

## FORUM: REORGANIZING UNIONS UNION ORGANIZING: AN ONTARIO LABOUR PERSPECTIVE

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The Canadian Labour Congress Mid-Term Conference, *Building the Movement – Unions on the Move*, was a welcome undertaking by the CLC for unions and organizers. The panellists were stimulating and controversial. The atmosphere was upbeat despite the challenges and difficulties unions have faced over the last decade. The enthusiasm and exuberance of youth and the encouraging shift away from the corporate agenda reported in the Vector Poll *Canadians Talk About Unions* gave the conference an overall air of optimism.<sup>1</sup>

While short on specifics, the conference demonstrated some long-needed leadership on the part of the CLC on the issue of declining union density and the need to increase organizing. Yet, it is necessary to be constructively critical on several points.

**Union Density and Union Cooperation** Presenters were pleased to inform the audience of unionists from across the country that the slippage in the national unionization rate (union density) had stabilized. It was 32.2 percent in 1999, and 32.6 percent in 2003. This is good news, although everyone correctly agreed that much more effort is needed if we are to see a turnaround in unionization rates.

Ontario, with nearly 40 percent of the Canadian workforce, is a key case in point. Faced with a hostile political climate after the election of the Harris-Eves Tories in 1995, along with increasingly antiworker employment laws, the unionization rate in Ontario has fallen from 29.5 percent in 1995 to 26.1 percent in 2001. Despite low levels of new organizing, economic

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growth and increased hiring led to a small increase in the unionized percentage of the workforce: 26.8 percent in 2003.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, the picture gets worse, not better. When I first came to work at the Ontario Federation of Labour some 13 years ago, it was estimated that 30,000 workers had to be organized each year just to maintain the current union density rate. This number has only been reached once. In 1994-95, given a more supportive political climate, and with the NDP government's labour law reforms, 32,116 workers were unionized. It has been downhill ever since, even though we now need to organize 35,000 workers per year just to maintain current density.

In 2002/2003, the number of newly organized workers in Ontario totalled an unacceptably low 13,708. This is not only a decline from the previous year's level of 16,255 workers, it is a dramatic 57 percent decline from the high point of 1994-95.<sup>3</sup> In sharp contrast, Michel Arsenault of the Quebec Steelworkers reported to the conference that they were currently organizing about 40,000 workers per year in his province, where the unionization rate has risen to 40 percent.

With such a dramatic decline in organizing in Ontario, and severe difficulties in most other provinces, one would have hoped that harsh realities would have sparked some long-awaited union cooperation, some concrete solidarity between unions, some new initiatives and new structures to reverse decline. Dare one suggest the launch of multi-union organizing drives around particular corporate targets? Failing such, one would have thought that at least union cooperation in some form or another would have been the central theme at the CLC conference. But no such luck.

Union density will continue to fall until the trade union movement revamps its priorities, puts qualitatively more resources into organizing, and, most importantly, begins to work cooperatively on organizing efforts. This could mean simply learning from each other — what works, what doesn't — strategy meetings, or collective multi-union training such as that which takes place through the British Columbia Federation of Labour's Organizing Institute. A major step forward would be the establishment of more organizing institutes across the country to bring union organizers together to

assess organizing successes and failures, and to engage prospective organizers in common training.

It could mean union cooperation in organizing a particular company. Even tacit agreement among several unions on sectoral/workplace targets would be a step forward. The notion of solidarity ultimately needs to move beyond sloganeering and small steps to take specific form in major joint organizing drives directed to carefully chosen targets. From the large and concentrated financial sector to huge transnational conglomerates, it is increasingly obvious that no one union, far less one union local, can launch the kind of coast-to-coast and international organizing drives that are needed. Such organizing takes strategic planning and a pooling of resources. As challenging as it is, some unions have already made positive and concrete efforts in this regard.

**Support for Unions and Union Barriers** A major point presented to the conference by CLC president Ken Georgetti, in his very professional, well-articulated and upbeat opening address, was that one-third of the nonunion workforce would, given the chance, vote to have a union. One-third support is great, albeit down from 40 percent in 2000, but this figure was used by several people to suggest that the main problem is not so much a lack of resources and union cooperation and solidarity, or even employer opposition, but union barriers. The impression given was of people banging on union doors to get in, assuming they could find a door to bang on. There is an element of truth to this. It may well be true that finding a union can be more difficult than necessary. And there are, as noted by Grace-Edward Galabuzi in his research and in his address to the conference, specific barriers to the entry of people of colour and immigrants into unions.<sup>4</sup> But it is also true that workers have historically found and created unions when they have wanted to.

One must distinguish between the important reality of racial and gender barriers, and those of a more general nature, which supposedly inhibit one-third of the nonunion workforce from joining a union. Actually, only 14 percent said they were “very likely” to join a union according to the Vector

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Poll cited above. The “pro-union” one-third figure comes by adding the “very likely” (14 percent ) and “somewhat likely” (19 percent ) together. But a full 45 percent of the nonunionized said they were “not at all likely” to join a union, and a further 16 percent said they were “not very likely.” Now, total that! The one-third number might be good propaganda, but the reality of the current organizing ground is significantly more negative than conference participants were led to believe.

Despite the fact that unionization brings substantive benefits to workers compared to nonunion workers — a 33.1 percent wage advantage for men and 52.4 percent advantage for women — organizing, at least in Ontario, is tough sloggng.<sup>5</sup> I truly wish people were banging on union doors to get in, but they’re not. Even the 14 percent who are “very likely” to join are elusive given the antagonistic ideological climate and the hostility of employers.

**Fundamental Issues** The real question is why workers aren’t streaming into unions given the demonstrable material advantages of unionization. This is a question worth serious discussion, admittedly with no easy answers. Beyond the issues of barriers, the lack of widespread knowledge of the benefits of unionization, inadequate union resources, and the low priority given to organizing, lie even deeper concerns which deserved greater attention at the conference.

***Employer Opposition: If You Sign a Union Card – You Lose Your Job***

Put simply, the main barrier to joining a union is the power of employers, and the resulting fear by employees of job loss. This reaction is not irrational. For the past several decades, employers in Ontario, Canada, and indeed much of the world, have been on the offensive. They shape the political and ideological climate, and the limits of what workers see as possible.

Needed public services have been cut back. Public health care has seen fiscal restraints, delisting, and privatization, and public education has seen large budgetary cuts and rising costs for postsecondary students. More and more jobs are at or near the minimum wage, and fewer and fewer workers have well-paid, full-time jobs. Contingent or casual work has grown to the point that atypical work is increasingly typical.<sup>6</sup> EI eligibility and benefits have been

reduced. Competition, like work itself, has intensified, and industry after industry has been restructured. Employment standards have been weakened and are rarely enforced, and labour legislation is unabashedly antiunion.

The neoliberal perspective and practice behind these changes emphasizes individualism, entrepreneurship, and competitiveness over the needs of society as a whole — over public services, and, of course, trade unions. What doesn't fit within this neoliberal framework is considered a barrier — a rigidity — that must be removed so that the market is free to function more efficiently. We can't stop organizing because of neoliberalism, but this big picture has to be assessed if our organizing strategies are to be successful.

***The Battle of Ideas: A Decline in Collective Identities and a Rise in Individualistic Perspectives***

More profound than even media bias, although integrally connected, is the specific role of conservative antiunion ideas in our society. Structural changes, such as the shift of jobs to services and the growth of precarious work, along with the new ideas of neoliberalism, are linked to an ideological and cultural decline in collective identities and a rise in individualistic perspectives. The traditional support for collective organization and identity typical of industrial workers in decades gone by has been eroded by more individualistic and instrumental perspectives towards unions.<sup>7</sup> I don't want to oversimplify the complexities of this process, but rather make the point that the material concerns of increasingly insecure workers and the structural changes facing trade unions are integrally linked to the challenge of changing attitudes and the rise of hostile ideologies. Dominant ideas have to be challenged in trying to convince workers to join a union. Union renewal and social change necessitate a battle of ideas. Over time, the ideological dominance of Right-wing antiunion ideas will have to be confronted and replaced by alternative perspectives.<sup>8</sup> Unions need to take up this challenge.

***The State and Labour Laws: Easier to Decertify a Union than to Organize One***

No one engaged in organizing can fail to recognize the importance of labour laws. There are always a series of hoops to get through in order to organize workers, starting with the lack of access to the employer's

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property. Even gross violations of the law by employers are inadequately penalized. Since the Harris Conservatives won the 1995 election, Ontario labour legislation — enforced by various state bodies such as the Labour Relations Board, various other tribunals and commissions, the courts, and others — has seen amendment after amendment, with virtually each round of change making law and practice more restrictive of labour's rights. In Ontario today, it is easier to decertify a union than it is to organize one.

The key point is that, whether one likes it or not, politics and law-making are important to everyone, particularly trade unionists. Panitch and Swartz discuss this more fully in their aptly titled book *From Consent to Coercion: The Assault on Trade Union Freedoms*.<sup>9</sup> Labour law in Ontario stands as a major barrier to a substantial increase in unionization. The trade union movement in Ontario, both union members and leaders, needs to launch a united and concerted effort for labour law reform.

***Rank-and-File Democracy – Workers Organize Workers*** To take up the above challenges and qualitatively increase union organizing will no doubt take more resources, both money and staff, than are presently allocated. But, in the main, it will take membership participation, inter-union solidarity, and cooperation. If past organizing waves, such as that of industrial workers in the 1930s and '40s, provide any lessons for today, it is that despite the role of government and its antiworker legislation, despite inhibiting state institutions and regulations, and despite the hostility of employers, union organizing can be successful when thousands of determined workers participate; it was primarily workers that organized workers.<sup>10</sup> Surprising as it might seem today, such organizing was very often conducted in the name of the then new central labour body, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), rather than in the name of any one particular union.

Worker involvement and activism increased as workers discussed issues and tactics, agreed and disagreed, debated and decided to found unions and union locals, and established and structured their own organizations along participatory democratic lines. Members participated in open fora on issues, such as whether or not to strike or occupy their plant, to hold out for more wages and benefits, or to accept the latest employer offer, to

agree or disagree with events unfolding in their community, or the ongoing political issues pertinent at the time in society.

In short, unions today need to once again become more membership- and activist-driven.<sup>11</sup> Democratic elections are important, necessary, and are conducted on a regular basis in most all trade unions but, in and of themselves, elections are not sufficient. In representative democracy, precedence is given to the individual franchise, secret ballots, and constitutionally guaranteed elections. Yet, once elected, the “person is most frequently seen as a representative for a constituency rather than as a delegate of a constituency.”<sup>12</sup> The revitalization of unions and the scale of new organizing necessary for union growth need a surge of membership participation that will only be maintained if members are engaged and empowered through increased participation and new venues of decisionmaking. Empowered members become educated members gaining new skills and capacities, developing a worker-centred vision of their world which, in turn, plays the vital role of sustaining them, educating other union members, and attracting nonunion employees to the union movement.

**Concluding Comments: Context and Strategy to Tactics** All of the above issues related to the larger context in which unions find themselves, and strategic responses to such, could well be the basis of workshops at the next CLC conference. The issue of union cooperation alone will involve a sea-change in thinking on the part of some union leaders and many union practices. Union cooperation — like organizing itself — will involve difficult choices, take time, and will no doubt involve failures as well as successes. Yet, it is possible.

A discussion of organizing tactics is best situated within the context of these larger issues. The complexities of organizing in different sectors — such as in retail or manufacturing, or in workplaces where women, workers of colour, or precarious workers such as casual and temp agency workers predominate — demand very specific discussions and assessments. In addition, organizing tactics must evolve according to changing specific circumstances. Most decisions on specific tactics are therefore best left to the experiences and collective thinking of those directly involved in organizing.

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Research on union tactics in Canada remains more anecdotal than comprehensive.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, research in the United States over the last ten years provides a rich tapestry of ideas that, with necessary modifications for Canadian jurisdictions, can provide valuable insights. Kate Bronfenbrenner and Tom Juravich's statistical analysis of union organizing campaigns, both successes and failures, demonstrates that the more union members and prospective members are involved in rank-and-file intensive tactics (specific organizing activities on meaningful issues), the more likely that the workers and the union will win. Their view is that, from the beginning of an organizing campaign, workers need to operate on the premise that to successfully unionize they will have to act like a social movement. Their insistence that what unions do and how they do it matters, despite a hostile political climate and restrictive legislation, has gained in popularity and influence — evidenced by the higher organizing success rates of unions following this perspective.<sup>14</sup>

Other writers have advocated for closer links between work and the community. The significance of this emphasis is found in the recognition that the struggle for good wages, working conditions, and benefits is inseparable from the fight for good schools, good health care, and decent housing. But, such community unionism goes beyond communities as spatial or geographic entities, and encompasses communities of gender, ethnicity, and race.<sup>15</sup>

That organizing has to encompass diversity is today widely accepted. In cities like Toronto, where immigrants represent approximately 50 percent of the workforce, the need for a union to be explicitly antiracist, to have organizers who are able to communicate in other languages, and be sensitive to distinct cultures, is increasingly necessary for success. Unions in Ontario today try to match the demographic characteristics of their member and staff organizers to the workplace being organized. Bill Fletcher, Jr. and Richard Hurd call this “organizing for inclusion.”<sup>16</sup>

This research questions the traditional business union approach to organizing which pays exclusive attention to the number of new dues-paying members being organized, rather than to empowering people through unionization. Organizing is top down, the staff is the union which does things

for members, rather than assisting workers to do things for themselves, thereby developing their own skills and abilities. Communication in old-style unionism is vertical, often done through leaflets and press releases, rather than horizontal, using mass participation and democratic decision-making.

This latter orientation, of which I have captured only the essence in this discussion, might best be called a union-building approach to organizing. In my view, it is tactical directions such as these that hold the potential to build the confidence, membership capacities, and solidarity needed to revitalize the union movement in Ontario and across Canada. We need to use future conferences on organizing to ensure that this potential is realized.

## Notes

1. Canadian Labour Congress, *Canadians Talk About Unions* conducted by Vector Research and Development Inc. (Ottawa: CLC, 2003).
2. For 1995, see CALURA; other figures are from Statistics Canada's *Labour Force Survey*.
3. The statistics relied on in this section are published in the Ontario Labour Relations Board (OLRB) *Annual Reports*.
4. For those who missed Grace-Edward Galabuzi's address to the CLC Mid-Term Conference, see his *Canada's Creeping Economic Apartheid* (Toronto: Centre for Social Justice, 2001).
5. Statistics Canada, *Labour Force Survey*, cited in *Economy* (Fall 2003) 14/2 (Ottawa: Canadian Labour Congress).
6. L. Vosko, N. Zukewich and C. Crawford, "Precarious Jobs: A New Typology of Employment," *Perspective on Labour and Income* 15/4 (Statistics Canada, Catalogue No. 75-001XPE, Winter 2003).
7. See V. Perez-Diaz, "Unions Uncertainties and Workers' Ambivalence," *International Journal of Political Economy* (1997), pp. 114-16. See also R. Hyman, "Changing Trade Union Strategies," in R. Hyman and A. Ferner, (eds.), *New Frontiers in European Industrial Relations* (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1994), pp. 117-19.
8. C. Schenk, "Social Movement Unionism: Beyond the Organizing Model," P. Fairbrother and C. Yates, (eds.), *Trade Unions in Renewal: A Comparative Study* (London, New York: Continuum, 2003), pp. 244-62.
9. L. Panitch and D. Swartz, *From Consent to Coercion: The Assault on Trade Union Freedoms* third edition (Aurora, Ontario: Garamond Press, 2003).
10. I. Abella, *Nationalism, Communism and Canadian Labour: The CIO, the Communist Party and the Canadian Congress of Labour, 1935-1956* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973).
11. M. Eisenscher, "Critical Juncture: Unionism at the Crossroads," Bruce Nissen, (ed.), *Which Direction For Organized Labor?* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999); K. Moody, *Workers in a Lean World*, (London, New York: Verso, 1997); M. Parker and M. Gruelle, *Democracy is Power: Rebuilding Unions from the Bottom Up* (Detroit: A Labor Notes Book, 1999); C. Schenk, "Social Movement Unionism: Beyond the Organizing Mode," P. Fairbrother and C. Yates, (eds.), *Trade Union in Renewal: A Comparative Study* (London, New York: Continuum, 2003), pp. 248-51.
12. P. Fairbrother, *Trade Unions at the Crossroads* (London: Mansell, 2000), p. 325.

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13. While providing evidence of many employer tactics, Yates also finds two important union tactics: first, the merit of rank-and-file organizers and, second, the importance of inside organizing committees. See C. Yates, Report on *Union Organizing in Ontario: What Works? and What Doesn't?* (Toronto: Ontario Federation of Labour, February 2000).
14. K. Bronfenbrenner and T. Juravich, "It Takes More than Housecalls: Organizing to Win with a Comprehensive Union-Building Strategy." K. Bronfenbrenner, S. Friedman, R. Hurd, R. Oswald, and R. Seeber, (eds.), *Organizing to Win: New Research on Union Strategies* (Ithaca and London: ILR Press, 1998).
15. C. Yates, "The Revival of Industrial Unions in Canada: The Extension and Adoption of Industrial Union Practices to the New Economy." P. Fairbrother and C. Yates, (eds.), *Trade Unions in Renewal: A Comparative Study*. (London, New York: Continuum, 2003), pp. 222-228.
16. B. Fletcher, Jr. and Richard Hurd, "Is Organizing Enough? Race, Gender and Union Culture," *New Labor Forum* (Spring/Summer, 2000), pp. 59-69. For an overview on these issues and other changes occurring in Canadian unions, see P. Kumar and G. Murray, "Strategic Dilemma: the State of Union Renewal in Canada," P. Fairbrother and C. Yates, (eds.), *Trade Unions in Renewal: A Comparative Study* (London, New York: Continuum, 2003), pp. 200-220.