
Changing Employment Relations: What Can Unions Do?

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Abstract

We review four current challenges facing organization labor; the changing nature of work; the emergence of a new model of Human Resource Management; the changing composition of the labor force and political/legislative challenges. Based on psychological models of unionization (Barling, Fullagar, & Kelloway, 1992) and current research on the determinants of unionization, we predict that unions will survive as vital organizations to the extent that they are able to ensure their instrumentality for members and potential members. The need to enhance the public image of unions is also indicated.

What can unions do?

... unionism is not only 'dead' but 'obsolete' in the new, post-industrial, service-sector economy... Every thoughtful observer... seems to agree... that organized labor is through and history has passed it by. (Geoghegan, 1991, p. 42).

These views are depressingly and maddeningly familiar to labour organizations and those interested in their welfare. Through the 1980s and 1990s observers have increasingly pointed to the decline, and perhaps imminent demise, of the labour movement. That the labour movement is facing considerable challenge is beyond question. However, the conclusion that unions will not survive these challenges is by no means certain. Perhaps this uncertainty is best illustrated by the observation that Geoghegan's (1991) comments given above are summarizing the American labour movement of the 1920s rather than that of the 1990s.

While it would be rash to conclude that unions are now obsolete, it would be equally rash to predict a resurgence of interest in unionization such as occurred in the 1940s in North America. Our goals in this paper

are more limited. First, we outline some of the challenges currently facing organized labour. Second, we draw on models of unionization (e.g., Barling, Fullagar, & Kelloway, 1992) to outline potential responses to these challenges. In doing so, we place our emphasis on the contributions of psychological research to outlining strategies for unions.

CURRENT CHALLENGES

The labour movement is facing challenges on virtually all fronts. Hartley (1995), for example, identifies challenges in the economic, political and social spheres facing trade unions in the United Kingdom. We identify four major challenges facing unions today. First, the changing nature of work and, in particular, the way work is organized has profound implications for organized labour. Second, the emergence of a new model of human resources management has substantially changed the nature of union-management relations. Third, the changing demographics of the Canadian labour force have been particularly pronounced in the labour movement (Galarneau, 1996). Finally, political and legislative actions have had an impact on organized labour.

The Changing Nature of Work

Perhaps the single greatest change over the last decade has been the global restructuring of production (Hartley, 1995). The switch from a manufacturing-based to a service-based economy (or from a "Fordist" to a "Post-Fordist" system of production; Clegg, 1990), and the reduction in international trade barriers with the resultant globalization of the world economy (i.e., the emergence of the European market, the North American Free Trade Agreement, Reitsma, 1993), all pose significant challenges the labour movement.

The shift of work from the goods sector to the service sector is clearly reflected in union density figures. Indeed some observers attribute the stagnation and/or decline of union density to this shift (e.g., Galarneau, 1996). For example, union density in the goods sector had declined to 37.6% in 1992 (from 43.4% in 1976). Approximately 67% of all jobs lost during the most recent recession are attributed to plant closings (Pupo & White, 1994). Correspondingly, union density in the service sector increased from 25.6% to 31.8% in the same period (Galarneau, 1996). The growth in unionization in the service sector is largely attributable to high unionization rates among government employees and para-public employees. Unions have not been able to make the same gains in financial services or in private services. That is,

despite their current strength in the service sector, unions have not been able to capitalize on the fastest growing sector of the economy (Galarneau, 1996): perhaps because much of the employment in this sector is based in small firms that offer atypical (e.g., part-time or contingent) employment (Belanger & Murray, 1994).

The rapid growth of part-time (Barling & Gallagher, 1996), contingent (i.e., contract and agency work, Barker, 1995) and other non-standard forms of employment (e.g., telework, homework, Gottlieb, Kelloway, & Barham, in press) represents a particular challenge for labour unions and may play a critical role in determining whether the labour movement survives (Barling & Gallagher, 1996). Unions have been relatively inactive and/or unsuccessful in organizing part-time workers in both Canada (approximately 23% unionized; Kumar, 1993) and the U.S. (approximately 7% unionized; Kumar, 1993).

In part, these lower rates of unionization stem from the reluctance of unions to actively recruit among, and organize, part-time workers (Brooks, 1985; Leighton, 1991) particularly in the private sector. Many union leaders believe that part-time work is a means of union avoidance, or of lowering of employment standards on the part of employers (Nollen, 1982). Similarly, contingent work may be used as a means of union avoidance (Applebaum & Gregory, 1988) or decertification (Axelrod, 1987). Union leaders may also see part-time workers as being less committed to the union and less likely to participate in job action than their full-time counterparts (Duffy & Pupo, 1992; Kahne, 1985).

At best there is only marginal empirical support for these beliefs. Several studies have reported that part-time workers are less committed to the union than are full-time workers (e.g., Gallagher & Wetzel, 1989; Martin & Peterson, 1987; Sherer & Morishima, 1989). However, these differences are attributable to demographic or job-context variables and typically disappear when appropriate statistical controls are implemented (Barling & Gallagher, 1996).

A New Model of Human Resource Management

As a consequence of economic restructuring, enhancing managerial flexibility has become a watchword in Canadian industry. This approach would be consistent with what Arthur (1994) refers to as a control-oriented system, the dominant characteristics of which are an attempt to reduce labour costs and increase employee rule compliance. Employers operating within a control orientation would be more likely to make use of layoffs and part-time and contingent workers, and to reduce employee benefits and training budgets. However, worker and union resistance and resentment would also increase under such a system.

A second major thrust in the drive to achieve flexibility has been the emergence of a new model of Human Resources Management (HRM). Although various labels are used to describe the new model (e.g., Team Concept, Quality of Working Life, Sociotechnical System, multi-skilling, worker participation, self-organized, self-managed work-teams; Wells 1993), such interventions typically comprise two interrelated goals. First, employers attempt to achieve greater functional flexibility in the allocation of labour (Wells, 1993). Through the use of broad job descriptions, cross-training, and job rotation, employers are able to assign work to employees as needed. Second, HRM packages typically include attempts to enhance employee acceptance of employer-set production goals (Wells, 1993). This would be more consistent with what Arthur (1994) refers to as a commitment oriented system, which is more productive than the control oriented system.

There is some debate over whether such workplace interventions are compatible with the goals of organized labour (Verma, 1989). Wells (1993), for example, points to the strong unitarist assumption underlying such programs; i.e., that there is no inherent conflict between labour and capital. The assumption is that through the use of such practices, labour and management can reach a "win-win" state in which both management and labour achieve their goals (e.g., Verma and McKersie, 1987).

In contrast, industrial relations is typically viewed as being based on a pluralistic perspective which recognizes inherent conflicts in the workplace. Several authors have suggested that HRM programs undermine union autonomy and solidarity (e.g., Katz, 1989; Parker & Slaughter, 1988, Rinehart, 1986). In particular, Wells (1993) suggests that such programs act to undermine the union by substituting informal conflict resolution for the formalized procedures enshrined in the collective agreement; replacing collective bargaining with systems of individual and group rewards; fragmenting the union membership into "core" and "peripheral" workers; and co-opting the union leadership by either blurring the distinction between management and labour or supplanting union representatives with management-trained "team leaders". In non-union firms, the adoption of the new HRM model may be used as a form of union-substitution; whereby the introduction of HRM policies is designed to lessen the demand for unions in the workplace.

Although academics have identified the emergence of new models of human resource management as potential threats to the labour movement (e.g., Beaumont, 1995; Wells, 1993), union leaders are more sanguine. In their interviews with Canadian labour leaders, Pupo and White (1994) report only minimal concerns in this area. That is, while a few leaders questioned the underlying objectives of such programs, all of the leaders interviewed

expressed confidence in the continued role of "traditional" collective bargaining.

Thus the leaders interviewed by Pupo and White (1994) appeared to accept new models of human resource management as falling within the "management rights" clause of their collective agreements. Indeed when asked to identify the major challenges facing the labour movement in the 1990s few leaders identified workplace restructuring or the use of new management techniques (Pupo & White, 1994). These views are consistent with a 1992 report of the International Labour Organization suggesting that the union response to human resource management has been inadequate (Beaumont, 1995).

The Changing Labour Force

The 1980s and early 1990s were witness to almost universal decline in union membership. For example, in the United Kingdom unionization declined by approximately 25% or three million people during the 1980s (Towers, 1989). With the exception of the Scandinavian countries, most of Europe witnessed similar declines (Visser, 1988). In the United States, union density¹ has declined from 23% of the non-agricultural workforce in 1980 to 16% in 1990 (Riddell, 1993). On the surface, Canada has been resistant to the de-unionization of the workforce; union density in Canada has remained fairly constant for the past 30 years; ranging between 31% (in 1966) and 33% of the workforce (in 1992).²

As Galarneau (1996) points out, this stagnation masks striking changes in the composition of Canadian unions. In particular, Galarneau (1996) identifies three striking demographic trends affecting the labour movement. First, the number of women participating in the paid workforce has increased with a corresponding decrease in men's participation in the workforce (Basset, 1994). As a consequence, women are steadily increasing their presence in labour unions and in 1993 accounted for 42.4% (1.6 million members) of the membership of labour unions.

Second, the average age of Canada's workforce has increased and is expected to continue increasing throughout the 1990s (Cote, 1990). This trend is particu-

larly pronounced in the unionized sector of the workforce. The unionized workforce is, on average, four years older than the non-unionized workforce. Perhaps more importantly, unionization has declined among younger workers (under the age of 34), reflecting a decrease in the number of young people in the workforce (Akyeampong, 1992). Conversely, unionization has increased among older workers (age 35 and older), reflecting the aging of the "baby boom" generation.

Finally, the education of the Canadian workforce has dramatically increased in recent years. For example, the percentage of individuals in the workforce with some education beyond high school has increased from 29% in 1979 to 42% in 1989 (Oderkirk, 1993). Correspondingly, the percentage of individuals with less than eight years of formal education declined by approximately 50% in the same period.

In general, union members are more highly educated than the non-unionized workforce possibly because of the high rates of unionization in the public sector. However, the unionized segment of the workforce also contains a disproportionate number of individuals with less than a high school education (Galarneau, 1996). In particular, male union members in blue collar occupations are disproportionately likely to have low levels of education. In contrast, the generally higher level of education among union members is more pronounced for women.

Political and Legislative Challenges

Canadian political and legal systems will also play a central role in the determining the future of the Canadian labour movement. Viewed as operating within a larger system (e.g., Craig & Solomon, 1996; Dunlop, 1958), unions are known to both affect, and be affected by, changes in political legal environments (Maki, 1982; Martinello, 1996). The strength of the Canadian labour movement has, and will continue to, depend on how well it works through the contingencies of these systems.

In recent history, union density in Canada has been approximately twice as great as union density in the United States (Meltz, 1989; Rose & Chiasson, 1996). In contrast to those who would argue that higher union density reflects greater public support for unions, the available data would attribute higher unionization in Canada to two primary factors; the existence of labour-oriented political parties (most notably the New Democratic Party; and the passage of labour legislation favorable to unions (Bruce, 1988; Meltz, 1989; Rose & Chiasson, 1996).

The existence of labour-oriented political parties has resulted in all political parties being more favorable to unions, particularly during times of electoral uncertainty

¹ Union density is the percentage of the paid workforce that belong to a labour union. Estimate of union density vary slightly according to the method of data collection. We have generally chosen to use conservative estimates derived from Statistics Canada data.

² Although union density has remained stagnant, it should be noted that the Canadian workforce increased steadily through the 1970s and 1980s (Cote, 1990). Therefore, the constant level of union density throughout this period actually represents a substantial increase in the size of the labour movement.

(Bruce, 1988). In contrast to the sharp, ideologically based polarization in the United States, the Progressive Conservative and Liberal parties in Canada have been willing to accommodate labour's demands. As Bruce (1988, p. 135) notes the passage of favorable labour legislation in Canada has resulted from:

the rise and institutionalization of a democratic socialist party (the CCF/NDP) in a highly federalized, parliamentary constitutional system, a development that has forced the Conservative and Liberal parties to become "progressive conservative" parties. This kind of conservatism has led the major parties to introduce gradual, sustained, and generally pro-union reforms...

More recent evidence suggests that this generally favorable political climate is changing. For example, based on their longitudinal study of union organization, Panitch and Swartz (1993) concluded that there was an increasingly hostile approach taken by Canadian governments in which union rights were selectively nullified in order to increase government power and decrease union effectiveness. Similarly, Reshef (1990) found that legislative reforms in Alberta contributed to the decline of union density in the province. Reshef (1990) suggests that other jurisdictions may face similar declines as political and legislative reforms continue.

Rose (1992) reached similar conclusions based on his analysis of the construction industry. Throughout the mid and late 1980s there was a drastic decline (over 50%) in construction union membership in Saskatchewan, as a result of the repeal of legislation that permitted province wide negotiations between the trades and employers. This decline is in stark contrast to construction unions in Ontario and Quebec where province-wide bargaining is enshrined in legislation and union membership increased steadily through the same period (Rose, 1992). Similarly, the recent repeal of legislation banning replacement workers during strikes in Ontario is widely seen as a blow to the labour union. Perhaps most notably, recent history has seen the suspension of collective bargaining in several jurisdictions as both the federal and provincial governments have attempted to deal with their respective deficits.

At the same time, the "business" voice has been growing in influence. Economic forces such as increased competition, globalization, high labour costs and the free trade agreement and the challenges these forces present to Canadian business and organized labour (e.g., Chaykowski & Verma, 1992; Reitsma, 1993) have resulted in intensive lobbying for "softer" labour legislation in order to meet these challenges. These efforts have met with some success. Indeed just recently, the federal government took an unprecedented step by directly

intervening in the dispute between Canadian Airlines and its unions. The impact of economic factors on the labour movement will depend, in part, on how the various levels of government choose to react to the business lobby.

On the whole, legislation protecting labour in Canadian jurisdictions is much stronger than in the United States and most researchers (e.g., Bruce, 1988; Riddell, 1993) have suggested that this strength is one of the chief reasons for the stability of unions in Canada compared to declines in the United States. Indeed, faced with similar economic realities, Canadian unions have not seen the same losses in membership experienced by the American labour movement, likely because of the protective legislation in Canada (Chaykowski & Slotsve, 1996).

In particular, legislation on the certification of unions has, and will likely to continue to have, the greatest role in determining union density in Canada. With declining membership in the goods sector (Galarneau, 1996), the labour movement has mobilized to certify unions in other employment sectors (e.g., the service industry) as a means of maintaining union density. Given that certification rates are largely dependent on the terms of labour legislation (Martinello, 1996)³, unions will likely grow or decline based on how favourable the legislation is in their particular jurisdiction.

WHAT CAN UNIONS DO?

Unionization has been defined as the process of individual attachment to labour unions (Barling, Fullagar, & Kelloway, 1992) and a great deal of data has now accumulated on the factors that lead an individual to join (e.g., Brett, 1980; Premack & Hunter, 1988), be active in (Kelloway & Barling, 1993), and become committed to (Fullagar & Barling, 1987; 1989; Kelloway & Barling, 1993; Kelloway, Catano, & Southwell, 1992) the union. In reviewing this literature, Barling et al. (1992) pointed to central role of perceptions of union instrumentality. More recently, the role of general union attitudes has been emphasized as a central variable in the unionization process (Kelloway, Barling, & Catano, 1997)

Instrumentality: Consistent with a model of "business unionism" that focusses attention on the bread and butter issues (e.g., wages, benefits, working conditions; Barling et al., 1992), the suggestion has been that labour unions attract the support of their members to the

³ For example, some provinces (e.g., New Brunswick, Quebec) require support from 50% of the proposed bargaining unit members whereas other provinces (e.g., British Columbia, Ontario) require support from 50% of those voting in a certification election. The latter arrangement would be expected to yield greater success rates from the union perspective.

extent that they are able to deliver valued outcomes as a result of collective bargaining. Certainly, there is now sufficient empirical evidence to suggest that unions have been instrumental. Most strikingly, the existence of a "union wage effect" (i.e., the fact that union members receive higher salaries than non-union workers in comparable jobs) is well documented (for reviews see Barling et al., 1992; Freeman & Medoff, 1984).

The question therefore should be: Will unions be able to retain their instrumentality for members and potential members given changing employment relations? As a consequence of economic restructuring, unions have been under increasing attack at the bargaining table. Following the lead of the private sector, public sector bargaining is increasingly dominated by management calls for concessions and, more specifically, wage rollbacks. In several jurisdictions, tactics of hard-bargaining have been supplemented by wage-restraint legislation and/or mandated wage rollbacks. Indeed, for many unions the goal going into collective bargaining has been to "hold the line" and avoid concessions rather than to deliver wage increases. As manufacturing plants shut down and public sector employers slash budgets, unions are increasingly unable to guarantee job security for their members (Pupo & White, 1994); a traditional benefit of unionization (Barling et al., 1992).

Yet the need to demonstrate instrumentality is clearly recognized. As Pupo and White (1994) note, the labour movement's ability to demonstrate the benefits of union membership to an increasingly diverse workforce is considerably threatened by the harsh economic climate. Suggestions to enhance union instrumentality have focussed on three areas; organizing, mandate, and strategy.

First, there is a renewed emphasis in the union movement on organizing as a central activity. Organizing new members has often been seen as a primary goal for unions in itself by observers and by unions themselves. Shostak (1991, p. 59), for example, describes organizing as "the sinews and lifeblood of the union". UBC president Sigurd Lucassen, aptly summarized the central role of organizing in union activities with his statement that:

We must rediscover the wisdom our founders grasped — organizing workers is the fundamental task upon which all others depend. (cf Grabelsky & Hurd, 1994, p. 97)

Noting the increasing diversity of the labour force, commentators have identified the need for labour unions to focus their efforts on rapidly growing groups in the labour force such as women, minorities, and older workers (Foegen, 1989; Mosca & Pressman, 1985). Organizing members of these groups may require a re-evaluation of what the central issues are for both policy

and collective bargaining. For example, researchers have suggested that explicit attempts to recruit women, through the adoption of "women friendly" policies and the explicit representation of women's issues is a viable strategy for labour unions (Curtin, 1997).

Given the economic climate, several authors have identified the need for the union to demonstrate instrumentality by expanding their mandate to non-traditional areas. For example, unions have been forming alliances with community services or, in some cases, taking over the provision of such services to their members (Pupo & White, 1994). The provision of training and/or counselling services by unions for their members has also been identified as a means of demonstrating instrumentality (e.g., Mosca & Pressman, 1985; Rogers, 1995). In particular Rogers (1995) suggested that by providing such training, unions can improve their members' position in the labour market and, to the extent that they offer advanced technical training, help to ensure career security for their members.

Public sector unions in particular have broadened their mandate in an attempt to retain their instrumentality. Rather than an exclusive focus on workplace issues, public sector unions are increasingly active participants in the shaping of social policy. For example, public sector unions have been centrally involved in the "Days of Protest" held in Ontario to protest the policies of the Progressive Conservative government. In Nova Scotia, public sector unions have lead campaigns against privatization. Moreover, initial data suggest that these efforts are effective (see Catano & Kelloway, 1997), and union leaders expect this trend to continue (Pupo & White, 1994).

Others have proposed radically new models of organization for the labour movement. As Rogers (1995) points out, most labour unions in North America are based on a service model characterized by five features: [a] once the union is established in a workplace, the role of the organization is to provide services (e.g., representation, assistance with grievances) to the members; [b] establishment of a union in a workplace requires the support of a majority of members; [c] unions have avoided becoming involved in the control of production (seeing such decisions as falling under the "management rights" clause), [d] with some exceptions, unionization has been focussed on specific firms with little or no attempt at coordination within (or across) industrial sectors, [e] unions have been loyal and exclusive supporters of political parties (e.g., the Democratic party in the U.S., the New Democratic Party in Canada). While the service model of unionism is widespread, there is some evidence that it has also had unfortunate consequences.

One frequent complaint about the service model of unionism is that it does not engage the members in

union activities (Rogers, 1995). In particular, union activities are seen to be the responsibility of elected and/or paid union officials with little or no requirement for membership involvement. As a result, it is common for members not to participate in the union (Kelloway & Barling, 1993; Kelloway, Catano, & Carroll, 1995). For example, it is not uncommon for regularly scheduled union meetings to be attended by less than 10% of the union membership (Kelloway & Barling, 1993).

Perhaps more importantly, given that small business represents the fastest growing segment of the economy (Galarneau, 1996), the service model of unionism is expensive. Simply put, it may not be economically feasible for unions to organize workplaces with a small number of employees. The financial and resource costs of providing full services (including a part-time or full-time business agent) to such locals would far outweigh the revenue generated by the union dues of the members. Alternatively, attempting to recoup the costs of providing service to small locals would require a level of union dues that, in and of itself, would make unionization unattractive to potential members.

As Rogers (1995) points out, another problem with the service model of unionization is that it requires a majority of support in the workplace. This feature has limited union organizing to organizations where there is a reasonable probability of majority support. In practice, this feature has meant that union organizing efforts have focussed on organizations rather than individuals.

As alternatives to the service model of unionism, Rogers (1995) proposes a substantial re-orientation toward community-based organizations. In particular, he suggests the goal of union organizing should not be to get a contract *per se*. Rather, the goal of union organizing is seen as increasing the union presence in the workforce. In this new model of unionization, employees in firms that do not have a majority representation could be allowed to become full-members of the union.

Similarly, Heckscher (1988) has proposed a model of "associate membership" whereby individuals in non-union workplaces could become "associate" members of the union and access the resources of the union. Heckscher (1988) favors a broad definition of "associate" including environmental and community groups. Some unions have adopted a more limited definition whereby individuals in non-union workplaces are allowed to join the union and have access to union-sponsored credit cards, pension plans, and health insurance (Foegen, 1989).

General Union Attitudes: Although such suggestions have focussed their attention on increasing individual perceptions of union instrumentality, some recent research suggests that these efforts may not be sufficient to spark

increased interest in becoming a full union member. Early models of unionization (e.g., Brett, 1980) proposed that an individual's attitude toward the labour movement would moderate the impact of instrumentality on the decision to join a union. Although most of the available literature has focussed on the direct, linear effects of instrumentality, several recent studies (for a review see Kelloway, et al., 1997) support Brett's (1980) suggestion. Specifically, Kelloway et al. (1997) report several studies showing that instrumentality perceptions were related to desire to join a union, and members' union commitment, only for those individuals who held positive attitudes toward unions in general.

These data suggest that simply pointing to the instrumental achievements of the union is unlikely to result in individuals turning toward labour unions unless the individuals also hold a favourable attitude toward labour unions. Shostak (1991) has noted the steady decline in the image of labour unions, and emphasized how critical the public image of unions is for the perceived power of organized labour. It has been also been documented that politicians are responsive to public opinions about labour (Goldfield, 1987). Both observations point to the need for labour organizations to focus on developing positive union attitudes among both unionized and non-unionized employees. The recent "Union-Yes" campaign mounted by the AFL-CIO in the U.S. is an example of such an attempt to improve general union attitudes. In this way, the AFL-CIO seeks to enlarge market size for all unions, while individual unions concern themselves with their traditional focus of market share

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In summary, we have reviewed several challenges currently facing unions. These challenges are expected to continue into the foreseeable future. Perhaps, more importantly, they suggest the need for labour organizations to re-examine the way they do business. In particular, we have suggested that the existing service model of unionization (Rogers, 1995) may not be optimal. Rather, labour unions need to identify new ways of providing instrumental gain to their members that are consistent with the changes in the workforce. At the same time, there is a clear need for unions to maintain and enhance their "public image". While the challenges facing unions are formidable, we suggest that they are not insurmountable. Indeed, the very fact that unions and labour scholars have recognized the need for change, and are actively debating the direction for change is a sign that labour unions will remain vital and active players in the 21st Century. As Klandermans (1986, p. 199) aptly observed "Unions are fascinating organizations and contrary to what the prophets of doom would have us believe, they will not vanish in the near future."

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Résumé

Dans cet article, nous analysons quatre défis courants auxquels font face les travailleurs des organisations : la nature changeante du travail, l'émergence d'un nouveau modèle de gestion des ressources humaines, la composition changeante de la main-d'oeuvre et les défis politiques et législatifs. En nous basant sur les modèles psychologiques de syndicalisation (Barling, Fullagar & Kelloway, 1992) et sur la recherche actuelle sur les facteurs déterminants de la syndicalisation, nous prévoyons que les syndicats resteront des organisations essentielles dans la mesure où ils demeureront utiles à leurs membres et membres potentiels. Nous soulignons également l'importance d'améliorer l'image des syndicats.

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