

What Union Membership Means To Me

In choosing this topic for my entry to compete for the CUPE Alberta Scholarship, I am committing to a more personal essay as opposed to a fact-based research paper. When I write about what union membership means to me, I have to think about the values and principles that inform my life, that were passed down to me from my parents, and that, indeed, I hope to pass on to my child. The principles are ones of dignity in work, fairness of treatment, reasonableness, integrity and honesty in all dealings, pride in work well done and a say in my working conditions. These principles have led me to make the decision to go back to school and hopefully, someday make a positive contribution in the field of labour law. That's essentially what union membership means to me. It's not just about my union or my job; at the end of the day, it's about human rights and what I consider to be the basis of a meaningful life for myself and for others.

In this essay, I would like to reflect on what union membership means to me, the current situation of unionization in Canada, and a few possible directions for union membership in the future.

Many people think that unions only directly impact work life and that, outside of work, unions really have no influence. From my observations of the world, nothing could be further from the truth. Collective agreements and union membership mean that workers, as a class, have rights. Knowledge of your rights separates an individual from slavery and imprisonment. When you have a union, you have a voice. When you have a voice,

you have the dignity accorded to humans who discourse with others, for example, management. Unlike Egyptian or feudal societies, the conversation is a two-way conversation. Therefore, unions give people dignity on the job and outside of work. Union membership allows workers freedom of speech, association and equality which are core rights under Canada's Charter of Rights, and Freedoms. These rights afford individuals a sense of belonging to a civil society ruled by law not by some overlord's whim. Indeed, some people credit union membership with having created a middle class in the twentieth century after gaining an eight-hour workday and improved salaries. Many people take these rights for granted and don't realize that it was unions who fought for them and, in the process, created the kind of workplace where fair pay, benefits, and pensions existed. As my mother often used to say: "People died for your rights."

What happens to people who don't know their rights? To put it simply, they remain enslaved due to ignorance and often exhibit a deficit of expectations, that is, they merely accept whatever they are accorded by the employer. In today's workplace, non-unionized workers take part-time and term contracts, casual hours and on-call status, schedules that conflict with family life or endanger women, lack of proper breaks, no benefits or pension or paid vacation, and the inevitable low pay. And that's just in North America never mind the working conditions in parts of Mexico, China, or India. On occasion, I have taken the opportunity to talk with non-unionized workers because I'm interested to know how they see their jobs. I never fail to be amazed that they accept and even embrace substandard working conditions. Often, they will make remarks such as: "My employer is good." or "They told me before I was hired that I could expect to work any

shift in a twenty-four period” or “No I don’t have benefits or a pension. So what?”

Sometimes, in speaking with unorganized workers, I can’t help but point out that unionized workers are paid, on average, ten to twenty percent higher than non-unionized workers, that it is a form of extortion to require acceptance of outlandish working shifts as a condition of hiring, that benefits and pensions are good things for every member of society, that an annual vacation should be a paid right not something to wheedle and beg from the employer. This can be an eye-opening conversation for non-unionized workers and they are not always ready to hear this. The process of standing up for one’s rights is a gradual process of growth in understanding. As a CUPE representative told me many years ago, it’s a process of education.

Union Membership: Relic From Another Era?

Why is union membership such an unknown entity in our society today, especially in Alberta? It is true that Alberta’s unionization rate is a mere 24% compared to 40% in Quebec.¹ But why do the words “union membership” seem like foreign words to many people? The reality is that union membership is becoming more and more remote to a large percentage of working people both in Canada and the United States. Recent numbers from Statistics Canada indicate that the proportion of unionized employees in Canada fell from 38% to 31% between 1981 and 2004.² The decline, most of which took place between 1989 and 1998, was entirely due to trends in the commercial sector

¹ Kozhaya, Norma. “The Consequences of a Strong Union Presence in Quebec”, Economic Note, Montreal Economic Institute. September 2005

² “Perspectives on Labour and Income : Diverging Trends in Unionization”. Statistics Canada. April 2005 Vol. 6, no.4

according to Statistics Canada. In fact, the largest losses of union membership (almost 20%) were among young men aged 25 to 34 years who typically are concentrated in jobs that have low unionization rates. Accompanying this decline in unionization was a decline in wages for young men in this age group who saw their average hourly wages drop by 10%.

What factors are driving this loss of union membership in particular among men versus women? Unionization has historically been low in certain industries such as consumer services, business services, and agriculture, fishing, and trapping and rates of union membership in these sectors have always been modest. By contrast, some industries where unions have traditionally been strong such as forestry, mining, construction, manufacturing, and distributive services have seen their unionization rates decline substantially, anywhere from 10% to 20%. Whereas forestry, mining, and construction saw their losses occur in the 1980's and 90's, the bulk of the lost union members in manufacturing occurred in the 1990's.

Statistics Canada identifies the cause of the loss of unionization as “compositional changes in employment”. They say that about half of the 12% decline can be attributed to workers moving into industries and occupations with traditionally low unionization rates. For example, professional and managerial occupations and service industries have low rates of unionization. As for the other half of the unionization loss, Statistics Canada says this “remains unexplained”. They speculate that perhaps the 5% increase in small

firms could account for this or perhaps “a reduction in employee need for union representation” could also exert downward pressure on unionization rates.

Statistics Canada, showing a massive unwillingness to connect the dots in the economic picture, doesn't come out and state the causes of such loss of unionization. However, “compositional changes in employment” almost certainly means a large movement from well paid, unionized manufacturing jobs to low-paid, non-unionized service industry jobs. Some studies point to the massive exodus from North America of goods -creating or manufacturing jobs through plant closures, outsourcing, and low-wage overseas jobs in China, India, and Mexico. United States observers point to nine million factory jobs gone since the late 1970's due to the restructuring of the economy as a result of technological change, globalization and corporate mega-mergers.³ The clothing and textile industry is but one example of an industry ravaged by globalization and cheap offshore labour. What came in to fill the job vacuum in both the United States and Canada were newly created private sector jobs that paid minimum wages and offered few benefits. In addition, general fear and insecurity about jobs had a chilling effect on union organizing. Who wants to rally for a union when you're hired on a temporary, casual, or part-time basis and risk being laid off if you speak up?

In the last ten years, union activists in Canada have faced intransigent employers, laws arrayed against them (such as essential services laws that deny certain employment groups the right to strike), and a hostile or business-friendly media. Faced with this and the ever-present threat of layoffs, there has been a further erosion of the union position in

³ Aronowitz, Stanley. “On the Future of American Labor”. Working USA Spring 2005

many locals in Canada. Instead of bargaining hard for job security, many union members have succumbed reluctantly to wage and benefit rollbacks, wage increases below inflation rates, and contracting out.

The American Showdown

In the United States, where union membership is already much lower than Canada's rate, the crisis over union membership decline has deepened to the point where the labour movement has been termed "in free fall." In response to this crisis, there is much head-scratching and agonized discussion around the future of "big labour". Most recently, a large rift has appeared between major unions over how best to reorganize and regain lost ground. In August 2005, Andrew Stern, head of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), split away from the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) taking 4.6 million workers (40% of the total group) with him including his own members as well as the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, and the United Food and Commercial Workers. While the remaining unions in the AFL-CIO, headed by John Sweeney, intend to stay the course and focus on organizing and gaining political clout, Andrew Stern is now headed in a different direction to work for global unions, unions organized by industry sector, and fewer but massively larger unions. His organization, the New Unity Partnership, bears close observation; there may be lessons to be learned for Canadian unions similarly trying to address loss of union membership numbers.

Grassroots Participation and Union Revitalization

There is no one perfect solution to the problem of declining rates of union membership and it seems advisable to adopt strategies on several fronts. However, my own experience with union membership, including over sixteen years as a union member and two years as union president of CUPE 1169 (Calgary Public Library), leads me to believe that the most important factor in union revitalization is engaging union members themselves. Union executives need to be responsive to the concerns affecting their members and the unorganized workers in their industry or profession in general. Goals and priorities should reflect the needs of the members. To be truly representative, participation must come from all segments of the union, that is, full time and part-time or casual workers, male and females, youth and age, all races and ethnic backgrounds that make up the membership. For example, not enough union members in the 1990's were unaware of the grim impact that globalization, trade liberalization and technology were having in the private sector, in particular the manufacturing sector. The problem may be that "There is no unifying vision of a different world, no new paradigm to inspire workers and challenge the status quo." The question must be "How do we build a progressive movement?" rather than "How do we restructure our bureaucracy?"⁴

If they can be engaged there is a possibility that all working people and union members can take action to prevent a further decline in working conditions that will return us to the miserable conditions described by Charles Dickens in his novels. As a librarian, I believe

⁴ Hurd, Richard. "The Failure of Organizing: The New Unity Partnership and The Future of The Labor Movement", in Working : the Journal of Labor and Society Vol 8 September 2004,pp 5-25

in the power of stories. Unions need to find new stories to tell their members and the general public about what kind of a world that we want and how to effect it through activism, speaking out, and political action. The ideal of a just and fair workplace must extend beyond the union hall and reach the pages of magazines and newspapers and be told, sung, and even acted out at music festivals, farmers markets, cultural and community events to spread the message. It should be aired on funny and hip television ads. The union message needs to find new and more creative ways to communicate with members and the public at large. The success of Bono and Live Eight offers an example.

Education : Connecting Unions to Our Lives

One of the most important aspects of my vision of union membership revitalization involves education. I know that organizing has recently become a compelling priority for many unions and rightly so. However, organizing can happen from the ground up if educated members spread the message of better wage and benefit gains to non organized workers. How much more effective would gaining new members be if the process happened by word of mouth, through family, church, and cultural ties stemming from an informed and educated member to a non-unionized neighbour or friend. Education and communication need to be new priorities for union membership. Furthermore the content of courses and emails directed at members should go well beyond basic stewarding and “My Union” courses. What is needed is something that speaks to the everyday life issues of members. For example topics such as benefits, pensions, childcare, health, the environment, food production and pesticides, pay rates of entry level and youth workers,

education and more are all union issues. Union leaders and activists should look at their membership and even at other unorganized workers in their industry sector and consider what issues are most critical and top-of-mind for these people and speak to the role of unions in these areas.

In other words, unions have to go to where people live, figuratively speaking. All of these issues are union issues. If you speak to someone about what excellent public health care is about, you speak about unions. If you speak to new immigrants about finding work and coping, you are speaking about what unions can do for new Canadians. If you speak to young adults about job prospects and the impact of technology on jobs with regard to working conditions and temporary contracts, you are speaking about unions. My vision of union membership is that the educational section in any given local should be at least as large as the organizing division and funded amply to engage members and promote strategic union goals. Every means should be used to engage and attract members to listen, think, and become involved in the movement away from a big business agenda and back to a more human and just society where all workers have a say in determining their future.

Social Coalitions and Union Revitalization

If unions are to influence the community at large, they must find a simple way to form coalitions with and communicate with other groups in society (including, but not limited to, other unions) who have similar issues and aims. There is a great deal of symmetry

between unions and political, environmental, liberal, and other special interest groups in society. As part of a strategic plan to expand and engage more people, unions must communicate and support other groups who are similarly striving for the same goals of social justice. Again, this opens up huge areas of influence and dialogue between unions and environmentalists, farmers, youth, religious groups, seniors, parents, political groups, poverty advocates, community associations, animal rights activists, and the list goes on and on to encompass all the variety of life. On my summer vacation this year, I discovered that small towns in British Columbia are being revitalized by the different music, drama, and art festivals that take place throughout the province over the summer. Unions need to go there.

In a recent article, David Kidd suggests this strategy to stop the decline of union membership. In addition to making concrete suggestions having to do with organizing small workplaces and creating workers resource centers, he argues for putting a “social movement orientation” back into the union movement. He says: “...the union movement needs to reassert its place as one of the key movements that fought for social institutions like medicare and public education ...Unorganized workers are attracted to unions not just for better wages and working conditions, but also for justice and dignity.”⁵

In summary, what does union membership mean to me? It means being courageous enough to recognize the overall weakening of unionization in our society and being bold enough to reinvent unions for the future. It means starting a crusade to fight the degrading, demeaning new work world of jobs that are temporary, low paid, with no

⁵ Kidd, David. “State of the Unions 2005”, Canadian Dimension (May 1, 2005), Vol 39, Issue 3.

benefits or pension. How? I would like to see some simple steps to connect with members and society as a whole. In my opinion, growing union membership means a reconnection to the power of grassroots, ordinary working people. It means communicating and educating our members in new and more effective ways so that unions become a major educating force in society. It means reaching out in new ways to form social coalitions so that that unions do not stand alone but stand with other brothers and sisters who come from every part of our community and who believe in the same goals of fairness, equity, justice and dignity not just in the workplace but throughout our society.