



Youth and Unions

— by *Melanie Racette-Campbell and Melanie Sadler*

Young workers in Saskatchewan, Canada, and the world were harder hit by the recession of the 1990s than older workers. They were among the first to lose their jobs, and even now have not benefited from the improving economic condition. Fewer people 15-26 years of age are employed now than at any time in recent history, and those who are employed are more likely, than in the past, to occupy low-paying, part-time, or temporary positions. Young workers are much less likely than their older counterparts to be in unionized workplaces, both due to the nature of their employment and to the labour movement's reluctance to seriously address the concerns of young workers.

Economic Climate Change

Most young workers today realize that it is more difficult finding work than it was for youth 20 or 30 years ago. People could get good jobs right out of high school and expect to stay in them until they retired. Those jobs are far fewer now, and for the most part, the jobs young people can find are in the physical labour (for men) or retail sales (for women) fields, with little or no job security, benefits, or chance for advancement. It can be difficult for older workers to understand the situation facing the young who are often written off as lazy and not willing to persevere, when the reality is that the job market is radically changed from 20 or 30 years ago. Youth employment decreased drastically in the recession of the 1990s and has not recovered in any significant way.

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The 1980s were a time of political conservatism and backlash against the progressive gains of the 60s and 70s. Leaders such as Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, and Brian Mulroney were setting the stage for wealthy corporations and international trade agreements to take power from people and governments. One of the effects of this was to open up opportunities in the developing world for multinational corporations. Many manufacturing jobs from developed nations disappeared, sent south and east to countries with few labour or environmental standards and, often, to cooperative governments and military leaders who were willing to put the interests of corporations above those of their people for the sake of more foreign trade. As relatively well-paid manufacturing jobs were sent to sweatshops in the South, more relatively poorly paid service sector jobs were being created in the North. Currently, 75% of the jobs in Canada are in the service industry, with about 25% of all jobs in the country in the low paid food, retail, and entertainment sections of the service industry. Three quarters of employed youth work within the service sector (AFL, 2003). This shift in employment patterns has taken its toll on unions as well, as people working in manufacturing are far more likely to be unionized than those in the service industry.

More Recent Developments

Saskatchewan is a somewhat positive place for youth employment and union experience at the present time. A national study on youth employment (Kunz, 1998) found that youth living in rural areas and smaller (under 100,000 people) urban centres were more likely to find jobs. As about 60% of Saskatchewan's population lives in rural areas or small urban areas, youth here have that advantage. Saskatchewan has strong labour laws and the process of union certification is relatively easy here, compared to many other provinces.

However, as of 1998, only 10.9% of workers aged 18 to 24 belonged to a union, as compared to 45% of workers 45 to 54 (McAdam, 1998). Part of the reason for this lies in the shift in employment patterns described above, which have left many young workers in part-time or temporary employment in difficult to unionize, multinational corporations. Unions have also often shown reluctance to expend their resources on organizing and administering workplaces with primarily young employees, particularly where there is a high turnover rate. There also may be real or perceived barriers to youth participation within unions.

Additionally, older union members do not always have a positive view of young workers. They may consider them lazy, or not experienced enough in work or the union to have opinions that need to be considered. Older people also may have mistaken beliefs that stints in the service industry are only temporary, to prepare young people for better jobs later on. Unfortunately, this is not necessarily true. Although young workers may not stay with any one service job for long, they may spend a decade or more at various jobs in the industry.

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When young workers are union members, they do not often feel strong ties to their union. Too many young people's only interaction with their unions consists of the dues which come off of their paycheques, and sometimes these dues bring their

hourly wage below the minimum. A young woman who worked at a grocery store for 6 months when she was 21 shared a common story. Although she was a union member, she never met her shop steward (or even knew that such a person existed), never signed a union card, and saw no evidence in her daily work experience of a union existing at her

workplace. She was a cashier at the store, the lowest paid position there. Cashiers also bear the brunt of customer dissatisfaction and abuse, and, as a result of this and the low pay, there is a very high turnover rate among cashiers. The high turnover may be the reason the union gives for paying so little attention to the cashiers. But since it is the cashiers' low pay and stressful work environment that cause them to leave so frequently, if their union addressed these concerns, the cashiers might be longer term employees.

This indicates that the best time to introduce people to the labour movement is when they are young. Due to ignorance about their rights and about the labour movement, many young people have no idea how to contact a union, so the onus falls upon those who are already involved to reach out to and educate the youth.

The cashiers' problem illustrates an unfortunate catch-22. Unions believe that there is little point in investing in young workers due to their apathy and nomadic employment, which is a cause as well as an effect of those factors. When unions are unwilling to invest seriously in young workers, it should be no surprise that young workers are unwilling to invest in unions. An Alberta study reported that young workers have more positive attitudes toward unions than their older counterparts. This indicates that the best time to introduce people to the labour movement is when they are young. Due to ignorance about their rights and about the labour movement, many young people have no idea how to contact a union, so the onus falls upon those who are already involved to reach out to and educate the youth.

Subgroups within youth face additional barriers to employment. Aboriginal youth and young people of colour, particularly immigrants, encounter institutionalized and personal racism in the workplace and in unions. In Saskatchewan, Aboriginal people constitute 12.5% of the population, and expected to grow to 32% in the next 40 years, but only 2% of the workforce (CUPE Research, 2002). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered youth face homophobia and rigid gender role expectations. Young parents of any group face the challenges of finding suitable and affordable childcare and of supporting their children on low wages, in addition to the more general societal prejudices toward young parents, especially if they are unmarried.

People working within the labour movement are starting to recognize that things need to change if they are to be effective in the future. The recent economic downturn, coupled with increasing globalization, is a threat to the progress of the labour movement. One side effect of the aforementioned trends is the increase in service sector jobs, as well as temporary and part-time positions, many of which are filled by youth. These “McJobs” used to be seen as a rite of passage, assuming that once the young person got more education he or she would be able to get a better job. This is no longer necessarily the case. Nearly every young person knows someone with a degree, or two or three, who still has to work the low-paying, no-respect job. Because it costs more now to get an education, it takes longer to pay off loans or save for tuition, which often means longer stays in minimum wage jobs.

It is important to try and unionize these jobs, but, as the history of the Wobblies shows, this can be a daunting task. As explained in *Workers of Tomorrow*, “...young workers are underrepresented in the ranks of organized labour. Broadly speaking, unions are not a significant force in the sectors of the economy where youth are working, and age is one of the best ways to predict if an individual is likely to be unionized” (AFL, 2003, p. 1). Many multinational companies can afford to close an entire store and reopen down the street just to get rid of a union if their attempts at sabotaging the union drive through intimidation tactics fail. This

happened to Sarah Inglis, a youth from Orangeville, Ontario, whose first job was at McDonalds. She wanted to begin organizing after the new management started giving staff 3 ½ hour shifts. Employees were forced to take second jobs to supplement their lost income and were threatened by management (Inglis, 1994). Inglis called various unions for help but encountered negative attitudes when she disclosed her age. No union seemed to want to go to bat for a 14 year old. Finally she got the help she needed after deliberately withholding her age. The union drive ultimately failed due to severe anti-union sentiment as well as anti-union literature distributed by management.

However, in the changing landscape of labour there are some organizations that are working to attract more young people to the labour movement, including the Canadian Labour Congress on a national level. There are also provincial organizations such as the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour that develop programs specifically for youth.

Present day unions often talk about how important youth are to the labour movement, but, as Sarah Inglis discovered, there is a huge discrepancy between talk and action. However, in the changing landscape of labour there are some organizations that are working to attract more young people to the labour movement, including the Canadian Labour Congress on a national level.

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Young workers in developing nations are even more negatively affected than we are here by the employment practices of multinational corporations. In her book *No Logo*, Naomi Klein writes of companies closing down factories and moving to cheaper locales. Cheaper labour can be found in what are called “Free Trade Zones”. These places are found in Mexico, the Philippines, and China, to name a few. In many of these areas nearly all the workers are young females, working days of 12 to a maximum of 16 hours in southern China (Klein, 2000). These young women may be forced to take pregnancy tests, and are generally harassed into quitting if they do become pregnant, as their employers do not want to have to take on any pregnancy or parental related costs. The underpaid workers in the developing world are employed by contractors who are in turn employed by companies based in developed nations, including Canada.

What Will the Future Bring?

A Canadian Labour Congress National Youth Representative recently stated, “Labour doesn’t just need a face lift, or image change, they need a cultural change. This means a workers’ culture that fights for young people’s issues”.

Hopefully attempts at incorporating youth into present unions, as well as those at forming new unions, will be successful. As the baby boomers retire, new energy and creativity must be injected into the struggle for fair wages and fair work. While multinational corporations grow fatter by the day, the youth, who are making those profits possible, both in the developed and the developing world, suffer. Unions need to stand strong with young workers such as Sarah Inglis and pressure employers to treat their workers fairly and with respect.

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Unions need to create real, not token, space within their organizations for youth. Governments need to be pressured to take meaningful steps to alleviate youth unemployment and underemployment, as well as student debt and tuition costs. Young workers, not only in Canada but worldwide, need to organize just so they can bring home enough real wages to survive, not to mention to create bearable workplaces. This is where the labour movement’s progress, and its involvement with young people, is crucial to the resurrection and survival of workers’ rights worldwide.

“In Canada, as in all advanced industrial countries, the degree to which unions regroup will determine their success in surviving and growing as progressive social forces for the next century” (Peters, 2002, p. 26). ❖

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