

# SHAKING THINGS UP

## Unions in a rapidly changing world

**C**HANGE IS ABOUT SHAKING THINGS UP. This can be a little annoying, since most of us don't like things to be shaken up. In fact, our first response when faced with a demand to change is often to become defensive, and even to go through denial about the need to change.

I'll give you a U.S. example. Since 1955, organized labour in the U.S. has been declining in density. That is, the proportion of the workforce that is unionized is plummeting. For a time, labour leaders tried to deny it; some are still denying it. By the mid-1970s, union members had declined not only as a proportion of the workforce, but also in absolute numbers. And yet, some were still in denial about the need for change.

When denial is no longer possible, you move to the next stage, which is called "blame." That's when you start to blame everybody, as if the appropriate allocation of blame will solve a problem. Blame the employers, blame the laws, blame the politicians, blame the workers for not joining unions. There's more than enough blame to go around. But allocating blame doesn't solve the problem. We need to understand what has changed, assess the new environment and devise an appropriate response.

In Canada, I think all of us in the labour movement recognize that the social and economic climate has changed dramatically. We're faced with the ascent of neo-liberal politics — which seeks to commercialize all human relations — as well as the challenge of globalization and the greater global mobility of capital and corporations. So, we are now in a very challenging environment for labour.

Some of us may be cranky about it because we're not driving the change. (Change is great when we're directing it. It's not so great when it's being imposed upon you.) Nonetheless, the task of labour is to find new strengths and opportunities in this new, cold climate. We need to use the necessity to undergo change to transform our organizations in order to better serve the needs of our existing members, and new members. Keep in mind that, while the changing economy may be shaking us up as an institution, the good news is that it's shaking up employers and other institutions that, frankly, we

didn't invent, we don't particularly like, and we would like to change. That, in my mind, is an opportunity for radical, not just incremental, change.

Some people mistake the demand for change as being a condemnation of what went before. That's not necessarily the case. Sometimes what we did before was right for the times, and if we were still living in the environment of the 1950s or 1960s, it might still be right. However, we're not. The world has changed; the economy has changed; the social/political environment has changed; the workforce has changed. And so, our unions need to change.

One point of optimism is that, throughout our history, as the economy and workforce has changed, so have our unions. In North America, we have had many forms of unions, most often mirroring the structure of the industry they've organized in. We've had craft, industrial, sector/service, and general workers unions, just to mention a few. Remarkably, each one of these is still here, undergoing transformation.

Take craft unions, for instance, one of the oldest and most enduring forms of unions. If we look at what's happening among professionals, craft-type unionism is experiencing a bit of a rebirth. Many workers at the high end of the labour market, or who define themselves by their work skills, are starting to identify with each other on the basis of their shared skill, and they are seeking the type of collective voice and action that a union can provide. Craft unions introduced the concept of benefit portability, making it possible for their members to carry employment benefits such as pensions, vacation pay, and health benefits with them throughout their work life, without regard to who their employer was at any given time. As well, craft unions have been able to provide their members with life-long education and skills upgrading, by creating special training funds that all their employers and members pay into. Again, this feature of craft unionization makes these unions even more relevant in our new economy, where employment is more precarious. So, what we're seeing is not craft unions disappearing and a new type of unionism appearing, but craft unionism having oppor-

By Elaine Bernard

tunities with new segments of the workforce.

What about industrial unions? These unions, in contrast and often in opposition to craft unions, organized all

workers, regardless of skill, into a single union. They organized workers in whole sectors of the economy, such as steel, auto, and meat packing. They were the foundation of the great labour upsurge in Canada and the U.S. during the 1930s and 1940s. Again, this model of organizing is not disappearing. In fact, it's being explored as a possible model for organizing workers in new areas, such as childcare and home services. The recent organizing of over 79,000 homecare workers in Los Angeles county is reminiscent of the old industrial union drives of the last century — only this time they were among women and immigrant workers in the service sector.

Speaking of the service sector, the most organized group of workers within this sector are public employees. We don't think of the public sector as a totally different organizing model. Yet, public sector unions don't look like craft unions, and they don't look like industrial unions. They are structured very differently, because they organize in a very different environment. They often have to deal with a unique set of laws, and they need to be much more political, if not partisan, since their employer is the government and has the authority to make many of the rules under which the union must operate.

Often, the first step in public-sector organizing is establishing the right of a particular group of workers to organize and collectively bargain. The second step is usually defending the notion of public enterprise as not simply a cost, but as a wealth-creation entity in society: one that produces common wealth and public goods that benefit the whole community. In spite of their historic successes making the public sector the most densely organized part of the workforce, public-employee unions are continuing to evolve. They are recognizing that they must play an important role in organizing in the private sector (since so many public services are being privatized), and in promoting the concept of quality services for the public, whether provided by the public or the private sector.

A fourth type of union, possibly one of the oldest forms of unions, is now making a comeback: the general workers' union. We don't have many unions that call themselves that. Increasingly, however, more of our unions are looking and behaving like general workers' unions, whether through mergers, amalgamations or new organizing. This is a very robust, vigorous model that allows unions to get a foothold in industries they do not have the power to completely organize, and to bring the strength of a much larger

## The law makes us see unions as institutions as opposed to movements

organization to a few, possibly isolated, workers. And by gaining a few members in a new sector, the union gradually gains the capacity to be able to move into the sector.

These union models, which are undergoing transformation, are very familiar to us. There are also some ideas about — and experiments with — new and renewed forms of worker organizations. One new idea, for example, is "minority unionism." This means operating like a union in a workplace, even if we have not yet been able to demonstrate to a labour board that we represent a majority of the designated bargaining unit.

We spend a lot of time talking about how the legal framework is changing from bad to worse, especially in places like Ontario. Yet, the whole notion of "exclusive representation" or "appropriate bargaining units," as determined by labour relations boards, may have outlived its purpose. This whole legal framework is a set of laws, framed in the 1940s, that assumes a big, factory-like worksite, one where union organizers leaflet the workers, get a majority to sign up with the union, and then go before the labour board, which determines the "appropriate bargaining unit" (often separating the front office from the backshop — the boys from the girls — in 20th century fashion). The board then determines if the union has majority support among the workers. If it does, it is designated the "exclusive representative" for all of the employees in the bargaining unit. The union is then permitted to seek to negotiate a collective agreement with the employer.

Think about how this restrictive law frames our own thinking about unions, making us see them as institutions as opposed to movements. We say, on the one hand, that "the purpose of a union is to form a community of interest." On the other hand, we often argue that "there is no use in organizing people unless they can get a collective agreement." That's where the concept of "minority unionism" comes in. There is a use in organizing people, even if they can't get a collective agreement. Don't ever tell someone, "We're not going to organize you unless we can get you a collective agreement."

It was a minority of workers at IBM — Alliance@IBM — that managed to force that corporation to change some of its policies, even though they had no collective agreement. Although they still don't have a collective agreement, and will probably not win union recognition for many, many years, these IBM workers have learned the most important lesson of trade unionism: collective self-organization. They have learned that one person is weak, but that, together, they can have power. A

collective agreement is very important, but it is a means to an end, not an end in itself.

The Alliance@IBM example also demonstrates that, with the Internet, we now have the low-cost possibility of moving into sectors unions could not penetrate before. Employers can keep organizers off their property, but not our ideas. Young workers, in particular, are talking to each other over the Internet. We can be a part of that conversation and assist them in organizing in ways never before possible.

A notion whose time has come again is community unionism. Labour councils predated national and international unions. City and town labour councils were once dynamic organizing centres where the labour movement (which was always much more than just unions) gathered to discuss issues of importance to working people in a community. Central labour councils would affiliate not just unions, but community organizations as well, including women's suffrage organizations, and labour and socialist parties. (It was one of the reactionary moves of the American Federation of Labour in the last century to put an end to this wider inclusion.) Do we have the imagination to reinvent our institutions — including labour councils — to include community-based organizations?

This is a time for innovation and experimentation. That's what successful strategies for change require. But where do we expect innovation to come from? Local unions are the most important building blocks of the labour movement. It seems to me that it would be useful for federations and councils to begin to think of themselves as resource centres for building locals' strength, and encouraging locals to experiment with new forms of organization and tactics.

There is a whole new generation of workers now, living and working in a very different social and political environment than before. To reinvent unions for them, we need to start by reminding ourselves about what unions do. In my mind, what's important about unions is not just the organizing, servicing, representation and collective bargaining. The most important thing unions do is act as instruments of power for workers. Unions teach us not only how to form organizations, but they teach us how to build power out of literally nothing. The difference between joining a union (what I call "recruitment") and becoming a unionist (what I call "getting organized") is an important distinction.

For unions to continue to be powerful vehicles for workers today, we need to make sure that all of our union functions and activities are designed to make union activists, not simply recruit new members. Unionists are forged through informed, collective action.

As well, union activists need to have a vision that is larger than their own workplace. That's where

politics comes in. Historically, the labour movement has been more than just an instrument of power for workers in the workplace. To put it simply, we used to think we should rule. We have always believed that we had a more democratic, egalitarian notion about the economy: how it should be organized to serve the needs of the community as a whole. Working people are the majority, and personally, I still think we should rule. I don't think it's enough just to say that we would like to "temper capitalism," or that we should have influence with governments beholden to the wealthy.

But to engage in politics, especially if working people are to be more than lobbyists, we ultimately need an instrument to contest political power. That means a political party. What type of party, and what our relationship should be to this party, are age-old questions, but they are ones I believe we will continue to need to address as long as our ambitions are to be more than a "special interest." It is in the process of contesting power in elections, and forging an alliance and program for ruling, that a wider community of interest among citizens is built. So, labour will always find itself drawn back into the political arena, but maybe we can develop some new models of political parties, in the same way that we are experimenting with new forms of worker representation and organization.

I'll end with my favourite comment on change: the best way to predict the future is to create it.

Originally from Canada, Elaine Bernard has directed Harvard University's trade union program, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, for the past five years. It's an intensive, six-week training program designed for trade union leaders. This article is based on the remarks she made during the closing panel at the International Symposium on the Future of Trade Unions, held in May this year at Laval University, in Quebec City. Thank you to conference organizer Gregor Murray for supplying a videotape of the panel. Thank you to Elaine Bernard for her subsequent work on this article.



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E-mail: fhowes@trebnet.com

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