The Politics of Professional Unions in the Public Sector

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Discourses of professionalism serve to simultaneously mobilize and constrain union activism in the professional workplace.

We draw from both printed materials concerning the structure, practice and politics of professional unions as well as qualitative interviews with ten key informants

- PIPSC, AMAPCEO, NUCAUT, IFPTE
Professional Unions

- Professional union – represent a primarily professional workforce and actively brand themselves as professional organizations
- Variation as to process and reasons for creation of professional unions
- Most do not share the militant history of many industrial labour organizations
Perceptions of Professional Workers

- Prefer conciliation over confrontation, try to avoid labour disruptions at all costs, engage in little, if any, political action, tend not to identify with broader working-class struggles.
- Unionization and professionalism presented as incompatible.
- Professional workers see themselves as sharing very little in common with blue-collar unionized workers.
Professionals and Unions

- Juxtaposition of unionization and professionalism underestimated organized labour’s ability to represent employment interests of professional workers
- Ex. High level of union density in Canadian universities suggests unions have adapted well to individualized aspects of the academic workplace
Interviewees: professional workers perform voluntary unpaid overtime, shorten their vacations

“And a lot of them work overtime off the books...their professional pride sort of says, ‘I’ve got to get the job done. That’s part of my identity as a professional. I’m someone who gets my work done, finishes my projects, does a good job’.”

Solidarity based on “occupational prestige”, not working-class consciousness
Professional Unions and Labour Movement Culture

- Seldom refer to themselves as unions – instead “association”, “society”, “institute”
- Grievances are “disputes”, union stewards are “advocates” or dispute resolution “officers”
- Tend not to sing “Solidarity Forever” at conferences, do not use terms “sister” and “brother” at meetings
- Strikes are relatively rare (although increasing among university faculty associations)
Professional Unions and Politics

- Public education campaigns over rank-and-file activism
- Tend not to engage in partisan electoral activities
- Sectionalist public policy interventions – ex. university faculty associations (higher education), professional engineers (energy issues)
“We sit down with [management] and we joke about this and that and how our golf game is...and they respect us and we respect them, and we’re professionals and so we’re not going to do anything hasty like strike or do anything to embarrass them and then they’re going to give us our due and that’s how it works. And that’s how bargaining worked for a very, very long time, and they’ve been just so confused over the last few years, why they’re not being treated that way anymore.”
The Shifting Landscape of Professional Unionism

- Responding to neo-liberal austerity and deprofessionalization
- 3 of the 4 unions examined now affiliated with Canadian Labour Congress
- 2001 – NUCAUT was established as avenue for faculty unions to affiliate to CLC – now 21 faculty unions have joined NUCAUT
- 2003 – Society of Energy Professionals affiliated to CLC
- 2011 – PIPSC affiliated to the CLC
Changing demographics of the Canadian labour movement

Experiencing a lockout or strike cultivates a willingness for more radical approaches in the future (ex. Society of Energy Professionals, Faculty Associations)

Deterioration of working conditions, encroachments on professional autonomy, government austerity – will continue to bring unions and public sector professional workers closer together
Which Way Forward?

- Mobilizing members around professional occupational identities has limitations
  - Reinforces “separate” and “distinct”
  - False sense of class position

- Challenge for professional unions – how to use “professionalism” to elevate public good as a whole (rather than a narrow occupational entitlement)