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FAST FACTS

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The Labour Movement in Manitoba: The Struggle Continues

Concerns have been raised recently about the declining fortunes of trade unions and the labour movement in the hostile climate created by neoliberalism in Canada. In a Winnipeg Free Press article (Strategy for unions to get up off their knees, August 30, 2008), John Conway argues that with declining membership and an ebb in worker militancy, the labour movement is in retreat.

While some of the concerns raised by Conway are valid, his story is incomplete. It obscures some positive developments, as shown by recent experience in Manitoba.

Declining Unionization Rates

Unionization rates declined significantly between 1981 and 1998: for Canada as a whole, from 37.6% to 30.7%. This was attributable to a serious economic slump in the early 1980s that drove the unemployment rate into double digits, followed by stagnation and another serious slump in the early 1990s. The declines were particularly large in New Brunswick, PEI, Quebec and British Columbia, where the rates fell by 13.2, 11.7, 8.5 and 8.5 points, respectively. Manitoba and Saskatchewan fared better, with declines of 3.0 and 4.3 points.

Since 1998, the decline has slowed for the country as a whole, and in most provinces. For Canada, the rate in 2007 was down a further

point to 29.7%. In most provinces, the change in rates was less than one point. The exceptions on the negative side were British Columbia (3.8), Newfoundland (3.1), and Ontario (1.2); and on the positive side, Prince Edward Island (3.2) and Manitoba (1.0).

Over the entire period 1981 to 2007, the unionization rate for Canada declined by 21%. All provinces experienced declines, ranging from 31.9% in New Brunswick to 5.3% in Manitoba.

In brief, the precipitous decline in unionization rates since the 1980s is primarily a result of unfavourable economic conditions. But also, in those cases where unions have mounted major efforts at organizing, they have been beaten back by hostile employers and governments. Wal-Mart is an obvious example.

Reduced Combativeness

There has also been a reduction in overt conflict in industrial relations over the past 30 years. Statistics Canada reports that the frequency of strikes (and lockouts), person-days lost, and days lost per 1000 paid workers all declined through the 1980s, 1990s and through 2005. A surge of strikes in 2005 caused concern amongst those who interpret such increases as signaling deterioration in industrial relations. But the surge proved to be short lived and declined again in 2006 and 2007.



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These developments are reflected in the trend in days lost per thousands paid workers: 1980s, 541; 1990s, 233; early 2000s, 203; 2005, 301; 2006, 58; and 2007, 127. Since the early 1980s, Manitoba has been near the bottom of the league table when it comes to industrial conflict. This pattern has continued in Manitoba in recent years with days lost per 1000 paid workers at 26 in 2006 and 12 in 2007.

But Unions Make and Defend Gains

The point that Conway overlooks is that organized labour directs considerable effort into trying to influence governments' agendas. These efforts take two forms.

First, virtually all of the programs Conway credits to the labour movement - Medicare, unemployment insurance, health and safety regulation and enforcement, the minimum wage, etc. - have been under attack from those intent on curtailing the size of the public sector and deregulating the labour market. The labour movement has been at the forefront of efforts to prevent the degradation of such programs.

Second, the labour movement seeks to expand and enrich existing programs and to add new ones that will improve the lives of working people. The efforts of the labour movement in Manitoba - the Manitoba Federation of Labour, the Brandon and District Labour Council and other labour councils, most mainstream trade unions, and thousands of labour activists - have resulted in important reforms that benefit all workers:

- The designation of the third Monday in February as a general holiday – Louis Riel Day;
- Regular increases in the minimum wage to the current level of \$8.50.
- Improvements in employment standards legislation (the first time in 30 years) that took effect April 30, 2007;
- The extension of minimum wage and employment standards legislation to paid workers in

agriculture effective June 1, 2008, and subsequently, a commitment to bring these same workers under Workers Compensation legislation; and

- The establishment of new minimum wage levels for construction workers (the first time in 15 or more years), as well as the introduction of a single, province-wide wage scale for all industrial, commercial and institutional projects to replace the existing four-tier structure (which is based on geographical locations).

In the months ahead we will continue to defend and press for improvements to established programs such as Medicare, Child Care, and Employment Insurance. We will also be campaigning for measures to end avoidable deaths and injuries in workplaces; establishment of a coherent strategy to eliminate poverty; increased job and educational and training opportunities for aboriginal youth and adults; further changes to employment standards legislation to address the situation of part-time and casual workers (for example, the pro-rating of benefits); and changes to the Labour Relations Act to eliminate the provisions of the act that undermine organizing campaigns in retail trade, finance and service industries.

Yes, times are difficult for unions, as Conway argues. But it is important to recognize that gains have been made by the Manitoba labour movement in recent years, and they are due in large measure to our having a NDP government with roots in the labour movement. It follows that the labour movement must continue to press for reforms that benefit working people, and also mobilize trade union members to support and defend the gains we make with a social democratic government.

Jan Chaboyer, President, Brandon and District Labour Council; Errol Black, CCPA – Manitoba Board Member and co-author with Jim Silver of Building A Better World (2nd edition), Fernwood Press, 2008.



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