

# The Insensitivity of the Union Movement to the Real Needs of the Union Members

## Le syndicat et les besoins réels des membres

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Volume 23, Number 4, 1968

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/027949ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/027949ar>

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### Publisher(s)

Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval

### ISSN

0034-379X (print)

1703-8138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this article

Humphries, M. (1968). The Insensitivity of the Union Movement to the Real Needs of the Union Members. *Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations*, 23(4), 605–612. <https://doi.org/10.7202/027949ar>

### Article abstract

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# The Insensitivity of the Union Movement to the Real Needs of the Union Members

Michael Humphries

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## Introduction

When men talk about reviewing the structure of an organization, there is conjured up in my mind a series of images. One is a re-evaluation of the interdependency of roles of various union functions, one to the other. Another image is that of the typical organizational structure. Having spent some fifteen years in the large corporate environment, I am most familiar with the traditional organizational charts. Since this type of structure is a static thing as such, I am sure that the majority of the time within the union organizations was spent in examining the work or practices of the structure as opposed to the structure itself. I hope, therefore, that the new organizational structure and functions will be more sensitive to the individual needs of the union member than has been demonstrated by the existing structure.

If this appears to be an indictment against the union movement, then, in my view, it is an indictment that can be equally shared with management.

I am deeply concerned that both management and union structures today display a shocking degree of not only insensitivity to, but lack of knowledge of, the real needs and aspirations of the working man. As a starting point, I think it is necessary to critique the functions of the existing structure. With this critique perhaps my comments will provide some food for thought, and some new means of assessing the new structures.

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My approach will be one that springs from some relatively recent behavioral science research. Time does not permit me to discuss in depth the concepts expressed by such men as Maslow, Herzberg, McGregor, Likert and others. My comments will be based on some understanding of Abraham Maslow's theory of the needs hierarchy of man and Frederick Herzberg's illuminating work on employee motivation.

### **Maslow's Theory and the Union Movement**

Maslow's theory, in its simplest form, is this: Within each of us, there is a hierarchy of needs. At the base there is our physiological needs, our need for air, food, exercise, etc. When these are satisfied, man looks towards satisfaction of the next higher need, his safety, his need for protection against harm, deprivation of a job, etc. When this is accomplished, he looks to the satisfaction of his social needs, his need to love and be loved, for belonging, for association and for acceptance by his fellows. Above this level comes his social needs. These are egoistic needs and are of two kinds. First are those needs that relate to his self esteem, needs for self confidence, for independence, for achievement, for competence and for knowledge. Secondly, there are those needs that relate to his reputation, needs for status, recognition, appreciation and for the deserved respect of his fellows. Finally, at the hierarchy of man's needs there are what we call the needs for self fulfillment. These are the needs for realizing one's own potentialities for continued self development and for being creative in the broadest sense of that term.

Maslow states that a satisfied need is not a motivator of behavior. This fact is of profound significance. Unless, for example, you deprive me of my need for air it has no appreciable motivating effect upon my behavior. This fact plus the urge of man to constantly seek satisfaction of his higher needs is a key to Maslow's theory.

Using this theory, we may now review the historical development of the union movement and critique its present performance.

The spectacular growth pattern of the union movement can be viewed as a force which grew to satisfy some basic and secondary needs of the working man. Those of you from the union movement need not be reminded of the conditions in the industrial scene in the early years

of this century. The working man indeed was threatened if not at the physiological level certainly at the safety level. Discriminatory practices made it almost impossible for the working man to have any confidence that the job that he held today would be there for him tomorrow.

The very foundation and structure of the majority of our modern unions were established during these early years. It was also during this period that the relationship of locals to the central union body, the duties and responsibilities of the business agent, steward, international representative, etc. were basically established. It was also during these years that the basic concepts of the role of the union vis-a-vis the needs of the employee were developed.

I submit that we do not live in this environment today. Generally speaking, the physiological and safety needs of the working man in Canada have been met in our industrial society. However, I also submit that the union organizations today are operating as if these basic needs are still unsatisfied. I submit further that the problems facing the industrial society today stem from the frustration of the working man of not being able to satisfy his higher needs. I believe that the blame for this frustration rests squarely on the shoulders of both management and the union movement. Management in the search for increased productivity has, in my opinion, generally engineered the « life » out of work. Although increased productivity has created our affluent society, work in the industrial sector to many an employee has lost its meaning. Rules and regulations within the industrial environment frustrate or completely prohibit the working man from satisfying needs higher than physiological and safety. The unions on the other hand have done little to help their members achieve higher than basic needs, satisfaction. I think my points will be a little clearer if we examine some of the union functional areas as we see them operating today.

First, the organizing function. It is a tender point to mention the relative lack of success in the unionization of white collar employees. Why this record which is so poor when compared to the successes in the blue collar field? Could it be that the appeal to the white collar employee has been made to the wrong needs level? Generally speaking, I think it can be accepted that the average white collar worker has not been faced with the same problems as his blue collar brother. There has been a closer association between the white collar employee and management. To appeal to the lower needs level of the white collar

employee is, in my opinion therefore, a futile effort. But suppose the appeal were made to a higher level, not « Join us and increase your pay cheque » but « Join us and let us strive on your behalf with management to make your job more meaningful. »

And what needs level is satisfied in the inter-union organizational drives? Are the real needs of employees being met by such activity?

I acknowledge that stepping into a discussion concerning union security is akin to playing with fire but I wonder if the union shop clause inhibits or encourages freer expression of opinion by the union member.

We face today the problem of a younger, better educated work force. They are indeed more vocal in their opinions than many of us were at their age. Does the union shop clause encourage this desire for free expression? I have some concern that such clauses may really inhibit the creative young member. The constant needling of a Maverick is difficult to handle by any executive whether he be associated with management or the union movement. Pressure in its most subtle form can be placed upon this Maverick and threat of deprivation of his status as a union member which would consequently put his very employment in jeopardy can be an inhibiting force upon free expression.

Seniority provisions, negotiated originally to satisfy the safety needs of the worker may really be working against him in today's environment.

### **Herzberg's Theory on Motivation**

Frederick Herzberg's work in the area of employee motivation which has been subsequently verified many times by other researchers, can be simply summarized as follows. Man is truly motivated when he can feel a sense of achievement, recognition and growth in his work environment. These factors, and not pay working conditions and other items that Herzberg calls hygiene factors, motivate man. Herzberg is emphatic to point out that the hygiene factors cannot be ignored. What he says, however, is that over-satisfaction of hygiene factors will not motivate man to be a better worker. Transferring this theory to our own homes, giving our children more pocket money, will not motivate them to become mature adults. We cannot ignore the pocket

money, but what will motivate them is to live in a home environment which permits them a full sense of achievement, growth and responsibility.

Relating Herzberg's work to the critique of present seniority provisions, I question whether they really assist an employee to obtain any sense of achievement on his job. This is particularly true in the production line operation. How much sense of accomplishment can be gained by repetitive work on one fragment of the total product? How much pride can an automobile assembler achieve at the end of a working day when his functions have been limited to tightening one or two bolts or specializing in one small aspect of the entire operation? Yet the employee who strives for this feeling of accomplishment and growth by obtaining skills in other facets of the operation is frustrated not only by management but by the seniority provisions of his collective agreement. If, over a period of time, an employee could rotate through various jobs to the end that at some point, he could with pride, point to an automobile and say to himself as well as to his peer group, there is a product that I know how to build and I know how to build every part of it. Contrasts this to the same man today standing at the same corner as he watches an automobile go by and really all he can say to himself or to his peer group is, there is a product that I tightened the third nut from the left-hand side underneath where you can't see it. How meaningful to him is his work? I am not advocating the giving up of seniority, I am advocating a fresh approach to it.

In the realm of wage rate structure and the general approach to compensation I fear that we are following the narrow path that ignores recent research.

Compensation should serve two purposes. First, it should act as a means of satisfying the maintenance or hygiene needs. Secondly, it should serve as a means of recognizing achievement or accomplishment. Our current approach serves the first purpose very well but ignores the second.

The traditional position towards wages in labour relations is one based on egalitarianism. It can be traced back to the early days of the union organization when there was need in industry to treat men equally. This need was particularly evident in wage administration. Discrimination was seen in most industrial concerns. Merit ranges or

wage rate ranges were substituted through union pressure with the « one job — one rate » concept. I am not advocating a return to discriminatory practices. I am questioning however, whether the present practice truly meets the worker's need for recognition. I believe that there would be value in a joint labour management research project to investigate ways and means of re-structuring our wage rates so that the employee who has need of obtaining a sense of recognition or a mark of recognition may be so satisfied.

In the area of technological change, we see various approaches for assisting workers adversely affected. Two or three years ago, I had the privilege of working on the Domtar Industrial Conversion Plan with my fellow panelist, John Fryer. The most distinctive factor which separates the Domtar approach from the others is its sensitivity to individual need.

The plan recognizes that men have different levels of needs. Even in the case, for example, of two machinists of the same age and service working in the same plant. These differences may result from their family circumstances, their willingness to relocate, their willingness to undertake new training and these are just a few of the possible variables.

I suspect that the very nature of this new approach was one of the underlying reasons behind the difficulty faced by the unions at Domtar to sell the plan to the memberships. This reluctance underscores difficulties faced by free-thinking joint labour management groups when they embark upon a program that is different from the historical norm. Those who worked on the plan, however, under the guidance of Dr. John Crispo remain convinced that the underlying principles of the Domtar plan are valid.

I have been critical in my remarks regarding the general lack of sensitivity of the union structures to the needs of their members. I have not forwarded answers because I don't believe that there are any easy answer. We face a problem which is constantly changing. The rate of change is accelerating on a geometric scale.

We see today the emergence of a full new social force in the youth. Over 50% of Canadians are under 25. Their aspirations and demands are so different from our own. Attempts to enforce our own beliefs which generally spring from the protestant ethic are not acceptable

to the young. But the youth force must be considered by our society and by its various systems including the union organization. The cry for involvement, heard at the university, is really being heard in industry — if we tune in to it.

### **No Answers Only Recommendations**

My few recommendations towards solutions of these problems are not profound. They are simply these. First, the union leadership should make itself aware of the current knowledge in behavioral science. The theories of McGregor, Likert, Herzberg and Maslow are not exclusively applicable to management. I believe it is necessary to examine the « why » before determining the « how to ». Secondly, armed with this new knowledge, I then recommend that the leadership analyze the basic assumptions they hold about their fellow man. Do they believe that men are inherently indolent, that they lack ambition and prefer to be led, that they are self-centered and indifferent to the union, that they, by nature, resist change? Or do they believe that the potential for development, motivation and capacity for responsibility are present in all people? Do they recognize that if people are passive or resistant to organizational objectives, they are this way because of their past sad experiences? Thirdly, following this introspection, it would be recommended that the leadership work through the difficult task of applying this new theory to actual internal union problems. In other words, do the practices and policies of the organization conflict with the basic assumptions that the leadership holds about their fellow man?

What could be the results of such an exercise? I suggest that the benefits are many. From a narrow point of view, they could provide the union movement with the successful message for the organization of the white collar worker. In broader terms, the union movement would become a more viable force in the community, with positive objectives. The challenge of 1968 is far greater than the challenge met in the 1930's — and the rewards are far greater.

### **Conclusion**

May I conclude my remarks by quoting from Douglas McGregor:

« Health whether in the individual, the group, the organization or the society is never achieved by ignoring or suppressing underlying conflicts but by discovering how to manage them. This we can choose to



do. In doing so, it will open a door to the future. The possible result could be developments during the next few decades with respect to the human side of enterprise comparable to those that have occurred in technology during the past half century and if we can learn how to realize the potential of collaboration inherent in the human resources of industry, we will provide a model for governments and nations which mankind sorely needs. »

## LE SYNDICAT ET LES BESOINS RÉELS DES MEMBRES

Nous avons l'intention d'aborder la problème ci-haut mentionné au moyen de quelques-unes des conclusions récentes des sciences du comportement. Il ne s'agira pas de discuter les idées émises par les Maslow, les Herzberg, les McGregor, les Likert ou les autres. Nos commentaires seront exclusivement basés sur la théorie des besoins de Maslow et sur les conclusions de Herzberg sur la motivation des employés.

### LA THÉORIE DE MASLOW ET LE MOUVEMENT SYNDICAL

Nous pouvons considérer la croissance spectaculaire du mouvement syndical comme un moyen de satisfaire autant les besoins de base que les besoins secondaires des travailleurs. Il n'y a pas lieu ici, croyons-nous, de rappeler les conditions qui prévalaient dans le milieu industriel au début du siècle. Disons cependant que ces conditions étaient telles qu'elles justifiaient une action dans le but de satisfaire les besoins fondamentaux des travailleurs.

C'est durant ces années noires que les bases et les structures de nos syndicats modernes furent établies. Cependant, nous ne vivons plus aujourd'hui dans un tel contexte. Nous irions même jusqu'à dire que les problèmes de notre société industrielle sont dus à la frustration des travailleurs non pas de ne pas pouvoir satisfaire leurs besoins de base, mais de n'être pas capable de satisfaire leurs besoins plus élevés (higher needs) pour employer une expression de Maslow.

### LA THÉORIE DE LA MOTIVATION DE HERZBERG

Suivant la théorie d'Herzberg, nous croyons qu'il serait grand temps de repenser les clauses d'ancienneté, les structures de salaires et les dispositions relatives aux changements technologiques afin que les travailleurs ressentent un certain accomplissement, une certaine croissance personnelle dans leur milieu de travail.

### QUELQUES RECOMMANDATIONS

- 1.—Le leadership syndical devrait s'intéresser aux sciences du comportement ;
- 2.—A la lumière de ces connaissances, le leadership syndical devrait repenser ses hypothèses de base au sujet des travailleurs et des hommes ;
- 3.—L'application de ces théories nouvelles aux problèmes internes actuels du syndicalisme.