

## Union Decline: Lessons from Alberta

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Article abstract

This paper tests whether an inconsistency exists between unions' industrial relations philosophies and their abilities to secure real wage gains. One economic measure and two attitudinal measures are related to union membership. The influence of these measures on both the likelihood that a person is a union member and union membership's impact upon these measures are simultaneously estimated. The implications of the results for private-sector union decline in Canada are then discussed.

# *Union Decline*

## *Lessons from Alberta*

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and  
**Alan I. Murray**

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In Alberta, unionization levels (the proportion of organized labor) declined from 32,3% in 1983, to 31,9% in 1984, 30,9% in 1985, 29,4% in 1986, and 28,4% in 1987, well below the national level which stayed at about 38%. This decline is even more pronounced when public/private-sector differences are taken into account. Private-sector unionization dropped by 25%, from 16% in 1984, to 12% in 1987, while public-sector unionization dropped by 8%, from 69% to 63% over the same time period (Alberta Labour 1985-1988).

At least part of this decline can be attributed to environmental developments in the 1980s which combined to increase hostility to unions. Alberta unions faced both a hostile polity and a severe economic recession. Plummeting demand for output from Alberta's two major industries, oil and agriculture, boosted unemployment levels from 3,9% in 1979, to 9,8% in 1986. Politically, conservatism in both the government and the courts made unionization and the achievement of real wage gains difficult (Reshef

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1990). In 1986, for example, the Consumer Price Index rose by 3,3%, yet the average annual percentage increase for all new wage settlements was only 2,5% (Alberta Labour 1987).

Union political and labor market activities are just two, albeit very visible, aspects of union activity which were negatively affected by these macro-level developments. Another, less visible, aspect of union activity is the process whereby the membership is socialized into a unique world view. Here also, it will be argued, macro-level developments undercut unions by decoupling union action from its underlying philosophy. This reduces unions' abilities to maintain organizational prosperity.

Historically, Alberta trade unions' philosophical and practical approach to industrial relations fitted Adam's (1988: 11) notion of "mature adversarialism." They accepted a division of labor between management and unions. Managements' role, they felt, was to organize and direct work. Their role was to protect members by ensuring that management did not breach the collectively negotiated rules.

Philosophically, then, unions accepted a limited role in Albertan society. They strove to improve their members' working conditions and, thus, members' well-being. Since they shared no common interest with management, unions believed they should stay outside the management decision-making processes and rely on collective bargaining to advance their members' interests.

In practice, unions attempted to realize their industrial relations philosophy by following an action orientation emphasizing immediate economic interests — real wage increases and job security — in collective negotiations and other labor market-oriented actions.

Union decline in Alberta, we argue, is the result of an inconsistency between unions' adversarial view, just described, and their inability to realize the economic objectives that this view promotes. An inconsistency has developed between union members' economic expectations, which are the product of beliefs inculcated by the union, and unions' abilities to meet these expectations. Unions have continued to reinforce the belief that members are victims of a hostile work environment and that unions are their only hope. Now, with the increased hostility to unions, Alberta unions face growing difficulties "delivering the goods." This may have reduced unions' attractiveness to members and nonmembers alike and thus, may in part explain union decline.

This paper tests whether an inconsistency, in fact, existed between unions' view of industrial relations and their effectiveness in securing real

wage gains<sup>1</sup>. The implications of the results for the union organization are then discussed. To accurately estimate these effects, the fact that workers' incomes and views of industrial relations also affect the likelihood of being a union member is taken into account. This paper, thus, is predicated on the view that union membership constantly affects and is affected by workers' incomes and their attitudinal dispositions toward the union-management relationship.

## PRIOR RESEARCH AND HYPOTHESES

The research questions outlined above are tested by examining the relationships between union membership and worker attitudes toward the union-management relationship and between union membership and workers' incomes.

*Union membership and worker attitudes toward unions and employers.* In order to strengthen organizational solidarity, especially in times of economic hardships, union leaders and members must share the same understanding, perspective, and interpretation of socio-economic reality. To realize this unions like other organizations need a common culture, that is, a set of beliefs into which members can be socialized. Two particularly relevant sets of beliefs concerning industrial relations are: (a) Big-capital — the notion that unions are essential to balance the power of employers and improve workers' working conditions, and (b) big-labor — the notion that unions are too powerful an institution in society and that their power must be limited. Big-capital beliefs are an offspring of the "business unionism" philosophy. Here, unions are perceived to be essential to counter powerful and selfish employers and improve their members' economic conditions. Big-labor beliefs assert that unions are too powerful, that they impose too many restrictions on employers, and that to improve production efficiency union power must be limited.

Traditionally, unions have tended to reinforce the belief that employers' power must be constrained by a countervailing force to prevent worker exploitation. At the same time, unions have maintained the notion among their members that they have not become so powerful that economic stability is jeopardized. Indeed, Lowe and Krahn (1989b) have demonstrated that union membership produces sentiments against a big-labor image and pro big-capital image. Hence,

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<sup>1</sup> It is noteworthy that while wage gains are by no means the only benefit unions deliver to members, they are a major one. Hence, the ability of unions to deliver wage increases can serve as a powerful proxy for unions' capability to live up to their economic paradigm and is a major indicator of their effectiveness.

H1: organizing a group of workers will result in these workers on average holding weaker big-labor sentiments than previously

and,

H2: organizing a group of workers will result in these workers on average holding stronger big-capital sentiments than previously.

These hypotheses imply that workers' big-capital and big-labor attitudes change once they are organized. Rather than measuring this change *per se*, we test its logical corollary. If H1 and H2 are true it follows that unionized workers must hold stronger big-capital and weaker pro-labor sentiments than nonunion workers. If this condition were not met, the absurd situation would arise whereby nonunion workers were better integrated into a "union philosophy" than unionized workers. Indeed, there is some evidence that union members perceive unions to be quite effective in providing increased wages and in protecting workers against unfair actions by employers, and that nonunion workers perceive unions to be stronger than employers (Chacko and Greer 1982; Kochan, Lipsky, and Dyer 1974). Hence,

H3: the greater a worker's big-labor beliefs the smaller the likelihood the worker is a union member and,

H4: the greater a worker's big-capital beliefs the greater the likelihood the worker is a union member.

*The effect of union membership on income.* In Canada, the most recent *Labour Market Activity Survey* conducted by Statistics Canada (1988a) shows that, as in the U.S. (Freeman and Medoff 1984: 46; Kochan, Katz, and McKersie 1986: 103-104), unionized workers earn higher wages than nonunionized workers. In 1986, when the national average hourly wage was \$11.48, unionized workers earned \$13.29, and nonunionized workers earned \$10.29. The same pattern applied to full-time (\$11.71 – \$13.34 – \$10.59) and part-time (\$8.69 – \$12.41 – \$7.42) and for male (\$12.80 – \$14.05 – \$11.84) and female workers (\$9.52 – \$11.91 – \$8.23). While it is not clear whether the magnitudes of these wage differentials were entirely due to the union effect, both Canadian (Maki and Christensen 1980; Christensen and Maki 1981; Robinson and Tomes 1984; Gunderson and Riddel 1988: 303-339) and U.S. researchers (Lee 1978; Freeman and Medoff 1984; Hirsh and Addison 1986; Lewis 1986) concur that, by and large, unions have a positive effect on their members' wages. Hence,

H5: union members are more likely to earn higher wages than nonunion workers.

*The effect of income on union membership.* It is a highly consistent finding that workers who are more dissatisfied with the economic aspects of their job, or those who report more problems with these aspects, are more likely to seek unionization (e.g., Schreisheim 1978; Kochan 1979; Gordon and Long 1981; Maxey and Mohrman 1981; Chacko and Greer 1982). In our sample, union members may belong to either of two groups. They may have recently joined unions in the expectation of improving their economic situation. Or, they may have been union members for sometime. If union memberships comprise only the first group it would be reasonable to posit a negative effect of income on union membership, meaning that the lower a worker's income the higher the likelihood that the worker is a union member.

Evidence cited above has shown, however, that in the past unions have improved their members' income. Therefore, if union membership comprises only the "veteran" group it would be reasonable to posit a positive effect of income on union membership, meaning that the higher a worker's income the higher the likelihood that the worker is a union member. Since we are not able to control for a worker's tenure as a union member we cannot predict the direction of the expected effect of income on union membership.

*The effect of income on attitudes toward employers.* A final hypothesis concerns the relationship between income and big-capital beliefs. Due to a lack of prior work in this area there is no evidence about this relationship. It is, however, logical to assume that high-income workers, who benefit from the existing socio-economic order, are less likely to be critical of it. Hence,

H6: the higher a worker's income the weaker the worker's big-capital beliefs.

Figure 1 presents a causal model the relationships of which capture the hypotheses presented above.

## METHODS

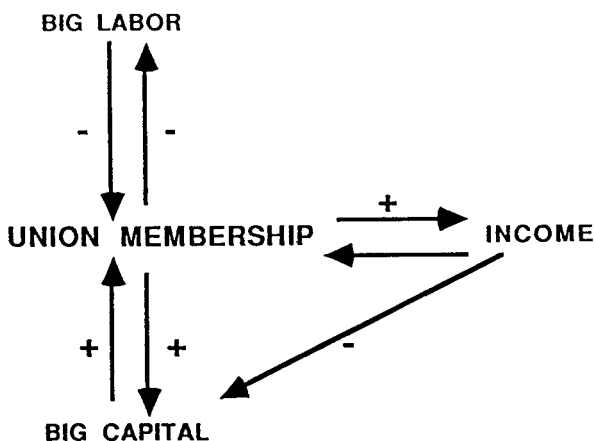
### Sources of Data

This study's data are part of the *All Alberta Study* (AAS87) conducted in 1987 by the Population Research Laboratory at the University of Alberta. The 1045-subject sample was randomly selected (see Kinzel 1987

for sampling methods). Face-to-face interviewing was conducted in the City of Edmonton while telephone interviewing was conducted for all other areas of Alberta. The questions asked were the same in all cases.

Out of 1045 subjects, 49,1% were male and 50,9% were female. A respondent's average age was 41,14 years (and the range was from 18 to 94) and, on average, she/he had 12,75 years of education. At the time of the survey, 54,8% of the respondents were employed full-time, 28% were employed by the public-sector and, on average, a respondent's income was between \$30,000 and \$30,999 before taxes were deducted.

Figure 1  
The Core Hypotheses



### Variables and Measurements

The full model presented in Figure 2 contains, in addition to the endogenous variables discussed above, all the control variables and their hypothesized relationships with the endogenous variables. This model takes the following form:

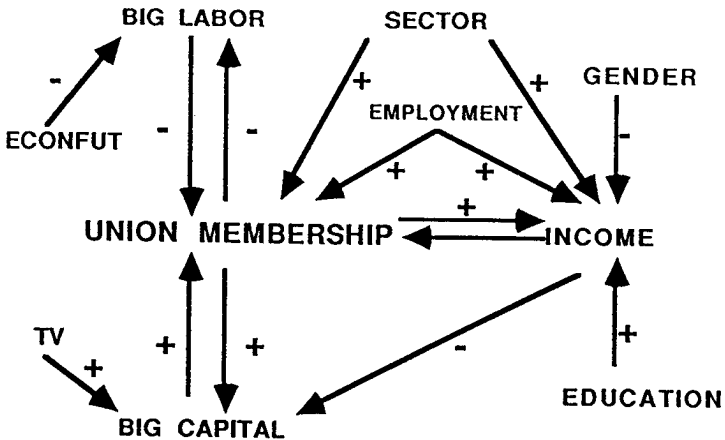
- (I)  $UNION\ MEMBERSHIP = G_{11}SECTOR + G_{12}EMPLOYMENT + B_{11}INCOME + B_{12}BIGCAPITAL - B_{13}BIGLABOR + z,$
- (II)  $INCOME = -G_{21}GENDER + G_{22}EDUCATION + G_{23}SECTOR + G_{24}EMPLOYMENT + B_{21}UNION\ MEMBERSHIP + z,$

$$(III) \text{ BIGLABOR} = -G_{31}\text{ECONFUT} - B_{31}\text{UNION MEMBERSHIP} + z,$$

$$(IV) \text{ BIGCAPITAL} = G_{41}\text{TV} + B_{41}\text{UNION MEMBERSHIP} - B_{42}\text{INCOME} + z,$$

where a B (BETA) represents an effect of one endogenous variable on another endogenous variable, a G (GAMMA) represents an effect of one exogenous variable on an endogenous variable, and a z (ZETA) is an error term.

Figure 2  
The Theoretical Model



### Endogenous Variables

**UNION MEMBERSHIP** is a dichotomous variable measuring whether a respondent is a union member (1 = yes; 0 = no). One hundred and sixty seven (16% of the sample) respondents were unionized.

**INCOME** is an interval variable measuring the income of a respondent before taxes were deducted, in 1986. There are 26 categories starting with "under \$6,000" and, advancing in \$2,000 increments, ending with "\$75,000+".

**BIG LABOR** comprises two Likert-type items ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree): (1) "We need more laws to limit the powers of unions"; (2) "Unions impose too many restrictions on employers".



**BIG CAPITAL** comprises four Likert-type items ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree): (1) "Employees of an organization have better wages and working conditions when all of them belong to unions"; (2) "During a strike, management should be prohibited by law from hiring workers to take the place of strikers"; (3) "The selfishness of employers can be fought only by strong unions"; (4) "We need more laws to limit the power of employers in dealing with unions".

### **Control Variables**

**EMPLOYMENT** is a dichotomous variable measuring whether a respondent is a full- or part-time employee (employed less than 30 hours per week) (1 = full-time; 0 = part-time). In Canada in 1986 a much smaller proportion of part-timers (16,6%) were organized than paid full-timers (32,8%) (Statistics Canada 1988a). Being frequently casual workers, "[p]art-time workers have always been the neglected step-children of the labor force — relegated to low-paying jobs, denied access to fringe benefits, rarely promoted, and generally ignored by human resource managers" (Wallace 1986: 15,519). Consequently, in 1986 the average hourly wage of a part-timer was \$8.69 compared with a full-timer's hourly average of \$11.71 and a national hourly average of \$11.48 (Statistics Canada 1988a).

In Canada, 88 percent of union members (Statistics Canada 1988a) are full-time employees. While unions appear to welcome part-timers in certain professions such as teaching, nursing, and social work, they either do not pursue part-timers located in low-paying (i.e., sales, service, and primary occupations) jobs or, have difficulty attracting them (Wallace 1983: 95-96). We therefore expect **EMPLOYMENT** to positively affect **UNION MEMBERSHIP** and **INCOME**.

**GENDER** is a dichotomous variable where 1 = female and 0 = male. During the past decade, the increasing number of women in the workforce has significantly affected the structure of the Canadian labor force. Since 1980, women have been entering the labor market in record numbers. In 1981-1986, women accounted for 75% of the growth in the labor force and filled 94% of additional jobs. The number of women in the workforce increased by 46% from 1975 to 1985 (Statistics Canada 1988b), and in 1986, the 6,8 million women who worked in Canada comprised 45,5% of the total national workforce (Statistics Canada 1988a).

In 1986, 60% of the female workers, 4,1 million, worked in the low-paying service, sales, and clerical occupations, where their respective average hourly wages were \$6.43, \$7.65, and \$9.03 — much below the national hourly average of \$11.48 (Statistics Canada 1988a). Furthermore, while most Canadian men (86%) worked full time, almost a third (31,1%)

of all female workers worked only part-time. As a result, women made up 66% of all part-time workers in Canada. We therefore expect GENDER to negatively affect INCOME.

EDUCATION is a continuous variable measuring a respondent's years of education. We, obviously, expect EDUCATION to positively affect INCOME.

SECTOR is a dichotomous variable measuring whether a respondent is employed by the public sector or not (1 = yes; 0 = no). Since the late 1960s, Canadian public-sector employees have been allowed to join unions, engage in collective bargaining, and even to strike in six jurisdictions including the Federal. In 1986, in Alberta, 68% of all employees in the public sector were unionized, and comprised 70,9% of the total union membership (Alberta Labour 1985-1988). In our sample, 107 out of 166 union workers (64,3%) were employed in the public sector. We control for the impact of SECTOR on INCOME since, in Canada, public-sector employees earn above the national hourly average — \$13.77 in public administration, \$15.53 in teaching, \$12.43 in medicine, and \$16.27 in transportation, communication and utilities compared with a national average of \$11.48 (Statistics Canada 1988a). We, therefore, expect that SECTOR positively affects UNION MEMBERSHIP and INCOME.

ECONFUT is a scale measuring a respondent's perceived economic future — "Now looking ahead, do you think that a year from now you (and your family), will be better off financially, or worse off, or just about the same as now?" The scale ranges from 1 (better a year from now) to 3 (will be worse off a year from now). Prior research has found that those who are economically dissatisfied at work are more likely to support trade unions (e.g., Chacko and Greer 1982; Lowe and Krahn 1989a). We, therefore, expect ECONFUT to negatively affect BIG LABOR.

TV is a continuous variable measuring the hours a respondent watched television in the week preceding the day of the survey — "In the past week, about how many hours did you watch television?" It is noteworthy that in Alberta, the summer of 1986 — labelled "the summer of discontent" — was characterized by an unusually high number of violent strikes the television coverage of which was sympathetic to workers (Noel and Gardner 1988; Panitch and Swartz 1988: 80). We, therefore, expect TV to positively affect BIG CAPITAL.

### **Data Analysis**

The model is estimated using the LISREL 6 program which is a full-information maximum-likelihood estimator. LISREL allows one to specify theoretical or latent factors when multiple indicators are present and when

non-recursive causal relationships are hypothesized. It provides several indicators of goodness-of-fit to determine the extent to which the estimated parameters can reproduce the original input correlation/covariance matrix. The most commonly used one is the  $X^2$  (chi-square) goodness-of-fit test. The target is to get a ratio between the model's  $X^2$  and degrees of freedom (df) that yields a probability level greater than .05, which means that the tested model predicts a matrix that is not significantly different the one actually obtained.

When a correlation rather than a covariance matrix is the input to the program (Joreskog and Sorbom 1984: I-39), however, and when the sample size is greater than 200 cases (Hayduk 1987: 168), as is the case here, the quality of the model's fit should be assessed by examining the residual covariances<sup>2</sup> and by running several models with different restrictions, selecting the one with the smaller  $X^2$ . A smaller  $X^2$  implies that the model predicts a correlation matrix that more closely matches the matrix actually obtained.

## RESULTS

Table 1 reports the correlation matrix which is the input to the program<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Residuals greater than +2,0 or less than -2,0 imply nonrandom error variance. LISREL, however, allows flexibility in the specification of the error terms so that correlated errors can be specified. Correlated errors indicate that not all the variation in responses can be accounted for by one underlying construct plus random error. By correlating error terms, systematic error variance which is due to the effect of excluded variables is accounted for and partialled out. Whereas the specific correlations among error terms are not of interest in themselves, their incorporation into the model provides more precise estimates of the parameters.

<sup>3</sup> This correlation matrix is based on pairwise deletion of missing cases. The number of observations reported here and in Figure 3 ( $N=781$ ), therefore, is a conservative figure denoting the minimum  $N$  for any correlation in this matrix. Note, that only three correlations are based on less than 799 observations and 10 on less than 900 observations. The decision to use the pairwise rather than the listwise matrix is based on a twofold consideration: First, the listwise deletion of missing cases reduced the sample size by 32,4%, to 706 cases. Second, the listwise deletion of missing cases resulted in a "stability index" greater than 1 (1,003) which indicates at least one inflated B estimate (Hayduk 1987: 271, 274). The pairwise matrix, on the other hand, produced a smaller and acceptable index value (.826).

We, however, ran the model twice using a different correlation matrix each time. The only significant difference involves the effect of INCOME on UNION MEMBERSHIP. While it was highly significant ( $p < .05$ ) and relatively strong (.32) when the listwise matrix was used as the input to the program, it became less significant ( $p = .12$ ) and weaker (.18) when the pairwise matrix was used.

**Table 1**  
**Correlations, Means and Standard Deviations**  
**of Variables in the Model**

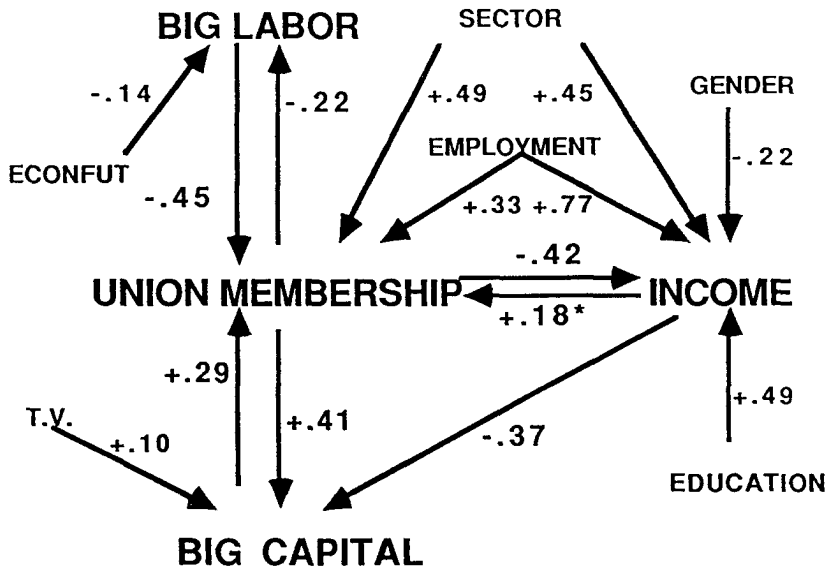
<i>Variables</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Biglabor1														
2. Biglabor2	,50													
3. Bigcapital1	-,17	-,14												
4. Bigcapital2	-,31	-,32	,29											
5. Bigcapital3	-,24	-,23	,42	,42										
6. Bigcapital4	-,08	-,15	,23	,35	,38									
7. Unionmember	-,25	-,20	,18	,19	,12	,05								
8. Income	,02	,05	-,18	-,10	-,07	-,19	,12							
9. Econfut	-,12	-,12	,09	,04	,05	,02	-,01	-,07						
10. TV	,04	-,04	,11	,18	,14	,11	-,05	-,24	,08					
11. Education	-,06	-,03	-,06	-,07	-,10	-,10	,14	,30	-,03	-,28				
12. Employment	-,06	,03	-,10	-,05	-,10	-,09	,22	,36	-,11	-,22	,24			
13. Gender	,06	-,06	,02	,07	,07	,08	-,07	-,17	,02	,03	-,07	-,29		
14. Sector	-,09	-,13	,06	,12	,06	,06	,36	,10	,12	-,03	,25	-,03	,22	
MEAN	4,56	4,68	4,34	3,84	3,60	3,78	,19	14,70	1,66	14,08	13,08	,55	,45	,31
SD	2,06	1,85	1,95	2,41	1,98	1,80	,40	7,35	,64	12,87	2,95	,50	,50	,46

The model demonstrated in Figure 3 is a standardized solution, presented to facilitate the interpretation of the results<sup>4</sup>. As mentioned before, since  $X^2$  and  $X^2/df$  indexes are dependent on sample size, two alternative methods of assessing the appropriateness of the model are explored. First, the standardized residual matrix, that is, the normalized differences between the correlation matrix and the correlation matrix reproduced by application of the values for the structural parameters indicated in the model, includes only one value larger than 2,00. This value, the relationship between INCOME and TV, does not involve a relationship between variables that would suggest any alteration of the model. Second, the model presented in Figure 3 has the smallest  $X^2$  (125,88 with 55 df) of the several models we estimated. Most importantly, throughout the runs the signs of the parameter of the core model (Figure 1) remained unchanged. The results support five of the hypotheses.

<sup>4</sup> We omitted the measurement model and correlations among exogenous variables for diagrammatic simplicity. The full model including these estimates is available from the authors. We have, however, confirmed the structure of the two multiple-indicator factors — BIG LABOR and BIG CAPITAL — before running the full model. The item loadings are: Biglabor1 - ,79; biglabor2 - ,64; bigcapital1 - ,54; bigcapital2 - ,59; bigcapital3 - ,72; bigcapital4 - ,52. The reliability of the "biglabor" scale (Spearman-Brown) is ,66, and that of the "bigcapital" scale (Chronbach's Alpha) is ,67.

Figure 3

## The Empirical Model

Notes:

A standardized solution.

\* $P=.12$  (two-tailed test).

$P<.01$  for all other coefficients (one- or two-tailed test as appropriate).

$\chi^2 = 125.88$   $df=55$   $N=781$

*The effect of UNION MEMBERSHIP on attitudes toward unions and employers.* From the effect of UNION MEMBERSHIP on BIG LABOR ( $-.22$ ) it appears that, as predicted, union members agree less with big-labor statements than nonmembers. The positive strong effect of UNION MEMBERSHIP on BIG CAPITAL ( $.41$ ) indicates that, as predicted, union members also agree more with big-capital statements than nonmembers and these differences, as shown below, are enhanced by union membership.

*The effect of attitudes toward unions and employers on UNION MEMBERSHIP.* The predicted negative effect of BIG LABOR on UNION MEMBERSHIP ( $-.45$ ) suggests that the higher the big-labor beliefs held by

workers the less likely they are to be union members. The opposite is true for big-capital beliefs. The positive effect of BIG CAPITAL on UNION MEMBERSHIP (.29) means that the higher the big-capital beliefs held by workers the more likely they are to be union members.

*The effect of INCOME on UNION MEMBERSHIP.* We found a positive, although nonsignificant, effect of INCOME on UNION MEMBERSHIP (.18). This suggests that most members in our sample had been union members for some time and had benefited from that membership. Note, however, that this is only the direct effect of INCOME on UNION MEMBERSHIP. When the indirect effect of INCOME on UNION MEMBERSHIP (through the effect INCOME has on BIG CAPITAL) is taken into account INCOME's total effect is only .07. This means that in our sample the union wage differential is low and thus cannot effectively predict union membership. One surprising explanation for this finding is provided below.

*The effect of UNION MEMBERSHIP on INCOME.* Traditional views hypothesize a positive effect of UNION MEMBERSHIP on INCOME. Our analysis resulted in a negative effect. This result coupled with the result described above implies that unionized workers in Alberta may be giving back financial gains achieved in the past.

*The effect of INCOME on attitudes toward employers.* As expected, INCOME affects strongly and negatively (-.37) worker sentiments toward employers as reflected by BIG CAPITAL statements. High-income workers may be satisfied with the socio-economic system and feel no desire to limit the power of employers. Or, they may be dissatisfied with it but do not view unions as the appropriate agents of change.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

To recapitulate our main findings, union membership was found to attenuate big-labor beliefs and reinforce big-capital beliefs, both as predicted. Also, workers holding big-labor beliefs were less likely to be union members and workers with stronger big-capital beliefs were more likely to be union members. Both of these results were as predicted. Effective socialization of union members to an adversarial view toward the union-management relationship, thus, enhanced and was enhanced by the effects of this view on union membership. What we have observed here, then, is a positive enhancement loop. The union collectivity and the individual members of whom it is composed constrain each other and thus strengthen the union's culture, making cultural changes difficult.

The relationships between union membership and income deviated in part from the traditional patterns. First, we found that workers with higher incomes were more likely to be union members. Had a full information approach to parameter estimation not been employed it would be reasonable to conclude that this result was merely an artifact resulting from unions' relative avoidance of part-timers and their successful pursuit of public-sector employees. But, the estimates we report here are based on a full-information causal model in which these independent effects are already estimated and thereby "partialled out." Second, unlike our prediction, union membership negatively affected member incomes.

While the negative effect of UNION MEMBERSHIP on INCOME may be sample specific, and while we are familiar with only one study (MacDonald and Evans 1981) where Canadian semi-skilled workers suffered wage losses from union coverage, there is a growing evidence that in both the U.S. (e.g., Bernstein 1986; Freeman and Kleiner 1988) and Canada (Adams and Saul 1988; *Globe and Mail* October 21, 1988: B:3; Panitch and Swartz 1988: 100) the union wage effect is becoming less positive than it once was.

These results provide, in the microcosm of Alberta, evidence that unions are facing difficulties to satisfying their members' income expectations and, yet, are still nurturing such expectations by pursuing an adversarial view of industrial relations. If our analysis and conceptual arguments are correct, some Canadian unions may be crippled by an inability to adapt their industrial relations philosophy to changing industrial relations circumstances. Whether they emerge from this conflict permanently crippled or reborn will depend on their ability to implement a thorough-going reevaluation of their fundamental role and objectives — their *raison d'être*. In the next few years some unions will adopt a whole new set of assumptions about their role in society. Others, we believe, may fall back on their old world view and will suffer decline as a result of their choice.

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## *Le déclin du syndicalisme leçons de l'Alberta*

Le déclin du syndicalisme en Alberta peut ressortir, du moins en partie, à des transformations de l'environnement survenues dans les années 1980, lesquelles se sont combinées pour accroître l'hostilité à son égard. En effet, les syndicats albertains ont dû affronter en même temps des attitudes politiques rébarbatives et une grave récession économique. Les activités syndicales dans l'arène politique et sur le marché du travail ne sont que deux aspects — et très visibles — de l'action syndicale qui ont été modifiés par ces changements macro-économiques. Un troisième aspect de l'activité syndicale, moins perceptible celui-ci, est le processus par lequel les membres sont conditionnés à une unique vision du monde, de telle sorte que, peut-on affirmer, les transformations économiques tendent à écarter l'action des syndicats de leur philosophie fondamentale, ce qui est de nature à freiner leur cheminement en tant qu'organisation.

Historiquement, l'approche pratique et idéologique des syndicats albertains en matière de relations professionnelles répondait à la notion d'«antagonisme mature» exposée par Adams (1988). Ils acceptaient un partage dans l'aménagement des relations du travail entre les employeurs et eux. Le rôle de ceux-là, estimaient-ils, consistait à organiser et à diriger l'entreprise. Leur propre fonction, c'était de protéger leurs membres en s'assurant que les employeurs n'enfreindraient pas les normes négociées collectivement.

Du point de vue philosophique, les syndicats acceptaient d'avoir une responsabilité limitée dans la société albertaine. Ils s'efforçaient d'améliorer les conditions de travail de leurs membres et, donc, leur bien-être. Puisqu'ils n'avaient aucun intérêt commun avec les employeurs, les syndicats estimaient qu'ils devaient rester en

dehors des mécanismes de prise de décisions dans l'entreprise et s'en tenir à la négociation collective pour faire progresser les intérêts de leurs membres. Dans la pratique, les syndicats tentaient de réaliser leur propre conception des relations professionnelles en poursuivant une orientation fondée sur des intérêts d'ordre économique immédiats, soit l'augmentation du pouvoir d'achat et la sécurité d'emploi, par la négociation collective et autres activités reliées au marché du travail.

Le déclin du syndicalisme en Alberta, croyons-nous, est le résultat de l'incompatibilité entre cette vision syndicale antagoniste et l'incapacité d'atteindre les objectifs économiques qu'une telle attitude suppose. Une contradiction s'est développée entre les attentes économiques des syndiqués résultant des promesses que les syndicats leur ont laissé miroiter, et l'incapacité des syndicats à les réaliser. Les syndicats ont continué d'inculquer à leurs adhérents qu'ils sont les victimes d'un milieu de travail hostile et que l'organisation syndicale constitue leur seule planche de salut. Aujourd'hui, par suite d'une opposition devenue de plus en plus farouche, les syndicats ont beaucoup plus de difficulté à «livrer la marchandise». Ceci a pu avoir pour effet d'amoindrir l'attrait du syndicalisme tant pour les salariés qui en sont membres que pour ceux qui ne le sont pas, ce qui pourrait expliquer en partie son déclin.

Cet article vise à vérifier l'existence d'une incompatibilité entre la vision que peuvent avoir les syndicats du régime de relations professionnelles et leur capacité d'assurer à leurs adhérents des avantages véritables en matière de salaires. On traite ensuite des conséquences d'une telle incompatibilité sur l'organisation syndicale. Pour en évaluer la portée exacte, on a tenu compte du fait que les revenus des salariés et leur conception des relations du travail ont aussi un effet sur la probabilité d'être syndiqué. Aussi, les auteurs de l'étude estiment-ils que l'adhésion syndicale, d'une part, de même que les gains des salariés et leurs attitudes face aux relations patronales-syndicales, d'autre part, s'influencent réciproquement.

On a découvert, tel que prévu, que la syndicalisation atténue l'opinion du «travail musclé» (c'est-à-dire la notion que les syndicats sont des institutions trop puissantes et qu'il faut freiner leur influence) et renforcent l'idée du «capital musclé» (c'est-à-dire la conception que les syndicats sont essentiels pour contrebalancer le pouvoir des employeurs et améliorer les conditions de travail des salariés). Aussi, les salariés croyant les syndicats trop forts étaient davantage des non-syndiqués et ceux qui, au contraire, exprimaient le sentiment du trop grand pouvoir du capital étaient plus portés à être syndiqués. On observe donc une forte socialisation des membres à cette conception antagoniste des relations du travail.

Le rapport entre l'adhésion syndicale et les gains s'écartait partiellement des modèles traditionnels. En premier lieu, nous avons constaté que les salariés dont les salaires étaient les plus élevés étaient davantage des syndiqués. Alors que l'effet négatif de l'affiliation syndicale sur les salaires peut n'être qu'un cas d'espèce, puisque nous ne connaissons qu'une seule étude faisant état d'ouvriers spécialisés ayant subi une perte de salaire à la suite de leur adhésion syndicale (MacDonald et Evans 1981), on se rend de plus en plus compte que, aux États-Unis (Bernstein 1986; Freeman et Kleiner 1988) et au Canada (Adams et Saul 1988; *Globe and Mail*, 21 octobre 1988; Panitch et Swartz 1987:100), la valeur comparative des salaires conventionnels devient moins marquée qu'elle ne l'était auparavant.

Ces constatations montrent que, dans le microcosme albertain, les syndicats éprouvent des difficultés à satisfaire les désirs de leurs membres en matière de salaires, mais qu'ils entretiennent néanmoins encore de tels espoirs et nourrissent l'idée que les relations professionnelles doivent se fonder sur l'antagonisme. Si nos analyses et notre raisonnement théorique sont justes, un certain nombre de syndicats canadiens risquent de dépérir à cause de leur incapacité à adapter leur philosophie des relations du travail à des circonstances nouvelles. Qu'ils émergent handicapés de ce conflit ou qu'ils reprennent vigueur dépendra de leur aptitude à réévaluer en profondeur leur rôle premier et leurs objectifs.

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