

REINVENTING THE WORKERS' MOVEMENT

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The workers' movement in Canada and Quebec is in a state of disarray, unable to deal with ongoing attacks on the diverse working class. Whether unionized, non-unionized, temporary, racialized, women or indigenous workers, the weakness or absence of workers' organization reveals a movement in need of reinvention. What follows is an introductory piece meant to open discussion on the state of the workers' movement today.

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The workers' movement in Canada and Quebec today is in trouble. During the more than six years since the 2008-2009 "Great Recession" that opened a new era, it has been unable to begin to build significant resistance against attacks on the working class by employers and all levels of government. It is true that the number of unionized workers hasn't been shrinking and that the decline in overall union density (the percentage of workers who are unionized) has been slow in recent years. This is not as bad as the situation in the US, where both union numbers and density have been falling for years. Union institutions remain generally stable, though some unions have lost large numbers of members and therefore income (for example, job losses reduced the CAW's membership from 265 000 in 2005 to 225 000 in 2009, which contributed to the CAW's 2013 merger with the CEP to form Unifor). This relative stability has contributed to complacency in some quarters about the state of unions in Canada and Quebec.

Signs of decay

But such complacency is misguided. Membership numbers and density don't translate directly into dynamism and power. Even more disturbing than the slow erosion of union density are the signs that it is becoming more difficult for workers to use unions as organizations through which they can act collectively in their own interests. (We say more difficult because workers in Canada and Quebec have faced significant difficulties on this front ever since the 1940s, when workers' struggles won new rights for unions that came with new restrictions on union activity.)

"The movement has turned more inward, so lobbying becomes the actions," is how one union insider describes the situation. The union officialdom (officers and staff) today is often preoccupied with defending unions as institutions. A Hospital Employees Union staffer put it this way: "I think there's just a real lack of solidarity, and any real focus on representing workers and the working class, as opposed to how do we get through this and survive. So I see a lot of the survival of the union, the institution is at the top of people's minds instead of workers' rights being advanced."

This has many damaging repercussions. For example, unions pay even less attention to what most non-unionized wage-earners experience. About 20% of men and 32% of women whom Statistics Canada classifies as employees do not have full-time permanent jobs. This underestimates the problem because some people classified as "own-account self-employed" rather than employees are, in fact, wage-workers. Some union officials give lip service to the plight of such precariously-employed workers, but action is rare. Only 23% of part-time workers are unionized, compared to 31% of full-time wage-earners.

People of colour are significantly under-represented among unionized workers. They face significant barriers in the workforce and are disproportionately represented in precarious and low-wage sectors. This has created a greater distance between unions and the non-unionized working class. So too has the decline of union density in the private sector, where most wage-earners are employed, to 16%. The

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Faced with increasingly aggressive employer demands, most of the union officialdom has come to accept concessions as inevitable (rather than seeing them as repugnant but sometimes forced on workers). This has a significant impact. As Unifor Local 199 Vice President Bruce Allen has argued, "Workers did not form unions to go backwards" but "to defend their dignity, to defend what they have and to move forwards whenever possible." Union appeal suffers when unions become associated with giving concessions to employers without a struggle.

A related problem is that union officials, concerned about getting workers to accept give-backs, can undermine union democracy to ensure workers agree to the "right" decision. Union democracy has suffered in recent years as a result of concession-selling officials asserting their control.

Another worrying sign is how often union political action involves campaigning for whichever politicians are seen as the "lesser evil." This often results in giving uncritical backing to parties (Liberals, the NDP in some provinces, the PQ and BQ in Quebec, Vision Vancouver) and candidates (such as Toronto mayoral candidate Olivia Chow) that get support from capitalists - or (not quite as awful) uncritical support for the NDP where it doesn't enjoy direct business support. Union political action today is rarely about trying to develop the working class as a force to change society. The rock-bottom standard of backing the "lesser evil" mirrors the low hopes that most workers have for what unions can accomplish through collective bargaining; both are evidence of how working-class expectations have been lowered by over three decades of attacks from business and government.

As the union officialdom has become more inward-looking, divisions between it and social justice activists outside the unions have deepened. This was visible in the mobilization against the G-20 summit in Toronto in June 2010. Perhaps most obvious was the way Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) President Ken Georgetti quickly condemned attacks on property by some protestors, while CLC criticism of the arrest of some 1100 people was muted and failed to challenge the state's efforts to criminalize dissent. Taken together, these changes amount to a process of the decay of unions as working-class movement organizations. The process is uneven, but it is real.

This matters a lot, for two simple reasons. First, wage-earners and the unwaged are facing capitalists and governments whose determination to expand corporate profits and power has never been greater. All that workers currently have to defend themselves against this threat are unions and much smaller community-based organizations. Second, these are the only existing organizations which give workers any possibility of changing society in ways that reflect their needs and interests.

What kind of change?

How, then, does the working-class movement need to change? What is needed of workers' organizations that can effectively mobilize sections of the working class to fight for change?:

- *More democracy.* If members do not see themselves represented in -- and control -- their own unions and other organizations, other people whose interests are not the same as theirs -- full-time officers and staff or, even worse, employers -- will. The power of working-class organizations, as Mike Parker and Martha Gruelle argue, "lies in the participation of members, and it requires democracy to make members want to be involved." Democratically running an organization teaches people new skills and boosts self-confidence. This makes them more likely to use their collective power. A culture in which people are encouraged to speak up, raise tough questions and debate issues in a respectful way is essential in the movement. Mistakes are inevitable, but in democratic organizations people can learn from mistakes and then make changes. The title of Parker and Gruelle's book on changing unions hits the nail on the head: **Democracy is Power**.
- *More activists.* For the movement to become stronger, it needs more people to become active. Fernando Gapasin, who has been active in movements in the US for many years, believes "that there are two keys to developing activism. First, people have to come to the belief that change is

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- *Better activists.* Most union education aims to help workers handle grievances and arbitration cases and negotiate contracts -- the stuff of contract unionism. Working-class movement activists, whether they are involved in unions or other organizations, need more than this. Rank and file activists need to be able to think and act for themselves, to be less dependent on full-time officers and staff. A lot of what activists need to learn about mobilizing democratically can only come from first-hand experience, through trial and error. Lessons learned through struggles need to be shared.
- There is also much that cannot be learned just from personal experience (or which is much harder to learn this way), including a basic understanding of how capitalism works, what employers and governments are up to, different forms of oppression and the movement's history. All this calls for a *different kind of education* for activists than what most union education programs offer.
- *Grassroots leadership that reflects the working class.* The activist layer in workplaces and neighbourhoods should be as diverse in terms of gender, ethno-racial identity, sexuality and occupation as the working class.
- *More militancy.* Militant methods are active and assertive ones, like determined strikes, sit-ins and other kinds of direct action. Militancy is not -- contrary to how the term is often used in the corporate media -- the same as violence. Militancy refers to the means people use to press for what they want, while radicalism refers to the ends people are trying to achieve.
- *More radicalism.* Sam Gindin has suggested that "The other side has come to understand that... the choices are polarized. To defend their privileges, they've concluded that they must become more radical. We need to learn that same radical lesson, but, of course, from our own perspective." Being radical does not mean being violent or irrational. It means identifying the root causes of the problems people face and working towards fundamental change in how society is organized. "
- *More independence.* Workers need to become more aware that their collective interests are different from -- and opposed to - the interests of the dominant class. Because their interests are different, workers' organizations should try to be as independent as possible from employers, the legal system and the existing political parties.
- *A commitment to mobilizing and organizing the entire working class.* A focus only on one's own union, unionized workers, low-income people, wage-earners or any other particular section of the working class is too narrow. The working class is broad, diverse and fragmented. Building a movement of and for all workers should be the aim. This cannot be done through unions alone. It is essential for unions to support and work with community-based organizations, including workers' centres whose priority is low-paid precariously-employed wage-earners. Extending unionization among racialized and other marginalized workers will require more than a traditional "bread and butter" issues approach. It will require union activists to place specific issues that affect racialized workers, workers with disabilities, indigenous workers, LGBTQ workers and women workers at the top of their agenda. This means going beyond often- tokenistic equity measures within unions and instead addressing issues such as employment equity provisions, increases to the minimum wage, access to childcare and organizing in sectors of the economy where racialized and other marginalized workers are disproportionately represented. Addressing the systemic barriers that exist within union organizing is also an important step toward building a broader and more inclusive workers' movement.
- *Deeper and broader solidarity.* Because the working class is divided in many ways, solidarity must be actively built. The old union slogan that "An injury to one is an injury to all" needs to become more than just rhetoric. Some divisions stem mainly from how employment is structured. The split between public and private sector workers is an example. Other divisions are rooted in racism, sexism and other forms of oppression. Workers who belong to groups in society that are privileged rather than oppressed have a special responsibility to extend the hand of solidarity. For example, white workers do not experience racism. To build unity between white workers and people who

probably are part of the working class). Examples include campaigns to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, end violence against women and win permanent resident status for non-status immigrants. Solidarity must also be international, in support of people in the US and Mexico and on other continents.

- *Solidarity with indigenous struggles.* **The workers' movement must start to reckon with the reality of settler colonialism** and challenge the Canadian state's oppression of indigenous people. It needs to stand in solidarity with the struggles of indigenous nations for self-determination. Some indigenous demands (for example, to stop destructive oil and gas extraction) will be disruptive for some wage-earners, so it's important to combine support for indigenous struggles with demands for the creation of alternative jobs.

What these changes add up to is more than a renewal of the movement in its current form. Making these changes would reinvent the working-class movement.

Today, few people even on the left endorse this goal. But those of us who do need to start having serious discussions about the state of the movement and how to do whatever we can to contribute even in small ways to reinventing it. It's crucial that our efforts start from how workers are organizing and resisting today, not the vision of a different kind of movement sketched above. Tiny steps taken by radicals working with other people who want to fight back more effectively have much more potential than initiatives by radicals alone. We can take inspiration from - and build on - the desire for a very different kind of workers' movement that can be seen in the support for Hassan Husseini's [campaign](#) for the presidency of the CLC, the [Offensive syndicale](#) network in Quebec, the publication [Rankandfile.ca](#), [Migrant Workers' Alliance for Change](#) and other initiatives.

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