

## FORUM: REORGANIZING UNIONS DIFFUSING INNOVATIONS AND ARTICULATING LABOUR'S VISION<sup>1</sup>

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Union density — the proportion of wage and salary earners who are union members — has been falling around the world in recent years.<sup>2</sup> Although there are exceptions, the trend has been pervasive. The reasons for the decline are well-known and documented in several studies. The major factors contributing to the decline include corporate restructuring in the wake of globalization (marked by downsizing, outsourcing, and use of part-time, temporary, and contract work); privatization and contracting out of public services; increasing application of information technologies and new methods of production and management; changes in public policy towards deregulation and market-oriented solutions; aggressive antiunion employer behaviour and attitudes; insufficient organizing efforts by unions to offset losses in membership, and the inability of unions to work in solidarity to organize the expanding nonunion workforce. Canada is no exception. As Andrew Jackson has documented in his paper,<sup>3</sup> union density has been declining over the past two decades despite a steady increase in absolute membership. The erosion of unions' organizational strength has been interpreted by the media and business-oriented commentators as an indication that unions are losing ground, and becoming irrelevant and incapable of helping workers in the face of heightened global competition and the rising influence of transnational corporations.

As one prominent academic has noted, however, while “the decline of the trade union movement around the world is a familiar and depressing story, less well-known is the fact that union movements in many countries are reorganizing and becoming proactive as they try to turn the tide and revive

*Studies in Political Economy*

themselves.”<sup>4</sup> Based on examples of successful innovative activity of unions around the world, he concludes that “even in the most adverse settings, union action of some kind is still possible and can often make a significant difference to the lives of working people.”<sup>5</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to outline how unions in Canada are transforming themselves in response to changes in their internal and external environments, and how innovations can be widely diffused to revitalize the labour movement. Union renewal is not synonymous with just increasing membership through expansion of organizing efforts. Experience suggests that organizing new members is closely connected to effective bargaining and political action. Moreover, although expanded organizing efforts are crucial to bolster union strength, union revival cannot be sustained without changes in union culture. To be viable institutions of, by, and for workers, unions must become more democratic, inclusive, and participatory. They have to work in solidarity with each other and with other social groups, both at home and abroad, towards a common vision. Since widespread mobilization is an important force for institutional change, the labour movement in Canada needs to more effectively articulate its vision of social unionism, a form of unionism that is rooted not simply in the workplace but is an integral part of the community at large. Labour’s vision of economic and social change can be realized only by “developing the capability to organize communities around workplace struggles... (t)hat is the power and promise of community unionism.”<sup>6</sup> Survey and case study research, as well as recent policy documents of many unions, indicate that most Canadian unions and their rank and file are committed to this vision.

**Keeping a Balanced Perspective and Accentuating the Positive** In the current climate of insecurity and constant attacks on union legitimacy, it is important to keep in mind that the trade union movement in Canada is not facing a crisis, or approaching an imminent serious decline. On the contrary, despite a marginal decline in union density, the Canadian labour movement has been vibrant and dynamic. Union membership has been steadily increasing in contrast to a sustained decline in the United States, Britain, Australia, Japan, and many European countries. While membership growth

in the 1990s was slower than in the 1970s and 1980s, it should be borne in mind that the last decade was a period of extreme adversities. It was characterized by many unfavourable changes in public policy, hardening of employer attitudes towards union activity, stepped-up demands for wage and work-rule concessions, continuous waves of downsizing in unionized sectors of the economy, and an increasing emphasis on lean production and “continuous improvement” which brought about rising levels of stress and insecurity. In addition, union involvement in management initiatives to reorganize work systems resulted in high service loads for union staff with consequent neglect of organizing and community action.

Notwithstanding these pressures, unions have continued to expand their organizing efforts. Since 1997, union membership has grown by nearly half a million (an increase of 454,000 or 11.7 percent between mid-1997 and the first half of 2003, according to Statistics Canada estimates based on the *Labour Force Survey*). While most of the growth has come in the public sector, primarily in health and education, unions have also made small but significant gains in the private service sector; in particular, in trade and hospitality industries, in some parts of manufacturing, in construction, in small workplaces employing fewer than 100 workers, and among women, youth and part-time workers. Although not a reason to become complacent, these are important accomplishments in a highly adverse environment.

Recent opinion polls also suggest that Canadian unions have transformed their public image.<sup>7</sup> Unions are seen as a force that can help broad segments of the population. Workers are increasingly willing to join unions, to fight for their basic rights and legal protections, and to fight to maintain the social safety net. Unions have a positive image as a catalyst for change among youth, women, and minorities, those in precarious jobs, and workers who are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with their quality of work-life. However, much cynicism still prevails regarding unions’ motives. The polls stress the need to raise the profile of the labour movement by working in the communities and developing strong links with community organizations and civil society groups, encouraging the membership to speak out publicly and positively about union accomplishments, attracting new members through innovative organizing campaigns, and increasing advocacy for social

*Studies in Political Economy*

and economic change through aggressive lobbying and political action. The current situation does not confirm the highly speculative prediction that unions are in terminal decline, or face a crisis of survival; rather, it highlights the important challenges and opportunities facing the labour movement, emphasizing the need for strategic thinking and bold action to rebuild the movement and increase the speed of change.

**Union Innovations and Change** Recent surveys and case studies, as well as discussions in union conferences and labour media, suggest that unions in Canada have been engaged in a critical assessment of their goals, functions, and strategies. Many changes and innovations have occurred in approaches and priorities relating to organizing, bargaining, servicing, and building coalitions. Organizational structures have been modified to include more women, people of colour, youth, and Aboriginals to reflect changing demographics. A number of public and private sector unions have reaffirmed their commitment to social unionism, and have been devoting significant time and resources to community issues.

Many of these changes are reflected in the 2000-01 Human Resources Development Canada sponsored survey of unions covering 120 of the 205 national and international unions with a combined membership of over 2.9 million, or more than three-quarters of the total union membership.<sup>8</sup> The survey revealed widespread incidence of organizational change; increased emphasis on rank and file communication, involvement, and participation in union activities, and a high priority on education and training to promote union awareness, activism, and solidarity. The major organizational innovations underway include evaluation of union goals and performance, changes in methods of servicing, proactive (as well as defensive) bargaining approaches and priorities, allocating greater resources towards organizing smaller workplaces, increasing emphasis on membership participation and involvement in union decision-making through surveys and other instruments, use of new technologies for more effective communications, modifications in organizational structures, and adoption of specific programs and policies for women, youth, people of colour, gays and lesbians, those with

disabilities, and retired. The survey also found heightened awareness of the need for political action to effect legislative change and community mobilization, coalition building and cross-border international coordination, and a growing trend towards adopting an independent agenda on workplace change. Survey findings indicate that unions are using innovative practices for organizing with specific organizing targets, creation of separate departments for organizing with racially and gender-diverse full-time staff and trained local officers, as well as activists to organize new units.

Yates<sup>9</sup> similarly reports a revival in industrial unions based on interviews with union staff and leaders, a survey of union organizers in Ontario, documentary evidence, and observation of several unions. Her analysis is devoted to membership composition, union strategy, organizational structure, and culture. She focuses on four areas of adaptation and change: organizing the unorganized, bargaining, restructuring of internal union organization, and changes to union identity. She concludes that “rather than the dinosaurs of the new economy, industrial unions are engaged in a process of revitalization to emerge once again as counterbalances to increasingly powerful employers,” and argues that a “new form of unionism is emerging.” Further evidence of change is provided by studies of Quebec unions by Gregory Murray and Christian Levesque,<sup>10</sup> and of community unionism practices.<sup>11</sup> The widespread organizational change reflected in these studies is a testimony to Canadian unions’ acute awareness of the need for change to adapt to new realities, and their commitment to internal reorganization and mobilization to become a more inclusive and democratic institution, capable of bringing about progressive economic and social change. This awareness and the process of innovation and change underway in many unions may be the reason why union membership growth has remained steady and the decline in union density has slowed down over the past six years.

**Accelerating the Speed of Change** Unions in Canada have done well compared to those in other countries. They have every reason to be proud of their accomplishments. However, they continue to face many difficult challenges from an adverse external environment and rising expectations of current and potential members. As Geoff Bickerton<sup>12</sup> has noted:

*Studies in Political Economy*

Today unions are expected to play a leadership role — at the workplace and within the community on a host of issues, including sexism, harassment, racism, homophobia, childcare, international solidarity, globalization, trade, health and safety, environment, peace, deregulation, privatization, and any number of issues specific to their sector. **Activists rightfully demand that their unions play a significant role in coalitions and community struggles** [emphasis added].

Unions under these pressures cannot afford to be complacent. They have to constantly build and rebuild on the accomplishments of the past through innovations. Slow and incremental change is unlikely to bring about revival, not even restoration of the strength unions enjoyed twenty years ago. Labour leaders have to think strategically and proactively to accelerate the speed of change, and to widely diffuse the process of innovation. The labour movement needs an integrated strategy and a coordinated program of action.

The change has to be led by the Canadian Labour Congress, based on its document *Building a Stronger Movement*, discussed and passed at the 23<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Convention.<sup>13</sup> The program of action, as developed by the CLC, has to include:

- Reaffirming labour's long-term vision of economic and social change, and its commitment to community unionism. Union values and mission are not always clear to members and the public at large. The Congress should mount a public relations campaign to articulate its goals and objectives, emphasizing their links with the needs and aspirations of communities;
- Formulating, with the help of affiliates, an integrated strategy for more effective organizing, creative bargaining, and renewed political action for safe and healthy communities and workplaces. The Congress should develop a menu of best practices for change based on model union initiatives and community campaigns;
- Pushing affiliates for an accelerated process of change in their organizational structures to reflect the changing workforce and foster greater rank and file involvement and participation in union decision-making processes;
- An emphasis on the important role of local unions in the process of rebuilding, the need to build local union power and capacity to engage

in more creative bargaining for meeting the unfilled needs of workers, to design support services and structures to implement labour's independent agenda on workplace change, and to mobilize workers around community issues;

- Enlarge the community network by rebuilding and strengthening local labour councils, by providing them adequate resources for more effective coalition building with progressive social movements on grass root community issues. As one labour activist has noted: "Labour must do more than simply build alliances, it must fuse with these movements such that it is no longer clear what is a labour issue, a women's issue or an immigrant issue."<sup>14</sup> The coalitions need to be built around issues, identities and concerns;
- Creation of a positive environment of working together, and a viable framework for inter-union co-operation and solidarity for effectively regulating the growing inter-union competition and conflicts, based on a voluntary code of conduct, and
- Lobbying the federal government to restore funding to the labour education program to build union leadership. As the CLC document *Building a Stronger Movement* emphasizes, labour education is an important element of labour revitalization. It "helps build common purpose and identity," and promotes public interest by helping to achieve a stable industrial relations environment.

**Conclusion** Unions in Canada have faced the adversities of the past two decades much more successfully than labour movements in other countries. They have been able not only to maintain but also increase membership in an increasingly hostile environment through innovation and adapting to new realities, turning challenges into opportunities. The incidence and pace of innovation has, however, been uneven and sporadic. To be effective and to secure the future, the process of change must be diffused widely. The labour movement needs to more effectively articulate its vision and adopt an integrated strategy to build stronger links with community issues and struggles. Unless it thinks and acts strategically, organizing and bargaining strength, and labour's role in civil society, could be eroded. Rather than

*Studies in Political Economy*

becoming complacent, unions need to be more proactive and determined in their efforts to build rank-and-file activism through expanded programs of education, communication, and participation. The Canadian Labour Congress, as the House of Labour, has to become the catalyst of change through an effective program of action.

**Notes**

1. This paper is based on a presentation given at the Canadian Labour Congress Mid-Term Conference, *Building the Movement – Unions on the Move* in October 2003. The author is grateful to the organizers for the invitation and to many delegates for their comments and suggestions.
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3. A. Jackson, *Solidarity Forever? Trends In Canadian Density* (Ottawa: Canadian Labour Congress, 2004).
4. J. Kelley, *Union Revival – Organizing Around the World* (London: Trade Union Congress, 2002).
5. For evidence of union revival initiatives in developed and developing countries, see the special issue of *European Journal of Industrial Relations* (special theme: Trade Union Revitalization) 9/1 (March 2003); Fairbrother and Yates 2003; D.B. Cornfield and H. McCammon, *Labor Revitalization: Global Perspectives and New Initiatives Research In the Sociology of Work* 11 (Danvers, MA: Elsevier Ltd., 2003), and A.V. Jose, *Organized Labour In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Geneva: International Labour Office, 2002).
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14. D. Clawson, *The Next Upsurge: Labor and the New Social Movements* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).

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