



FASTFACTS



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The Way Forward for Labour

Union membership in Canada has increased steadily since the 1940s. In 1940 there were 362,000 union members; in 2004, 4,261,000 members. However, union density - union members as a percent of non-agricultural paid workers - has declined in recent decades (see Table below). The decline is significant. If the 37.9 percent union density rate of the 1980s had been maintained through the 1990s and into the first years of this century, the number of union members in 2004 would have been 5,319,000 - 25 percent higher than the actual number of 4,261,000.

| Union Membership and Density in Canada | | |
|--|------------------|---------------|
| Years | Union Membership | Union Density |
| 1981-90 | 3,731,000 | 37.9 |
| 1991-00 | 4,042,000 | 34.7 |
| 2001-04 | 4,181,000 | 30.8 |

This decline in union density has profoundly affected the capacity of the labour movement to influence the political, economic and social agendas at both national and provincial levels.

Two main factors determine the power of labour to shape events: union density; and the militancy and combativeness of union members and organizations. The two are interrelated. When union density is on the increase, it becomes easier to mobilize members and to confront employers and the state to achieve gains for working people. When union density is declining, such gains are much more difficult. The marginalization of

labour in all jurisdictions, including those with NDP governments, since the 1980s is testimony to what happens when union density is declining. For further evidence consider the case of the USA, where union density in the private sector in 2004 was down to 7.9 % - with disastrous consequences for American working people and their communities.

The corrosive effects associated with the decline in union density create conditions which accentuate the erosion. Anti-union employers and governments become more aggressive in their efforts to drive unions from workplaces and entrench anti-union legislation. This demoralizes those already in unions, and makes it more difficult to recruit new members.

It is imperative that we find ways to stop the decline in union density, and increase significantly the numbers in unions. To do this, we must organize the unorganized.

There has long been survey and other evidence to show that more workers want to be union members than there are union members. Recent evidence is that around 50 per cent of Canadian workers would like to be in unions - 20 percentage points above the present rate of unionization.

There are formidable obstacles facing unions seeking to organize in the private sector. Recent efforts to unionize Wal-Mart, for example, have met with some success, but Wal-Mart is a ruthless employer, comparable to the coal barons and the Eaton's and chartered banks of previous eras. Walmart will stop at nothing to thwart efforts to



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unionize, including cutting off its own parts to prevent the spread of unionization.

To organize workers in the Walmarts of this world, organized labour has to build grassroots support in the communities where Walmart and other such reactionary employers are located.

Reinventing Labour Councils

Historically, local labour councils mobilized support for workers involved in industrial disputes with employers; organized educational activities on political, social and economic issues for workers; and supported efforts to elect working people to city council, school boards and federal and provincial legislatures.

These activities were inspired by the belief that the labour movement represented *all* working people, and was committed not only to improving conditions in the workplace, but also to building better communities. Labour councils led the fights for public libraries, for universal suffrage in local, provincial and federal elections, for parks and recreation, for public utilities to provide sewer and water, public transit and public health services. Labour councils fought in national campaigns in support of universal pensions, Medicare, unemployment insurance and a social safety net for the poor.

But in recent decades, labour councils have been battered by relentless attacks on working people and their organizations by employers and governments. Labour councils have had to fight defensive campaigns to block the GST, stop cuts to Unemployment Insurance, oppose privatization, protect Medicare, and block anti-union legislation. At the same time, many trade unions that had historically encouraged their members to get active in labour councils, withdrew their support to pursue more narrowly-focused agendas.

If we are to breathe new life into the labour movement, and reverse the long-term decline in union density, we need once again to look to local labour councils as a catalyst in building a culture supportive of trade unionism and progressive social change. It is labour councils that can, through their active campaigns to support communities, promote a vision that embraces all working people.

To achieve these results, three things need to happen immediately. First, the Canadian Labour Congress must direct more resources to local labour councils to support them in expanding their range of activities and initiatives in local communities. The CLC has previously considered, but backed away from, requiring affiliates to contribute per

capita dues to labour councils. Perhaps the time has come to revisit this idea.

Second, while money is important, so is active participation by unions in support of labour councils. The CLC and its affiliates must encourage local unions to elect/appoint delegates to labour councils, and support and promote the initiatives of labour councils, including, for example, information pickets directed at anti-union employers, and election campaigns in support of progressive labour candidates.

Third, labour councils must build coalitions with other progressive organizations in their communities to unite on issues of common concern, for example, degradation of the environment, poverty and affordable housing, and the building of community through support for improved public transit, and local library and recreational facilities.

This rejuvenation at the bottom that arises from involvement in local communities will contribute significantly to building social solidarity, expanding the ranks of unionized workers, and promoting democracy and social justice.

By Errol Black and Jim Silver

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