

FORUM: REORGANIZING UNIONS UNION MYTHS, ENIGMAS, AND OTHER TALES: FIVE CHALLENGES FOR UNION RENEWAL

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Few can be against union renewal, especially in the context of a conference on this subject. The reality of renewal on the ground, however, is very complex. The labour movement in particular is built on many myths, enigmas, and half-truths. There's a need to confront them. Such is the modest objective of this contribution.

I seek to do so by outlining five paradoxes that currently confront unions in Canada: union growth and density, and the sense of crisis (or lack thereof) on the part of labour leaders and activists; the precise nature of the so-called union advantage; the multiple meanings of social unionism; the nature of the gender, generation, and colour gaps, and, finally, the implications of union chauvinism for renewal.

Each of these sets of observations draws on a variety of empirical research: either the excellent research effort that went into the preparation of the 2003 CLC Mid-Term Conference, notably by Jackson,¹ Jackson and Schetagne,² the CLC Vector Poll,³ and the CLC's work on organizing,⁴ or the research conducted by various academic researchers, including our own Inter-University Research Centre on Globalization and Work/Centre de recherche interuniversitaire sur la mondialisation et le travail (CRIMT)⁵ research team, over the last several years. Each paradox entails a particular challenge for the labour movement. Together, not only do they constitute a daunting agenda, but they illustrate the need to focus much more sharply on the nature of the challenges at hand.

Union Growth: Is the Glass Half-Empty or Half-Full? Membership is increasing, but not nearly as fast as the labour market as a whole. Australian, Japanese, American, and French trade unionists can visit us and admire the relative health of Canadian unions. According to the very comprehensive portrait painted by Andrew Jackson and Sylvain Schetagne,⁶ over the last five years (1997-2002), unions added 350,000 new members (many of whom were added to already unionized workplaces) to expand to 4.2 million members. During the same period, however, overall density fell by 1.5 percentage points to 32.2 percent of the workforce. This means that there is membership growth taking place and considerable energy being invested, but not nearly enough.

Economists talk about “money illusion” i.e., in periods where there are increases in both wages and the cost of living, the increases in wages do not match the increases in the cost of living. This money illusion means that workers do not necessarily realize that they are experiencing declining living standards because the absolute amount of money that they are getting is increasing, albeit not as quickly as is the cost of living. In the case of the recent union growth observed in Canada, we have instead a phenomenon of “membership illusion.” Absolute union membership in Canada has risen. Union resources, therefore, appear to be fairly healthy and this breeds a degree of complacency on the part of union leaderships. Indeed, it appears that the decline in overall density and collective union power is someone else’s problem because “our” membership is still rising. In contrast, other national union movements, experiencing both membership and density decline, often face a much starker reality, and there is little scope for such illusion.

The good news is that there is union growth in the private sector; the bad news is that job growth in this sector is much, much greater. For example, in Ontario, where the public sector has been under attack for the last many years, the rate of union coverage in the public sector only declined by one-tenth of a percentage point (from 70.9 percent to 70.8 percent) from 1997 to 2002. In the private sector, it declined from 19.4 percent to 17.4 percent in the same period; a full two percentage points in just five years. In British Columbia, the decline observed is even greater — three percentage points (from 24.5 percent to 21.4 percent).

These observations are salutary as Canadian unionists often demonstrate a degree of complacency relative to their brothers and sisters from US unions because the level of unionization in the US private sector is seen to be so low. It should be emphasized, however, that while the roughly 13.3 percent level of unionization in the US in 2003 is in marked contrast with the 32.2 percent in Canada in 2002, the 17 percent and still declining private sector union density in Ontario is not all that far removed from the US rate of 8.2 percent union density in the private sector in 2003. If we were to extrapolate recent private sector trends in Ontario, then the net result in Canada over another decade would be a further marked decline.

However, and this is the membership illusion paradox, this decline in relative union density does not translate into financial crisis. Canadian unions have a fairly secure organizational basis from which to face the future, and it can be argued that this offers a window of opportunity, which is not indefinite. The challenge is how to leverage existing organizational resources in order to reinforce union presence.

In this sense, there are both worrying and encouraging signs. With the support of Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) and many unions in Canada, Pradeep Kumar and I conducted an extensive survey of the organizational practices of the major unions in Canada.⁷ The results can be considered to be fairly representative because they come from 120 unions covering approximately 76.5 percent of union members in Canada.

In terms of worrying signs, there are a number of indicators that organizing is not always a high priority. First, of the 7,818 direct union staff in Canada, 14.8 percent are deemed to be specialists in organizing and recruitment while 42.7 percent are engaged in general servicing. Second, fewer than half of unions (45 percent) have a person with overall responsibility for organizing. Third, fewer than half (42 percent) have specific organizing targets. Fourth, only 12.5 percent of unions have a specific target to spend on organizing. Fifth, the average percentage of resources spent on organizing is 6.8 percent: 21 percent of unions do not spend any resources, and just about half spend from one to five percent. Only 6.2 percent of unions spend more than 20 percent of their revenues on organizing. Sixth, most unions (66 percent) focus their organizing efforts on traditional areas of

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membership strength. In particular, this means that many unions seek simply to reproduce their existing gender and racial membership profiles, as opposed to seeking to diversify their membership base. Finally, only 30 percent of unions report increasing resources for organizing.

Our study also identifies some encouraging signs as a basis on which to build. Among these signs is the fact that 56 percent of unions report to be training activists to organize. Second, 20 percent of unions have dedicated funds for organizing. Third, 20 percent of unions have sought to alter the gender, racial, and age profiles of their members in order to better reflect the new groups they are seeking to organize. Finally, fifty percent of unions report a high degree of success when they organize. Indeed, the two major obstacles to increasing the organizing effort were identified as jurisdictional saturation and too many other priorities, as opposed to disinterest on the part of potential members or employer opposition.

It might be argued that membership loss is a key driver for innovation; in other words, that adversity breeds creativity. However, in multivariate analysis of the innovation patterns in these unions, we found that the availability of resources is a key driver for union innovation. Thus, it is unions with additional resources that seem most likely to engage in the types of practices associated with innovation in union organizing. The key challenge, then, is how to use existing organizational base (or capacity) in order to invest in organizing while that base remains strong.

The Union Advantage: Delivering the Goods or Dignity at Work? Union membership clearly procures certain advantages for workers. Statistics Canada data tell us this and the background paper by Andrew Jackson⁸ for the CLC Mid-Term Conference further analyzes the advantages.

The 2003 CLC Vector Poll offers some interesting insights into differences in perspective between the unionized and nonunionized. We might expect satisfaction about different aspects of people's jobs to reflect this union advantage: that the unionized should be more satisfied given their better working conditions. This is not, in fact, the case as there are not huge differences between unionized and nonunionized workers. Nonunionized workers are less satisfied than the unionized on certain aspects of their jobs.

These aspects can be identified as the union advantage, concentrated on pensions (+18 percent greater satisfaction on the part of union members), pay (+6 percent), benefits (+5 percent), and job security (+2 percent).

But, if the union advantage is so strong, why are union members less satisfied than nonunion members on certain aspects of their jobs? The CLC Vector poll suggests that nonunion employees are actually more satisfied with their jobs in several ways: how supervisors handle employee complaints (+8 percent greater satisfaction on the part of nonunionists), discrimination and favouritism (+6 percent), training for new skills (+6 percent), health and safety (+6 percent), the amount of pressure they are under (+5 percent), balancing work and family (+3 percent).

Moreover, there are no issues on which a greater proportion of nonunion employees believe that unions make working conditions a lot better. The issues on which nonunion members are most likely to see a positive union influence are health and safety (36 percent of nonunion members indicate that unions make this issue a lot better), job security (35 percent), benefits (34 percent), and pensions (31 percent).

In other words, and herein lies the paradox, the union advantage would appear to translate into a classic bread-and-butter view of unions as organizations pushing the boat forward on tangible benefits. Yet, this can be illusory because other data tell us that what's most important is fairness and dignity at work.

In surveys that my colleague Christian Levesque and I conducted with the three labour centrals in Québec (CSN, CSQ, FTQ), we asked members and nonmembers to choose between different items regarding what's really important in what unions do: negotiating pay rises, promoting social justice, giving workers a voice in the workplace, protecting workers against arbitrary and unfair treatment, or promoting particular professions or occupational groups. Invariably, the top priority for union and nonunion members alike is arbitrary and unfair treatment. This choice does not seem to correlate with any particular demographic characteristics, i.e., it is identified in roughly the same proportion by all types of worker.

There is another more experiential way of thinking about this issue. When union audiences are asked to think about their best, most interesting, and

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most personally rewarding, most collectively empowering union moment over the last number of years, it is rarely related to a big pay increase. The greatest probability is that it is related to a dignity-at-work issue — a sense of justice and self-affirmation that translates into collective empowerment.

Both of these readings are consistent with recent research on organizing. On the one hand, the spark for organizing drives often comes from justice and dignity issues; successful campaigns therefore focus on issues of direct concern to workers and these issues are often about dignity at work. On the other hand, the decision to unionize is also related to a real analysis of whether a union is likely to make a difference. Such is the core of this second paradox. The prevailing, and most often correct, image about what unions do best is expressed in terms of a traditional range of achievements for improving working conditions. This is consistent with the results of the CLC Vector Poll in which pensions, benefits, pay, and job security come out on top. Yet, although important, these alone are not necessarily what drive people to unionize, as the spark comes from justice and dignity issues.

The challenge, then, involves how to think about the union advantage and how it is presented. There are two aspects to this union advantage challenge. First, on the basis of the research findings presented above, this must be about “dignity at work” issues and also about how dignity at work translates into a variety of long-term advantages. This suggests a path that is different from a narrow instrumental view of the union advantage. It is this view that often boxes in the union advantage in ways that narrow the purpose of unions and the real advantages generated. Especially relevant in the context of a globalizing economy is the fact that it is not always possible to assert a simple instrumental view of unions, especially in terms of the problems of securing significant instrumental advantages in certain weak sectors where the jobs are more likely to disappear than improve. Collective power and dignity are especially important in such contexts.

Second, there are too many urban legends in the labour movement about pent-up demand to unionize. According to this world view, it is merely a question of changing the legislative framework to allow the tide of new union members to flow. Analysis of the CLC Vector Poll sounds a cautionary note. Only 14 percent of nonunionists would be very likely to vote for a union

(versus 19 percent somewhat likely). Ironically, seven out of ten existing union members would likely vote to remain unionists if given the choice (39 percent of existing union members being very likely to vote for a union, and another 31 percent being somewhat likely to vote for union membership). This raises the question of whether the population is naturally distributed into groups who want to be union members and those who do not. Of course, this is not the case. For many workers, union status is a roll of the dice according to whether serendipity places them in a unionized or nonunionized work context. The second dimension of the union advantage paradox is that there is clearly something about union socialization that makes existing union members more likely to pursue their union advantage. That advantage cannot be asserted, it must be constructed in collective consciousness. For that to be the case, it must be fully understood.

Social Unionism: But What Kind? Canada has a long tradition of social unionism. People in resource towns and cyclically vulnerable industries have always been astute in rating their chances against multinational and other firms: there is a need for simultaneous action in the workplace and, beyond the workplace, in social and political issues. In addition, the CLC Vector Polls have consistently indicated that union involvement in the community is important.

But what kind of involvement? What are the value sets informing this view? It is often too easy for union activists to infer their particular take on what this means. In work done with my colleagues Christian Lévesque and Pradeep Kumar,⁹ we examined this issue using the results of a CLC Vector Poll conducted in 2000. We wanted to see how different priorities regarding business unionism and social unionism grouped together. There are three images of the appropriate space for union action.

Consistent with a more traditional business union agenda, the first group (and the smallest), did not support greater union involvement in either government social issues or human rights/global citizenship issues. The second group focused on the traditional social union agenda. This group tended to believe that unions in Canada should be more involved in lobbying governments on unemployment benefits, social programs, not-for-profit

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health care, child care, and an increased minimum wage. The third and largest group, in addition to supporting the social union agenda, also supported a new social union agenda, embracing both human rights and global citizenship issues. In other words, this group supported the extension of the traditional social union agenda to a larger set of citizenship issues. It's important to emphasize, however, that the driving factor is not antiglobalization questions, but rather a range of individual protections around issues to do with sexual and racial equality, such as educational campaigns to stop racism and the promotion of equality for women and visible minorities. This demonstrates why human rights charters are so important and need to be associated with labour gains.

This more complex rendering of the contents of social unionism raises the tricky issue of the relationship between individual and collective issues, how you package them, and for which groups. It's important to focus on what social and community unionism might mean and—this is the paradox—because there tends to be an overt slippage in terms of reframing, on what people might want in terms of an agenda that does not necessarily correspond to their aspirations.

We live in a society characterized by an increasing diversity of forms of employment and lifestyle choices. If the union reflex is to return to an idyllic past of full-time, life-long jobs, it is unlikely to connect with the realities of the contemporary labour market. The challenge, therefore, is how to engage strategically with new types of work and new sets of values that connect with this labour market and pick up both individual and collective issues.

The Gender, Generation, and Colour Gap: Appreciating Our Hard-Won Gains? There is an old refrain that new union members do not always appreciate the hard won gains of the past. In the context of a rapidly changing workforce, this might mean that some combination of women, the young, and immigrants are less likely to appreciate the benefits of unionism. This is patently not the case. As demonstrated by the CLC Vector Poll and by recent trends in union growth, it is precisely these groups that are more likely to want to join a union.

Indeed it might be suggested, somewhat euphemistically, that the labour movement's current problem appears to be the aging white male. Feminists seem to have known this for some time. Of course, the aging white male is a social artefact — a product of past generations of struggle. Surely the point is that those struggles are likely to take on different forms in the future and there is a need to tackle the demography and values issues. Indeed, this was a common theme running through many of the presentations at the CLC Mid-Term Conference. The paradox is, however, as follows: a greater propensity to want to unionize does not necessarily translate into an embrace of existing union value sets. While many women, visible minorities, and immigrants are more likely to want to join unions because they see a union advantage (but see, above), do they think of union value sets in the same way? In this respect, older activists and staff are probably quite right to raise the issue about differences on this point.

In research conducted for the *Confédération des syndicats nationaux* (CSN) in Quebec, our research team asked CSN members about both the need for unions and about the sets of values and practices that underlie them.¹⁰ On the need for unions, the results were compellingly strong with a huge majority espousing the view that unions are indeed necessary to protect workers and also expressing a willingness to remain a union member. There was very little variation by type of worker and employment. The value questions, however, yielded a more nuanced picture. In terms of a basket of values associated with industrial unions (defending all workers and not just union members, going on strike if necessary and not crossing picket lines), the support was much weaker, and variations in support for these values were sensitive to some of the fault lines of the new labour market — less support from women, part-timers, the young, and so on.

Two factors appeared to make a difference in the way that union members evaluated their union value sets: employer policies hostile to unionism (which unfortunately seemed to have some success in terms of their association with the alienation of union members from their unions) and, by far the strongest, the quality of the democratic experience within unions. On this latter point, a positive assessment of local union democracy meant that members were more likely to buy into union value sets.

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Given that this is one of the few levers available for unions to reinforce the link between the values underlying their collective projects and the assessments of union members, the challenge appears to be how to enhance the quality of that local democratic experience. Herein lies another paradox for labour movement renewal: at precisely the time when the value sets of the labour movement are increasingly open to challenge, there are several signs of weakness in the local democratic experience.

First, the 2003 CLC Vector Poll indicates that four out of ten respondents (union and nonunion alike) feel that they have no say in how a union operates. Second, the rise of amalgamated or composite locals seems to be inexorable. In North America at least, this is the administrative solution to the increasing servicing load and the small size of bargaining units. The question, however, is how can you be a member of a 5,000- or 10,000- or 20,000-member local and still have a quality experience of union democracy. In my view, this challenge remains largely unanswered in the Canadian labour movement and there has not been sufficient work to tackle it.

The key challenge, then, is the link between democracy and emerging values. How do you enhance the quality and perception of the democratic experience of unionism, which appear to be the key drivers in both the way that people judge unions, and in renewal of the local union experience?

Union Solidarity or Union Chauvinism? Currently, there is an outbreak of “my union is better than your union” syndrome in Canada. This reflects the new reality of a multiplicity of general unions increasingly competing for the same members.

Let there be no doubt that competition can be healthy. The prime example is that of Quebec where the labour movement is undoubtedly more dynamic because of inter-union competition. It should also be noted that this competition has as much to do with competition for existing members (as in raiding between competing union centrals) as for new members. Quebec, nonetheless, remains the province with the highest rate of organizing.¹¹

However, we do have some bad cases of “one true pathism” in Canada, and this has led to a systematic gutting of central labour federations. This

comment is not aimed at any particular union because the phenomenon is so widespread. The ironies are telling. Union leaders claim to want to promote community unions but they do not invest in local labour councils. Union organizers claim to want to develop community approaches to organizing, but often do so in a spirit of competitive recrimination and outside of any notion of jurisdiction or sectoral power.

The paradox here concerns the space for innovation. What's happening on the ground is very complex. There's not really space for "one true pathism" because the degree of economic and social change is so great that the future shape of union practices and institutions is far from evident. It is likely that there will emerge quite different practices, but the shape of these remains to be determined; hence, the importance of innovation. In order to create the space for innovation, it is necessary to suspend some of the more facile judgements. Yet, such judgements are in abundance. For example, some unions have begun servicing their membership with call centres. Is this good or bad? There are arguments for both: reinforcing the link between member and organization versus weakening collective consciousness in favour of a form of unionism as an insurance policy. We need to know about this, and activists should be eager to discuss the merits of this type of experiment. I am constantly astounded at the expressions of ignorance about what's going on in other unions — not from a knowledge basis, but from sheer ignorance or rank prejudice.

Union leaders appear to be somewhat aware of this problem, but their solution is too often an administrative one. Mergers become a panacea for overcoming the obstacles to innovation when, more often than not, they are a recipe for a decade of bureaucratic paralysis. This is not to suggest that mergers cannot be useful ways to consolidate union power, when conceived as such, but they do not lessen the need for a profusion of inter-union collaboration on the ground. Moreover, labour federations should be acting as brokers to discuss different forms of innovation.

The challenge is to promote innovation and experimentation about what unions are and should be doing, then to diffuse the results of these experiences. This entails different kinds of forums and exchanges, the greater use

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of new information technologies, more systematic evaluation of different types of experiences, and the continuing exchange of ideas. This is now happening in only the most limited ways.

Conclusion This contribution identifies five challenges facing the labour movement which merit particular consideration, each highlighting some of the real difficulties of a union renewal agenda. First, there is the question of how to leverage the existing organizational base in Canada to accomplish a more consistent organizing effort than is currently the case. Second, there is a need to think about the union advantage and its multiple meanings for different groups of workers. It is not sufficient to assert this advantage or to emphasize an overly narrow interpretation of it. Third, it is essential to engage with new types of work, workers, and value sets because it is from this engagement that new forms of unionism will emerge. Fourth, the quality and perception of the democratic experience in unions are paramount, and not to be glossed over, as we can readily identify real problems in the clash between administrative expediency and the quality of the collective experience as a unionist. Finally, there is a need to promote innovation and democratic experimentation, and to diffuse and discuss the results of these innovations and experiments. Unions, both national and local, should be fostering inter-union discussions about the paths for renewal rather than hindering them.

Notes

1. A. Jackson, *In Solidarity: The Union Advantage* Research Paper 28 (Ottawa: Canadian Labour Congress, 2003).
2. A. Jackson and S. Schetagne, *Solidarity Forever? An Analysis of Changes in Union Density* Research Paper 25 (Ottawa: Canadian Labour Congress, 2003).
3. Canadian Labour Congress, *Canadians Talk about Unions*, paper prepared for the CLC Mid-Term Conference (Ottawa: Canadian Labour Congress, 2003).
4. R. Katz-Rosene, *Union Organizing: A Look at Recent Organizing Activity through Analysis of Certification across Canadian Jurisdictions* Research Paper 26 (Ottawa: Canadian Labour Congress, 2003).
5. *Centre de recherche interuniversitaire sur la mondialisation et le travail* (CRIMT) / Inter-University Research Centre on Globalization and Work, School of Industrial Relations, Université de Montréal, Québec, <http://www.crimt.org>.
6. See Jackson and Schetagne (2003).
7. P. Kumar and G. Murray, *Innovation and Change in Labour Organizations in Canada: Results of the National 2000-2001 HRDC Survey* (2003), <http://www.crimt.org>.

8. See Jackson (2003).
9. C. Lévesque, P. Kumar and Gregor Murray, *Is Social Unionism the Way to the Future? Explaining Member and Non-Member Perceptions of Union Action*, paper presented to the Annual Conference of the Canadian Industrial Relations Association (Halifax: 2003).
10. Lévesque, Christian, Gregor Murray and Stéphane LeQueux, "Transformations sociales et identités syndicales: l'institution syndicale à l'épreuve de la différenciation sociale contemporaine," *Sociologie et sociétés* XXX/2 (1998), pp. 131-154.
11. See Katz-Rosene (2003).