

EXPANDING LABOUR'S HORIZONS: UNION ORGANIZING AND STRATEGIC CHANGE IN CANADA

Charlotte A.B. Yates,

Labour Studies Programme and Political Science Department, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

In 1999, for the first time in five decades, union density in Canada dipped below 30% of the paid labour force (Macredie and Pilon, 2001, 5). This membership decline in Canada initially caught unions off-guard. The results were disarray and uncertainty amongst unions as they wrestled with how best to respond to changing political-economic conditions and regroup in an increasingly hostile environment. How could unions arrest membership decline in a chilly climate? Although different unions found different answers to this question, one unifying theme emerged. Unions ranging from the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) to the United Steelworkers of America (USWA) to the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners (UBCJA) came to the conclusion that they had to place renewed emphasis on organizing the unorganized. With few exceptions, unions realized that postwar practices of looking after existing memberships and ignoring the growing numbers of non-union workers was not a way forward. Coupled with this realization was recognition that unions must reach out to workers who in the past were

seen either as un-organizable or uninterested in unions. Unions needed to bridge the gap between their organizations and the growing numbers of women, youth and people of colour who were employed, often in the private service sector, where unions have had a weak presence. Who are these groups that unions are reaching out to? What are unions doing to reach out to new groups of workers? What does a renewed emphasis on organizing the unorganized mean for the future of unions in Canada?

The remainder of this article seeks to answer these questions. Using data from a mass survey of union organizers in Ontario and British Columbia, interviews with organizers and directors of organizing departments and analysis of a range of union documents, this article explores recent organizing efforts by unions, particularly in Ontario and British Columbia.

WHO ARE UNIONS ORGANIZING?

Between 1997 and 2000, union membership in Canada increased only in a small but distinct set of

occupations and sectors (Macredie and Pilon, 2001). These include finance, insurance, real estate and leasing, nursing, support staff, university teachers, retail, childcare and homecare, as well as construction. What is distinct about the majority of these occupations is that they are 1) female dominated occupations and 2) service sector jobs, many in the private service sector.

These increases reflect, in part, recent strategic decisions by unions to organize the private service sector, a sector that is growing and one that has been seen by many as the Achilles heel of the labour movement. Labour Board data confirms this trend in organizing. In Ontario, for example, union organizing attempts amongst workers in the private service sector increased by more than 50% between the decade of the eighties and nineties. In the same periods, organizing in traditional areas of union support, namely manufacturing and construction, declined (OLRB, 2000; Yates, 2000a).

Surprisingly, the unions most active in organizing workers in the private service sector are older industrial unions such as the USWA and the Canadian Autoworkers (CAW). According to results from my survey of union organizers, only 32% of organizing drives by industrial unions that resulted in applications to the labour board were in the manufacturing sector compared to 44% in the private

service sector (Yates, 2000a).

Who are these workers in the private service sector that unions are organizing? They are workers employed in hotels, home care agencies and offices who serve food, clean rooms, attend children and the elderly and work as secretaries (USWA, 1998; Yates 2001). More often than not, they are women. Recognizing the gender of newly organized workers is critical, as women are more likely than men to vote in favour of unionization. Proof of this comes from the survey of organizers. In Ontario and British Columbia, workplaces in which women constitute the majority of workers are much more likely to vote in favour of union certification than male dominated workplaces (Yates, 2001). This trend is especially significant in private sector workplaces.

This shift in organizing towards the private service sector and female dominated workplaces raises a host of questions about strategic change by unions and the ways in which they have reformed organizing practices to respond to the needs of groups of workers, quite different from incumbent members. In spite of the fervent embrace of the U.S. Organizing Model by many Canadian unions, there exists no single model for union renewal. Rather, innovation is a slow and uneven process. It is therefore necessary to examine and learn from strategic innovations across a range of unions operating in different

parts of the economy and country. In so doing, we build a sense of union best practices from which other unions can learn. The remainder of the paper will explore what I refer to as two orders of change that are taking place within unions. Taken together these two orders of change provide some answers to the question of how unions are rebuilding memberships.

FIRST ORDER OF CHANGE: ORGANIZING STRATEGIES

The first order of change refers to the strategies unions use to reach out to and organize a more diverse population of workers. Changes to union strategy begin with changing who does the organizing, in particular 1) hiring organizers with diverse backgrounds and demographic characteristics and 2) deploying rank and file organizers.

Our communities are racially and ethnically diverse and the labour force is changing accordingly. Added to this is the fact that women, in particular those with young families, participate in the labour force in growing numbers. To date, many unions have failed to keep pace with these demographic changes. Unions are therefore in danger of being out of touch with many workers. The long-term survival of unions requires that they build membership amongst women and ethnically and racially diverse groups of workers, many of whom work in workplaces not typically

organized by unions. One way of meeting this challenge is to hire organizers who are women, people of colour and youth. Organizers who share similar experiences and backgrounds are more likely to be able to communicate (often also because of the need to organize workers in a language other than English), empathize and build relations of trust with workers like themselves. While this philosophy has long been espoused by unions, they have found it harder to put into practice than they have to change the ideas. Data from the survey of organizers shows that 87% of campaigns studied in Ontario and 79% of those in B.C. were headed by white organizers (women or men). B.C. has a noticeably higher number of women heading up organizing drives than does Ontario, with 41% of organizing campaigns headed by women in B.C. and only 22% in Ontario.

One of the most significant problems faced by unions in trying to diversify their pool of organizers is lack of supply, for want of another word. Several unions have few women or people of colour amongst existing members to train as organizers. One solution to this lies in recruiting organizers amongst community, social and political activists. Again B.C. unions have moved more quickly on this front. Approximately 44% of lead organizers in B.C. organizing campaigns in the period from 1997-1999 gained experience in

organizing through community, social movement or political activism compared to only 27% in Ontario from 1996-1998.

One possible explanation for B.C.'s greater capacity to hire organizers from diverse backgrounds and amongst social or political activists lies in the establishment of the Organizing Institute in 1997. The Organizing Institute (OI), located within the B.C. Federation of Labour and funded through member unions, has a mandate to coordinate organizing across unions and to train organizers. At its twice yearly training sessions, the Organizing Institute trains potential organizers who come from the ranks of member unions as well as outside activists. The OI therefore provides unions with a pool of trained organizers with diverse backgrounds, skills and experiences. Moreover, in part due to the culture of cooperation and coordination encouraged by the OI, unions periodically combine resources on large organizing campaigns thus once again increasing the potential pool and diversity of organizers.

Unions have also moved away from relying exclusively upon paid full-time organizing staff to recruit members. In their stead, many unions train rank and file workers as organizers who are assigned periodically to organize workplaces, on a volunteer basis or, most often, with time off the job paid by the union. Once the organizing drive is

complete, these organizers return to their respective workplaces.

Training and hiring rank-and-file organizers has the advantage of allowing the union to deploy organizers that mirror the composition of the workforce being organized, whether on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity, age or work experience. Older industrial unions have been most active in deploying this strategy. The success of this approach is underscored by the increased rates of certification, from 61% to 83%, amongst those organizing drives in Ontario where the first point of contact between a union and a workplace being organized is through workers from other bargaining units.

Effecting such changes in orientation to organizing requires training and education. There has thus been a noticeable increase in union investments in organizer training. In the 1990s, for example, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), Canada, spent more than \$2 million training over 100 rank and file Special Project Union Representatives (SPUR) (Neath, 1995, 1996, 2000). A second level of education and training has also become imperative as unions seek to overcome resistance to organizing amongst incumbent union members and leaders. Such resistance stems from many sources, including concerns about reduced resources available for servicing existing members, fears that new more diverse memberships will

challenge the positions of leaders and more general membership concerns about their dis-empowerment in the face of massive membership growth. To overcome this resistance and fear, many unions have redesigned membership and leadership training to include sessions on organizing.

The UBCJA in Ontario launched a particularly innovative training programme in 2000, which combines several elements of strategic change. Two challenges prompted changes in the UBCJA:

1. the need to organize effectively in the face of growing employer and government hostility, and
2. the need to overcome a skilled trades history of exclusivity and domination by Anglo Saxon members and practices in the face of a rapidly changing construction labour force.

The UBCJA has tackled these challenges through their new education and organizing practices. In 1995, the UBCJA adopted an education programme called COMET (Construction Organizing Membership and Education and Training), first developed by the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. Developed as a two-stage education programme, COMET I seeks to shift union members' attitudes away from restrictive membership practices and instill in members an appreciation of the importance of membership recruitment (COMET 2000; Grabelsky et al, 1999). COMET II,

trains union members in organizing. In 2000, the UBCJA committed itself to training all new UBCJA members with the COMET programme. This training holds out the hope of breaking down internal resistance to membership recruitment and rebuilding union memberships that reflect the ethnic and racial diversity of the workforce.

Alongside these changes unions have begun experimenting with new organizing strategies. Strategies that empower workers themselves have proven to be particularly important in building support for unions in Ontario. Two examples illustrate this point. The single most important organizing tactic used by unions is building an inside organizing committee. Inside organizing committees are made up of the workers being organized who take responsibility for the organizing drive. In Ontario, the use of an inside organizing committee increases the likely success rate of an organizing campaign from 62% to 71%. Interviews with organizers suggest that these committees are most effective when they involve workers from each of several work areas or departments and the gender/racial/ethnic groupings found in the workplace. These committees are effective in part because 1) organizing strategies developed by workers themselves are more responsive to the particular needs and problems of each workplace, 2) they involve people who have a high

trust relationship with other workers and 3) they improve communication between the union and workers.

Organizing drives were at one time cultivated like mushrooms, in dark quiet places away from the eyes and ears of a public. Many unions now argue that such a secretive strategy hinders their success. Secrecy impedes the union's ability to defend themselves from employer misinformation or accusations, identify union supporters and build connections with workers and their communities. Secrecy also reinforces the image of unions as underhanded and union membership as something to be ashamed of. Several unions have therefore abandoned secrecy. Instead they make known to employers and workers alike that an organizing campaign is underway.

Yet, many argue that secrecy in union organizing is a response to the very real fear workers have of employer retribution against workers active in a union organizing drive. The Communications Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP) counters this argument with their experimentation with greater openness during organizing drives. Vic Morden, director of organizing for CEP in Ontario, agrees that the biggest barrier they face in an organizing campaign is fear. But he disagrees that secrecy solves this problem. Instead, to counter this fear and build support amongst workers

once a campaign begins, Morden advises the employer in a letter that they are being organized. In this letter Morden counsels the employer about the legal rights of workers, in particular their right to join a union without fear of reprisals or firing. In so doing, the union serves notice on the employer that it is monitoring the employer's behaviour and is willing to take action to defend workers involved in an organizing drive. According to Morden, this strategy has reduced the likelihood of people getting fired for involvement in organizing and therefore battles workers' fears during an organizing campaign (Morden, May 2001).

SECOND ORDER OF CHANGE: REPRESENTING WORKERS INTERESTS

Yet, even if unions succeed in drawing into their organizations massive numbers of new members, this is but the first step towards renewal. To keep these new members and encourage them to become activists, unions need to ensure that new members are represented and have opportunities for meaningful participation. This brings us to the second order of union change. Unions need to re-examine and in many cases reinvent established union structures and practices. Of the many dimensions to this issue, only two elements are explored below.

Reforming democracy

Unions pride themselves on their democratic structures and practices. Criticism is often met with defensive resistance or stony silence as union leaders and incumbent members defend the democracy that has served them in good stead, in many cases for decades. Yet, the ways and means of democracy have to change alongside who and what issues are being represented. Unions need to couple their reliance on formal democratic processes such as elections, voting and majority rule, with innovations in union structure and practice that encourage participation and activism amongst members from varied backgrounds and experiences.

In the last thirty years, the most dramatic reforms to union structures and practices have come as a result of pressure from women trade union members. Reforms include increasing the number of women in leadership positions, establishing dedicated women's structures such as women's committees, offering special skills building education to women, and effecting broader cultural changes, such as an end to sexist language in union literature and proceedings and greater visibility of women in union publications. These reforms were never complete, and by the 1980s were stalled by fears of declining membership and economic instability. But as unions work to

expand their memberships, many have once again taken on the mantle of reform. There are two ways in which reforms begun under pressure from women trade unionists are being and need to be extended. Some unions, such as the IWA are now engaged in internal reform to accommodate a growing female membership. Other unions are extending structural reform to encompass new groups, in particular people of colour and youth. The USWA has undergone significant internal restructuring under the rubric of enhanced human rights both in the workplace and the union. The CAW has extended special education and dedicated union structures to include youth and people of colour. Various labour federations have begun structural reform to represent disabled and gay and lesbian members. These are important steps forward in the reform of union democracy but ones that must be accompanied by a second strategy. Unions must deepen the commitment to reform at the local level. Here, the momentum behind structural reform is weak. Yet, meaningful local reform can be made with small steps forward. Local labour councils in Windsor and Victoria have opened their meetings to representatives of several community groups, providing a forum for dialogue and concerted cooperative action at the community level (Hargrove, 2001). IWA Local 1000 in Northern Ontario

revised protocols for local union meetings. These meetings were characterized by low membership attendance, leadership domination and exclusionary bureaucratic practices that silenced many members, in particular newly organized groups who came from outside the union's traditional jurisdiction. The local reversed the order of business. Opening reports from the leadership and local executive were replaced by an opening forum where rules of order were relaxed allowing members to voice and get action on their concerns. The local therefore increased meeting attendance and tapped into new levels of membership activism.

Radical and small scale restructuring of union structures and procedures designed to increase membership participation and activism need to be driven by a recognition that different groups of workers have barriers to their involvement in union affairs. These may be linked to responsibilities outside the home, use of English as a second language or exclusionary cultural practices. Unless unions pursue a path of reform they are likely to find it impossible to retain new members who they worked so hard to organize.

Bargaining reform

The biggest collective bargaining problem identified by unions is how to bargain effectively for multiple

small and dispersed bargaining units. As unions organize more service, part-time and small workplaces, this issue takes on increasing importance. One answer to these problems lies in coordinated bargaining, either at a company or sectoral level. Coordinated bargaining between more than one workplace is cost effective, increases bargaining leverage and has the potential to limit competition in the labour market. Several unions have extended the principles of master and sectoral contracts to the private service sector. Examples include the USWA negotiation of a single contract for Pinkerton's security guards, the CAW master contract covering more than 50 Kentucky Fried Chicken outlets in British Columbia and the BC Government Employees Union's master contract covering health care units across the province.

Yet another problem faced by unions in bargaining for small groups of workers employed by small employers is the high cost of benefits. Negotiating the purchase of individual benefits from companies such as Blue Cross and Sunlife can be prohibitively expensive for low wage workers and small employers. The USWA found a solution to this when it negotiated dental benefits for security guards. The USWA has established dental clinics in select union halls, where for a fraction of the cost it provides basic dental care for members. Bargaining remains one of the critical reasons workers

look to unions as a solution for their employment problems. Thus, a union that organizes without attending to the real challenges of bargaining in a new world of work is one that cannot sustain its membership.

CONCLUSION

Unions face a serious crisis. Not only is membership declining, but massive increases in resources invested to organize the unorganized have not brought the turn around in union membership that so many unions anticipated. In fact, in 2000, the numbers of workers organized in B.C., Ontario and across the United States declined significantly. Does this suggest that a strategy of union renewal that has organizing the unorganized as its centrepiece is misplaced? Many pundits and analysts suggest that a waiting game is required. Wait until more favourable governments come to power which, through legislative action, can correct the inadequacies of the labor market and bolster the position of unions. These same analysts look to the 1940s for proof of their argument. Didn't the greatest period of union expansion occur in Canada and the United States *after* labor codes were introduced? But this is a misreading of history and of the present.

Changes to labor laws and improved regulation of labor markets in the 1940s came only in the aftermath of growing

mobilization by unions.

Governments were *forced* to act in labor's interests. They did not do so of their own free choice. For unions to force governments once again to act in workers' interests, they need to prove themselves as the legitimate voice of working people and a potent force for change. Such legitimacy and power can only come from unions that are inclusive and representative of diverse communities of workers. The first step towards successful rebuilding of unions involves organizing the unorganized and reforming internal union structures and practices. A second step towards these goals involves a third order of change for unions, the rethinking of the means of political power and activism by unions. Once unions remobilize they need the means by which to influence government action. To date, unions in Canada have relied on the NDP to advance their interests. Yet, in the last few years, the NDP has proved to be an uncertain ally - in part because of the abandonment of Keynesian commitments to full employment and the welfare state but also in part because of unions themselves. If unions represent only a small, relatively privileged section of the working class, they undercut their own legitimacy and political power, including within their own party. While dramatic increases in union membership through organizing may elude unions at present, there are few other ways forward.

Acknowledgements:

Research for this paper was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. Special thanks to the dozens of union activists who participated in my survey and discussed their union organizing efforts with me. All opinions and analysis are, however, the responsibility of the author and in no way reflect the position of the unions or unionists involved.

References:

- COMET (Construction Organizing Membership Education and Training) Train-the-Trainer Session. Sponsored by the Toronto Building Construction Trades Council, Scarborough, June 19, 2000.
- CUPE 1996 *Organize* 1(1).
- Grabelsky, J., A. Pagnucco and S. Rockafellow 1999. Fanning the Flames (After Lighting the Spark): Multi-Trade COMET Programs. *Labor Studies Journal* 23: 34-50.
- Hargrove, B. 2001. Speech to International Symposium on "The Future of Trade Unions: Prospects for Union Renewal" Universite Laval, Quebec. May 25 & 26, 2001
- Macredie, I. and J. Pilon 2001. A Profile of Union Members in Canada. Paper presented at International Conference on Union Growth, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario April 30 - May 1, 2001.
- Martinello, F. 2000. Mr. Harris, Mr Rae, and Union Activity in Ontario *Canadian Public Policy* 24(1): 17-33.
- Morden, V. 2001. Conversation with author at Centre for Social Justice Conference, "Whose Economy?" Toronto, May.
- Neath, B. 1995,1996. Ontario Assistant to the Canadian Director of UFCW. Interviews by author.
- Neath, B. 2000. Ontario Assistant to the Canadian Director of UFCW. E-mail correspondence with author, June 13.
- United Steelworkers of America, 1998. Report of the Organizing Task Force. 29th Constitutional Convention, Las Vegas, Nevada, August 10-13,
- Yates, C. with G. Auton, 2001 Debunking the Myths about Organizing Women into Unions. Paper presented to Annual Meetings of the Canadian Industrial Relations Association, Quebec City, PQ, May.
- Yates, C. 2001. 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) *Union Organizing and Renewal: A Comparative Study of Union Movements in Five Countries*. London: Continuum Publishers, forthcoming.
- Yates, C. 2000a. Staying the Decline in Union Membership: Union Organizing in Ontario, 1985-1999. *Relations Industrielles/Industrial Relations* 55(4): 640-674.
- Yates, C. 2000b. Union Organizing: What Works? What Doesn't?. Report on Organizing prepared for and presented to meeting of OFL unions, Feb 24.