.1 percent). The incidence of very low tenure jobs has not increased since the mid-1980s, and average job tenure for women and men has increased. None of this is to deny that many Canadian workers, particularly women, youth, and workers of colour, are employed in precarious and insecure jobs in smaller workplaces that make union organization extremely difficult under prevailing labour laws. The extent of structural change can, however, be greatly exaggerated.

Trends in Union Density by Sector and Gender Table 2 provides data from Statistics Canada household surveys on union coverage from 1984 to 2002. Unfortunately, fully consistent data by industry are available only for 1997-2002, so such detail should be interpreted cautiously. Tables 3 and 4 provide consistent industrial detail for 1997-2002.

In 2002, fewer than one in three Canadian workers were covered by a collective agreement. The union coverage rate has trended down by more than nine percentage points, from a high of 41.8 percent in 1984 to 32.2 percent in 2002.

Table 2
Changes in Union Coverage, 1984-2002

	1984	1988	1997	2002
Total	41.8	39.5	33.7	32.2
Men	46.0	43.2	35.2	32.3
Women	36.6	35.2	32.0	32.0
Public Sector	na	na	75.8	75.8
Private Sector	na	na	21.5	19.6
Age				
15-24	na	21.7	13.0	15.3
25-44	na	42.8	34.5	32.4
45-54	na	48.5	47.3	43.0
55 and over	na	44.3	37.8	36.3
Full-Time	45.5	43.1	36.0	33.8
Part-Time	23.4	30.5	23.6	24.2
Selected Industry				
Manufacturing	49.0	45.5	36.3	32.4
Construction	42.3	35.2	32.4	33.6
Transportation	58.4	57.8	45.2	43.7
Utilities	70.8	73.9	72.3	67.5
Trade	16.0	16.0	14.9	14.1
Accommodation and Food	11.5	13.2	8.7	8.0
Finance, Insurance, Real Estate	12.9	12.2	10.4	10.7
Education	78.4	75.8	73.5	73.8
Health and Welfare	62.6	61.6	55.8	56.5
Public Administration	78.4	75.8	71.4	72.1

Source: Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey, 1997 and 2002.

1984 and 1988 data are from the Survey of Union Membership and the Labour Market Activity Survey.

(As reported in J. David Arrowsmith, *Canada's Trade Unions: An Information Manual*. Industrial Relations Centre. Queen's University. 1992.)

Data are for workers covered by a collective agreement, slightly greater than union membership.

Industry data are not fully consistent due to change in classifications.

The decline in density has been gradual rather than sudden, and seems to have been concentrated in the recession and slow recovery period of the late 1980s through the mid-1990s when many jobs were lost in already unionized workplaces. The decline has slowed with the economic recovery. Indeed, density in 2002 was almost exactly the same as in 1999, and recently union coverage has grown in absolute numbers. This provides at least a basis for organizational renewal compared to the constraints that arise from absolute membership decline.

Studies in Political Economy

The decline in union coverage has been much more pronounced among men than among women. The coverage rate for men has fallen from almost half in the mid-1980s to just one-third today. The rate for women has fallen much less, and has remained steady at 32.0 percent since 1997. The gap in coverage between women and men has shrunk from almost 10 percentage points in 1984, to just one-third of one percentage point.

Table 3
Unions and Public Services Restructuring – Education, Health Care and Social Assistance, and Public Administration

	Education		Health Care / Social Assistance		Public Administration	
	1997	2002	1997	2002	1997	2002
Total Number	876,000	968,000	1,185,000	1,412,000	793,150	777,867
% Total Workforce	7.7%	7.4%	10.4%	10.8%	6.9%	5.9%
% Women Workers in Sector	62.1%	65.8%	83.3%	84.3%	43.9%	46.7%
% in Public Sector	88.2%	92.3%	57.2%	56.2%	98.0%	99.7%
Union Coverage						
All	73.5%	73.8%	55.8%	56.5%	71.4%	72.1%
Public Sector	79.2%	78.8%	73.9%	78.7%	72.2%	72.3%
Private / Non-Profit Sector	31.0%	14.5%	31.5%	28.1%	na	na
% All Union Members in Sector	16.8%	17.0%	17.2%	19.0%	14.7%	13.4%

Source: Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey.

Stable union coverage for women compared to the continuing decline among men since 1997 is mainly a function of the much greater likelihood of women working in public and social services. Two-thirds of union women work in the public sector (defined as direct government employment, plus employment in directly government-funded institutions, such as schools, universities, colleges, and hospitals) while only one-third work in the private sector. Well over one-half (61 percent) of unionized men work in the private sector. Coverage is much higher in the public sector (75.9 percent) than in the private sector (19.6 percent), and women in the public sector are even more likely to be union members than men. Coverage in public and social services (e.g., public administration, education, and health and social

services) has remained high, and, while perhaps slipping a bit from the mid-1980s, increased between 1997 and 2002.

In public and social services, union coverage was unchanged between 1997 and 2002 at 75.8 percent in direct public sector jobs, and the public sector remained constant as a share of all jobs (falling only from 22.4 percent to 22.3 percent of all jobs). Because of the fall in private sector density, the share of all union jobs to be found in the public sector rose, from 50.4 percent to 52.5 percent.

In health and welfare services (where more than 80 percent of workers are women), the share of total employment has grown, from 10.4 percent to 10.8 percent since 1997, and the public sector share of health and welfare jobs has shrunk only slightly, from 57.2 percent to 56.2 percent. Union coverage in the public sector part of health and welfare services rose, from 73.9 percent to 78.7 percent, 1997-2002, while union coverage in the private part (which includes not-for-profits) fell, from 31.5 percent to 28.1 percent. The net effect was that union density in this subsector rose from 55.8 percent to 56.5 percent. In educational services, where the public sector share of jobs is very high and is rising, union coverage rose from 73.5 percent to 73.8 percent. Direct government (e.g., public administration) employment fell from 6.9 percent to 5.9 percent of all jobs between 1997 and 2002, mainly because of cuts in municipal jobs, while union coverage remained constant at 72.2 percent.

In sum, the broader public sector has continued to be a bastion of union strength, partly because the direct public sector is now stable in size, and partly because of union strength in private and nonprofit, often-contracted-out services, such as long-term care, child care and home care. Public services unions have actively organized within and outside the formal public sector, and have had notable success among mainly women workers. The proportion of public sector employees who are women increased (from 56.2 percent to 60.5 percent), and the union coverage rate of women in the public sector increased (from 76.5 percent to 77.3 percent), while falling for men.

Due to changes in boundary definitions, there is no consistent long-term data on union coverage in the private sector before 1997. Likely, union

Studies in Political Economy

density in the private sector was close to 30 percent in the mid-1980s compared to less than 20 percent today. The continued slippage in private sector union density since 1997 — from 21.5 percent to 19.6 percent — took place in a period of strong private sector job growth, and suggests that there has been much more hiring in nonunion than union workplaces. Between 1997 and 2002, private sector union density fell among both men (26.1 percent to 23.8 percent) and women (16.0 percent to 14.5 percent), a proportionally similar rate of decline. The private sector paid workforce grew by 14.6 percent between 1997 and 2002, while the union-covered private sector workforce grew by only 4.6 percent. In absolute numbers, the private sector workforce grew by 1.3 million, while the number of union-covered private sector workers rose by just 88,000 over this period. Given the organizing rate, it is likely that job losses in private sector union workplaces have continued to outpace union membership gains from new organizing.

Table 4
Changes in Private Sector Union Density, 1997-2002

	1997	2002
Private Sector	21.5%	19.6%
Men	26.1%	23.8%
Women	16.0%	14.5%
Mining, Oil, Gas	28.9%	23.4%
Construction	32.4%	33.6%
(Trade Contracting)	29.8%	34.6%
Manufacturing	36.3%	32.4%
Transportation / Warehousing	45.2%	43.7%
Finance, Insurance, Real Estate	10.4%	10.7%
Men	9.0%	9.9%
Women	11.1%	11.2%
Trade	14.9%	14.1%
Men	16.8%	15.3%
Women	12.9%	12.9%
Accommodation, Food	8.7%	8.0%
Information, Culture, Recreation	30.3%	27.3%
Business Services		
(a) Professional, Scientific, Technical	5.8%	5.7%
(b) Managerial / Administrative	15.1%	15.0%

Source: Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey.

Looking at changes within the private sector, there has been a marked decline in union density in the traditional bastions of male, blue-collar

unionism. Density has fallen from one-half to less than one-third of all workers in manufacturing since the mid-1980s. This decline is significant enough to have had a major impact on density overall, and in the total private sector. About one-third of the nearly 10 percentage-point decline in density since the mid-1980s, and as much as one-half of private sector decline can probably be explained by decline within manufacturing. Between 1997 and 2002, density in manufacturing continued to fall, from 36.3 percent to 32.4 percent, arithmetically explaining 40 percent of the decline in overall density over this period.

The manufacturing density decline since 1997 has been pervasive across most subsectors and occupations, though it may be partly explained by a small shift away from blue-collar occupations. It is almost certainly closely linked to a huge turnover in manufacturing establishments since the mid-1980s, masked by the overall stability of jobs from cyclical peak to peak. One-half of all plants in 1988, accounting for one-quarter of employment, had closed by 1997, while four in ten of the 1997 plants, accounting for one-fifth of employment, did not exist even in 1988.¹⁶ Widespread restructuring in response to free trade and other forces likely drove density to decline through a combination of large job losses in union plants through closures and layoffs, stronger recent growth of employment in nonunion than union plants, and much stronger employer hostility to new organizing.

The data for 1984 to 2002 and 1997 to 2002 shows that there has also been a marked decline of union density in other industries with relatively high concentrations of male, blue-collar workers which have undergone similar restructuring — primary industries, transportation, and, to a lesser extent, utilities. By contrast, union coverage in construction has been quite stable at about one-third of all workers since the mid-1980s, and coverage actually increased between 1997 and 2002 because of an increase in density in trade contracting. The industrial construction sector remains highly unionized in some provinces and expanded in this period, and construction union employment benefitted from the housing and commercial building boom in some cities, especially the Greater Toronto Area. More widely, it seems that there is still room for a craft-based union model in the new economy, as suggested by resilient unionism in parts of the communications

Studies in Political Economy

and culture sectors. Craft unions can promote better wages, benefits, and access to training for workers who typically move frequently between employers within a sector, matching some characteristics of a more fluid job market.

Union coverage has always been low in private services, but seems to have held up relatively much better than in the traditional high union density, blue-collar sectors since the mid-1980s. In the recent period, 1997 to 2002, density actually rose (from 10.4 percent to 10.7 percent) in finance, insurance, and real estate, and slipped only slightly in trade (from 14.9 percent to 14.1 percent); accommodation and food services (from 8.7 percent to 8.0 percent), and business services (from 5.8 percent to 5.7 percent in professional/technical services, and from 15.1 percent to 15.0 percent in management/administrative services). Women represent about 60 percent of the workforce in consumer services and about 50 percent in business services, and the gap in density rates between women and men is small (with the exception of retail trade). It is hard to generalize about private services, but relatively stable density likely reflects a combination of stable employment in some highly unionized sectors (e.g., parts of the retail and insurance industries) and new organizing in high turnover sectors like cleaning, security, and hotels. Many unions in private services, such as the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), typically organize a higher than average share of their membership each year.

Geographical Trends in Union Density In 2002, as in 1984, the provinces with the highest union density rates were Quebec (40.4 percent), Newfoundland and Labrador (39.1 percent), Manitoba (36.1 percent), Saskatchewan (35.8 percent), and British Columbia (34.7 percent). All of these provinces, except British Columbia, experienced below average declines in density compared to the national average, 1984 to 2002. This suggests that relative strength is self-reinforcing to a degree because of organizational resources, bargaining strength, and the ability to influence governments. Ontario and Alberta, where national job growth was relatively concentrated from the mid-1980s, experienced above-average declines in density from already below-average levels from the mid-1980s. Geographical employment shifts have clearly played a role in declining density.

Table 5
Union Coverage by Province

	1984	2002	2002 as % 1984	Private Sector 2002	Public Sector 2002
Canada	41.8%	32.2%	77.0%	19.6%	75.8%
Newfoundland and Labrador	46.3%	39.1%	84.4%	20.7%	77.7%
Prince Edward Island	35.2%	30.9%	87.8%	9.5%	80.5%
Nova Scotia	42.5%	28.1%	66.1%	13.5%	72.0%
New Brunswick	40.9%	28.1%	68.7%	12.8%	71.6%
Quebec	49.7%	40.4%	81.3%	27.4%	82.0%
Ontario	37.6%	28.1%	74.7%	17.4%	70.8%
Manitoba	41.9%	36.1%	86.2%	19.9%	77.2%
Saskatchewan	41.9%	35.8%	85.4%	18.4%	76.1%
Alberta	33.4%	24.5%	73.4%	12.6%	72.6%
British Columbia	46.4%	34.7%	74.8%	21.4%	81.1%

(No data available for Territories)

Source: Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey.

Public sector union density rates are high across all provinces, ranging from a low of 70.8 percent in Ontario to 82.0 percent in Quebec in 2002, while private sector density is much more dispersed, ranging from a low of just 9.5 percent in Prince Edward Island and 12.6 percent in Alberta to highs of 27.4 percent in Quebec and 21.4 percent in British Columbia. Only Quebec, Newfoundland and Labrador, and British Columbia now have private sector unionization rates above 20 percent, and private sector density in Ontario (17.4 percent) and Alberta (12.6 percent) is relatively low and falling. Union density is very variable across cities, but is notably lower than the national average in two fast-growing cities, the huge Toronto CMA (22.4 percent) and Calgary (21.5 percent), though higher than average in two other very large urban centres, Montreal (35.3 percent) and Vancouver (33.5 percent).

What is to be Done? To summarize: declining union density has been concentrated in the private sector, particularly in the traditional strongholds of male, blue-collar industrial workers. Density has held up much better among women than among men, mainly because of high density in public and social services combined with a high concentration of women in such services.

Studies in Political Economy

However, it seems likely that recent organizing efforts in private as well as public and social services have had some positive effects given the relative stability of private services density, albeit at very low levels. Changes in density within industries seem to be more important than structural shifts of employment between industries, though a small but growing source of weakness has been a shift in jobs to very low-density business services. Shifts in employment by broad occupational categories, forms of employment, and establishment size do not seem to explain much, but establishment turnover probably explains a lot. Union density has held up better in higher density provinces with relatively labour-friendly governments, and has relatively eroded in the fastest growing provinces.

Analysis of changes in density can be only a rough guide to strategies for union renewal, if only because union agency is an absolutely critical key variable. The slower decline of density in Canada than in the US almost certainly reflects a greater union commitment to new organizing over the 1980s and 1990s, and more widespread adoption of an organizing, as opposed to servicing, model of trade unionism.¹⁷ Union membership will not grow if unions are not organizing new workplaces, yet some unions have been relatively complacent about density decline, or at least unwilling to divert resources and staff from servicing existing members to organizing new members. Unions which have been successful in new organizing typically make important internal changes, such as including rank and file members much more in the governance of already unionized workplaces, and in organizing campaigns, engaging members more in the internal life of the union through education and democratic reforms, recreating social movement dimensions of unions which had atrophied in the days of greater employer acceptance, and building stronger links with community organizations and other social movements. Union renewal has often involved changes in leadership and staff, for example through the inclusion of more women, workers of colour, and younger workers who are better placed to connect with the new workforce. The servicing model, which is often unfavourably contrasted to the organizing model, tended to rest on the relatively bureaucratic structures and member passivity that were the product of stable industrial relations in long-unionized firms and sectors. As

Schenk reminds us, however, unions abandon the servicing of current members at their peril, and an organizing model is not necessarily coincident with social movement unionism connecting the interests of organized and unorganized workers.

Presentations to the CLC conference by Yates, Kumar, and Murray, based on recent research, suggest that Canadian unions have had some success in recent organizing efforts as a result of ongoing union renewal. While incomplete, there has been a shift in orientation to organizing, to greater internal democracy and activism, and to building stronger links with communities. There has also been a limited shift in bargaining and in workplace activities to issues of interest to the new workforce, including training, work-family balance, and issues of particular interest to women and younger workers. A renewal of activism helps explain some recent successes, particularly among workers in services who would otherwise be in relatively low paid and precarious jobs. This may explain why the proportion of all union members in low-paid jobs (paid less than two-thirds of the median hourly wage) rose from 7.1 percent to 8.4 percent between 1997 and 2002, echoing increased union density among part-time workers, youth, and in small workplaces.

If organizing is making a difference, it seems to be at the low end of the job market. By contrast, unions seem to have had very little success in organizing core private sector workers: male, blue-collar workers including those in large workplaces, and higher skilled, professional workers in the private sector. This may reflect a lack of union focus on organizing such workers, particularly the latter group, and/or a lack of interest on the part of such workers in the potential gains from unionization. It may be that greater instability of employment and lack of progress in collective bargaining for the already organized have been factors at play: real wages of (predominantly male) private sector unionized workers have, on average, stagnated since the mid-1980s despite rising productivity.

The need to link organizing and bargaining strategies is an important theme that emerged at the CLC conference. Organizing a handful of small workplaces in a low-density sector is very difficult given strong employer resistance, and unlikely to make much difference for workers, at least in economic terms. Organizing across an economically relevant labour market

Studies in Political Economy

is likely to result in greater gains and, beyond a certain threshold, less employer resistance. Bargaining of master agreements with groups of employers, the norm in construction, also lowers the servicing costs of workplace-by-workplace bargaining. Examples in Canada include a handful of master agreements in hotels, restaurants, and the retail sector in some big cities. In some public and social services, such as home care and elder care, organizing success has been achieved, in part, by promoting sector-wide bargaining. Sector-wide organizing and bargaining can be facilitated through legislative and administrative changes, and runs against the grain of current labour law and practice.

Broader-based organizing and bargaining is also more likely to provide the basis for connections between unions and community organizations, which can often speak to a self-defined community of workers working for many employers. In recent years, notable broader-based private sector organizing and bargaining successes in the US have included large groups of low-paid, predominantly minority-group workers in specific cities. For example, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) has organized downtown office cleaning services in several cities through “Justice for Janitors” campaigns. The hotel workforce in Las Vegas is highly unionized as a result of union renewal and new organizing across the sector, and wages and benefits are now well above the industrial average.¹⁸ Attempts have also been made to organize some large employers across the board rather than on a workplace-by-workplace basis.

It is true that broader-based organizing and bargaining are generally hindered rather than facilitated by current labour laws based on the norm of workplace-by-workplace certification and bargaining, but successful organizing can make change happen regardless of legal norms and force changes in those norms. The industrial unions of the 1930s built industrial unions and forced industry-wide bargaining, with the *Wagner Act* placing a new legal framework over what had already happened.

Another major topic of discussion has been the need for union cooperation in organizing and bargaining. There may be a case for some competition between unions, which differ along many dimensions, but union

organizational rivalry, combined with fragmented bargaining, undercuts the potential of broader-based sectoral approaches, and of community unionism cutting across specific workplaces. The relative success of Quebec unions probably owes something to the stronger role played by the (rival) union centrals. These and many other issues are addressed in the contributions of Kumar, Murray, Yates and Schenk which follow.

Notes

1. Unfortunately, there is no fully comparable source of data on union density by industry, occupation, or public/private sector available before the *Labour Force Survey* series, which began in 1997. From 1962 to 1993, the major ongoing source of data on unionization was the *Companies and Labour Unions Returns Act* (CALURA) return, filed annually with Statistics Canada by most unions. CALURA data show that union density in the last year of the survey was, at 32.6 percent, virtually unchanged from the peak of 33.5 percent in 1983, giving rise to a general impression of stability. (See D. Galerneau, "Unionized Workers," *Perspectives on Labour and Income* (Statistics Canada Cat. 75-001-XPE Spring 1996); and *Unionization in Canada: A Retrospective* (Statistics Canada Cat. 75-001-SPE. Summer 1999)) However, CALURA data underestimated union coverage due to underreporting by small unions, particularly prior to the early 1980s, and other sources indicate a decline in density. Labour Canada (now Bureau of Labour Information) data — calculated annually from the reported national membership of unions — show a peak unionization rate of 40.0 percent of non-agricultural paid workers in 1983 and 1984, falling to 34.8 percent in 1990, and 30.4 percent in 2003. Comparable household surveys by Statistics Canada, the source of the data in Table 2, also suggest a significant decline in density — defined as the proportion of paid workers covered by a collective agreement — from 41.8 percent in 1984 to 32.2 percent in 2002. Collective agreement coverage today is about two percentage points higher than union membership.
2. The papers prepared for the conference, available from <http://www.clc-ctc.ca>, are: A. Jackson, *In Solidarity: The Union Advantage*; A. Jackson and S. Schetagne, *Solidarity Forever? An Analysis of Changes in Union Density* (based on micro-data from the *Labour Force Survey*); R. Katz-Rosene, *Union Organizing*, and a summary of the results of the Vector Poll commissioned by the CLC. In addition to presentations from community and union leaders and activists, the conference heard presentations from Elaine Bernard, Pradeep Kumar, Gregor Murray, and Charlotte Yates.
3. T. Fang and A. Verma, "The Union Wage Premium," *Perspectives on Labour and Income* (Statistics Canada, September 2002).
4. D. J. Doiron and W.C. Riddell, "The Impact of Unions on Male-Female Earnings Differences in Canada," *Journal of Human Resources* 29/2 (1994); A. Jackson and G. Schellenberg, "Unions, Collective Bargaining and Labour Market Outcomes for Canadian Working Women," in R. Chaykowski and L. Powell, (eds.), *Women and Work* (Kingston: J. Deutch Institute for Economic Policy, Queen's University, 1999); J. Reitz and A. Verma, "Immigration, Race and Labour: Unionization and Wages in the Canadian Labour Market," mimeo (2003).
5. T. Lemieux, "Unions and Wage Inequality in Canada and the United States," in D. Card and R. Freeman, (eds.), *Small Differences that Matter: Labor Market and Income Maintenance in Canada and the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); J. Dinardo, "Diverging Male Wage Inequality in the United States and Canada, 1981-1988: Do Institutions Explain the Difference?" *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 50/4 (July 1997); D. Card, T. Lemieux and W.C. Riddell, *Unionization and Wage Inequality: A Comparative*

Studies in Political Economy

- Study of the US, the UK and Canada*, National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. W9473. (February 2003); R. Chaykowski and G. Slotsve, *Economic Inequality and Poverty in Canada: Do Unions Matter?* Paper presented to the Centre for the Study of Living Standards Conference on the State of Living Standards and the Quality of Life in Canada (October 1998), <http://www.csls.ca>.
6. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, "Earnings Inequality, Low Paid Employment and Earnings Mobility" *Employment Outlook* (OECD, 1996).
 7. T. Aidt and Z. Tzannatos, *Unions and Collective Bargaining: Economic Effects in a Global Environment* (Washington: The World Bank, 2003); (OECD, 1996).
 8. P. Auer, *Employment Revival in Europe: Labour Market Success in Austria, Denmark, Ireland and the Netherlands* (Geneva: ILO, 2000); A. Jackson, "Can There Be a Second Way in the New Millennium?" *Studies in Political Economy* 65 (Summer 2001), pp. 39-64; International Labour Organization, *Decent Work in Denmark: Employment, Social Efficiency and Economic Security* (Geneva: ILO, 2003).
 9. R. Freeman and J. Medoff, *What Do Unions Do?* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).
 10. S. Black and L. Lynch, *What's Driving the New Economy: The Benefits of Workplace Innovation* (National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper #7479, 2000).
 11. In Canada, a slightly higher proportion of workers are covered by a collective agreement than are union members because individuals can opt out of membership, and because lower-level supervisors are sometimes covered by agreements but excluded from membership. The gap between coverage and membership is far greater in many European countries.
 12. R. Katz-Rosene for CLC; S. Johnson, "Canadian Union Density 1980 to 1998 and Prospects for the Future," *Canadian Public Policy* XXVIII/ 3 (2002); F. Martinello, *Certification and Decertification Activity in Canadian Jurisdictions* (Kingston: Industrial Relations Centre, Queen's University, 1996).
 13. C. Yates, "Staying the Decline in Union Membership: Union Organizing in Ontario, 1985-1999," *Relations Industrielles/Industrial Relations* 55/4: 640-74 2000; C. Yates, "The Revival of Industrial Unions in Canada," in P. Fairbrother and C. Yates, (eds.), *Unions in Renewal: A Comparative Study*. (New York: Continuum, 2003).
 14. C. Riddell and W.C. Riddell, *Changing Patterns of Unionization: The North American Experience to 1998* (University of British Columbia Department of Economics Working Paper 2001).
 15. M. Drolet and R. Morrissette, *Recent Evidence on Job Quality by Firm Size* (Statistics Canada, 1998).
 16. J. Baldwin and W. Gu, *Plant Turnover and Productivity Growth in Canadian Manufacturing* (Statistics Canada, 2003).
 17. C. Yates, "Expanding Labour's Horizons: Union Organizing and Strategic Change in Canada," *Just Labour* 1 (2002); P. Kumar and G. Murray, "Strategic Dilemma: The State of Union Renewal in Canada;" and C. Schenk, "Social Movement Unionism: Beyond the Organizing Model" in Fairbrother and Yates, (eds.), (2003). On the strategic terrain of union organizing, see L. Haiven, "The Union and Non-Union Zone: A Framework For the Challenge of Unions to Organize," *Just Labour* 3 (Fall 2003).
 18. H. Meyerson, "Las Vegas as a Workers' Paradise," *The American Prospect* (January 2004).