

FORUM: REORGANIZING UNIONS
REBUILDING THE LABOUR
MOVEMENT BY ORGANIZING
THE UNORGANIZED:
STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS

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The labour movement in Canada is losing ground, both in terms of membership and political/economic influence.² The media, government, and business would have us believe that unions are part of a bygone era — useful in the past, but no longer necessary in an age of enlightened managers, global competition, and new forms of work. They insist that workers do not want or need unions any longer.

This is wrong. Growing evidence shows that workers, in particular women, racialized groups and youth, want and need unions. Many of these workers work long hours, but remain trapped in poverty. Increasing job insecurity, combined with greater management power, leaves workers vulnerable to arbitrary and unfair treatment at work. Women are forced to make impossible choices between raising their children and working to put food on the table and a roof over their heads.³ The wage gap for nonunionized women and racialized groups has increased despite, in the case of new immigrants, higher levels of education.⁴ Is it any surprise that these groups want unions? Study after study shows that women, immigrants, racialized groups, and youth are more likely to want and to join unions than are white males. Data from my survey of union organizers in Ontario show that for every one percent increase in the number of women in a workplace being organized, there was a one percent greater chance of a union winning that organizing drive.⁵ Similar results were evident in British Columbia. If so many workers

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want unions, why is union membership in Canada stagnant, and how can this be turned around?

Employers and governments have a lot to do with the weakening of unions. Employers are increasingly hostile to unions, and governments have made this easier with changes to labour law. We could spend a lot of time speaking about government and employer efforts to combat unions. While this would make us feel righteous in our anger, it would not move us very far forward. At present, the labour movement has little influence over governments and employers, and cannot afford to wait for the days of better labour laws to turn around the emerging union crisis. Unions, therefore, need to look inward. What they will find is that, although many unions have pledged commitments to organizing, there remain many obstacles within the labour movement to organizing successfully.

The problem for the labour movement is not workers' lack of interest in unions, but inadequate union supply — unions aren't there where and when workers want them. There are five reasons why this is the case.

Fear and Loathing of Organizing Many union members and leaders fear the kinds of changes to their unions that are likely to accompany organizing, especially organizing among an increasingly diverse workforce. Union members fear that new members will divert attention and resources away from their own concerns. Many also fear a change in union culture and established ways of doing union business. In short, organizing threatens many union members' sense of belonging and control within their union.

For their part, many union leaders also fear the effects of success in organizing the unorganized. Power within unions is likely to shift, as are membership expectations of leaders — changes that could result in a loss of power and privilege for existing leaders. Such fear and loathing builds resistance to reallocation of union resources towards organizing. Without adequate resources, organizing cannot succeed.

Unions have found two solutions to the challenge of fear — education, and increasing the costs to union members and leaders who obstruct a shift to organizing. Unions in the building trades offer one example of the role education can play in building support for organizing. The Construction

Organizing Membership and Education and Training (COMET), used by a growing number of skilled trade unions, seeks to shift union members' attitudes away from restrictive membership practices and towards support for organizing. This education, combined with new organizing strategies, has contributed considerably to the organizing success in the construction industry. Sherman and Voss's study of union organizing success in California points to the importance of union leadership sanctions on those locals which refused to reallocate resources towards organizing.⁶ This, combined with a sense of crisis and an infusion of outside activists with a broader understanding of social justice, were critical factors associated with widespread internal union change and organizing success.

Gendering and Racializing the Supply of Unions A second, more difficult challenge for unions lies in the need to increase and change the supply of unions available to workers. Women and racialized workers do not have the same opportunities to join unions that white men do. This is not just the fault of employers and governments, but of unions themselves. Let me explain using an example about women and union organizing. My studies show that unions are more likely to target male-dominated workplaces than female-dominated workplaces. Except in large and public sector workplaces, women have to break down union doors to get them to organize their workplaces. For the growing numbers of women employed in small workplaces, it is even harder to interest unions in organizing their workplaces.

Thus, even though women are more likely to join a union if given the chance, unions are not strategically targeting workplaces dominated by women. One critical reason for this lies in the overwhelming predominance of older white men as union organizers. There is a tendency amongst all of us to befriend, make contacts with, and see people who are like ourselves. In union movements where older white male organizers predominate, this results in investing organizing resources into those workplaces and sectors that are male-dominated. Yet, this is not where organizing is most successful. In British Columbia, where a much greater number of organizers are women, unions have begun to turn this around.

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Yet, many unions are caught in a catch-22. By not organizing women and racialized groups in the first place, they do not have a pool of activists from these and other diverse communities from which to draw organizers. This then means that they are less likely to organize workplaces where women, immigrant, and other communities predominate.

Creating a diverse organizing department therefore becomes a pressing challenge. Union solutions to this problem have included training and deploying rank and file organizers, hiring organizers from among social movement activists and, in British Columbia, establishing an Organizing Institute that works with unions to recruit and train organizers from multiple communities. Unions need to go even further. They need to shift their model of organizing such that they organize women and racialized groups, not just workplaces and workers. To achieve this requires radical shifts in the organization and cultures of unions. A first step towards this goal could involve devolving authority and allocating resources to groups of women and racialized workers so that they can independently develop and pursue a strategy for organizing diverse communities of workers. Multi-union collaboration could make this even more effective.

Organizing and Bargaining for Small Workplaces A large number of nonunion workers work in small workplaces of fewer than 25 employees. Although union density in small workplaces is currently very low, the number of organizing drives and organizing success rates amongst small workplaces are considerably higher than in large workplaces. Nonetheless, small workplaces pose enormous challenges to unions. Most unions find that organizing these workplaces is easy, but bargaining for and servicing these units is a nightmare. The reasons are obvious. Bargaining for small, dispersed workplaces usually results in multiple agreements which are costly to service and weak in terms of bargaining leverage. Union members in small workplaces often feel isolated and beleaguered, potentially reducing their support for the union over time.

There are many possible solutions to these problems. Several unions have adapted master bargaining strategies to the service sector where they organize multiple small workplaces.⁷ The organization of community health care

units by the NUPGE British Columbia Government and Service Employees' Union (National Union of Public and General Employees), and of Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) and Starbucks restaurants by the National Automobile, Aerospace, Transportation and General Workers Union of Canada (CAW-Canada) in British Columbia are two examples of the successful negotiation of master agreements covering geographically dispersed, small workplaces in the service sector. In both cases, the unions mobilized power resources to force employers to bargain a master agreement. Master agreements increase bargaining leverage, rationalize the costs of bargaining and servicing, and benefit workers through industry-wide wage rates. Unfortunately, many unions lack the resources or the commitment to pursue this strategy systematically. Instead, unions often concentrate their efforts into organizing the easy pickings offered in large urban centres. This tends to result in union competition for workers in a few regions, sectors, or workplaces, while ignoring other workers. The overall effects of this are to reduce the advantages of master bargaining while fuelling self-destructive, interunion rivalry and hostility.

A second challenge facing unions which bargain for small workplaces lies in the high cost of delivering much needed benefits, such as pensions and dental benefits. The present model of buying individual benefits from private insurers is expensive and out of reach for growing numbers of small employers. This problem requires short- and long-term solutions. In the short-term, unions might consider returning to the establishment of cooperatives for delivering reasonable-cost benefits. The United Steelworkers of America (USWA) developed an innovative scheme for providing dental benefits to security guards. They hired dentists to work in dental offices set up in several union halls where workers would come to get dental care. Although this model of dental coverage for security guards covered fewer dental procedures than found in many collective agreements and limited the choice of dentists, it significantly reduced the cost of providing basic benefits. By opening these dental offices to members of the community, the USWA has also used the clinics as a means of building community alliances.

What unions have forgotten, however, in their quest to defend and expand existing private benefit plans is that the cheapest way to amortize

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costs for any benefit is to spread the costs and risks across larger populations. In the 1950s and 1960s, unions tackled the problem of health care for working people by pushing for public Medicare. Today, unions need once again to mount campaigns for public benefits, such as good public pensions and broader health care coverage that includes dental and home care. But once again, to make this a credible demand, unions need to convince their members to make sacrifices, such as foregoing the tax cuts from which so many affluent workers have benefitted.

Modifying Jurisdictional Integrity The previous discussion raises the thorny issue of jurisdictional integrity, the model of union membership whereby unions have an exclusive claim to representing workers in certain jurisdictions, defined by industry and type of work. Unions insist today that this continues to be the best model for sorting out who organizes and represents which workers and, in many instances, this model continues to be viable. But the reality is that the boundaries between unions have already been blurred, and unions are not going to give away the members they represent in jurisdictions claimed by other unions. Further, jurisdictional integrity is often a cloak behind which many unions hide their inability to organize, or lack of commitment to organizing, or their unwillingness to accept that a union's jurisdiction needs to be balanced with workers' democratic right to union representation. Rather than trying to turn back the clock, we need to find a way forward, recognizing that the landscape has changed.

Unions need to balance their rights to jurisdictions with their strategic capacity to follow through with organizing workers, such as those employed in geographically dispersed small workplaces. Unions then need to consider different models of union cooperation to get the job done. Some unions have experimented with borrowing the facilities of another union already established in a region, which provides them with a base from which to launch an organizing drive. Unions unable or lacking the commitment to organize dispersed workers may need to cede some portion of their jurisdiction to another union which is in a better position to follow through in organizing and representing workers in a particular community.

For example, in small or outlying communities where one or two unions are already dominant, perhaps these unions need to be allowed to organize and represent small workplaces outside their traditional jurisdiction. Large bargaining units could then subsidize the servicing and bargaining needs of the smaller units, also lending expertise and opening the possibility for building local bases of power. These same large unions, however, would have to agree to stay out of the ceded jurisdictions in regions or cities where the original union was actively organizing. To increase bargaining effectiveness, the unions involved in such arrangements would have to consider multi-union bargaining teams at a master bargaining table. Alternatively, unions could form a multi-union organizing committee that works collaboratively to organize small workplaces in their community and, in consultation with the newly organized workers, sort out which unions will take responsibility for servicing and representation. These models require a level of cooperation and trust amongst unions that has been largely absent from the labour movement. They also require that union leaders be willing to give up something in order to secure the future of the whole movement. Yet, there are some signs of hope. In the United States and some provinces, unions have established collaborative multi-union partnerships intent on organizing the hard-to-organize.

Make Work-Life Issues a National Campaign In the last decade or more, unions have been less and less vocal about broader social justice issues that affect all working people. In many instances, unions excuse this lack of social activism with the argument that this is the time for them to focus on bread and butter issues for existing and potential members. It is true that union organizing of the unorganized requires paying attention to the daily workplace concerns of workers. Many of these concerns, however, are linked to broader social justice issues around which unions can and should mobilize, rather than limiting their attention to collective bargaining. And many of the issues ignored by unions — work-life balance, racism, discrimination — are most central to the workers whose unions should be organizing, namely women, racialized groups, immigrants, and youth. As a start, unions need to launch a massive national campaign in favour of childcare and

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better work-life balance. Consider the story of a worker I interviewed last year.

When I met “Linda,” she was the single mother of three children working full-time in a factory at \$13.00 per hour. Our conversation turned to why and how she had ended up working at this place, which, by all accounts, was one of the nastier workshops in town. Pushed by lack of adequate income support from her husband, Linda realized she had to find a job. Across the road from her house was a factory where she went in search of a job, her only condition being that she be allowed to work outside until 7:30 or 8:00 a.m. The wages were poor, the working conditions horrendous, and sexual and racial harassment a constant threat. But, the advantage of this factory over better workplaces was that she could begin work as early as 5:00 a.m. and always long before her children rose from bed, yet, keep an eye on the house. Linda described that she would watch from the factory yard as the lights in the house went on, first upstairs and then in the kitchen, as the three children, the youngest five, the oldest eleven, alone at home, got themselves ready for school. She would watch silently as they waited for and boarded the school bus, after which she could begin work inside. Linda could not afford childcare. But, her children knew that if there was any trouble, like a fire, “they could scream, and I would come running,” even though it would likely mean losing her job.

This is not a story of the distant past, but of our present. That five-year-old is now only eleven, and her mother has never been allowed time off from work to see her Christmas concert. This is wrong. These are issues that unions can and must change. The first step is to mount a massive, multi-union campaign telling government and employers that unions are joining with working mothers in a campaign for childcare and work-life balance. This campaign can build much needed community alliances for unions while also demonstrating that they can and will meet the needs of working women.

Conclusion In the last ten years, unions in Canada have committed growing resources and attention to organizing the unorganized. This has resulted in considerable change to unions, but the union movement needs to do more if it wants to reverse the receding tide of union membership. Unions need

to overcome fear and petty rivalry, engage in massive organizational and cultural change, and become advocates for social justice in ways that highlight the labour movement's willingness and capacity to champion the interests of all working people and their communities. Only in this way can unions face the present crisis and disprove the pundits who insist that the day of the unions is passed.

Notes

1. This piece was delivered as a speech to the Canadian Labour Congress Mid-Term Conference, *Building the Movement – Unions on the Move* (Ottawa: 17-19 October 2003). A special thank you to union members, activists, and organizers who have helped me do the research upon which this talk is based. Thanks also to the CLC for giving me the opportunity to share my research with union delegates from across the country.
2. A. Jackson, "Solidarity Forever? Trends in Canadian Union Density," this volume.
3. J. Johnson, *Getting By on the Minimum: The Lives of Working Class Women* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002).
4. A. Jackson, *Is Work Working for Workers of Colour?* Research Paper 18 (Ottawa: Canadian Labour Congress, October 2002).
5. C. Yates, *Debunking the Myths about Organizing Women in Unions*, paper presented to Annual Meetings of the Canadian Industrial Relations Association (Quebec City: May 2001).
6. R. Sherman, and K. Voss, "You Just Can't Do it Automatically," in P. Fairbrother and C. Yates, (eds.), *Unions in Renewal* (New York: Continuum, 2003), pp. 51-77.
7. C. Yates, "The Revival of Industrial Unions in Canada: the Extension and Adaptation of Industrial Union Practices to the New Economy," in P. Fairbrother and C. Yates, (eds.), *Unions in Renewal* (New York: Continuum, 2003), pp. 221-243.