

FROM DEMONIZED TO ORGANIZED

BUILDING THE NEW UNION MOVEMENT

NORA LORETO



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INTRODUCTION

I grew up in a small town, almost a suburb of Toronto but not quite, where my classmates were solidly working class. Some students had parents with good union jobs at the nearby Chrysler plant in Brampton. Many parents were bookkeepers. Some worked for Nortel and others worked at the grocery or department stores that helped support the town. Two of us had teachers for parents.

By Grade 7, my classmates and I had experienced what it was like to be on strike: our teachers kindly gave us a two-week November break in 1997 to protest the concession contracts that were being offered by the government of Mike Harris.

The jobs our parents had didn't always feel reliable; there were strikes and lockouts, plant closures and mergers that all took their toll on the families of my classmates. But in retrospect, now that we've grown up and gone our separate ways, I wonder how many of us landed in jobs as stable as the ones our parents had.

Of course, some have: at least four of the 18 who graduated with me from Grade 8 have found jobs in the public sector; two full-time. Others have full-time jobs too, the permanence of which I can only guess. But for the majority of us, the prospect of long-term employment stability is doubtful.

This is not just the experience of a bunch of kids from Georgetown, Ontario. It's a widespread, new reality that's the result of a deliberate

attack on workers and their families. These attacks are in the process of creating the greatest crisis in modern Canadian society. Terrible, short-term and destructive economic, social and political policies threaten the livelihoods of the majority of all Canadians, especially the young.

These policies were first called neoliberal. Now, they come under the frame of austerity. Both policy regimes seek to undermine every social service available to Canadians, gut the middle-class, destroy the environment, create larger profits for the rich, and deepen Canada's economic divide.

Unfortunately, much of the mainstream press examines this phenomenon through a narrow lens. Rather than provide an analysis of how young people are impacted by these policies, the media instead portrays young Canadians as either too indebted to be enfranchised, too unemployed to be engaged or simply too entitled and not willing to put in the work that's required to "get ahead" in the current economy. These portrayals breed resentment among workers in my generation and cynicism among workers in my parents' generation: neither sentiment is healthy and neither sentiment will lead to positive action.

Through nearly a decade of organizing students with the Canadian Federation of Students, the biggest obstacle I encountered in fighting against these destructive economic policies is how they have divided us, conquered many of our movements, and damaged our sense of community. This has had the hardest impact on young people, for whom the traditional notion of community has been obliterated.

The natural result of neoliberalism, the destruction of community, has nearly been realized. The results can be seen in public policies that have been imposed on citizens across Canada including high tuition fees, increasingly privatized health services, cuts to EI and other social service benefits and even an attack on our personal freedom when we protest these cuts. At the same time, environmental destruction in order to generate record-high profits is causing irreparable harm to water, soil and air, and creating devastating sickness and disease. Together, the solutions to the problems created by these policies seem impossible to imagine.

For some, it's easier to tune out and simply try to survive.

In Canada, there exists a clear lack of social solidarity that should accompany living in any society and this has isolated young people like never before. The results of neoliberal policies have left us debt-laden, struggling to find work that pays, scraping by to start or feed our families and too occupied with our own lives to look at the lives of the people around us.

These attacks play out on two fields: at home and at work. At work, precarious, low-paid and no-benefits jobs deepen the pressures already piled high. Fortunately, the labour movement remains one of the strongest forces in Canada to fight against these attacks. As the attacks accelerate, the labour movement's role in protecting the average person will become even more important.

It's no secret that unionized workers have found themselves under siege. The result in some cases has been to accept concession contracts where new workers (or younger workers) will have to work with fewer benefits and less pay. For non-unionized workers, many see the stability offered by a union and choose to resent that stability rather than fight for a union of their own. In both cases, the image of the union is demonized and damaged.

If Canadians are going to mount a national, well-resourced and coordinated campaign to restore our public services and defend our democracy we need an active and united labour movement. My goal is to cut through right-wing rhetoric and explain the roles that unions play and should play in Canadian society to combat the cynicism that is bred when workers of all types are divided. I hope to provide arguments for activists within the movements working to help ensure that unions can once again be a powerful balance to our corporate-controlled governments.

This book is an attempt to explain unionization to my generation; to my friends who distrust established civil society organizations as much as they distrust government; to my unemployed friends who are living from contract to contract and who would kill for a stable, unionized job;

for the workers who have never had the benefit of being represented when facing injustice at work; for the workers who would rather not think of what would happen if they were injured on the job.

It's a reminder to unionized folks that many of the truths that they take for granted are not obvious to others and that the labour movement must change how it reaches out to its members, its communities and to non-unionized workers if it hopes to grow. It's a call to action for activists to share their stories, debunk much of the right-wing, anti-union rhetoric that exists, re-engage in their communities, and build a movement that can defeat neoliberal policies and their political proponents.

Despite disengagement from electoral politics, many young Canadians are refusing to check out entirely. In the aftermath of the most recent global financial crisis, young Canadians have demonstrated that they aren't an apathetic lot.

Inspired by the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011, occupations were established in every major Canadian city. In one case, students at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario turned their occupation into an indoor space for students to gather, talk about politics or just do homework, which lasted until April 2012, long after most Occupy encampments had dissolved.

At the same time, Québec students went on long-standing and impressive student strikes to defend post-secondary education from price increases. During the so-called Maple Spring, hundreds of thousands of people went to the streets, jurists stood up to oppose oppressive laws and tactics were borrowed from Latin America that brought families out into the streets banging pots and pans with students to demand that tuition fees not be increased.

At the end of 2012, Idle No More was sparked in communities across Canada and many people, both younger and older, found their voice and united against Canadian colonial policies, environmental deregulation, and the right-wing agenda of the Harper government.

The sum total of the mess created by neoliberalism has generated new ways of organizing, and a new reality that labour activists must contend with when building their campaigns. It's both a challenge and a transformative opportunity.

The labour movement is the only force that is large enough, regionally diverse and well enough resourced to lead the fight against policies that place profits ahead of people. But most of the language and strategies of the labour movement that have worked in the past no longer convince younger Canadians. Massive changes are required in how the labour establishment frames and addresses its roles and responsibilities, especially when it comes to young people.

Labour activists often find themselves caught between two assumptions: either that their audience knows very well the benefits of their union, how it works and what it does, or that their audience knows nothing about this. In chapters 1 through 4, I start with the latter assumption, offer a basic and broad overview, and incorporate current examples of how unions work, where workers have benefitted from their membership, and the responsibility that workers and labour leaders have to ensure a true, grassroots engagement of the membership.

Because the labour movement does not exist within a vacuum, it's impossible to talk about unions or the labour movement without examining the roles that they play in broader society. In chapter 5, I argue that unions must be the principal defenders of democracy and have a responsibility to hold majority governments to account. Through neoliberal policies like deregulation and privatization, Canadian society has been deeply changed and attacks against workers and citizens in general have accelerated. This is covered in chapters 6 and 7.

Chapters 8 and 9 attempt to debunk the right-wing myth that governments simply cannot afford to pay for high quality public services or for the salaries of the workers who carry out this work. Through an examination of the constraints that have been imposed on our system of taxation, the money lost through off-shore tax shelters and billions of dollars lost in spending scandals, it becomes clear

that “the money just isn’t there” argument is rarely true. Despite this, workers are often forced to accept contracts that they would normally reject. The narrative that it is the workers who are greedy, and not the politicians or corporate owners, damages the public image of union members and misleads Canadians about the facts.

Chapter 10 examines how politicians have attacked workers by infringing on their basic freedoms, including the right to a free collective bargaining process. This public policy pile-on has demonized workers who are going through bargaining while stripping them of benefits formerly won and imposing contracts anti-democratically. I link this to broader attacks being waged against Canadians in general: attacks against the right to protest, assemble and criticize government. In an era of austerity, where politicians sacrifice democracy through shadow arguments about economic crises, these attacks have become more brutal, more brazen and possibly, more illegal. An attack waged against one group in society is always a practice exercise in preparation to use similar tactics elsewhere. Labour activists must publicly connect the dots for those who might not immediately see the connections between bargaining interference, heavy police presence or oppressive laws. As austerity policies continue to be imposed on Canadians, and as social movements seek new ways to protest, unions must continue to be on the front lines defending democracy against these attacks.

The most important question that this book poses is “what is to be done?” a question to which I provide an incomplete answer. While the problems may be obvious, or at least debatable, the solutions remain complex and elusive. Chapter 11 explores how workers are finding new ways to organize, especially in industries that have traditionally had fewer unionized workers, and suggests new roles that established, national unions can consider in order to reengage with communities and help reinvigorate their base.

For anyone who grew up in the 1980s or later, the pull to support the individualistic rhetoric spouted by right-wing politicians can be very strong. Indeed, when asked to absorb social cuts, to do more with less than our parents had or to take on massive amounts of debt and consider it as an “investment,” it’s impossible to blame young people

for being cynical and bitter for the world we are inheriting from an older generation. And with no uniting, community-based movement, it's easy enough to live a cloistered existence in the suburbs and dedicate all your time working to pay rent or a mortgage. The current economic realities of Canada have deeply sewn political and social disenfranchisement.

But realities can shift. Realities can be changed by social movements that reject the status quo and demand, both through their actions and their rhetoric, a better world than what has been left to us. For the kids I grew up with, and for the kids I'm about to have, we must aim higher than the inadequate and unsustainable status quo. We really have no other choice.

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~ From the Introduction



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