CLASS ACTION: BUILDING POLITICAL ACTIVISM AMONG UNION ACTIVISTS

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Ask someone involved in the Canadian labour movement about levels of political involvement among union members, and you get a very discouraging answer. The conventional belief is that union activists do not want to get involved politically. They want their union to negotiate a good contract and that is where it stops. Best not to try engaging union activists politically.

That may be the conventional belief, but new research suggests this pessimism may be misplaced. Few studies have ever explored the political attitudes and behaviours union activists, as opposed to the leadership or membership at large. The new research reveals two unexpected results. First, union activists are more politically active than most observers believe. Second, unions can play a crucial role in fostering political activism among their activists. However, fulfilling this role requires unions to approach their members from a new perspective – one that reflects the class-based lived experience of workers and helps workers navigate the class divide separating them from politics.

THE STUDY

The study was conducted in 2003 among union activists in Alberta. Union activists are the minority of union members who have actively chosen to become active in their local union through committees or executive, and who have not elevated to leadership positions. They spend most of their time on the shop floor and volunteer additional time to their union. They have made a choice to be active in their union, but remain linked to their workplace on a day-to-day basis.

The study included a survey distributed in class and by mail to attendees of labour schools in Alberta and follow-up interviews with selected respondents. Approximately 50% of distributed surveys were completed, for a total of 213. Eight in-depth interviews were conducted.

The study examines the potential for political activism among Alberta unionists. However, there is strong reason to believe the results are applicable nation-wide given Alberta has the lowest union density and weakest class-based movements in Canada.

DEFINITIONS

A few definitions are in order before embarking on the research results. First, "politics" – a central concept in the study – is defined broadly but not exhaustively. It is seen as the cluster of political behaviours and structures generally accepted as Canada's political system – elections, parties, issue movements, lobby groups, protest rallies, boycotts, petitions and so on. While this definition excludes other, non-traditional forms of politics, such as political art or struggles against personal power sources (e.g. abusive spouse), it is chosen for its ability to capture how workers relate to the "system" of politics, thus teasing out the relational nature of how workers perceive politics.

To be defined as a "politically active" person, one would need to engage in political behaviours unusual for the average citizen and that require consciousness, commitment and public identification. Voting or signing a petition, for example, are not markers of a politically active person. Both actions are commonplace, require little time or energy commitment, and contain no ongoing engagement with politics. However, joining a political party, attending a protest rally, or engaging in direct action (confronting authority, occupying buildings, breaking the law for political reasons) are acts requiring a more deliberate intention to be involved in politics, and hence satisfying the measurement of "politically active".

Finally the other central concept in the study, that of "class", is seen both as the objective conditions of production and as a social construction. Workers are part of the working class because they possess a common relation to production – they must rent their labour power. But to give class any real meaning, we must acknowledge the "working class" is also constructed by workers through their lived experience; an observation akin to the considerations of E.P. Thompson and Ira Katznelson (see Thompson, 1963; Katznelson, 1986). This "making" occurs at the workplace and in the pubs, neighbourhoods and households where workers reside.

POLITICAL ACTIVITY LEVELS

Most labour movement observers perceive the majority of union members as politically inactive. This perception usually extends to the smaller group of activists who spend many hours a month performing the business of their local union.

The research results below turn this perception on its head. The survey findings suggest union activists are more involved in politics than conventional wisdom would predict (Table 1). 90% voted in one of the last provincial, federal or municipal elections (including 75% who voted in all three). One in five were

members of a political party, one half recently contacted a politician about an issue, and 12% engaged in direct action.

Table 1: Selected Political Activities of Survey Sample (Percent Involved)

Activity	Total Sample	Male	Female
Partisan			
Member	19.7	21.3	17.7
Volunteer for candidate	24.4	28.2	19.8
Attend convention	8.9	12.0	5.2
Vote in provincial election	88.3	91.5	84.4
Informal Non-Partisan			
Signed a petition	76.5	76.9	76.0
Contact politician	48.1	47.0	49.5
Join boycott	57.3	64.1	49.0
Join solidarity picket	54.0	59.8	46.9
Attend rally	52.4	53.9	50.5
Partake in direct action	12.7	15.4	9.4
Formal Non-Partisan			
Volunteer/member of envir. group	12.7	13.7	11.6
Volunteer/member of peace group	9.9	7.7	12.5
Volunteer/member of health group	18.8	18.0	19.8

The surveyed unionists are two to four times more likely to engage in political activities than the average Canadian or Albertan. For example, 11% of Albertans belong to a political party (Young 2002), below the 20% of survey respondents. Only 12% of Canadians have attended political meetings or rallies (Nevitte, 1996), compared to 57% in the survey.

Overall, the survey finds that 72.8% of the respondent union activists can be classified as "politically active". This is significantly higher than the population at large.

The survey also reveals some interesting, while not unexpected, demographic differences in political participation (Table 2). Women were significantly less likely to be active than men across all demographic groups.

Younger workers, lower income workers, service sector workers and less-skilled white-collar workers all had lower political participation levels. These results reflect broader societal patterns. While union involvement increases political participation for all groups, it cannot completely eliminate societal barriers experienced by certain demographic groups.

Table 2: Proportion Politically Active, by Demographic Characteristic

	Total Sample (% politically active)	Male	Female
Overall	72.8	78.6	65.6
Under 30 years	52.6	63.6	37.5
31-40 years	73.5	80.0	63.2
41-50 years	68.7	74.0	62.2
51-60 years	97.1	100	94.1
61+ years	63.6	-	-
Under $20,000	50.0	-	-
$21,000-$40,000	69.1	80.8	61.9
$41,000-$60,000	72.0	73.8	68.8
Over $60,000	85.7	89.7	76.9
Professional	83.3	-	84.0
Blue collar	78.8	82.6	54.6
Service	66.0	66.7	65.7
Trades	80.0	77.8	-
Less Skilled White Collar	53.6	66.7	50.0
Public Sector	78.2	88.9	69.6
Private Sector	67.3	71.4	59.5

Note: Cells with less than 10 cases are not reported.

We should not assume the remaining 27% of respondents are disengaged from and uninterested in politics. In turn, the politically active unionists are not uniform in their political activity. What emerges from the survey results is a political activity spectrum with rather fluid boundaries.

Only a very small portion of the sample (6%) could be considered disinterested in politics entirely. Almost one-in-four respondents (22%) were currently inactive politically but followed politics closely and expressed willingness to consider activity in the future.

Among politically active unionists, there were also distinctions. Some (19%) chose only informal types of political activity – rallies, boycotts, etc – at moderate levels of time spent. A larger group of moderate activists gravitated toward more formal politics, such as political parties and issue groups (28%). Finally, there is a category of super-activists (26%) who engaged in all forms of politics and at very high levels of intensity.

The survey puts to rest any hypothesis that union activists are politically inactive. It also refutes that there are two types of unionist – political and non-political. Instead we witness a group of workers highly interested in politics, but who make different choices about political behaviour. This suggests we need to look at how they make that choice, rather than at their pre-disposition to politics.

CHOOSING POLITICS

In-depth interviews reveal four factors shaping unionists' decision to become politically active: how they define class, their sense of political efficacy, their experience of the political "class divide", and if the union actively fostered political activity.

Interviewees were asked to define "working class" and assess to which class they belonged. Politically inactive participants identified class as income or occupation – a traditional Canadian perception. "I would say more the blue collar workers. Lower paying perhaps … I see working class not having the benefits that unions do." (IPrF[i]) They were split on whether they included themselves as part of the working class.

Politically active participants, on the other hand, linked class to their relationship to work. Working class, one indicated, is:

> "A person whose day is governed by the alarm clock. They have to get up each morning, they have to get up and do the work. They have to do this. It is not a choice. You have to go. You don't necessarily have to be down digging in the dirt with your hands any more than shuffling papers in an office. The fact you have to get up and you have to go. You have to work to survive. That's what working class means to me." (APM)

There was a running theme among this group of a lack of control and dependency on an employer for a paycheque. They saw class as spanning occupational and income categories, as a more relational concept. The distinction between the two groups' attitudes about class was marked, and offers a clear correlation between class awareness and political activity.

Politically active participants also possessed a stronger sense of political efficacy. Both groups showed similar attitudes toward politics – seeing it as

distant and run by elites disinteresting in working people. Both groups also followed politics rather closely. Both groups felt strong efficacy about their union work and making change in the workplace. What separates them is their perceptions about the political sphere. Politically inactive participants articulated pessimism about changing the political system. Working people's involvement in politics "[w]ouldn't make a difference. Because it is the same. Always the same." (IPF) Politically active respondents on the other hand felt urgency to getting involved in politics.

The third factor is their perception of the "class divide" separating workers and politics. Politics is often seen as a middle class system. The institutions, rules, language and discourse of politics, it is argued, are rooted in middle class culture and thus are alien to workers and other citizens who are not a part of the middle class. Often called the "class divide" (see Croteau, 1995; Rose, 2000), this cultural gulf is seen as a barrier to workers' participation in politics. Croteau argues working people's experience of politics in North America is that it does not work for them, leading to alienation and inactivity.

The study finds that all participants experienced some form of class divide. When looking at politics, they sense it is a different world. The politically inactive saw it as not open to them: "That's not for me." (IPF) The active also saw politics as somehow separate from their regular experience. "I see things as the working guy kind of thing … something happens when we go from the union to government politics." (APM) When one interviewee was asked if she felt comfortable when she first joined an NDP election campaign, she answered: "No. Absolutely not. I just felt like … we've got a body here for the duration of the campaign and we'll give that person the shit jobs." (APrF) She spoke of how the whole process and structure felt alien and degrading. This experience of the class divide was expressed vaguely as a feeling of unease and discomfort. Politics seemed a game not made for workers. For this group of workers, the class divide is very real.

To answer how some unionists are able to transcend the class divide and become active in politics the fourth factor may come into play. From the results of the interviews, it is clear the union has an important role to play in fostering political activism.

The union was often integral to encouraging the first steps toward political participation. This role was in part due to personal contact: "[I]t was either the president of my local or the business agent, I can't recall, that asked if I would like to work on a campaign." (APrF) But there was also a more nebulous role of self-confidence building. "I have had some really good reps who have encouraged me and pushed me along. Really brought out some confidence in me I didn't used to have." (APrF)

Some interviewees reported that a co-worker or union representative went with them to a rally or political meeting, and this initial act of support

helped soften the discomfort of their first political experience. It offered support for their first steps across the divide.

Further, even politically inactive participants demonstrated an openness to their union nudging them into politics. When one was asked if they would attend a rally if their union representative approached them, he answered: "Yeah, I think I would. … If [our national representative] came to our shop directly and asked for that, I would definitely help him." (IPrM) It is worth noting none of the politically inactive interviewees had ever been approached in such a way by someone in their union.

We see here an active role for unions in fostering political participation. It is not one of teaching or leading, but of nudging and facilitating. Unions hold credibility and respect among their activists and this can be parlayed into support for political action. It is a personal, cultural support, helping to demonstrate political options and provide assistance for the first few steps into the middle class world of politics. Clearly not everyone needs or uses this support, as there are myriad paths to political participation. However, the union has the potential to hold a place in shaping the decisions their activists make about politics.

WORKING CLASS POLITICS?

Both the survey and the interviews offer evidence that the politics engaged by these workers is a progressive working class politics – one rooted in a sense of class and the need for change. These activists are not becoming Conservative Party stalwarts.

They chose to join or volunteer for peace groups (10% of sample), environmental groups (13%) and progressive lobby groups such as Friends of Medicare (19%). While views about the NDP were complex, they viewed it positively for being more worker-friendly than the other parties.

The corporate, elite-driven nature of politics is derided and lamented. "I really think the whole big [political] machine is run by big corporations and Wall Street." (IPrF) There is a desire for a more working class form of politics. And they see their union as a potential counterforce to the dominant interests in politics. "[Unions] should be involved in politics because if they weren't god knows where we would be." (APrF)

In part the working class nature of their politics exacerbates their perceptions of the class divide, but it also offers an anchor for those who choose to be politically active. It gives them a sense of who they are, preventing them from being bucked about by political tides.

POLITICIZING UNIONISTS: CLASS AND THE UNION'S ROLE

So far we have learned that union activists are more politically engaged and active than expected, and that their politics appear to be a working class style of politics. We have also learned that perceptions of class and the class divide, as well as a specific union role in encouraging activism, shape the political behaviour of this population. But the results tell us more than this. They hint at how class shapes the decisions made by union activists about their political activism. They also offer us a path for unions who want to politicize their membership.

Among this population we do not find a conventional Marxist articulation of class. If we look for class consciousness among these workers in their articulation of objective economic realities, we are searching in vain. Their sense of class arises from their lived experience of being a worker. Their expression of class is dominated by the language of living the life of a worker – the feeling of being governed by the alarm clock and by others for their livelihood. This is significant for two reasons.

First it demonstrates why a 21st century definition of class must be more flexible and multi-dimensional than traditional conceptions. We witness in the study subjects an understanding of class, sometimes only partially articulated, that is rooted in life and not in textbooks. The objective reality of being a worker clearly shapes their experience, but it only gains vitality when passed through the prism of lived experience.

Second, it helps us better understand an individual's decisions about political activism. The decision lies at the point of intersection between the individual and their understanding of the political system. Sharing an objective class position is not enough. Each study subject translates their common experience uniquely, and each ends up simultaneously in the same place – active in their union – and in a different place – choosing or not choosing political action.

Their different decisions can be seen in the differing perceptions of what class is. Politically inactive unionists have interpreted their objective class position in occupational or income terms, which is enough to lead to union activism, but not political activism. On the other hand, politically active unionists articulate a relational sense of class.

Only provisional conclusions can be reached here, but we can postulate that the link between a relational sense of class and political activism rests in identifying where power in society lies. When one sees class as linked to relations, and not income or occupation, the locus of power shifts from specific individuals and employers to employers as a class and to the state. One moves naturally to act where one can most affect power.

But alone this is not enough. Perceptions about the potential for making change in politics (efficacy), and about how daunting the class divide seems also shape whether a union activist makes the jump into politics. Both of these factors are intertwined with perceptions of class and being a worker in Canada, forming a complex triangle of motivation that determines the decisions about political participation. The interplay of the three points leads to a wide diversity of personal political choices. This helps us understand both the difference between politically active and inactive unionists, and also the wide array of political behaviour observed in this population – from informal, single-action behaviours to more ongoing, formalized political activity.

The rich dynamic of class and political behaviour, and the potential it holds for activism also opens up new possibilities for unions to politically engage their activists. When unions actively encourage their activists to become politically involved they have some measure of success. Unfortunately in unions today, this happens in a haphazard fashion. Unions need to change their strategies for bringing politics to the workplace.

First, unions need not be afraid of talking in class terms – as long as it is grounded in workers' real experiences and not just fiery rhetoric. This is about unions transcending the inherent limits of business unionism's "negotiate and grieve" mentality. It begins by articulating an overt political purpose for unions – something rarely attempted in this era of Klein, Harris, Campbell and Martin. Unions have a role to play in creating a safe space for workers to construct their own sense of class politics.

Yet, it must move beyond how unions talk about themselves. Any effort to politicize members must be consistent, grounded in action and directly linked to the personal relationships. Labour leaders, for far too long, have favoured the easy path to politics. Speeches are ineffective, and possibly counter-productive. Candidate endorsements are not frowned upon by activists, but neither are they particularly useful at creating political activity. Newsletters and pamphlets are forgotten as quickly as they are distributed.

These strategies fail because they lack vivacity. They lack the key ingredient to move a union activist – connection to lived experience. This requires unions to act differently in at least two ways. First, they must stop talking and start acting. Unions need to demonstrate in practical ways their commitment to a larger working class and to political change. Their activities should be smaller acts connected to local communities, rather than sweeping national campaigns (which can be just as disconnected as middle class politics). Each union local can find ways to breathe life into this idea through seeking out solidaristic political actions with which to engage in the community. The CAW's recent taskforce on politics recognizes the need to re-integrate workers' experience into political campaigns. "[C]ampaigns [must] be regional and local,

so that they are linked to CAW members' lives both in and out of the workplace." (CAW, 2002: 14)

Second, political mobilization needs to occur on the personal level, through committed individuals reaching out to other workers in their workplace. Speeches from the national president will not make a unionist more politically active, but the co-worker and union colleague with whom they work and socialize may succeed, as long as it is through their own example and encouragement.

The strategies articulated here may or may not be transferable to the membership at large. That remains to be seen. However, more fully engaging the thousands of union activists across Canada can by itself change the course of politics in Canada, by building a force of political activists who see politics through the prism of being a worker and who advocate for change on behalf of the working class.

These steps may not build a revolutionary workers' movement, but they will make unions more relevant in the community and politics more relevant to unionists. The union activists studied here are unquestionably engaged in reformist politics. This may disappoint many left theorists. But in this de-politicized, globalized, corporate world, where the political system reduces alternatives to a homogenized broth, any vibrant up swelling of workers engaging in politics must be a positive development. It could be the beginning of reversing the post-war trend toward docility and passivity.

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NOTES

[i] Quotes from interviewees are labelled identifying their gender, sector and whether they are political active or inactive. A politically active male from the public sector is labelled APM. An inactive private sector female is IPrF. And so on.