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FAST FACTS

May 15, 2012

The Challenges Facing Labour

Formidable challenges face Canada's labour movement. Meeting these requires organized labour to reclaim its historic role as the progressive voice of all working people, and as an active participant in broader struggles for social justice.

The Challenge

The proportion of working people who are unionized has collapsed in the U.S.A. In 2010, 12% of all U.S. workers and 7% of private sector workers were unionized. These numbers may decline further, because powerful right-wing forces in America have launched a crusade not to weaken, but to obliterate, public sector unions.

In Canada, rates of unionization remain higher than in the U.S.A. (31.2 % overall; 17.4% in the private sector), but anti-union sentiments are rampant. Right-wing governments blame union members for our economic woes, and erode the right to strike. Private sector employers demand concessions and repeatedly resort to lockouts to get them. Unions are scapegoated as outdated institutions whose demands for improved collective agreements and social legislation are an obstacle to the country's betterment. These pressures are intensified by the erosion of manufacturing in Canada, and growing investment by anti-union entities such as the Koch brothers in oil and

resource industries and Target (joining Walmart) in retail trade.

Meanwhile, those orchestrating the attacks on unions grow ever richer, while the incomes of working people decline. Between 1980 and 2009, market incomes (before taxes and transfers) of the top 20 % of income earners in Canada grew by 38.4 %, while incomes of the middle 20 % fell by 0.3 %, and incomes of the bottom 20 % fell by 11.4 %. At the same time the tax revenues needed to support the public goods that enrich working people's lives have been eroding: in the 1960s people's federal taxes were 25 % of corporate profits; in 2010-2011 they were 16.6 % of corporate profits. These data make clear where the *real* economic problem lies. They are the direct result of the neoliberal strategy imposed upon us over the past 30 years.

We Need a Different Frame

Given these economic realities, it is important to re-frame unions in a more accurate light: as leaders in efforts to build a better world for Canadians. It was trade unions and the labour movement that joined with progressive popular groups to fight for and win union and collective bargaining rights for workers, old age pensions, unemployment insurance, Medicare, the Canada Pension Plan, programs to protect the poor, decent



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minimum wages and employment standards, libraries, expanded access to education at all levels, workers' compensation and workplace health and safety legislation, and the housing and infrastructure required to build decent communities for working people and their families. Not only does the union advantage produce higher wages and improved benefits for union members, but also unions bring the rule of law to the workplace, placing limits on the arbitrary power of owners and managers—thus enriching democracy and our individual and collective human rights.

These are enormous achievements from which all Canadians benefit.

We need to be relentless in saying these things.

What is to be Done?

It is equally important for unions to act, as they have done historically, to assert their role as key players in struggles for social change, in the workplace and broader society.

In the present circumstances, these struggles must begin with defending past gains and making new ones in unions' direct relations with employers. Because labour policy has such an important effect on workplace struggles, unions need to mobilize workers to oppose actions by governments that weaken unions, and support campaigns for legislative changes that would strengthen union rights, on the grounds that improved union rights accrue to the benefit of almost all Canadians.

It is vital also that the labour movement intensify efforts to organize the unorganized. Almost all Canadian have benefited when organizing drives have brought industrial and public sector workers into the union fold. We would all benefit if the vast numbers of precarious workers in retail trade, accommodation and food services, and other industries dependent on cheap labour were to be unionized. At the same time, of course, it is important that unions maintain quality services for members as a means of fending off

challenges and raids from organizations promoting acceptance of employer demands.

As if these many challenges were not enough, unions must also expand their presence in broader struggles for social justice. This includes struggles to defeat poverty, to ensure quality housing and childcare for all, to establish a national Aboriginal strategy, and to build a productive economy. Such a presence will strengthen the campaigns for social justice and help to revitalize the labour movement.

These things, it goes without saying, are easier said than done. They require resources, skilled and dedicated organizers, and the political will and courage to act. But there are tens of thousands of young and not-so-young people eager to build a better world. They can be brought into this effort by making unions exciting places to work—places where real change happens, where bright and energetic people use their skills to take this country back from the right-wing ideologues that are destroying it.

Conclusion

To some this may sound naïve, or clichéd. It may seem to be a hollow and ritualistic call to arms, long since outdated, part of the “old thinking.”

But the idea that this is “old thinking” is simply more evidence of the success of right-wing “think tanks” and the Conservative Party and their supporters, in promoting their socially destructive ideas.

The truth is, we need to fight back. But not just that. We need to set out a vision of a better, more just world, and fight for it. Unions—as has been the case historically—have a central role to play in our doing so. To think otherwise, given the relentlessness with which the Right is pushing their regressive vision, is naïve.

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