

## **Union Leaders and the Economic Crisis : Responses to Restructuring**

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Article abstract

The restructuring of the Canadian economy continued throughout the recession of the early 1990s. How do union leaders see this situation and what are their reactions? We discuss the current economic restructuring, examining the "competitiveness" analysis of Michael Porter, the initiatives of capital and the state, such as the FTA and NAFTA, and the restructuring of the workplace through "flexibility initiatives". We explore the response of the unions to this complex situation as seen through the eyes of selected leaders and draw some tentative conclusions on the future directions of labour in Canada.

# *Union Leaders and the Economic Crisis Responses to Restructuring*

**Norene Pupo  
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Jerry White**

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The restructuring of the Canadian economy continued at a quick pace throughout the recession of the early 1990s. How do union leaders see this situation and how have they reacted? This paper examines the challenges faced by unions and their leaders as the workplace undergoes major reorganization as a result of recent economic policy, unrelenting global competition, and political uncertainty.

In the first part of the paper we discuss the forms of restructuring faced by unions and their leaders. We explore both the restructuring of the workplace through "flexibility initiatives" and Japanese Management Techniques (JMT) and economic restructuring, with a particular focus on the "competitiveness" analysis of Michael Porter as well as the initiatives of capital and the State. In

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the latter part of the paper, we explore the unions' response to this complex situation as perceived by selected leaders and draw some tentative conclusions on the future directions of labour in Canada.

This is of importance for several reasons. First, the Canadian union movement is relatively vibrant in comparison to its counterpart in the U.S. where unions have been forced into a decline (Cuneo and White 1990). Secondly, union leaders are confronted with developing new strategies to compete with comparatively lower wages in the U.S. and Mexico. Thirdly, the composition of the labour movement has changed over the past twenty years, and with ongoing restructuring, will continue to shift. Consequently, unions are faced with new requests for services and political action from their memberships as well as from the communities in which they operate.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper is an exploratory investigation aimed at uncovering major trends and patterns in union leaders' responses to economic restructuring and their expectations with regard to reorganization and policy initiatives within their unions. It is informed by interviews with senior and upper middle-level leaders of eight unions in Ontario. The interviews were conducted during the winter and spring of 1992. Each interview, averaging about an hour and a half in length, explored the leaders' views on the major issues challenging the labour movement and the specific union in light of economic restructuring and recent public policy initiatives.

In selecting the unions, we generated a quota sampling reflecting public and private, service and non-service, while capturing a more conservative or business-union attitude and a more progressive social unionism. The selection of the unions was based on both our own experience and knowledge of their reputations and on their general political orientation. We felt that interviewing leaders in these unions would provide a picture of the greatest differences among unionists' reactions and approaches to economic change and hence would enable us to discuss the direction of unions in the 1990s.

Where available, to supplement the interview data, we examined documents published during the early 1990s from union centrals such as the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) and the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) and the target unions — United Steelworkers of America (USWA), Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), Communication Workers of Canada (CWC), Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW), Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU), and Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC). The examination of these materials allowed us to differentiate

between the personal views of those interviewed and the position adopted by their union. Views that were clearly contradictory to official union positions and actions were avoided.

The limitations of interview-based data mean that our conclusions must remain tentative. Our aim here is to examine how the leaders perceive the current situation and the direction their unions and the labour movement may take in response. While perceptions may differ from actions, the ideas expressed by the leaders may influence the direction of the union and may initiate policy. Their views on the unions' state are based on personal and organizational experience and in this respect allow us to consider some of the micro processes involved in social and organizational change.

## RESTRUCTURING AND THE ECONOMIC CRISIS

### Canada and Competitiveness: Porter on Business

Porter (1991)<sup>1</sup> argues that in its development Canadian business has relied on basic rather than advanced factors. Basic factors are passively inherited, such as resources, or natural advantages such as ports, or are enhanced and garnered through only moderate investment, such as the infrastructure for transport. Porter suggests that there has been limited development of the advanced factors which are generated and sustained by longer-term, sophisticated investment in both physical capital and the skills and abilities of labour.

Canadian business has thus been able to operate competitively within the resource-based industries. As Porter (1991: 38) explains, "Canadian firms were able to meet world prices without having to invest heavily in the latest process technology or to upgrade to higher value products to invest in skills development or to utilize labour efficiency." Industrialist Robert Gillespie (1990: 35), Executive Vice President of General Electric Canada, shares Porter's view:

Traditionally Canadian Management ... strove to set up in Canada a small scale model of the parent. ... The risks, and R & D, were undertaken elsewhere. This has left us with ... technologically backward manufacturing industries or ... resource industries threatened by dwindling supply or cheaper third world sources.

The measure of this path's success rests on two factors, the overall increase in the standard of living and a general vibrancy in non-recessionary periods. While successful in maintaining a relatively high standard of living,

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<sup>1</sup> In 1991, the National Council on Business Issues and the Federal Government jointly funded a study of Canada's competitive situation in the world and the nature of the problems facing the Canadian economy.

Canadian business did not shift its course to develop what Porter calls the "advanced and specialized" factors, such as specially designed ports for shipping newsprint or fibre optics centres. In the 1980s and 1990s, this has resulted in a reduced advantage due to the lower international and domestic demand for unfinished and semi-processed resources.

The second factor contributing to present economic difficulties concerns research and development. Porter (1991: 6) argues that the severe loss of competitive advantage is linked to low levels of expenditure in research, development and training, as measured by poor growth in overall measures of productivity.<sup>2</sup> Here we must take into account two inter-related phenomena. Unlike the top producers within the global economy which enjoy high degrees of private sector research financing, Canadian research and development rely almost exclusively on public funds. The comparatively low rate of private sector support for research and development in Canada is related to the high degree of foreign ownership and the tendency for parent companies to keep these activities "close to home." Earlier waves of nationalists warned in the 1960s and 1970s that this would lead to a weakening of Canada's competitive position in the world (Levitt 1970; Safarian 1978; Watkins 1970).

Porter's outline of the source of recent Canadian economic problems is quite insightful. While stability marked the old economic order for decades, Porter (1991: 45-46) suggests that "it was an equilibrium in which significant national wealth was lost to inefficiency in the system". He does not point to high wage levels as the leading cause of Canada's trade dilemmas. In looking forward, Porter proposes upgrading the Canadian Diamond<sup>3</sup> (1991: 5) which demands, amongst other things, more training and retraining, more research and development, and an industrial relations climate centred on productivity (labour must be a partner not an adversary) and performance-related compensation (Porter 1991: 84-85). This advice is echoed by some unions such as the United Steelworkers of America (USWA) (Gerard: 1991) but questioned by others such as Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) (CAW: 1989) and altogether opposed by some public sector unions such as Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) (Personal Interview). These differences, in part, rest on the perceptions that the unions have about the nature of the recession that Canada has recently experienced.

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<sup>2</sup> In a survey of OECD countries Canada ranked last with regard to activities in seeking out technologies. This problem is compounded by Canada's complex relationship to the U.S. economy which maintains Canada's high capital borrowing rates (Porter 1991: 53).

<sup>3</sup> The "diamond of competitiveness" is a term developed by Porter to emphasize what he views as a paradigm for understanding relative advantage. He cites four elements: (1) factor conditions, which are the traditional factors of production; (2) demand conditions in home markets; (3) related and support industries to buttress internationally competitive firms; and (4) firms' strategy, structure, and rivalry.

### Qualitative or Quantitative Differences in Recent Recessions?

The 1990s recession differed significantly from earlier downturns, and consequently it is important to study its effects on labour. Cyclic job losses or layoffs marked the 1983 economic slump. By contrast a large proportion of the job loss in the early 1990s was permanent due to shutdowns, lean production and downsizing. According to the Ministry of Labour, plant closures accounted for no more than about one-third of the job losses during the 1983 slowdown. In the recent recession, plant closings accounted for approximately two-thirds of the jobs lost (Statistics Canada 1992). Figures reported in March 1992 indicated a loss of 31,000 manufacturing jobs in addition to 21,000 jobs from other sectors. This brought the total to 384,000 over the last three years. March 1992 was the sixth consecutive month in which losses were recorded. Between October 1991 and March 1992, just over 125,000 men and women were displaced due to the recession and the process of restructuring (Statistics Canada 1992). At the same time, employment within the service industries has been holding relatively stable. Growth in community, business and personal services contributed to a gain of 0.3 per cent in service employment over 1991. The nature of these "full-time equivalencies", however, must be questioned. In the past two decades, there has been a shift to part-time and temporary employment within this sector (Duffy and Pupo 1992).

The costs of recession and restructuring are not uniquely centred on the working class in this country. Canadian business is experiencing profitability problems with "the share of profits in GDP... at a post 1930 low of 4.1%" with firms "...planning a nearly 2% drop in spending [for 1992] after a real decline of almost 6% in 1991" (Statistics Canada 1992: 1.3).

Within the world economy there is a bifurcation among the strategies and practices adopted to meet the needs of the new global economic condition. In much of the third world, a low wage, mass production strategy is encouraged by the lack of labour laws as well as by less stringent environmental legislation. The second strategy, primarily adopted within the advanced industrial countries, promotes the use of modern technologies, high levels of skill, and specialization to approach global competition. Canada has neither a low wage labour force to compete with countries such as Korea or Taiwan nor does it generally boast a cutting edge technology (beyond notable exceptions, such as bio-medical and telecommunications technologies) necessary to compete with Germany, Japan, or other regions. As a result, Canadian industrialists are either scrambling to pursue the advanced technology, high skill option or lowering wages and benefits to create an artificial competitive edge. Leaders from the United Steelworkers argue that the North American manager has by and large adopted wage reduction strategies exclusively and has great difficulty employing alternate competitive strategies (Hynd 1991).

Due to its particular pattern of economic development and its long-established relationship with the U.S., the Canadian situation requires planning for structural change and rebuilding a social covenant between the stakeholders in the productive process. The expense of restructuring in the medium and long term is enormous. The direct costs of unemployment insurance and welfare are compounded by the increased health and social costs of joblessness. Restructuring requires redirection within the state in order to maintain a reasonably high level of confidence among Canadians facing a downturned economy and a fraying social safety net. The pull to raise taxes and cut expenditures on wages and social programs is immense but this approach jeopardizes public sector industrial relations.

Why does the recession of the 1990s differ significantly from those of earlier periods? The 1990s downturn may be called a "structural recession." This is a recession in which a "pillar" sector (one that plays an important role in the economy), begins to recede and pulls other sectors down with it. Some may disagree claiming that Canada's manufacturing sector has experienced similar recurring problems over the last four decades. Porter's analysis indicates that, in the past, problems in trade were dealt with by the state through tariff policy and by increasing the flow of low value-added products, particularly raw resources, for export. This "masked" problems, to use Porter's word. We would argue that this previous strategy was compensatory and counter-cyclic with workers paying dearly through temporary layoffs and drops in real income. In this process capital was able to maintain itself while avoiding the national diversification called for to direct the economy toward a permanently more productive path. Following past recessions there was often an overheating of the economy marked by high levels of inflation due to increased profit-taking and wage catchup where there were coincident increases in demand. Emerging from this recession, we anticipate subdued demand due to high levels of unemployment. This implies a very different type of recession, without the "normal" swing back to re-employment during economic recovery.

### **THE WORKPLACE: CAUGHT IN THE SWIRL OF RAPID CHANGE**

Policies adopted in the face of recession have real implications for the workplace and affect the relationships among the workplace stakeholders. Managements may move their operations elsewhere or alter the internal structures; that is, they may change their "space" geographically or they may change the "space" within the workplace by striking new relations of governance in the workplace. This could mean developing new power sharing and cooperative structures with the unions. Alternately, it could mean enlarging

management's sphere and reducing labour's power by adopting new systems of the "flexible firm" and therefore altering the composition of the labour force through the use of part-time or casual labour, by contracting work out, or by instituting multi-skilling systems.

The most widespread form of restructuring is that of the flexible organization or flexible firm. Flexibility is the attempt by management to seek adaptability to product market fluctuation (Atkinson 1986; Atkinson and Gregory 1986; Dey 1989; Ferner 1985; Hakim 1987; Jones 1987; Pollert 1988a, 1988b). It is a response to changing competitive pressures, to diversification and to the sophistication of consumption (including volatile demand fluctuations) in the affluent developed world. The mass production of "machine bureaucracies" (Mintzberg 1981) dominated by scientific management systems and assembly line production has vanished. Manufacturing a small number of product types with standard shapes and colours has given way to greater demand for small runs of more specialized commodities.

There are two distinct types of flexibility. One concerns technological manipulation in the workplace, such as smallbatching and cluster organization development (the Benetton Model, for example) and has generally been regarded as more applicable to the production of commodities within the private sector. The second type relates to labour market flexibility and consists of both numerical and functional aspects. The "flexible firm" seeks to segment the labour force into a small core of permanent full-time employees and a large periphery of part-time, casual, on call, temporary and subcontracted workers (Dey 1989; Pollert 1988b: 272). As product markets fluctuate, the number of workers involved in production may be altered by increasing or decreasing the number of peripheral workers drawn into the plant. This can be accomplished by increasing the number of part-timers or their hours, by calling in casuals, by overtime if demand increases occur suddenly, or by contracting out.

The flexible firm is dependent on the core workers having certain characteristics which include functional flexibility in the labour process through multi-skilling (crossing occupational boundaries), multi-crafting (where trades cross traditional boundaries and perform the work requiring several tickets) and time flexibility which allows overtime or work intensification. Major business interests are actively pursuing these forms of restructuring (see, for example Gillespie 1990: 36).

It is possible to see the roots of this flexible firm in the new "just in time" (JIT) inventory strategies (applied in this case to labour) and the Japanese employment system adapted by the British, German, French and Italians to their national situations (Pennucci 1987; Schonberger, 1982). The effect is to divide the workforce by introducing different levels of attachment



and stability as well as different compensation packages. The number of casuals, part-timers, and part-year in the periphery is increased, while the core workers encounter various labour process conditions. Core workers are expected to engage in multi-tasking, multi-crafting and multi-skilling. These demands raise a number of questions for unions.

The second element in workplace restructuring is best understood as a cluster of factors that are often attributed to the Japanese Management Techniques or Strategies (JMS). The JMS represent a break with traditional mass production techniques. They utilize more unskilled workers, and many argue break away from any remaining craft control (Womack, Jones and Roos 1990). The CAW notes that there is a contradictory aspect to the JMS or what they call Japanese Production Techniques (Huxley, Rinehart, and Robertson 1991, 1992). On the one hand, it is claimed that using the techniques empowers workers by providing them with the opportunity to make changes but, on the other hand, they increase productivity by drawing workers into management strategies (Parker and Slaughter 1988).

The JMS may be seen as an attempt to isolate unions by making their stakeholding in the company exclusively internal, while strengthening the common interests that internal stakeholders share. This parallels the single enterprise unionism that was decreed in the immediate post-war period in Japan (Okochi 1958). Recent studies of the GM-Suzuki plant in Ontario (CAMI) indicate that although the workers recognize the pro-company motivations in the programs, they nevertheless participate in large numbers (Huxley, Rinehart, and Robertson 1992).

## **STATE POLICIES AND THE CURRENT RESTRUCTURING**

The Canadian State has responded with a rather novel approach to the present economic situation. It has abandoned the more usual Keynesian approaches, opting instead to adopt a form of neo-conservatism. The Keynesian approach, simplistically rendered, is to exert policies which slow the cycle down. For example, if unemployment is deepening, thereby increasing welfare expenditure and cutting consumption, a counter-cyclic approach would initiate employment strategies in order to enhance demand.

Over the past three years, the State has taken actions which may be defined as pro-cyclic rather than counter-cyclic since its decisions may have reinforced crisis. Between 1990 and 1992, high interest rates kept investment down, mortgages high, and hindered the introduction of new technology. This encouraged capital flight and discouraged employment growth. The programme of deficit-fighting in the form of increased taxes (including the GST) took consumer dollars out of the economy and further aggravated retail and

service employment. In addition, the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (FTA) precipitated business decisions to transfer jobs. Labour has argued that the FTA has weakened the economy, caused job losses, increased the pressure for rolling back positive labour legislation, and created a range of weaknesses across the economy (CAW 1988a, 1988b, 1988c; CLC 1986, 1987; CUPE 1988; OPSEU 1987). The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has provoked a new round of critical commentaries. Nor has there been long-term strategic planning to determine future directions for investment and training.

Two factors may explain the changing direction in state policy. The first relates to the initiatives adopted under most neo-conservative agenda (Haiven, McBride, and Shields 1992; Cameron 1988; Calvert 1985; Drache 1991). In Canada this involved the central bank's practice (under the direction of John Crowe and with the Conservative Government blessing) of targeting inflation as the unique and central problem facing the Canadian economy with regard to growth. The second factor is structural. The dramatic increase in the deficit between 1982 and the 1990s created fiscal pressure on the government. Increasing unemployment and decreased economic activity meant a reduction in the tax base at a time when interest payments on the debt were rising, social service costs and unemployment insurance payments were escalating and health care demands were climbing. Compared with the early 1980s, during the late 1980s and early 1990s, the state had reduced flexibility in terms of the policy levers at its disposable (Donner 1991).

## RESTRUCTURING AND LABOUR UNIONS

Canada, as with other advanced industrial countries, is moving into a new phase which challenges the 'Fordist' structure and processes of trade unions within a post-war collective bargaining framework (Kochan, Katz, and McKersie 1986). Several key features of this post-Fordist trajectory have been identified: 1) a new human resources management approach to labour-management relations at the workplace, such as team concept, multi-skilling, contingent pay systems, flex-time, technological change, sub-contracting, just-in-time, etc. (Storey 1989; Wood 1989; Wells 1993; White 1993; USWA 1991); 2) the changing demographic composition of the labour market (more women and visible minorities); 3) changing labour laws (Haiven, McBride, and Shields 1992; Panitch and Swartz 1988; Russell 1990); 4) major technological innovation both in terms of information handling and production (Computer Assisted Design, Computer Integrated Manufacturing); 5) a new approach to regulation with increased exposure of the Canadian labour market to unregulated market forces (deregulation and the liberalization of trade

through the FTA and the GATT); and 6) a decrease in the fiscal ability of all levels of government which has led to constraint of the public sector workforce.

These post-Fordist elements are being introduced unevenly into the Canadian industrial relations system and have differential impact on unions in the country. There may be different constraints in the public and private sectors and hence on the unions in those domains. The public sector has experienced fiscal controls while global competition for market share has greatly affected the private sector.

In jurisdictions outside of Canada there are numerous studies of the responses to the current restructuring. It is widely argued that a fundamental change in the nature of labour-management relations at both the workplace and the sectoral levels is required (Adler and Suarez 1993; Mishel and Voos 1992; Womack, Jones, and Roos 1990). Some have proposed that the successful adaptation to these post-fordist contingencies requires the cooperation of the trade unions to establish a new regime between labour and management (Bluestone and Bluestone 1992; Heckscher 1988; Turner 1991; Rankin 1990). Others have argued that such changes constitute a threat to the very survival of unionism and contribute to work intensification and increased health and safety problems (Anderson 1993; Parker 1993).

Studies of the Canadian union response to changing economic conditions by Murray (1991) and Kumar and Ryan (1988) are of critical interest to this present study. Murray (1991) examines the effect of the changing product, labour and "political" markets on the union's structure and orientations in the early to mid 1980s. Murray's study rests on an established theoretical proposition that the patterns and structures of collective bargaining set logical lines and limits which guide leaders in determining both growth and employment strategies. He argues that the structures established before and during the early 1980s are ill-suited to the current political economy (1991: 3). The reorganization of production and the subsequent changes in the labour market necessitated new recruitment drives for the unions. The old industrial union model, which was adopted by the public sector, has not proven effective for coping with the ongoing restructuring.

Murray suggests that researchers should examine how new members affect the traditional structures (negotiations, service) and processes (internal solidarity, political activity, methods of organizing) associated with the old industrial union models. Murray acknowledges that unions seem to respond differentially to a common set of challenges, opening the door for future researchers to examine possible differences between business unionism and what he calls a "new" general social unionism.

Another important study is the interview-based research of Kumar and Ryan (1988). In their interviews with twelve union leaders they find that the “severe impacts of the 1980-81 recession...uneven recovery...privatisation...deregulation and free trade ...have left the union movement in a quandary” (1988: 2). They note that while there are differences, the unions “...have faced the crisis effectively and successfully” by seeking new members, starting new activities, improving their public image, and changing their bargaining approaches while opposing managerial demands for concessions (1988:2). Kumar and Ryan report leaders have positive attitudes and confidence, but that there are differences between private and public sectors. The private sector is preoccupied with the state of the economy and the rapidity of technological change while the public sector concentrates on the current government determination to cut costs, rationalize services and generally curtail state involvement in economic and social roles. Kumar and Ryan (1988: 5) point to “evidence of a trend toward mergers, realignments, Canadian autonomy, flexible jurisdictions...and restructuring of their appeal... by pursuing a distinct pattern of social unionism... .” Questions regarding the differences between the old industrial union models and the new structures, between the “dominant” union approaches and the new “pattern of social unionism,” and the links between these developments, are left to future research.

Both the Murray (1991) and the Kumar and Ryan (1988) studies are pivotal to our research. These studies both point to fractures in the labour movement as well as to differing responses. They speculate about private/public splits as well as about the potential for differing political cultures (business vs. social unionism) as important explanatory variables. Moreover, these studies suggest that further research delve into the internal structures and activities of unions as well as their external relations.

The unions now stand at the crossroads of change. They are simultaneously contending with major structural and workplace changes. We now turn to a discussion on the ways in which union leaders view the current situation and the directions they expect to take in the near future to safeguard their interests.

## **ECONOMIC CRISIS: THE RESPONSE OF THE UNIONS**

Organized labour in Canada is faced with a dramatic set of changes: a restructuring world economy in which Canada has fallen behind; a restructuring domestic economy; a complex and unfriendly set of state policies; a changing labour force composition; and a reorganization of the workplace itself which threatens the traditional roles of the union. How are the unions managing

this complex set of changes? How are union leaders reacting to these specific circumstances as well as to the general labour relations climate?

Despite the relative health of the Canadian labour movement in terms of total membership (Cuneo and White 1990), union leaders are concerned about their numbers. Most are considering moving into previously unfamiliar sectors and some are reviewing the advantages and disadvantages of mergers. The leaders we interviewed spoke candidly of the need to adopt aggressive tactics to entice workers with different backgrounds and from traditionally non-unionized settings to the labour movement. For the private sector unionists, the matter of recruiting members is urgent. One leader commented: "...if they want to be organized, we organize them. Traditional jurisdictions within the labour movement have disappeared. It seems to be now a free-for-all."

The adoption of new strategies and entry into new industries is regarded as a self-preservation strategy particularly for private sector unions:

In some of the traditional industries there doesn't seem to be room for growth. ... When certain industries stop growing, unions look in other industries to organize and that's what we're doing right now. ... The traditional boundaries have disappeared for a number of reasons. Traditional boundaries within labour within Canada aren't there any more. It seems to me the gloves are off. ... Better organized than unorganized.

Overall, with regard to the broad question of economic restructuring and its impact on the specific unions and the labour movement in general, unionists focused their comments on both internal matters and the external political processes. Union leaders varied on the degree to which they were willing to devote their time and energy to internal or external concerns. It is too early to establish a relationship between union type and orientation (business unionism as opposed to progressive or social unionism) and the level of commitment to internal or external matters. Nevertheless, we will summarize the overriding concerns within each sphere below and then draw some preliminary conclusions on union leaders' general outlook during the 1990s.

## **THE STATE OF THE UNIONS: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS**

### **Membership, Bargaining and Services**

All the union leaders argued that the basic roles of unions and their members' expectations of their unions have not changed despite transformations in the composition of the membership and changes in the structure of the workplace and the economy. There are some differences between public and private concerning the relative importance of these roles and what new roles are being

taken on. Members of the private sector, in particular, clung to a more traditional industrial union model. For example, one leader said:

I don't think things have changed much today than they were years ago. I think, number one, the member still wants us to negotiate on his behalf as much as we can in his wage packet, to take care of his benefit needs, to secure his pension ... to ensure that he has a safe environment ... and then after you've covered some of these basics, then any thing else that we're able to provide in assisting is an added benefit to that member. But I think they're still looking for the fundamental things.

Echoing this sentiment, another suggested:

It still gets down to bread and butter issues for ... [the membership], representation, negotiating good collective agreements, speaking out against the free trade deal ...

Interestingly, protesting against the free trade deal and working to soften its effects — plant closures and the deepening recession — have become a matter of course for union activists, thereby revising somewhat the standard notions of the role of the union.

Along with the “bread-and-butter” concerns, a number of leaders listed a variety of issues on which their membership expected action in the near future, including protection from management harassment (control issues), sexual harassment, child care, family-related issues such as extended parental leaves, and education and training. All the unionists interviewed discussed education and training as an essential issue for the bargaining process due to the high rate of unemployment and the daily job losses occurring at their work-sites because of plant closures, the free trade deal, the GST, and cross-border shopping.

With regard to the need to become involved in providing services for workers, most union leaders felt that social service, health and educational matters were beyond the bailiwick of the unions. According to one unionist in the public sector:

[Members are interested in] things like child care, that sort of stuff. Anything that can relate to the job, to work ... Most people can get behind that kind of thing ... There's at least tolerance among most people and support among some for that kind of issue which is not divorced from work. The further you get away from work the more opposition you get. If we took a position on something controversial, like gay rights, there would be some members who would say, “Why are you worried about this? We have more important things to do. You're wasting our time, or the time we're paying you to do other stuff.”

Union leaders, then, must negotiate the delicate balance between addressing the needs of the changing membership and maintaining the support of their shrinking traditional bases.

Creating an aura for the union to appeal to a diverse potential membership is clearly one of the overriding challenges of the 1990s and the difficulty of this challenge is exacerbated by the harsh economic climate. Clearly, union leaders expect to reorganize somewhat in response to the growing diversity of the labour force:

Organizers used to go to the plant gate and say, "we're going to get you better wages and conditions. Let's go do it." And it used to be easier to sign people up. Now we take more time to ... get people used to working in a collective than we used to do in the past. Before you went in and got people signing up and then you worried about their structure after. Now setting up the structure is an integral part of the signing process ... As we move into sectors that have not been traditionally organized, you need to set up the structure. ... You need to build a stronger base of support and so it means we've had to adjust our approaches.

Some had few concrete suggestions on ways in which to appeal to women and members of minority groups. Others noted that it is increasingly important to take advantage of the new technologies (videos, brochures, printed pamphlets) to reach people in addition to door-knocking and more traditional ways of organizing. Most noted the importance of supporting the election of women and minority members to leadership positions, but outside of the most social unionist formations, few presented strategies for accomplishing this.

One of the ways unionists expect to appeal to prospective members is by appearing to meet members' needs in other-than-work-related issues. Union leaders disagreed on the need to provide services to members and this disagreement seems to relate to the unions' growth rates. Among those whose unions have not experienced declines (primarily in the public sector), it was felt that unions should simply encourage their members to take advantage of services available in the local community and not "to supplant the role of those organizations". In some cases, alliances with community groups and social movements are being built to protect services which are important to the members. However, among unions hard hit by plant closures and declines in membership (mainly in the private sector), providing services is regarded as a means of renewal:

...When people start shopping around, looking for a union ... they want to see the number of services provided so to organize you have to try to keep yourself on top of the list.

### **Role in the Community and in Social and Economic Issues**

Union leaders generally see the importance of the union's involvement in local affairs, but are cautious about their particular union's place in social movements. They focus on the ways in which unions benefit communities overall by setting the standard for higher wage rates and decent working con-

ditions. Raising their visibility in the community through direct action presents a problem. One leader from the public sector notes:

We can deal with social issues by bringing them into our workplaces and implementing them there. That's where we have our leverage. And we can get our members to support people politically ... who will make those changes.

The leaders, then, point to the members (as consumers of unions' services) as constituting the primary roadblock to further involvement, particularly on contentious issues. Some of the issues union leaders would like their unions to commit to include spousal abuse and violence against women, human rights issues and racism. On the local level, one suggested that unions adopt a role as "the watchdog to see city councils aren't passing by-laws that'll have an effect on workers ... such as Sunday shopping." Along with the impact of members' attitudes on increased community involvement, one (public sector) leader voiced the need for a change in underlying philosophy:

In unions, the philosophy is helping the workers. So you just can't help them in their workplace. It means helping them outside. And it's taking unions a while to come around to that philosophy and to come around to that way of understanding and being ...

While it appears that both public and private sector unionists agree on the need to question unions' underlying philosophy, their approaches are quite divergent. Private sector unions (excluding the more social unionist formations such as the CAW) put their membership's attitudes forward as the obstacle to change. The public sector unions (while acknowledging this problem) are engaging in the process of changing these embedded views through education and other activities.

### **Labour-Management Relations**

All leaders agreed that the present climate for labour-management negotiations is adversarial and increasingly contentious. This climate was supported, they note, by the conservative economic policies of the Mulroney government. The climate for labour-management relations has changed, due to the neo-conservative agenda and that change has been fuelled by the recession and the Free Trade Agreement:

You have the old days where you went in and you really hammered out a collective agreement. After the collective agreement you waited another two years or so ... and you went in and hammered it out ... Unions never considered competition and companies didn't consider competition very effectively as well. And nowadays it's a whole question of not just going in and asking for more money, it's a whole question of competition, keeping your factories open, keeping your stores open ... being competitive. ... Those are the changes you're going to see when it comes to negotiations and unions are going to ask for different things.



They're going to ask for money for a layoff and closures programme which almost sounds silly because you go in to negotiate a company, you don't want to close 'em, but you're going to ask them for money for that.

Under the current climate, any gains previously made regarding flexibility and scheduling may be lost:

Negotiating job security for employees at a plant is going to be difficult. Increasing severance pay amounts is probably going to be difficult. ... Employers are going to be looking for more flexibility in the schedule because they'll want to get optimum efficiency out of a particular plant, so where we had traditional Monday to Friday, day shift type jobs, ... we're seeing it already, we're coming under more pressure because the employer is saying they want to operate seven days a week, three shifts ... to optimize the full capacity of their plants ... We'll come under attack in that area.

Most leaders would embrace a reorganized structure, paralleling the models adopted in Europe or Sweden, although the level of scepticism over the possibility of reorganizing varies. Some project the necessity of sectoral bargaining and others note the importance of 'getting involved in job design, in how workers perform, for an increased role in decision-making in any given workplace ...'. A few unionists voiced concern over the underlying objectives of alternate models:

All this team concept stuff ... is an attempt to bypass the unions so they don't involve the union in that ... Quality of Working Life stuff. It's an attempt by the companies to go directly to the workers and not deal with their organizations, try to make their union irrelevant.

All the union leaders we interviewed expressed doubt that any radical change in the structure of bargaining would occur in the near future.

There are two challenges to bargaining. First, the continual change and reorganization of work requires an ongoing commitment amongst labour leaders to renegotiate the labour process. The second is the potential move toward central bargaining, as CUPE has undertaken in the hospitals for example. This form of bargaining does not accommodate the other forms of labour process change, such as teams (under review by social unionist private sector unions, such as the CAW). The private sector is still exploring the centralized bargaining possibilities but unions such as USWA appear to be more committed to the new work reorganization initiatives.

#### **THE STATE OF THE LABOUR MOVEMENT: PROBLEMS, DYNAMICS AND FUTURE PROJECTIONS**

Not surprisingly, the union leaders spoke passionately about their commitment to lobby against free trade. As one private sector leader describes:

It's driven an American agenda to Canada ... Free trade gave the perception to the consumer that there'd be a whole pile of ... cheap goods in Canada, which never was to happen. ... Since free trade the flow of customers to the U.S. has been high because they believe they can now go across the border and buy things cheap and bring them back and pay no duties because they thought all the duties and tariffs were removed ... That's been the effect on us. We've lost members.

Even when unions have not been directly affected by the FTA, there have been indirect effects on members' job security.

The possibility of NAFTA will devastate the labour movement because of further plant closings and the competition for investment capital due to lower Mexican wages. Free trade is a rallying point for unionists willing to commit as many of their resources as possible to fight this issue. One unionist commented: "We're not dead yet. We'll give them the fight of our life." This may be seen as a private sector issue because it is often the private firm that chooses to shut down and move. However, the public sector has devoted considerable time and resources to this issue (CUPE 1988), perhaps demonstrating its pledge to deal with political issues which affect the public sector indirectly along with those which are most immediate.

### **The State of the Labour Movement**

The general opinion regarding the state of the labour movement is captured in this comment by a public sector leader:

It's in flux. ... It's facing some very difficult, some very new challenges ... Certainly the economic challenges that are facing the labour movement today ... are significant. The attack on the labour movement by the neo-Conservative agenda is unprecedented, worse than I've certainly ever experienced and ever have been aware of ... The economy is being used as a tool against the labour movement. And so unions are struggling to respond to that and it's very difficult. Both private and public sector unions are losing members.

As a result, unions are becoming, according to one private sector leader, "more sophisticated, far more sensible, a lot less of the typical person who could yell the loudest".

A number of leaders (particularly the public sector and progressive social unionists of the private sector) agree that the present economic difficulties faced by the movement have contributed to its politicization. This politicization is attributed to members' increased willingness to become involved in political issues because of their ability to connect their personal problems with the broader economic conditions:

When we hold meetings, the issue of politics and political action is now a key focus. Members understand that unions can no longer just go in and negotiate a contract and then leave everything alone ... I'm hearing this everywhere ... but

most importantly at the locals. It's John and Jane Doe saying, "We have to do something about the government." This is a profound and fundamental change in a focus ... within the labour movement.

Increasing political action at all levels is, according to all leaders, necessary to shape labour's agenda for the 1990s.

Along with the increasing politicization, labour leaders especially within the public sector point to the importance of collective spirit in strengthening the movement. A number of the leaders commented that the labour movement will be further strengthened by the "potentially good leadership" and specifically welcome the influence of Bob White as President of the Canadian Labour Congress.

Despite the growing strength of the movement, leaders pointed to a number of inherent weaknesses and problems, including raiding, philosophical differences among leaders, commitment to the NDP, the lack of centralization, declining membership numbers, different ideas on how to respond to the economic crisis, and little consensus on workplace ownership and workplace restructuring. One private sector unionist (a minority view) is convinced that "there isn't disagreement among labour leaders on the issues. They'll argue the process ... It's more the process and how to get where they want to be ... working out the mechanics." In contrast, for some public sector unionists, there "are deep seated differences on many issues of substance."

Several leaders described major flaws in the structure of the movement, particularly in terms of the fragmentation between different types of unionism. Many worry that the movement simply does not reflect current conditions, notably because of the weakness of the traditional tools such as collective bargaining and the right to strike in the light of increased government willingness to legislate workers back to work. And still others question the level of agreement over the general posture unions should adopt. Some leaders are convinced that the adversarial nature of the relationship among unions, companies and governments must change to reflect the general reorganization of the labour market and the economy.

### **The 1990s: General Predictions and Political Action**

The labour leaders we interviewed expect that the major issues confronting the labour movement in the 1990s will be the effects of free trade and the recession, employment equity, racism and gender equality, job loss and retraining, and the empowerment of workers. Few commented on the issue of workplace restructuring and how the specific forms of reorganization, such as the employment of Japanese Management Strategies, would affect their workforces.

While labour leaders consolidate their positions and work to develop consensus on the overriding political issues, the change in the overall structure of the movement will present new challenges. As one public sector leader suggests:

What's facing the labour movement is finding a new way of mobilizing traditional worker strength. In other words, if we can't use strikes as our tools, what other tools can we use? And what other activities can we participate in in order to try to better the influence?

Although the leaders may disagree on the amount of resources their respective unions may commit to the struggle as well as on the degree of emphasis on any one matter, there seems to be consensus that the central issues facing the labour movement — free trade and economic restructuring—call for concerted, ongoing political action through both traditional and non-traditional channels. However, this seeming consensus shows signs of breaking down when it is challenged.

In the spring of 1993 the Ontario New Democratic Government announced that the deficit was increasing too rapidly and therefore public sector workers would have to agree to open their contracts and take a reduction in compensation. It was necessary, according to Premier Bob Rae, for the public sector worker to “make a contribution” to cutting the deficit in Ontario. He noted that the private sector worker had already given through the market place. These Social Contract negotiations seriously angered labour groups. The Social Contract is viewed as a “direct assault on union rights” with “far-reaching implications for collective bargaining” and a clear rebuke “to those that helped get the NDP elected” (Darcy 1993). This breach between the NDP and organized labour undoubtedly affects political relations and changes union leaders' attitudes. Follow-up interviews with available public sector and private sector union leaders confirm this assessment.

This new direction has been crystallized in resolutions submitted to the 1993 Ontario Federation of Labour annual convention (*Ontario Labour* 1993) which is indicative of a realignment of labour on political questions. The social unionist tendency to be active politically is being channelled, not into support for electing the NDP but, towards extra-parliamentary actions. The question of labour's relationship with the NDP has sharpened the differences amongst public and private sector unionists as they work to capture the best interests of their increasingly diverse memberships.

At the Ontario Federation of Labour Annual Convention (Toronto, November 1993) a decision was taken to withhold support for the NDP members who had backed the Social Contract and to increase the distance between the labour movement and the NDP. Differences of opinion were evident when 500 delegates representing the more traditional private sector unions walked

out before the debate to show their displeasure with this vigorous critique of the NDP.

## CONCLUSION

Union leaders agree that the labour movement and their particular unions are challenged by the process of economic restructuring. All leaders concede that we have entered a new phase of collective bargaining and labour negotiations, generated by the state's economic policies, global economic conditions, and changes in the nature and structure of the workplace. Some have already been hard hit by the current economic conditions and are now in the process of internal evaluation of their circumstances and their future options. Others have only been indirectly affected thus far and are now preparing for future reorganization.

Union leaders' responses to economic restructuring fall into two relatively distinct groupings. The overriding concern of one group, represented mainly by private sector leaders, is to find ways in which to handle matters internally and to maintain their current mode of functioning. Union leaders in this group stressed the need to maintain or expand their numbers by undertaking aggressive organizing campaigns, to establish alliances with and to raise their level of visibility in local communities, and to satisfy their memberships through service and education in the traditional style. This group's main interest, then, rests in self-preservation.

The second group of responses, voiced predominantly by public sector unionists, are primarily concerned with political and social change. These unionists will work to preserve equilibrium internally and will maintain a steady state within their organizations by raising the profile of unionism in general in their communities. The main thrust among this group is to work toward political change through escalated political involvement with the CLC, as well as through alliances with other coalitions. These unionists have been most pointed in their recent criticisms of the Ontario NDP. These unionists wish to write a new mandate for the labour movement as they propose to commit a greater share of their time and resources to (non-traditional) issues considered by some to lay outside the province of labour. This group seems to be most committed to developing a labour movement which reflects and is responsive to the changed economic conditions and workplace structures.

There is not a central or dominant position within the labour movement today regarding public or private sector interests or business or social unionism. While we note some differences between public and private sector unionists' views, the rate of economic, political and technological change may divert the course of action preferred by these leaders. Further research

accounting for the level of competition and conditions in the labour market in relation to unions' structures, policies, and political commitments may distinguish more clearly between the business and social unionist postures.

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## ***Les dirigeants syndicaux et la crise économique Réponses à la restructuration***

Cet article étudie les défis auxquels sont confrontés les syndicats et leurs dirigeants face aux transformations en cours sur les lieux de travail. Transformations qui s'inscrivent dans une période d'instabilité politique, de globalisation des marchés et de libéralisme économique.

D'entrée de jeu, la discussion porte sur les différentes formes de restructuration avec lesquelles doivent composer les syndicats et leurs leaders. Sous les thèmes de la flexibilité, des méthodes de gestion dites japonaises et des transformations économiques, l'exploration des changements dans les modes de déploiement de la main-d'œuvre nous amène à questionner l'analyse compétitive proposée par Michael Porter à la lumière des initiatives récentes des employeurs et de l'État. Nous tournons ensuite notre regard vers les réponses syndicales à ce nouvel environnement.

Les matériaux empiriques proviennent d'une série d'entrevues auprès des dirigeants de huit syndicats en Ontario. Dans la sélection des syndicats, nous avons fait en sorte que l'échantillon soit représentatif autant du secteur public que du secteur

privé, autant des syndicats des industries de services que ceux des industries manufacturières. Nous avons également tenu compte des diverses traditions syndicales au Canada de sorte que l'échantillon représente le syndicalisme d'affaires et le syndicalisme à teneur sociale. Enfin, nous avons consulté les diverses publications des syndicats locaux et des centrales syndicales disponibles pour compléter les données recueillies lors des entrevues.

Dans l'ensemble, les leaders syndicaux contactés s'accordent à dire que leurs organisations traversent une période de transformation économique et qu'une nouvelle phase de négociation collective est enclenchée. Ces transformations seraient le résultat des politiques économiques de l'État, de la globalisation des marchés et des changements dans la structure et dans la nature des lieux de travail. Certains syndicats, durement ébranlés par cette nouvelle donne, sont maintenant à faire le bilan des dernières années et à revoir leurs orientations. D'autres, touchés que partiellement par la crise actuelle, préparent leur organisation à affronter de nouveaux défis.

Les réponses des dirigeants syndicaux à cet environnement nouveau et incertain peuvent être classées en deux catégories distinctes. La première est formée essentiellement de syndicats du secteur privé préoccupés par leur survie. Ces derniers traitent des questions relatives à la restructuration à l'interne afin de préserver leur mode de fonctionnement actuel. Les représentants de ce groupe sont concernés par la préservation et la croissance de leurs effectifs. Ils soulignent l'importance des campagnes de recrutement et des alliances qui rehaussent leur présence au sein de la communauté locale. Ces actions sont accompagnées de programmes traditionnels comme l'éducation syndicale. En somme, cette orientation syndicale est caractérisée par l'instinct de préservation.

Chez les répondants de la seconde catégorie, composée en majorité par des syndicats du secteur public, on observe une orientation politique à saveur de transformation sociale. Pour ces syndicalistes, la préservation de l'équilibre interne est également importante mais l'impulsion première provient de l'arène politique, de l'implication au sein du CTC et des alliances stratégiques avec les grandes coalitions sociales. Souhaitant un mandat nouveau pour le mouvement ouvrier, les leaders de ce deuxième groupe sont prêts à investir une plus grande proportion de leur temps et de leurs ressources à des questions qui sont traditionnellement considérées comme étant hors du champ de l'intervention syndicale. Un mouvement ouvrier reflétant les nouvelles données socio-économiques et les changements structurels survenus sur les lieux de travail correspond d'avantage à l'orientation de ce deuxième groupe de répondants.

Même s'il y a des divergences entre les opinions des représentants syndicaux des secteurs public et privé, le rythme des mutations économique, politique et technologique pourrait induire un changement d'orientation au sein des deux groupes identifiés. Les recherches futures pourraient distinguer plus clairement entre le syndicalisme d'affaires et le syndicalisme à vocation sociale en mettant en lumière les relations entre la structure interne des syndicats, leur orientation et leur engagement politique et les conditions du marché du travail.