

Public Sector Unions and Electoral Politics in Canada

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Overview

- The structural conflict between government's role as an employer and government's role as head of a liberal capitalist state has made it difficult for public sector workers to express their full rights of citizenship and to challenge the bureaucratic, authoritarian structures that govern public sector work.
- In response, public sector workers have sometimes turned to the electoral arena in search of better public sector managers
- The experience of social democratic provincial governments in Canada demonstrates that such governments have long struggled with their uncomfortable dual role as employers and allies of organized labour
- These tensions point to the limitations of electoral politics as a strategy for social change.

Brief History of Public Sector Unions and Electoral Politics

- Legal restrictions on public sector worker political action
 - *Civil Service Act 1908*
 - *Public Service Employment Act 1967*
- Even where legal restrictions did not exist or were later removed, political action was rare
 - Tied to the traditional notion of the non-partisan “public servant”

Testing the Waters: Public Sector Unions and Electoral Politics, 1960-1990

- Public sector unions played an almost insignificant role in forming the New Democratic Party in 1961
- In 1967, the national Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) convention adopted a resolution calling for the union to “institute a more extensive program to educate the membership on the platform of the New Democratic Party, and how it affects them personally, to promote greater interest in politics and local union affiliation to the NDP”

Testing the Waters: Public Sector Unions and Electoral Politics, 1960-1990

- Many public sector union leaders have shared close ties to the party
 - Ex. Lenihan, Carr, Ryan, Parrot, Turmel, Doer
- Despite increased public sector union interest in the NDP after the passage of PSSRA in 1967, the party continued to be dominated by numerically weaker private sector unions

Legal challenges to political restrictions

- *Osborne v. Canada (Treasury Board)*, 1991
 - Successfully challenged key sections of the *Public Service Employment Act 1967* based on the Charter's guarantee of freedom of expression
- Still, for many unions the boundaries of public sector worker political activity continued to be constrained by the mentality of the “public servant”

Public Sector Unions, Electoral Politics and Social Democracy, 1990-2012

- public sector unions and social democratic governments have always always maintained a contradictory relationship
- “voice of labour” in opposition vs. “voice of the employer” in government

NDP provincial governments

- Ontario NDP's Social Contract
- Saskatchewan NDP's back-to-work legislation
- Similar patterns in Manitoba and British Columbia
- Bryan Evans (2012: 59) has noted: "In provinces where the NDP faces a single right-wing competitor, organized labour fears the right-wing party more than the NDP's fair-weather friendship."

Quebec labour and the PQ

- The PQ, although not a labour party, does tend to share closer relations with unions than other parties in Québec.
- The FTQ has endorsed the PQ in five of the last ten provincial elections.
- Other union centrals have been more critical of the PQ, but the Québec labour movement's support for Québec sovereignty has played a key role in sustaining its relatively warmer relationship with the PQ.
- However, this relationship is not without contradictions. After the PQ government embraced public sector austerity programs in the early 1980s and late 1990s respectively, their union allies withdrew support.

Conseil Centrale du Montréal Métropolitain CSN (CCMM), “Question nationale et stratégie syndicale”

“Disons-le clairement, nous avons parfois de la difficulté à développer et à articuler nos stratégies quand l'État québécois est gouverné par des souverainistes. Nos positions sur la question nationale et l'importance que nous y accordons pour régler la question sociale pose, à l'occasion des problèmes d'ordre stratégique. Bien entendu, loin de nous l'idée de remettre en question nos orientations sur la souveraineté du Québec. Cependant nous croyons qu'il existe un problème réel dans nos rangs quand le PQ est au pouvoir. Pas dans le discours mais dans la pratique.”

The Future of Public Sector Unions and Electoral Politics

- Public sector union electoral strategies are incredibly fragmented
 - Divisions manifest themselves both regionally and ideologically
- Political tactics used by public sector unions are equally diverse
 - Strategic voting, soft money campaigns, partisan affiliation etc.
- Support for nominally pro-union parties can only offer short-term solutions, at best
- No government, social democratic or otherwise, will openly concede its power over the workplace, the public purse or its perceived monopoly over what constitutes the public interest.
- Public sector unions must recognize that the election of a political ally is only the beginning of the struggle for social change