

Issues in the Canadian Union Movement

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It would be no exaggeration to say that the union movement throughout the capitalist world is passing through a period of stress. Recession in the international economy, shifts in work and employment based on new technology, and conflict within the unions over nationalism, democracy and political strategy have affected the movement in every country. In this situation there is something to be learnt from the ways in which unions and workers have confronted their difficulties in other parts of the world. Continental European and north American conditions are largely unknown but still relevant to South African unions, as was remarked in the *Labour Bulletin* in 1976. In this article, some of the issues which have concerned the Canadian union movement will be examined. The issues include nationalism, local bargaining, certification (related to registration), the right to strike and picket, and many more. While the context in which these issues have appeared is clearly different from that in South Africa, the similarities will immediately be noted by those involved in the independent union movement in South Africa.

Unions in Canada

Canada is usually perceived as an 'affluent country', and it is of course a wealthier society than South Africa. The achievement of higher wages and the rights of workers is the product of a long period of worker organisation, which has included some tremendous victories and some bloody defeats. Since the late nineteenth century, the Canadian economy, originally the product of British colonialism, has increasingly come under American domination. Canada has the highest level of foreign control of any relatively industrialised country — foreign, mainly American, interests own well over half of Canadian industry, while in some sectors the proportion of foreign control rises to 90 per cent. Exactly how Canada has come to be relatively wealthy while so dependent is a matter which will not be discussed here. But the context of extensive foreign control, and an economy highly dependent on primary production and export of mine, forest and farm products is clearly important to understanding the development of the union movement.

The first unions in Canada were essentially craft unions, organising skilled workers to the exclusion of others. Owing to the proximity of the United States, there were organisational overlaps from the first, though the large number of British immigrants meant that the British traditions of unionism also played a role. The American Federation of Labour, the Knights of Labour and other organisa-

tions originating among skilled American craft workers were thus among the first unions in Canada. At the same time, a militant tradition very quickly emerged in Canada, particularly in two areas: in the unions which set out to organise on an industrial basis, and among workers in the extractive industries where conditions were very harsh. Thus the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) flourished for a time in western Canada; and the state, in the form of the Canadian federal government, moved harshly to crush worker militance. The newly-formed Canadian army saw its first actions against striking coal miners in Nova Scotia and on Vancouver Island between 1909 and 1913. The best-known expression of the militant tradition was the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919, when the city of Winnipeg was brought to a standstill for a month, though the strike ended in the defeat and decline of the organisation (One Big Union) involved. But the militant tradition survived such defeats and still plays a role in many unions, as will be revealed below.

At the same time the incorporation of much of the working class into the ideology of north American capitalism needs to be acknowledged, and explained. Part of the explanation lies in the history of the union movement during the depression of the thirties, the second world war, and the conditions of the late forties and early fifties. The depression put over a quarter of working people out of work in the thirties. The memory of unemployment and poverty strengthened the militant tradition of the industrial unions as large numbers found new jobs in the economic expansion of the second world war. In the craft unions, where the membership had to a large extent retained their jobs during the thirties, the effect of the period was increasing conservatism, reflected in the contrast between the conservative Trades and Labour Congress (TLC) and the break-away Canadian Congress of Labour (CCL), in which the industrial unions predominated.

During the war the struggle for control of the industrial unions began in earnest. Much of the organising of these unions in the thirties (and forties) was undertaken by the people with connections in the communist party, and the left either influenced or controlled the leadership of many industrial unions. But communist leadership suffered a tremendous setback in credibility by first opposing the war with Germany (after the Hitler-Stalin pact) and then vigourously supporting it (after the invasion of Russia) - support which even extended to no-strike pledges. After the war the policy of the Soviet Union in eastern Europe (at least as portrayed by the north American media) fueled fresh doubts about leaders who appeared to follow an external agenda rather than working for union members. Under these conditions, the left was defeated in most Canadian unions in the forties and fifties, and those unions which maintained left leadership (like the United Fishermen and Allied Workers Union) found themselves excluded from central labour organisations. Employers and the state played a red-baiting and harassing role as in the United States at the same time.

Two further factors encouraged conservatism. The boom conditions of the late forties and early fifties provided good organising times for the craft unions — es-

pecially in the construction trades — and their strength increased, while the industrial unions were torn by internal leadership struggles. Simultaneously the mass organising of both types of union provided a base for the bureaucratisation of union leadership, with full-time, highly-paid business agents assuming ever more power in the running of the unions. Workers were prepared to trade off control of their unions for high wages and complicated benefits. Under these conditions the militance of earlier years was dissipated and the non-communist party left squeezed into a corner. In Canada it was not until the seventies that either found room for resurgence.

Nationalism and the central labour organisations

Throughout the history of Canadian unions, nationalism has exercised a sizable influence on organising. The major division on nationalist grounds in Canada is that between Quebec, where the overwhelming majority of population are French-speaking, and the rest of the country, in which the population is generally dominated to an even greater extent by English speakers. Workers in Quebec are largely, though not entirely, organised in the Confederation des syndicats nationaux (CSN) and the Corporation des enseignants du Québec (CEQ). While Quebec nationalism is concerned with the domination of Quebec by the Canadian federal government and thus with the dominance of English Canada, English Canadian nationalism is concerned with the domination of the Canadian economy and culture by the United States. Especially since the late sixties, the latter nationalism has been increasingly vociferous. To understand the context of this nationalism, it is necessary to know that many Canadian workers are members of American-based unions — the so-called international unions. These are unions which originated in the US and expanded their organising into Canada. Many of the internationals are affiliates, there has been an ongoing struggle for Canadian control. Some new and breakaway organisations are affiliated to the Confederation of Canadian Unions (CCU), part of the rationale for which is an explicit Canadian nationalism.

The union congresses of federations (often called 'centrals' in Canada) have a long history. The CLC was formed in 1956 by the merger of the Trades Labour Congress (TLC) and Canadian Congress of Labour (CCL). The CLC is the largest labour central in Canada, with a membership in its affiliates of about two million. The CCU is far smaller, with about 40,000 members. Perhaps 15% of all organised workers are in unaffiliated unions, while overall about one third of Canadian workers are union members.

The explicit links between the CLC and the social democratic party is called the NDP (New Democratic Party) point to one of the significant differences between Canada and the US, for in the latter country no social democratic movement able to challenge the established parties has emerged. The union-party connection has been responsible for the ability of the NDP to win elections in three of the ten Canadian provinces in the past ten years. At the same time the contradiction

between the political influence of the CLC in Canada, and the influence of American-based unions in the CLC itself, is apparent.

The issue of the so-called 'international' unions in Canada is far from resolved at this point. The divisions, and raids, between international and Canadian unions have a long history. Perhaps the most celebrated battle for control of a group of workers was that carried on by the Seafarers International Union (SIU) against the Canadian Seamens Union in the 1940s and against a group of other unions in the 1960s. Using violence, collusion with employers and the financial power of the AFL-CIO, the SIU succeeded in replacing all the Canadian unions (which had been far more militant and successful in improving the conditions of Canadian workers than the SIU, especially on the Great Lakes steamers). Having been suspended for these activities, the SIU even succeeded in being readmitted to the CLC in 1966.

Some of the international unions have sought to supplant not only Canadian unions, but also other originally 'international' unions. Thus the United Steelworkers of America (USWA) supplanted the more militant Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers Union at almost every Canadian location by tactics of raiding, intimidation and red-baiting — again, with backing from the AFL-CIO. This background is important to understanding the tension and acrimony surrounding the current fight between the CLC and the American-based building trades unions, which have been expelled from the CLC for withholding dues from the Canadian central organisation. At the behest of the American head offices of these unions, and again with AFL-CIO support, the Canadian districts of the construction trades unions have set up a rival union congress in Canada. The battle over the affiliation of the 300,000 Canadian members of the construction unions will probably be similar to that between the craft unions and the new industrial unions in the thirties.

In each of these situations, the role of the AFL-CIO has been to promote conservatism and bureaucracy within the unions in Canada, and disunity between the unions. This is not to say that the membership of the international unions has been entirely passive, and (as described in the section on strikes below) some international unions in Canada have been involved in progressive strikes and support for other unions on strike. Nevertheless, the impression of undemocratic conservatism made by some international unions within the CLC, and by the AFL-CIO's role in the Canadian context, is a reality.

Nationalism and democracy

Issues of nationalism and democracy are interwoven in many of the struggles within the Canadian union movement — whether raiding, breakaways or arguments at CLC conventions. On the one hand are the American-based unions, with their generally highly bureaucratic structures and lack of democracy, frequently controlled from head offices in the US. On the other hand are organisations based in Canada, appealing to the nationalist sympathies of Canadian workers, and generally rather more democratic than the the American-based internationals.

But the separation is not as simple as this. The unions which predominate in the CLC are a mixture of international and Canadian unions, some much more democratic than others. What is certain is that undemocratic control exercised by bureaucratic leadership, often identifiably American-based, has led to the strengthening of the nationalist movement in Canadian unions.

The most obvious representative of the democratic nationalist union movement is undoubtedly the Confederation of Canadian Unions (CCU). Although it is still very small by comparison with the CLC, the CCU's role in acting as a catalyst in the movement for Canadian autonomy in the locals (branches) of international unions and, though less so, in the attempt to democratise and radicalise the CLC had been recognised even by its strongest opponents. The CCU is composed to a considerable extent of members of breakaways from the international unions, such as the 1800 members of the Canadian Association of Smelter and Allied Workers (CASWA) at Kitimat, British Columbia, who after a long struggle eventually succeeded in divorcing themselves from the United Steelworkers of America in 1972.

The coincidence of the nationalist and democratic issues also affects the independent unions, which represent 15% of organised Canadian workers. Examples of the independents vary from the American-based and undemocratic Teamsters to the Canadian based and rather more typical Hospital Employees Union. Among many members of the independent unions the question of affiliation to the CLC or an alternative labour central is quite divisive. For example, in the case of the Association of University of College Employees (AUCE), a relatively small (2500 member) union in British Columbia, the proposal to seek affiliation with the CLC led to a long debate in the union. Since the CLC's ruling was that AUCE could not affiliate as a unit but would have to merge with another affiliated union to accomplish entry into the CLC, the debate tended to centre around the issue of whether the democratic practices of AUCE could be maintained in another union, or whether affiliation instead with the alternative central, the CCU might not strengthen AUCE's democracy. As a result the proponents of CLC affiliation ended up being labelled 'undemocratic', and the proponents of continued independence or CCU affiliation became 'ultra-democratic' or 'nationalist flag-wavers', or both. This struggle (which resulted in stalemate) has echoes elsewhere in the Canadian union movement as the issues of nationalism and democracy continue to be interwoven.

Workers' rights and the state

The struggle for recognition by the state of the rights of workers in Canada has a long history and continues today. Rights have been established in three areas: the regulation of conditions of work and of employment, the recognition of the right to organise and the establishment of the right to strike and picket. Here the latter two subjects will be discussed.

The right of workers to organise in unions was first established by law during the thirties in most parts of Canada. Today, the right to organise is contained in

the labour relations legislation of all the provinces and of the federal government. An example is found in sections 2 and 3 of the British Columbia Labour Code:**

s.2(1) Every employee is free to be a member of a trade union and to participate in its lawful activities.

Section 3 further provides that no employer may interfere with the formation or administration of a union, discharge or discipline an employee for being a member or official of a trade union, impose conditions of employment which restrain employees from exercising their rights or intimidate employees with respect to these rights. The limits of these legal guarantees are clearly evident in sections 3(2)(g) and (h) which allow employers to 'communicate a statement of fact or opinion ... with respect to the employer's business' to employees and to make changes in the conduct of that business which are 'reasonably necessary'. Both of these provisions obviously allow employers to exert pressure on workers, and complaints against employers in this connection can lead to long and expensive legal proceedings.

Another limit on the right to organise is imposed through the definition of 'employee'. In most parts of Canada, domestic and farm workers are excluded from one or other aspect of labour standards or labour relations legislation, and other sectors (teachers for example) are often similarly excluded. One major current struggle is thus the attempt to win legal rights for domestic and farm workers. The Canadian Farmworkers Union (CFU) is an example of an organisation involved in this area; many of its members are immigrants, frequently non-English speaking and often subject to the racism which prevails in Canada as much as in most western countries. Despite continual promises, provincial governments have yet to extend basic legislation to cover domestic and farm workers. As long as these categories of workers are without the same protection as other workers, they remain subject to employer intimidation, which in turn restricts the effective right to organise. The *legal* right to organise is never absolute.

As is the case in most parts of the world, strikes in Canada are surrounded by legal questions. First, only a certified union may legally strike (the certification issue will be discussed below). There are limits on the extent to which pickets may be placed at the struck work location, and even more so on the use of secondary pickets — that is, picketing the premises of employers not immediately involved in a strike. The courts are often ready to grant injunctions limiting strike or picket rights; and the state occasionally legislates against strikes of specific types (as in 'essential services' legislation) or even against specific strikes (as in the 1975 lumber industry strike in British Columbia, or the 1978 postal workers strike: both groups found their right to strike suspended by law).

** In this article most illustrations are drawn from British Columbia, which like the other nine provinces has its own particular labour legislation, union history and current major issues.

Direct interventions by police against strikers are perhaps less frequent than in some parts of the world, but happen nevertheless. An 'illegal' strike in Kitimat was violently ended by police in 1976. In 1979, a strike by non-academic workers at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver ended in the arrest of 18 people on the picket line and a subsequent series of trials which took a year to complete. Both were instances in which picket lines were destroyed by police action and the strikes concerned subsequently lost. The right to picket is an integral part of the right to strike which has to be maintained in Canada as much as anywhere else.

The legal process: certification and arbitration.

As remarked above, there is no legal strike in Canada unless that strike is carried out by a certified union. In order to understand the nature of the certification process, it is necessary to place it in the context of the legal framework which surrounds unions in Canada. Just as in South Africa the registration process is intended to carry its own rewards for registered unions, so in Canada the certification process is designed to give access to the protection of labour relations laws. In order to illustrate this process the example of the British Columbia Labour Code will be used.

Certification refers to the process whereby a union obtains legal recognition as the representative of a specific group of workers. One union can therefore have many different certifications covering different types of workers at different sites. When organising begins, organisers must seek to obtain the signatures of at least 45% of the workers whom the union wishes to represent. Once that mark is reached, the union may apply to the Labour Relations Board (LRB) for certification with respect to these workers. The LRB has the power to decide whether or not the workers make up an 'appropriate bargaining unit'. For example, if an application is made to represent manual workers at one place of work, but not the clerical workers at the same place, the LRB might rule that the clerical workers must be included, or that some employees (usually supervisory workers) be excluded. On the determination that the unit is appropriate and that 45% or more workers have signed cards, the LRB orders a representation vote. The vote is conducted by officials of the Ministry of Labour. On a majority of votes being cast for the union, the LRB certifies the union. The LRB can also decertify a union if it loses majority support. This sometimes happens when one union raids another and succeeds in winning a new representation vote.

Certification carries with it the responsibility and the sole authority to bargain on behalf of the workers in the unit. In the period between an application for certification and the certification vote, conditions of employment are frozen by the Labour Code, and the freeze stays in effect until four months after the certification of the union. After either party — employer or union — has given notice to commence collective bargaining, the Code lays down that bargaining 'in good faith' must commence within 10 days. Collective bargaining usually leads to a comprehensive collective agreement including provisions on wages, benefits, hir-

ing, dismissal and various other conditions of work. Such an agreement remains in force for periods usually of one to three years. In addition a grievance procedure is almost always included, and in terms of the code the agreement must make provision for the settlement of disputes by arbitration. Since under the code strikes and lockouts are illegal during the term of the collective agreement, the arbitration system provides the main means of settling major disputes between employer and union.

In view of the number of decisions with which the LRB and arbitrators are charged in this labour relations system, the extent to which legal argument and interpretation of the law, and of collective agreements, plays a role, is considerable. This means that much of the representation of workers is handled not by workers themselves, or even by their elected or hired agents and representatives, but by lawyers. The effects of the system are perhaps best illustrated by arbitration.

Under the Labour Code, grievances not resolved through grievance procedures set up between union and management go to arbitration, and as long as a collective agreement is in force cannot be settled by strikes. One important effect of this structure is that strikes become restricted to actions undertaken to gain improvements through collective bargaining after the expiry of existing agreements. Workers do not experience the strike as a collective weapon always available with which to force the resolution of a particular grievance, such as unfair dismissal of union members. Another effect of the system is that union members come to depend on lawyers to represent them at complex arbitration and LRB hearings in which the outcome frequently depends more on interpretation of law and collective agreements than on the union's strength. Often the first few days of lengthy and expensive arbitration proceedings will be taken up by argument over whether or not the issue is arbitrable at all. And much of the subsequent hearing around the specific case, if it takes place at all, likewise depends on legal technicalities which seldom provide the stuff of vigorous organising campaigns.

The LRB itself hears cases arising out of alleged breaches of the Labour Code; unfair labour practices such as failure to bargain in good faith, dismissal of union members, use of professional strikebreakers. This function of the LRB provides unions with a much cheaper means of obtaining legal redress than either arbitration or the courts, since hearings before the LRB are free, while unions share with management the costs of jointly-appointed arbitrators (often running into hundreds of dollars a day). But again, hearings before the LRB involve unions in the legal process to a degree which makes it difficult for ordinary workers to exercise control over the process. The legal system provides management with a means of individualising grievances, making it hard for unions to treat grievances as collective issues. The best means of avoiding the pitfalls of this legal apparatus is through the kind of strong membership and shop steward system which ensures that most grievances can be settled through grievance procedures without going to arbitration.

The Labour Code does not require such potentially dangerous things as ap-

proval of union constitutions as South Africa law seeks to do, but it does set down procedures which have the effect of interfering in the internal working of unions. In particular, a union cannot legally call a strike without obtaining 50% support in a compulsory strike vote, in which not only union members but anyone in the bargaining unit affected may vote. This provision interferes with the ability of union members to decide democratically for themselves whether or not to strike, in places of work where some workers are not union members.

The legal framework under the Labour Code allows unions to become increasingly involved in expensive and technical legal matters, which encourages the concentration of decision making power in the hands of a few individuals within the union (and lawyers outside the union). At the same time the Labour Code contains protections for unions and for workers which have proved sufficiently powerful incentives to draw unions into the system despite the significant limitations placed on them, such as the loss of the right to strike in settlement of grievances. The state in Canada has been able to draw unions into compromises over democracy, the right to strike and other issues. Within this system, unions have frequently become bureaucratized institutions. These results are apparent despite (or even because of) the fact that Canadian labour law provides protection to workers, outlaws professional scabs and legalises (some) picketing.

Some major Canadian strikes of recent years

While the legal right to strike is essentially restricted to the achievement of collective bargaining goals, this does not mean that strikes are a rare occurrence in Canada. In recent years, much to the distress of employer organisations, the number of days lost per worker through strike action in Canada has exceeded the figure for Britain and come close to that for Italy. In this section of the article, some of the major strikes of the past decade will be discussed in order to illustrate the issues which workers have sometimes been prepared to lose months of wages to win.

In Canada, a resurgence of militancy seems to have begun in the early seventies with actions by civil servants, teachers, non-medical hospital workers, nurses and postal workers. For example, since 1970 there have been close to 40 strikes by the Canadian Union of Postal Workers and the Letter Carriers Union of Canada (CUPW and LCUC). The issues have included pay, job security and technological change. Over a long period the postal workers have opposed the introduction, or at least the method of introduction, of automated sorting machinery. Post Office management decided to pay sorting machine operators 50 cents an hour less than manual sorters, and much strike action (often undertaken strictly 'illegally', during the term of an agreement) has focussed around this issue. Following national postal strikes in 1974 and 1976, the CUPW workers obtained improved terms regarding job classification and pay, but the basic issues continued to rankle, leading to the 1978 postal strike, which was terminated when the federal government passed a law making the strike illegal. For encouraging members to defy the

law, several executive members of the union went to jail for varying terms. In the 1981 postal strike, one of the main demands was for 18 weeks paid maternity leave, a demand which the postal workers managed to win, much to the horror of other employers who were concerned at the effects this victory would have on women workers generally — of whom more will be said below.

Some industrial unions also adopted more militant strategies in the seventies. The United Steelworkers of America (USWA) represents thousands of workers in the steel, mining and smelting industries in Canada. In 1974, the USWA local at Trail, British Columbia, held out for three months and won much increased wages, retirement at 55, and other improved conditions. In 1979 the particularly militant local of the same union at Sudbury, Ontario, stayed on strike for even longer, with massive community support, for improvement in wages and working conditions — but more particularly for better job security, which is crucial for many Canadian workers since so much Canadian industry is tied to the fluctuations of the American market in lumber (wood), mineral products, etc. There were, likewise, extensive strikes during the seventies in the lumber industry in all parts of Canada, by unions such as the International Woodworkers of America (IWA) and the Canadian Paperworkers Union (CPU).

Rapid inflation and government wage controls brought a number of strikes from the mid-seventies on. In 1976, a one-day national stay-away brought out about a million workers on the 14th of October, demonstrating the ability of the organised labour movement in Canada to mobilise its strength. The object was to demonstrate against the national wage controls — which were removed a few months later. Under conditions of rapid inflation, wages have continued to be a central issue in recent strikes. In 1981 public employees bore the brunt of the wage struggle: the federal civil servants in the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) were out for a few weeks, and municipal workers in the Vancouver metropolitan area shut down municipal services for two months.

Not every strike results in victory for the workers. In Ontario, hospital workers represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) organised an illegal strike of about 15000 workers in 1981, mainly prompted by bad wages and the issue of the right to strike. Due to poor coordination of strategy and the foot dragging of the central union organisation, the strike ended in defeat, with the arrest of large numbers of workers and the jailing of several union members.

One of the most interesting strikes of recent years in Canada took place in British Columbia in 1981 when the employees of the Telephone Company (BC Tel) stopped work. This company employs about 11000 people, about 3000 of whom are excluded from the union on the grounds of their 'supervisory' work, which makes it possible for the company to continue operations for a lengthy period even if the 8000 members of the Telecommunications Workers Union (TWU) are on strike. As a result of frustration both at the company's intransigent bargaining position and at the prospect of a long and only partially successful strike, TWU workers occupied the company's premises. Previously the techni-

cians (half the workers) had been running small scale rotating strikes and using flying secondary pickets to disrupt work at some of the company's major customers. The operators and clerical workers, most of whom are women who work with video display equipment under very rigid rules, responded to their frustration by beginning the occupation of offices. Calls to operators were greeted by the phrase 'Good day, union telephone', and buildings were festooned with banners reading 'Under new management'. Confronted by the ten day sit-in, the company came to a settlement certainly more favourable than would have been achieved by a long strike, which would have been undermined by the 3000 'supervisors'. Another factor leading to the success of this strike was the ability of the union to gain the support of many other workers through a 'mini general strike' for a day in a large area of the province.

Another important issue in recent strikes has been local level bargaining. For most of the summer of 1981, the 60,000 workers in the British Columbia lumber, pulp and paper industries were on strike, and one of the major demands of the unions involved (IWA, CPU, PPWC) was the devolution of a larger number of issues from the industry-wide bargaining level to the local level. While there is no statutory industrial council system in Canada as there is in South Africa, there are industries in which industry-wide bargaining has emerged as employers have insisted on bargaining only at, say, the provincial level, thereby removing the issues in negotiations from the environment and often the control of the workers whose conditions are at stake. The Labour Code supports this system, in that employers' organisations can be recognised by the LRB as the sole bargaining authorities from the management side, forcing unions to deal with them unless the militance and strength of the membership is such as to successfully reject the system. The 1981 strike saw more local issues returned to settlement at local level than had been the case for many years.

Organising the unorganised; clerical workers and women

As in most countries, the majority of union members in Canada are men. But in the past decade or more, the most rapid growth in union membership has been among women. This is due to the extent to which clerical and related 'white collar' workers have been organised over this period. To a degree, the very growth of organising in these areas is related to the greatly increased proportion of the workforce in them, which is of course reflected in the increased proportion of the workforce made up by women. Unions have looked to this area of organising as industry has been automated, and as the increased militancy of women has demanded that women be organised at work as well as elsewhere.

The largest growth in union membership among women has taken place in the public sector unions. In particular, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) has grown over a decade and a half to a quarter of a million members, mainly because of its approach to general organising in all areas of public and semi-public employment. In CUPE locals of municipal workers, for example, the

original members were often the 'outside' workers — mainly men — with later extension to office workers, mainly women. CUPE also includes locals of university workers, hospital employees and even student union and trade union employees.

There are strong contrasts between the various unions which have large office worker membership. CUPE is a relatively democratic union in which the locals decide their own policy, bargain with employers directly, and depend on the central organisation for a limited level of services, for which they pay about 40% of their union dues. The British Columbia Government Employees Union, by comparison, is a highly centralised union in which the only autonomy locals (branches) have is their ability to decide on a few specific clauses in collective agreements on their immediate conditions, while the central executive of the union negotiates a master agreement with the employer representatives. Locals have little or no control over their own funds.

Organising of office workers is not restricted to the public sector. Many of the industrial unions have extended their membership to the clerical workers in the companies where they already represent the production workers, and sometimes beyond, as in the case of the United Auto Workers (UAW). There are also unions of 'white collar' workers which have concentrated on non-government workers, such as the Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU). But workers have frequently found that the big international unions seem to be more interested in their dues than in providing services. In one small financial office in Vancouver, workers found that the OPEIU was prepared to agree to retrenchment without even consulting the workers concerned.

Unions like CUPE have made efforts to organise previously neglected 'ghettoes' where women are concentrated, like clerical work. So, too, have smaller independent unions with a strong feminist orientation. British Columbia provides two examples of such 'feminist' unions: the previously mentioned Association of University and College Employees (AUCE) and the Service, Office and Retail Workers Union of Canada (SORWUC). Both unions originated in the Working Women's Association, which began organising women in clerical and service jobs after gaining experience in strike support and public education activities. SORWUC has been involved in attempts to organise workers in previously neglected sectors, such as small offices and restaurants. Small units are notoriously difficult to organise, but very significant, since it is in these sectors that wages and working conditions are often most degrading. At one restaurant in Vancouver, a strike over recognition lasted for a number of YEARS, without a satisfactory outcome.

Perhaps SORWUC's best-known project was the United Bank Workers organising drive. Most workers in Canadian banks are women, and most work in bad conditions at low rates of pay. Organising has always proved difficult, sufficiently so to discourage unions with vastly greater resources than SORWUC. Much of the difficulty is due to the size of the banks and the number of branches. As long as it remained impossible to sign up over 50% of the workers at ALL

branches, it remained impossible to gain recognition from the banks. In 1976, the bank workers branch of SORWUC won a decision from the Canada Labour Relations Board that certification could be granted for one branch at a time, forcing the banks to recognise the union in each branch in which over 50% of workers were signed up. This decision greatly eased the sign-up work, but opened the door to another problem. The banks insisted on bargaining at the branch level, which made it necessary to conclude lengthy and expensive negotiations many times over. As a result SORWUC had to end the organising campaign in the banks, leaving the field to the CLC's Bank Workers Union, which has yet to show any greater ability to organise in this tough sector.

Both AUCE and SORWUC, as unions begun by feminists, have had their successes and failures. The successes include the best wages and working conditions for clerical workers in Canada. Both organisations have managed to set up and maintain themselves for over a decade on the basis of very little funding, and using organising methods that drew on the skills and experience of members themselves. Both have entered into collective bargaining, handled their own cases (often without legal counsel) at Labour Relations Board hearings, won precedent setting decisions and concluded progressive agreements with management without well-paid, full-time organisers or employees other than members elected to temporary positions as organisers and co-ordinators. The contrast with much of the rest of the bureaucratic and centralised labour movement could hardly be more striking, and the reason for it is to be found in the determination of many of the women workers involved not to be dominated by (usually male) bureaucrats in a repetition of the pattern which they confront on the job every day at the hand of management.

Recently, strikes by several unions in Canada have illustrated the extent to which issues originally generated by women have become vital struggles. Reference has been made above to CUPWU's success in winning 18 weeks paid maternity leave. CUPE's strikes in the Vancouver municipalities in 1981 were characterised by the slogan 'equal pay for work of equal value'; the difference from the more usual 'equal pay for equal work' reflects the belated recognition that 'women's work' is usually undervalued. The same issue was focussed in another 1981 strike in Vancouver. At a truck-building plant, the almost exclusively male production workers had traditionally received (in common with many other workplaces) much higher wages than the women who worked longer hours, under tight supervision at jobs like punch card operator. One of the union's demands in the strike was that the starting rate in the data processing department should be the same as the starting wages in the plant. After a 3-month strike, the demand was achieved. Along the way, the union received the active support of other union locals and from the women's movement generally, owing to the general significance of the demand for equal pay for work of equal value.

Conclusion

This article has reviewed some of the important issues confronting workers and unions in Canada. The current decade is likely to see the intensification of struggles around all these issues. The organisation of previously unorganised women, the raiding battles between CLC unions and American based construction unions, and the continuing struggle to maintain and extend the right to strike are examples of these campaigns. The union movement is presently facing a deepening recession in the Canadian economy, with real unemployment levels at their highest since the depression of the thirties, renewed wage controls in some provinces and continuing interference by the state in the rights of workers and their organisations. The majority of the unions are still relatively conservative. But the union movement, and an increasing proportion of union membership, is in a more militant mood than was the case in decades past. In Canada, as elsewhere, the struggle continues.

Sources

I have not given specific references in the article, but further reading can be found on all the subjects mentioned in the books listed below. In addition, there are papers and magazines which carry regular, in-depth reports on strikes and other issues in the union movement: the best is possibly *Canadian Dimension*, published from 801-44 Princess Street, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada R3B 1K2. Useful books:

Robert Laxer *Canada's Unions*, Toronto, James Lorimer and Co., 1976.

Paul Philips *No Power Greater: A century of Labour in BC*, Vancouver, BC Federation of Labour, 1967.

Jack Scott *Canadian Workers, American Unions*, Vancouver, New Star Books, 1978.

Resources for Feminist Research Women and Trade Unions, Published as Vol 10, No. 2, of Resources for Feminist Research in Toronto, 1981.

Paul Weiler *Reconcilable Differences: New Directions in Canadian Labour Law*, Toronto, Carswell Co., 1980.

SORWUC *An Account to Settle: The Story of the United Bank Workers*, Vancouver, Press Gang, 1980.