

## The Unjustified Demonization of Unions

The revived argument in political debates that “union bosses” are able to significantly influence the outcome of elections in Canada, such as the recent victory by the Ontario Liberal Party in last year’s provincial election, are but a continuation of a convenient but misleading narrative about the “undemocratic” evils of unions in Canada. This misleading narrative, which tends to be presented (without any supporting evidence) by those political parties seeking votes from a targeted segment of the electorate, deserves further consideration given the rising concerns about income inequality and job insecurity in Canada.

To begin with, it’s useful to reflect on why unions came into being in the first place. One need only think back to the Industrial Revolution and the brutal working conditions imposed upon the working class in the factories of eighteenth and nineteenth century England. The “Poor Law” was introduced as a means to ensure a supply of cheap labour, while using the consequences of internment in a “work house” as an “incentive” for workers (including children) to comply with the employer’s strict demands.

In academic circles, this is known as the beginning of the “commodification” of labour, wherein employees were simply treated as an expendable commodity that kept the factories operating to maximize profits for the wealthy owners. Given that cash income was essential to survival for those who were not land owners, this meant that the majority of the population needed some form of employment to put food on the table and pay their bills. Clearly, the evolving mechanisms of the developing capitalist economy were quickly becoming one sided, with the owner-employer wielding control over the employment opportunities as well as the terms of conditions and compensation for their increasingly dependent employees.

Unions evolved from this dark period of our history, acting as a counter-balance to the one-sided employment system. Over time, and through great risk and sacrifice, they were eventually able to ensure better terms of employment, better wages and a safer work environment. In Canada, it was none other than Sir John A. MacDonald who personally tabled a bill (the Trade Unions Act) in Parliament in April 1872 to legalize unions and to repeal the “barbarous” way in which the police had dealt with protesting workers in Toronto early that same year. Those members of the current Government who are so proud of their history that they spend millions of our taxpayer dollars to advertise the War of 1812 (while concurrently trying to save money by closing veteran service centers), seem to overlook the historical fact that Sir John A. MacDonald was a Conservative Prime Minister!

In fairness to the debate, the influence and demands of some unions, particularly in the United Kingdom in the 1970s, went so far as to put companies in financial jeopardy or out of business through their over-arching demands. However, given that workers depend on employment, such tactics evolved towards more strategic reasoning. Over the course of the past few decades, the majority of labour relations and collective agreements in Canada are designed to ensure that owners, employers and workers all benefit from their interdependent requirements and efforts. So why the recent efforts to strip trade unions of their bargaining rights, to impose “back to work” legislation, and the extraordinary efforts to pass Bill C-377 through the Senate so as to impose transparency on the spending of union dues? Quite simply because there are some in the current Government (and its supporters),

who perpetuate the myth that union leaders can somehow force its members to vote a particular way. The inconvenient truth is that they cannot. The electoral voting process in Canada is secret, and union members can vote as they please...if at all. Furthermore, contribution limits imposed by the Canada Elections Act in January 2007 curtail disproportionate funding support from trade unions and corporations alike.

The unfortunate consequence of this misleading narrative and seemingly ideological quest to weaken unions is that working class Canadians find themselves losing ground in wages, job security, and benefits (such as pension security, health-dental care, and disability insurance). As most Canadians readily know, we live with greater debt loads and other cost pressures than ever before. Rising house prices might give a false sense of wealth, but it also means bigger mortgages and higher annual land taxes. The growing inequality in wealth and income that has been linked in part to global markets and the advent of outsourcing to cheaper, offshore labour pools is creating an increasingly difficult situation for middle and lower income earning Canadians in Canada. While unions may be demonized by such political spin, they are actually struggling to protect employee rights and to avoid a “race to the bottom” in the labour market. Furthermore, many of these same unions invest in working class Canadians by supporting the development of essential skills through apprenticeships in numerous trades and the opening of numerous union-owned training centers. Not only have these strategic investments in skills training provided people with access to higher wages and employment opportunities, they’ve also been making a significant contribution to higher productivity in the workplace, thereby enabling companies in Canada to be more competitive in the global market!

One need only reflect on the causes of the tragic incidents in Bangladesh on 24 November 2012 when over 112 workers perished in a fire, or the 24 April 2013 building collapse when several hundred workers were crushed within the confines of their workplace. Subsequent investigative reports identified inhumane management practices and disregard for unsafe working conditions. Given that these were textile businesses, the similarities with the horrible conditions of the Industrial Revolution are not only disturbing, but serve as a reminder of both the reasons why trade unions came into being, and the important role they continue to play today to safeguard the employment security and incomes of working class Canadians. Given the immutable trends towards greater income inequality, increasingly precarious employment and negligible post-inflation wage increases despite higher workplace demands, further efforts to diminish the trade unions in Canada should be viewed in sober consideration with the negative impacts of such unfounded narratives on future generations of working-class Canadians...beginning with our children and grandchildren.

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