
DEBATES

**UP AGAINST THE WALL: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE
NEW ATTACK ON THE CANADIAN LABOUR MOVEMENT: A
REPLY TO ANDREW JACKSON**

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The Left once wondered whether unions could lead a radical transformation of society; today, the prevailing question is whether unions in their present form can even hang on to past gains. Andrew Jackson's paper provides a very useful and sober overview of the impasse in labour. Since I would generally endorse the specifics of what he raises, it seems more useful to focus on the larger challenge implicit in his analysis but which his article does not pursue. What needs as much attention and discussion as the attack on labour is the profound crisis *within* labour itself.

Jackson's strategic contribution is twofold. First, he argues that defending public sector unions, which still have a decent union density, depends on reviving private sector unions. Absent such a revival, the public sector unions will be isolated and defeated. Second, he defines reviving private sector unionism in terms of raising union density (the proportion of workers in unions). Unless there is greater union coverage, unions can't effectively bargain and defend their members.

There is a common sense to this but it raises some critical questions. Is the weakness of private sector unions primarily about declining union density or is that itself only a symptom of the larger ineffectiveness of the unions? If the labour movement couldn't solidify its membership base and social influence when it was stronger, why expect it to do so when it is so much weaker? Given that the attack on the public sector is very much about consolidating the defeats imposed on private sector workers, won't the primary arena of struggle necessarily be the public sector—both because the state will force the issue and because this is where labour retains some ability to fight back? And if so, what can the public sector itself do other than waiting for the revival of the private sector?

Relevant here as well is Jackson's note, almost in passing, that "employer hostility to unions tends to be a reverse function of union strength." The implication seems to be that if unions are once again strong, the attacks will

abate. This is an unfortunate sidebar; it underestimates what we are really up against. The very economic strength of unions in the 1960s and into the 1970s became a barrier to corporate productivity and profits, contributed to inflation, and eventually brought the concerted attacks on labour now summarized as ‘neoliberalism’. Economic militancy and union density had proven a fragile foundation, on their own, for permanent gains. Unless workers are ready to think very much bigger, winning and hanging on to even small victories is unlikely.

Two inter-related issues are at the center of the crisis within unions. First, unions are at their core *sectional*, not class organizations. They represent particular groups of workers confronting specific employers around one (albeit very crucial) dimension of their lives. In the post-war decades, unique circumstances meant workers could make gains in spite of this fragmented orientation and those gains spread even to many non-union workers. But if the last three decades have taught us anything, it is that the earlier era is over.

This also affects the issue of unionization. As sectional organizations, unions are focussed on growing their own membership base, not really ‘organizing’ these members as effective social agents, nor building the broader working class as a social force.¹ Although some union expansion has occurred, achieving more substantive and lasting breakthroughs would build on a class perspective: cooperating across unions and overcoming parochial union jealousies, addressing class concerns both outside and inside the union, not being limited by narrow ‘cost-benefit’ analyses, and not only investing in creative mobilizing strategies, but ensuring that getting new members is not the end of the story but rather part of transforming the very nature of what unions are.²

The second dilemma is that the overwhelming priority of workers is getting or keeping jobs. Yet this isn’t what unions, structured around the price and conditions of work, have to offer. This has led to either looking for allies in business to support stimulus (even though business is more interested in worker austerity) or more direct collaboration with their own employer in the face of competitiveness and job threats. This has not led to job security, but it *has* contributed to weakened workers for future struggles. Any serious alternative would have to reorient unions to creating economic spaces outside dependence on their employers and the dictates of the market.

Unions have, in this regard pointed to the need to invest in infrastructure—roads, bridges, water supply, schools, health and care facilities, hydro and electronic grids, the environment—to ‘get the economy moving’. But this must be linked to not just getting out of the crisis, but to a much more ambitious rethinking of economic activity to address social needs and expand social spaces.³ Alongside this, instead of standing by while productive plants close and the potentially valuable equipment and skills are cast aside, we should be talking about their conversion to produce things we needed, a prime example being the

environmental needs that will have to be addressed through the rest of this century, from the conversion of homes and factories to the expansion of mass transit.⁴

In both of the above cases, the prospect of immediate victories is obviously limited. Yet if we do not start raising this now—and also asking the difficult questions that go along with this, like the need to challenge the control of the financial system over the allocation of funds and therefore of social priorities—we will *always* confront the fact of the time not being right yet. To raise this now is to begin to change common sense planning being left to private corporations and markets to something we collectively and democratically do; from production for profit versus production for social use; and from being limited by competition to being strengthened by solidarity.

This takes us back to unions in the public sector and their potential to lead private sector unions. If public sector unions cannot get the public on side they will be isolated and the only question will be how fast they will lose what they now have. The unions have understood this and responded by articulating a concern for ‘the public’. But they have not appreciated how profound a change this implies if they are not to be seen as just being opportunistic. To prove their genuine concern, they will need to show themselves as *leading* the fight to defend and expand social services and this necessitates a radical restructuring of how unions function: how they allocate resources, transform the role of staff and therefore also local leadership and activists, relate to their members and the community, and even rethink collective bargaining.⁵ In this moment, for example, the best way of establishing its credibility in leading the struggle for social services may be to place services themselves on the bargaining table—and not as an ‘additional’ item but as the *main* demand.⁶

This is not a matter of asking unions to be altruistic, although some altruism is an important part of solidarity and defining struggles in class terms. It also directly addresses a crucial concern of workers—the pressures of workloads—and the strategic importance of building the popular base for resistance when the state really comes after you. If the public sector were to move in this direction, it would signal a point of strength for private sector unions.

We can put this even more starkly. In the 1930s, the last time we had as profound a crisis in both the economy and within unions, craft unionism (the exclusive concentration on skilled workers) was the predominant form of unionism. But it had largely exhausted its potential in the face of the growth of new sectors dominated by semi-skilled and unskilled workers and industrial unionism emerged as a more militant, inclusive and democratic form of working class organization. Are we now at the point that we need again to rethink the appropriate form of working class organization(s) for this moment?

This is an intimidating challenge. Since there is little reason, based on historical precedence or consideration of union realities, to expect the new

changes to come from a dynamic solely internal to unions and if it is also unlikely to come from the socialist left, which has suffered a defeat as significant as that of the labour movement, where might the catalyst come from? It may be that we need to build a new kind of ‘intermediate’ organization that operates between the limits of sectional unions (and single issue movements) on the one hand and a socialist party that remains so distant on the other. Its role would be to support the establishment of fight back committees in workplaces and:

1. Encourage and/or support these committees in bringing a class sensibility to unions. Unions will always be primarily concerned with the immediate interests of their own members but they can become dramatically better organizations with a chance of defending their members if a class perspective is understood and part of strategic discussions.
2. Link these workplace committees to each other and to other dimensions of workers lives through regional (urban) campaigns around strike support, unionization, mass transit, environment, etc.—that is engage in class struggles that build class capacities.
3. Develop confidence in alternatives that move beyond the debilitating logic of capitalism— which is to say, make socialists and develop a socialist culture.

Jackson has outlined the present danger to unions. The question is whether we grasp the historical significance of this moment and the challenge to not only try harder, but try differently, including contemplating both a revolution inside unions and new forms of working class organization with feet both inside and outside the unions.

NOTES

- ¹ See Jane McAlevey (2012) *Raising Expectations (and Raising Hell): My Decade Fighting for the Labor Movement*, New York: Verso.
- ² The CAW-CEP merger has raised the question of ‘individual membership’ as a radically new organizing tactic. It remains, however, to be seen how this is implemented in practice so it does not just mean offering workers lower rates on their credit cards, as happened in a similar experiment with the AFL-CIO. The fact that unions have not even been organizing their own recently unemployed members suggests reason to doubt that unions will now bring in workers they have had no contact with.
- ³ See Hugh McKenzie’s (2013) excellent piece, “Canada’s Infrastructure Gap: Where It Came From and Why It Will Cost So Much To Close”, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA), available at: <http://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/canadas-infrastructure-gap>.
- ⁴ Greg Albo, Sam Gindin and Leo Panitch, *In and out of Crisis: The Global Financial Meltdown and Left Alternatives*, PM Press, 2010.

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- ⁵ Michael Hurley and Sam Gindin, 'The Assault on Public Services: Will Unions Lament the Attacks or Lead a Fightback?' *The Bullet*, November 2011. Available at: <http://www.socialistproject.ca/bullet/516.php>.
- ⁶ Jackson cites the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) campaign on public pensions as an example of the labour movement leading on a fundamental social issue. This issue does indeed have great potential and the CLC deserves credit for this initiative. What needs serious discussion is why this issue seems to have faded.