



**CURRENT ISSUES SERIES**

**Adapting to Change:  
Union Priorities in the 1990s**

*Pradeep Kumar  
Gregor Murray  
Sylvain Schetagne*

**IRC Press**

Industrial Relations Centre  
Queen's University  
Kingston, ON K7L 3N6  
Tel: (613) 533-6709  
Fax: (613) 533-6812

**E-mail:**

[ircpress@post.queensu.ca](mailto:ircpress@post.queensu.ca)

**Visit our Website at:**

<http://qsilver.queensu.ca/irl/qsirc/>

**IRC  
PRESS**

**Queen's University**

ISBN: 0-88886-525-2  
Printed and bound in Canada

Industrial Relations Centre  
Queen's University  
Kingston, Ontario  
Canada K7L 3N6

Publications' Orders: 613 533-6709

## Executive Summary

Many unions around the globe have been experiencing a drop in membership and a decline in density over the last ten years. While union membership and density have remained relatively stable in Canada, the environment for labour organizations has become difficult: there has been profound change in both the external and internal environments in which unions operate. The union response, as documented in this paper based on a survey of innovations and change in Canadian labour organizations, has been both defensive and pro-active, focusing on protecting current levels of wages and benefits as well as fostering social unionism.

- While all unions responding to the survey, irrespective of size or sectoral location, were likely to report change, it was the smaller unions that were more likely to report a greater extent of change over the preceding three years.
- Among the environmental changes identified as important to some degree to a majority of respondent unions were: economic uncertainties, employer attitudes/behaviour, rising membership expectations, government budget and spending cuts, industry restructuring, and adverse changes in labour legislation.
- Unions in Canada are experiencing increasing downward pressure on employment, which translates into decreased membership. A sizeable number of unions, however, have actually succeeded in increasing their membership.
- The majority of unions indicate increased management emphasis on cost reduction, closures and mergers, downsizing, outsourcing and contracting-out, use of temporary and part-time workers, and privatization.
- Workplace change initiatives appear to have had a major effect on the work environment in the form of increases in the workload, in health and safety concerns, and in layoffs, a decrease in job security, and shrinking opportunities for advancement and promotion.

## Contents

Introduction / 1
Extent and Nature of Environmental Change / 2
Organizational Priorities / 7
Bargaining Priorities and Success / 9
Conclusion / 12
References / 13

## About the Author

**Pradeep Kumar** is a Professor in the School of Industrial Relations, Queen's University.

**Gregor Murray** is a Professor in the Department of Industrial Relations, Laval University.

**Sylvain Schetagne** is an Independent Trade Union Researcher based in Montreal.

- The impact of change on the labour-management relations climate is evident in the number of unions reporting increased employer demands for wage concessions and work rule concessions. However, a large proportion of participant unions report no change in areas such as advance notice of change, information sharing, consultation and communication on workplace issues, incentive payment systems, profit-sharing, coordinated bargaining, and pattern agreements.
- There is unequivocal evidence of a significant shift in bargaining power towards the employer, more pronounced in the public sector, but the shift has not undermined membership support for the union as an institution.
- The overwhelming priority for Canadian unions, and the bargaining priority, is the protection of the current level of members' wages and benefits. Other priorities are: the encouragement of rank and file activism, the promotion of new employment opportunities, and of worker participation in decision-making. Almost half of respondent unions identify the building of coalitions with other unions and social groups, 'social unionism,' as an organizational priority.
- In summary, while there is evidence that Canadian unions are pursuing defensive and pro-active strategies, the challenge would appear to be finding the appropriate balance between these strategies.

This paper is the result of a research partnership on innovation and change in labour organizations between the Workplace Information Directorate of Human Resources Development Canada and Professors Pradeep Kumar and Gregor Murray. The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada.

The paper was originally published in *Workplace Gazette* (Fall 1998). This condensed version of the paper is reproduced with the permission of the Minister of Public Works and Government Services, 1999.

# Introduction

Unions around the globe are facing hard times and losing their power and influence. A recent International Labour Organisation study notes that of the approximately seventy countries for which comparable data are available, about half have seen a drop in their membership over the last ten years (International Labour Organisation 1997). Among the OECD countries, where trade unions have been relatively strong, union density, that is union membership as a percentage of the non-agricultural labour force, has been declining, in varying degrees, in almost all countries. In North America, the steady decline in US union membership, started in 1980, continues, while in Canada union membership and density have remained relatively stable (International Labour Organisation 1997, Human Resources Development Canada 1997). There is a consensus that the pervasive union decline is linked to profound changes in the external and internal environment. The adverse impact of these changes on the organizational, bargaining and political strength of unions is evident at all levels, from the workplace to national and international.

While there is little doubt that unions are facing a difficult problem of adaptation to change, the nature and extent of change in the environment or in union responses is indeterminate, not well documented, and varies from country to country.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this paper is to provide empirical perspectives on the nature, extent and scope of environmental change facing Canadian unions and the impact of these changes on their organizational and bargaining priorities.<sup>2</sup> The analysis is based on a survey of innovations and change in Canadian labour organizations,<sup>3</sup> conducted by the Workplace Information Directorate of Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) in 1997. Table 1 indicates the survey response rate by membership size and Table 2 by membership distribution.

*There is a consensus that the pervasive union decline is linked to **profound** changes in the external and internal environment.*

**Table 1**  
**Participating Unions by Membership Size**

	Respondents	Non Respondents	Total	Response Rate (%)
1 - 499	19	42	61	31.1
500 - 4,999	35	71	106	33.0
5,000 - 24,999	25	40	65	38.5
25,000 - 49,999	9	11	20	45.0
50,000 +	11	6	17	64.7
Total	99	170	269	36.8

1 For international perspectives, see Olney (1995) and Wever (1997); for the challenges facing Canadian unions, see the special issue of *Policy Options* (October 1995).

2 For a review of the nature and extent of *workplace* change, its impact on workers and unions, and the union agenda, policies and support systems to facilitate the change process, see Kumar, Murray, and Schetagne (1998b).

3 See Kumar, Murray, and Schetagne (1998a) for the survey sample, methodology and survey response. In brief, the survey was completed by 99 of the 269 labour organizations in Part I of the *Directory of Labour Organizations in Canada*. These 99 labour organizations represented 2,344 million members, roughly 59.9 percent of union members in the sample population. An overview of the survey results is available from the Workplace Information Directorate of HRDC.

*The change in union environment over the past few years has been **profound**.*

**Table 2**  
**Membership Distribution of Respondent Unions by Size**

	Respondent Unions		Total Sample	
	Membership	Distribution (%)	Membership	Distribution (%)
1 - 499	4,780	0.2	14,100	0.4
500 - 4,999	61,960	2.6	218,690	5.5
5,000 - 24,999	258,530	11.0	695,490	17.8
25,000 - 49,999	350,120	14.9	692,320	17.7
50,000 +	1,668,590	71.2	2,299,220	58.7
Total	2,343,980	100.0	3,914,820	100.0

The overall picture that emerges is that the change in union environment over the past few years has, indeed, been profound, rooted in both the changing economy, labour markets and public policy and employer and worker behaviour and attitudes. The union response, the survey results show, has been both defensive and pro-active, focusing on protecting current levels of wages and benefits as well as fostering social unionism through expanded programs of education and research, new organizing, building coalitions with social groups and promoting rank and file activism.

## **Extent and Nature of Environmental Change**

The environment for labour organizations in Canada has changed considerably over the last decade according to the survey results. We asked respondents to assess the overall current environment for bargaining, organizing and servicing for their organization compared to ten, five and three years ago. Change was, of course, more pronounced over the longer time frame (see Table 3). All unions, irrespective of size or sectoral location, were likely to report change but it was the smaller unions that were more likely to report a greater extent of change in the preceding three years.<sup>4</sup>

Respondents were also asked to rate the importance of 17 possible environmental changes on a three-point scale (very important, somewhat important, not important). Three factors are identified as very important or somewhat important in the new environment by more than nine out of ten unions in the survey (see Table 4). These include economic uncertainties, employer attitudes/behaviour and rising membership expectations. Among other elements judged as very important, a majority of respondents identified government budget and spending cuts, industry restructuring and adverse changes in labour legislation. Other factors cited by at least four out of ten respondents as being very important included changes in social policy, privatization, the rapid pace of technological change, deregulation, outsourcing or contracting-out, increasing part-time work and competitive pressures. The importance of these factors does not tend to vary either in terms of union size or sector. Only industry restructuring was more prevalent for unions in the private as opposed to the public sector.

<sup>4</sup> When reference is made to a significant difference, either in terms of union size or sectoral location, we are referring to a p value <0.05. Union size refers to smaller unions (under 1,000 members), medium-size unions (1,000 to 9,999 members) and large unions (10,000 and more members). The respondent unions were also classified as public or private in terms of the location of their principal concentration of members.

**Table 3**  
**Current Union Compared to 3, 5 and 10 Years Ago**

		Very Different (%)	Different (%)	Similar (%)
10 years ago	(n=96)	78.1	11.5	10.4
5 years ago	(n=98)	34.7	49.0	16.3
3 years ago	(n=99)	23.2	38.4	38.4

*n=number of respondents*

**Table 4**  
**Importance of Various Factors in the Current Environment**

		Very Important (%)	Somewhat Important (%)	Not Important (%)
Government budget/spending cuts	(n=97)	74.2	15.5	10.3
Employer attitudes/behaviour	(n=96)	62.5	33.3	4.2
Economic uncertainties	(n=97)	61.9	37.1	1.0
Industry restructuring	(n=94)	57.4	28.7	13.8
Adverse changes in labour legislation	(n=95)	55.8	28.4	15.8
Rising membership expectations	(n=94)	46.8	46.8	6.4
Changes in social policy	(n=94)	44.7	40.4	14.9
Privatization	(n=98)	42.9	27.6	29.6
Rapid pace of tech change	(n=93)	41.9	43.0	15.1
Deregulation	(n=96)	40.6	28.1	31.3
Out-sourcing/contracting-out	(n=97)	40.2	36.1	23.7
Increasing part-time/contract work	(n=97)	40.2	36.1	23.7
Competitive pressures	(n=95)	40.0	35.8	24.2
Persistent high unemployment	(n=95)	38.9	34.7	26.3
Jobless recovery	(n=96)	35.4	37.5	27.1
Aging population	(n=94)	24.5	47.9	27.7
Increasing population of women/ minorities in the workforce	(n=95)	10.5	44.2	45.3

*n=number of respondents*

In order to identify better the nature and scope of specific types of change taking place and the pressures that they exert on union organizations, we asked respondents to report on changes taking place in their major sector or industry over the preceding three years. More specifically, respondents were asked if there had been an increase, no change or a decrease in each of the areas identified. Although a few unions completed this part of the survey for more than one industry, we only report here the principal concentration of membership for each union organization. Themes included changes in union representation, environmental pressures, management strategies, workplace practices, work environment and labour-management relations.

### **Employment and Union Membership**

The pressures on employment and membership appear to be intense, judging by the survey response (see Table 5). In terms of the change in the overall level of employment in their major industry over the previous three years, a majority of the participating unions reported a decrease. The level of full-time employment followed a roughly similar pattern. The downward

Unions in Canada are experiencing increasing downward pressure on employment, which translates into **decreased** membership.

pressures on full-time employment seem to be more acute for unions in the public sector compared to the private sector. This pressure on employment and full-time employment in the major sector does not, however, necessarily translate into overall membership loss which suggests that unions are taking compensatory actions in other sectors. In summary, the survey results show that unions in Canada are experiencing increasing downward pressure on employment, particularly full-time employment, which translates into decreased membership. However, unions appear to be coping well with the change: a sizeable number of unions have actually succeeded in increasing their membership over the preceding three years.

**Table 5**  
**Changes in Employment and Union Representation**

		Increase (%)	No Change (%)	Decrease (%)
Overall level of employment in the industry	(n=93)	16.1	15.1	68.8
Full-time employment	(n=91)	4.4	27.5	68.1
Number of workers represented	(n=96)	27.1	27.1	45.8
Degree of inter-union competition	(n=76)	36.8	55.3	7.9

*n=number of respondents*

### **Environmental Pressures and Management Strategies**

Unions are clearly operating in an environment of increased competitive pressures and cost-cutting. The majority of respondents report an increase in domestic and international competition (see Table 6). These intense environmental pressures are manifested in the trends in management strategies reported by the unions participating in the survey. The majority of unions indicate increased management emphasis on cost reduction, closures and mergers, downsizing, outsourcing and contracting-out, use of temporary and part-time workers, and privatization. Moreover, these pressures are systematically more acute in the public sector than in the private sector. This is especially true of various forms of contingent or non standard work. Thus, 84.0 percent of public sector union respondents indicate an increase in the use of temporary workers and 72.7 percent an increase in the use of part-time workers as opposed to 38.2 percent for temporary workers and 31.3 percent for part-time workers in the private sector. The use of volunteers is also identified by 61.8 percent of public sector respondents (as opposed to 7.1 percent in the private sector).

### **Workplace Practices and Work Environment**

Management strategies to cope with the pressures of environmental change have also been associated with radical changes in methods of operation and work practices, impacting the work environment. As can be seen in Table 7, more than four-fifths of the unions surveyed report an increase in new methods of operations and in the use of new technologies. Respondents also report extensive recourse to new forms of work organization such as multi-tasking/multi-skilling, team or group working and the adoption of total quality or ISO programs. The workplace change initiatives appear to have had a major effect on the work environment: over three-fourths of participating organizations report increased workload and, once again, this effect is even more pronounced in the public sector than in the private sector. The majority of respondents also identify an increase in health and safety concerns, an increase in layoffs, which is again more likely in the public sector, and a decrease in the job security of members. These results are consistent with other recent

**Table 6**  
**Environmental Pressures and Management Strategies**

		Increase (%)	No Change (%)	Decrease (%)
Degree of domestic competition	(n=55)	56.4	36.4	7.3
Degree of international competition	(n=47)	55.3	38.3	6.4
Emphasis on cost reduction	(n=96)	88.5	7.3	4.2
Extent of closures/merges/amalgamations	(n=80)	76.3	16.3	7.5
Extent of downsizing	(n=93)	75.3	16.1	8.6
Level of outsourcing/contracting-out	(n=83)	67.5	27.7	4.8
Use of temporary workers	(n=84)	65.5	28.6	6.0
Recourse to privatization	(n=66)	57.6	36.4	6.1
Use of part-time workers	(n=82)	56.1	40.2	3.7
Use of volunteers	(n=48)	45.8	50.0	4.2

*n=number of respondents*

**Table 7**  
**Workplace Practices and Work Environment**

		Increase (%)	No Change (%)	Decrease (%)
Degree of new methods of operation	(n=67)	82.1	10.4	7.5
Implementation of new technologies	(n=87)	81.6	16.1	2.3
Extent of multi-task/multi-skilling	(n=87)	78.2	21.8	-
Use of team working/group-bases work systems	(n=82)	62.2	31.7	6.1
Use of total quality or ISO programs	(n=65)	61.5	33.8	4.6
Workload of members	(n=95)	85.3	10.5	4.2
Health and safety concerns	(n=97)	55.7	38.1	6.2
Numbers of layoffs	(n=86)	54.7	36.0	9.3
Level of job security	(n=95)	16.8	29.5	53.7
Promotional/advancement opportunities	(n=89)	4.5	47.2	48.3
Workers access to training/retraining opportunities	(n=92)	25.0	50.0	25.0
Public support for public/social services	(n=69)	30.4	43.5	26.1

*n=number of respondents*

studies of the effects of workplace change on work environment.<sup>5</sup> There also appear to be shrinking opportunities for advancement and promotion, irrespective of sector or size. Some aspects of the work environment are more equivocal however. Worker access to training, for example, is stable for half of the respondents while a quarter report an increase and the other quarter a decrease. The increases are more likely to be observed in workplaces represented by large unions and unions in the private sector. Public support for public and social services has also increased for a greater proportion of respondents than it has decreased, the remainder identifying no change. The survey adds, therefore, to the considerable evidence of a union environment characterized by extensive change, increased workload and declining job security and shrinking opportunities for promotion.

<sup>5</sup> See Statistics Canada (1994), Lewchuk and Robertson (1996 and 1997), Lewchuk (1997) and Lévesque, Murray, LeQueux and Roby (1996).

*There appear to be*  
**shrinking**  
*opportunities for*  
*advancement and*  
*promotion.*

## Labour-Management Relations

The environmental changes, modifications in managerial strategies and workplace practices and stresses in the work environment have had a significant impact on the labour-management relations climate. As Table 8 shows, nearly four-fifths of the unions surveyed report increases in employer demands for wage concessions and work rule concessions. An increase in such demands is again more prevalent in the public sector (reported by 87 percent of respondents) as opposed to the private sector (indicated by 65 percent in the case of wage concessions and 63.2 percent for work rule concessions). Moreover, nearly half of the respondent unions reported that they were 'often' asked for wage or other concessions during the term of an agreement.

**Table 8**  
**Changes in Labour-Management Relations**

		Increase (%)	No Change (%)	Decrease (%)
Employer demands for concessions in wages and benefits	(n=94)	77.7	19.1	3.2
Employer demands for concessions in work rules	(n=85)	76.5	20.0	3.5
Union-management conflicts	(n=95)	48.4	38.9	12.6
Union-management cooperation	(n=96)	38.5	36.5	25.0
Advance notice of organizational change by employers	(n=91)	25.3	57.1	17.6
Incidence of information sharing by employers	(n=91)	31.9	46.2	22.0
Degree of consultation/communication on workplace issues	(n=94)	38.3	41.5	20.2
Coordinated bargaining between different bargaining units of the same employer	(n=73)	31.5	53.4	15.1
Pattern agreements between employers in the same industry	(n=64)	17.2	71.9	10.9
Employer bargaining power	(n=95)	66.3	27.4	6.3
Union bargaining power	(n=94)	17.0	23.4	59.6
Worker trust/confidence in the union	(n=96)	30.2	50.0	19.8
Worker satisfaction with rank and file communications	(n=96)	30.2	54.2	15.6
Worker satisfaction with unions services	(n=94)	39.4	45.7	14.9
Public support for unions	(n=91)	16.5	48.4	35.2

*n=number of respondents*

The survey responses reveal contradictory trends in the union-management relationship: more conflict, but also increased cooperation. Nearly half of the participating unions indicate increased conflict over the preceding three years, and this is more often the case in the public sector (57.4 percent) than in the private sector (36.6 percent). However, over one-third of respondents (34.5 percent public sector and 43.9 percent private sector) also identify an increase in union-management cooperation, compared to one-fourth which have experienced a decline in such cooperation. For both conflict and cooperation, an increase is the dominant trend. In other words, environmental pressures and workplace change appear to have created a more volatile environment with both conflict and cooperation characterizing the new workplace.

Although change is invariably the dominant trait of current labour-management relations as perceived by the union respondents, a large proportion of participant unions report no change in a number of areas: advance notice of organizational change by employ-

*The survey responses reveal contradictory trends in the union-management relationship.*

ers, incidence of information sharing, degree of consultation and communication on workplace issues, number of management layers, workforce diversity, use of incentive payment systems and profit-sharing. A majority of unions also report no change in coordinated bargaining between different bargaining units of the same employer or in pattern agreements between employers in the same industry. Indeed, coordinated bargaining between different bargaining units of the same employer is more likely to have increased than decreased.

Although the survey shows mixed trends in relation to a number of aspects of the union-management relationship, the impact of the changing environment on the bargaining power of the parties appears to be unequivocal. The dominant trend is one in which employer bargaining power has increased, apparently to the detriment of union bargaining power. Union bargaining power appears to present virtually a mirror image of that of the employer: over half of respondents report a decrease in union bargaining power. Union bargaining power is more likely to have decreased and less likely to have increased in the public sector than in the private sector.

Neither the apparently negative results of environmental change on the work environment or the lesser union bargaining power imply, however, decreased worker confidence in their unions. The survey results indicate an underlying stability in membership support for their unions. A greater percentage of respondents actually perceive an increase than a decrease in worker support over the three years preceding the survey. Half of the unions report no change in worker trust or confidence in the union. Similarly, for the majority of participating unions, there has been no change in worker satisfaction with rank and file communication. Worker satisfaction with union services follows a similar pattern. Smaller respondent unions, with a membership of 1,000 members or less, are more likely to identify a positive trend on these three indicators as opposed to the larger unions with a membership of 10,000 or more. The reported strength of membership support for their unions contrasts, however, with the respondents' perception of public support for unions. If worker support for unions is more likely to have increased than decreased, the opposite is true of public support for unions.

To summarize, unions in Canada are experiencing a great deal of change. This is most evident in environmental changes, managerial strategies and associated modifications in workplace practices and their adverse effects on the work environment. The impact of these changes on labour-management relations is quite mixed, marked by an underlying stability in many aspects of the labour-management relationship as well as an increased incidence of both conflict and cooperation. There is unequivocal evidence of a significant shift in bargaining power towards the employer, more pronounced in the public sector, but the shift has not undermined membership support for the union as an institution. On the contrary, the dominant trend is one of stability and worker commitment to the union is more likely to have increased than decreased.

## Organizational Priorities

How has this environmental change affected the overall organizational priorities of the unions participating in the survey? We asked respondents to rate 13 items in terms of their overall importance for their organization's priorities. It is perhaps not surprising, given the relative adversity of the environmental changes outlined above, that the overwhelming priority of Canadian unions is, above all else, a defensive one, namely the protection of the current level of members' wages and benefits (see Table 9). Almost all of the organizations participating in the survey identified this as either an extremely important or a very important priority. Indeed, the relative importance of this core function is perhaps one reason why worker confidence in the union as an institution is either stable or on the increase.

*The survey results indicate an underlying stability in membership support for their unions.*

**Table 9**  
**Organizational Priorities**

		Extremely/ Very Important (%)	Somewhat Important (%)	Not Very/ Least Important (%)
Protect current level of members' wages and benefits	(n=97)	95.9	3.1	1.0
Encourage rank and file activism	(n=95)	70.5	25.3	4.2
Promote new employment opportunities	(n=95)	62.1	25.3	12.6
Promote worker participation in decision-making	(n=95)	60.0	26.3	13.7
Increase wages and benefits	(n=97)	57.7	33.0	9.3
Organize political action to change public policy	(n=96)	54.2	30.2	15.6
Organize workers in union's traditional jurisdiction	(n=94)	51.1	18.1	30.9
Build coalitions with other unions and social groups	(n=97)	45.4	37.1	17.5
Develop new services for membership	(n=96)	41.7	39.6	18.8
Organize workers in new areas of growth	(n=91)	36.3	20.9	42.9
Reduce levels of contingent employment	(n=86)	31.4	26.7	41.9
Develop alliances with unions in other countries	(n=95)	22.1	26.3	51.6
Reduce working time	(n=95)	20.0	41.1	38.9

*n=number of respondents*

Other organizational priorities suggest a more pro-active orientation on the part of Canadian unions. The second priority, in order of overall importance, is the encouragement of rank and file activism. The third and fourth priorities are similarly pro-active: promoting new employment opportunities and promoting worker participation in decision-making. In other words, the major priorities identified by the respondents are not solely focused on traditional 'bread and butter' issues but rather extend to building the organizational strength and dynamics of the union to respond more effectively to a vastly different environment.

The survey results highlight the importance of both traditional union objectives and the new areas of concern. Increased wages and benefits are a priority for over half of respondents. Political action to change public policy is identified as extremely or very important for their organization by over half of respondents. Similarly, the organization of workers in their union's traditional jurisdiction is a high priority for just over half of the participating unions. A substantial proportion of unions also appears to be exploring new ways of seeking members and defending their interests. In particular, 'social unionism' is an important option for a considerable number of unions as almost half of respondents identify the building of coalitions with other unions and social groups as an organizational priority.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, there is some emphasis on recruiting and retaining membership in new ways, e.g. the development of new services and the organization of workers in new areas of growth. Reducing levels of contingent employment, developing alliances with unions in other countries and reducing working time are less important organizational priorities.

<sup>6</sup> 'Social unionism' generally refers to the form of unionism oriented towards social change, emphasizing broader working class issues rather than pursuing the narrower interests of union members (Kumar 1993).

*The survey results highlight the importance of both traditional union objectives and the new areas of concern.*

In a context of globalization where effective union organization would increasingly appear to depend on some capacity to make linkages with groups of workers in other countries, the lack of emphasis on cross-border alliances might come as somewhat of a surprise. Similarly, given the international interest, particularly in Europe, in the reduction of working time as a method of attacking unemployment, the relative unimportance of this objective is striking.<sup>7</sup> It does, however, need to be placed in a larger context of economic uncertainty where union leaderships are under increasing pressure from their members to protect uncertain levels of working hours.

The overall organizational priorities appear to be influenced by two types of variables. First, a social unionism profile is more likely among the largest unions than the smaller unions. Thus, in terms of their most important priorities, the largest unions are significantly more likely to encourage rank and file activism (93.9 percent), to organize political action to change public policy (75.8 percent) and to build coalitions with other unions and social groups (63.6 percent). The largest unions are also more likely to organize workers in new areas of growth (53.1 percent) and to develop alliances with unions in other countries (45.5 percent). The contrast between the largest unions and the others is particularly remarkable on this latter point as only 14.3 percent of medium size unions and 3.7 percent of smaller unions listed cross-border union alliances as an extremely or very important priority. In other words, unions with greater resources are most likely to engage in these types of initiatives. Secondly, there is also some variation between public and private sector unions. The private sector unions are significantly more likely to identify organizing as a high priority, both within their traditional jurisdiction (70.7 percent) and in new areas of growth (57.5 percent). Unions in the private sector are also more likely to identify alliances with unions in other countries as an important priority (31.7 percent) as opposed to their counterparts in the public sector (14.8 percent).

## Bargaining Priorities and Success

The survey also explored the recent bargaining experience of the respondent unions. More particularly, from a list of 27 items, respondents were asked to rate the relative priority of different items on a three-point scale (high, modest and low) as well as the degree of success in meeting them during the most recent bargaining round.

The overwhelming bargaining priority was the protection of current wages and benefits (see Table 10). This was followed by lay-off protections. No other item was identified as a high priority by the majority of respondents. The importance accorded to these two items is undoubtedly the reflection of the relative adversity of the overall organizational environment facing the unions and the need for unions to concentrate on core defensive functions to ensure continued membership support.

A second tier of priorities, identified by more than 40 percent of respondents, suggests, however, that unions are pursuing traditional job control and instrumental items but also attach considerable importance to playing an active role in workplace change. These include: the restriction of contracting-out or out-sourcing, improved pensions and early retirement provisions, increased wages and benefits, increased union role in workplace decision-making, advance notice of organizational change, a consultation mechanism on

<sup>7</sup> The lack of union priority on reduction in working time apparently reflects worker attitudes on this issue. A recent survey, conducted by Statistics Canada in November 1995, found that two-thirds of the paid workers in Canada were satisfied with their working hours. Only six percent preferred fewer hours for less pay, and 27 percent would like to work more hours for more pay if given the choice. See Drolet and Morissette (1997).

*The overwhelming bargaining priority was the protection of current wages and benefits.*

**Table 10**  
**Bargaining Priorities in the Most Recent Bargaining Round**

		High	Modest	Low
		(%)	(%)	(%)
Protect current wages and benefits	(n=96)	90.6	6.3	3.1
Lay-off protections	(n=90)	64.4	20.0	15.6
Increase union role in workplace decision-making	(n=96)	49.0	37.5	13.5
Restrict contracting-out/out-sourcing	(n=92)	47.8	25.0	27.2
Advance notice of organizational change	(n=88)	46.6	28.4	25.0
Improved pensions and early retirement provisions	(n=93)	45.2	39.8	15.1
Increase wages and benefits	(n=97)	44.3	37.1	18.6
Consultation mechanism on change	(n=88)	44.3	34.1	21.6
Improved training and retraining opportunities	(n=92)	42.4	40.2	17.4
Merger/amalgamation protections and protocols	(n=87)	35.6	25.3	39.1
Cost-of-living adjustments	(n=94)	35.1	27.7	37.2
Guarantees of minimum levels of employment	(n=88)	34.1	26.1	39.8
Control or regulate workloads	(n=94)	34.0	50.0	16.0
Technological change protections	(n=91)	33.0	31.9	35.2
Labour adjustment provisions	(n=87)	32.2	35.6	32.2
Better severance pay provisions	(n=92)	31.5	33.7	34.8
Regulate working hours/shift schedules	(n=93)	30.1	35.5	34.4
Access to financial information	(n=90)	28.9	34.4	36.7
Regulate the pace and the nature of workplace change	(n=90)	27.8	36.7	35.6
Health and safety improvements	(n=92)	27.2	38.0	34.8
Increase worker control and responsibility	(n=91)	26.4	48.4	25.3
Policy on harassment	(n=89)	23.6	31.5	44.9
Employment equity policies	(n=91)	18.7	29.7	51.6
Family related leaves	(n=89)	11.2	41.6	47.2
Restriction on overtime	(n=89)	11.2	39.3	49.4
Flex time	(n=90)	5.6	31.1	63.6
Child care facilities	(n=88)	2.3	17.0	80.7

*n=number of respondents*

change, improved training and retraining opportunities. Once again, these results suggest that the union reaction to environmental change is not merely defensive, in terms of the importance of traditional control and protective objectives. These traditional goals, of course, remain very important but so too are a range of new bargaining priorities such as an increased union role in decision-making, advance notice of change and consultation mechanisms on change. These new priorities point to an attempt by Canadian unions to deal with change in a pro-active and consultative manner.

A third tier of priorities, rated as important by at least 25 percent of respondent unions, concerns a wide range of working conditions, job control and participative mechanisms, including cost-of-living adjustments, better severance pay provisions, health and safety improvements, merger/amalgamation protocols, guarantees of minimum levels of employment, the regulation of workloads, technological change protections, labour adjustment provisions, and the regulation of working hours and shift provisions, access to financial information, the regulation of the pace and nature of workplace change, and increased worker control and responsibility.

Finally, a fourth tier of high priorities, identified by less than 25 percent of the unions participating in the survey, largely concerns gender and family issues. Thus, among these less pressing priorities are a policy on harassment, employment equity, family related leaves, and child care facilities. The other items which were not listed as high priorities concern working time, notably restrictions on overtime and flex time. The grouping of the items in this fourth tier appears particularly significant given the importance of women and family issues for the future of the labour movement. Two possible explanations might be advanced here. The first and more unlikely explanation is that these issues are a relatively low or modest priority for the respondent unions because they have already achieved a high degree of success on these items. The second and more likely possibility is that these issues have not really found their place as high priority items on the bargaining agenda of the majority of labour organizations.

What then is the degree of success achieved by the unions on their bargaining objectives? Table 11 presents the degree of success in the most recent bargaining round. A preliminary analysis suggests, first of all, that a high degree of success on any item is unusu-

*A high degree of success on any bargaining item is unusual.*

**Table 11**  
**Degree of Success in the Most Recent Bargaining Round**

		<u>High</u>	<u>Modest</u>	<u>Low</u>
		(%)	(%)	(%)
Protect current wages and benefits	(n=87)	49.4	41.4	9.2
Lay-off protections	(n=80)	25.0	38.8	36.3
Increase union role in workplace decision-making	(n=86)	5.8	50.0	44.2
Restrict contracting-out/out-sourcing	(n=80)	15.0	48.8	36.3
Advance notice of organizational change	(n=77)	16.9	42.9	40.3
Improved pensions and early retirement provisions	(n=81)	23.5	44.4	32.1
Increase wage and benefits	(n=86)	14.0	47.7	38.4
Consultation mechanism on change	(n=77)	11.7	41.6	46.8
Improved training and retraining opportunities	(n=80)	13.8	50.0	36.3
Merger/amalgamation protections and protocols	(n=77)	18.2	27.3	54.5
Cost-of-living adjustments	(n=81)	11.1	29.6	59.3
Guarantees of minimum levels of employment	(n=77)	5.2	37.7	57.1
Control or regulate workloads	(n=79)	7.6	53.2	39.2
Technological change protections	(n=78)	14.1	42.3	43.6
Labour adjustment provisions	(n=74)	6.8	47.3	45.9
Better severance pay provisions	(n=79)	12.7	35.4	51.9
Regulate working hours/shift schedules	(n=81)	14.8	48.1	37.0
Access to financial information	(n=79)	13.9	35.4	50.6
Regulate the pace and the nature of workplace change	(n=78)	6.4	43.6	50.0
Health and safety improvements	(n=80)	12.5	46.3	41.3
Increase worker control and responsibility	(n=79)	7.6	35.4	57.0
Policy on harassment	(n=79)	16.5	36.7	46.8
Employment equity policies	(n=77)	14.3	31.2	54.5
Family related leaves	(n=77)	14.3	39.0	46.8
Restriction on overtime	(n=76)	7.9	23.7	68.4
Flex time	(n=77)	11.7	33.8	54.5
Child care facilities	(n=75)	5.3	10.7	84.0

*n=number of respondents*

al in the context of the adverse bargaining environment discussed earlier. Secondly, when considered for all of the respondents, whether or not it was a priority item, the most likely items on which respondents report a high degree of success are the protection of current wages and benefits, lay-off protections and improved pensions and early retirement provisions. Thirdly, on all other items, less than 20 percent of respondents indicated a high degree of success. In other words, irrespective of the priority attached to particular items, unions were more likely to succeed on traditional bargaining items and less likely to succeed in new areas of concern, even when they were judged to be a high priority. For example, an increased union role in workplace decision-making is a high priority for 49.0 percent of survey respondents but only 5.8 percent of the respondents report a high degree of success on this item. Finally, in a number of the new areas of concern, unions have achieved some, albeit modest, success. For example, on issues such as an increased union role in workplace decision-making, restrictions on contracting-out/out-sourcing, advanced notice of organizational change, consultation mechanisms on change, improved training and retraining opportunities, the control or regulation of workloads, family related leaves and policies on harassment, a majority of respondents reported modest to high success.

## Conclusion

The results of the HRDC survey highlighted in this paper clearly point to a difficult environment for labour organizations in Canada today. Key elements include economic uncertainty, employer attitudes and behaviour and rising membership expectations. This is generally true for all the unions surveyed but the pressures appear to be particularly acute in the public sector, notably as regards managerial strategies which emphasize downsizing and the use of contingent employees.

In response to this more difficult environment, Canadian unions are pursuing defensive and pro-active strategies. Both the adversity of the external environment and internal membership expectations seem to compel union leaderships to emphasize the traditional defensive functions of union representation: the protection of current wages and benefits, lay-off protections and improved pension and early retirement provisions. At the same time, however, there is considerable evidence of the pursuit of more pro-active strategies in new areas of endeavour. Unions are notably seeking to encourage rank and file activism, promoting new employment opportunities and worker participation in decision-making. Larger unions, in particular, are also pursuing a broader social agenda involving political action to change public policy, organizing new groups of members, building coalitions with other unions and social groups, and developing alliance with unions in other countries.

While these broader overall organizational priorities are reflected in a number of new bargaining objectives, for example an increased union role in workplace decision-making and improved training and retraining opportunities, the unions surveyed have achieved a higher degree of success on many of the traditional bargaining objectives than they have on some of the newer items on the agenda. That is not to suggest, however, that they have not achieved some degree of success on many of these new items.

The virtual strategic challenge for Canadian unions, therefore, would appear to be finding the appropriate balance between such defensive and pro-active strategies. Defensive strategies are a necessary but often insufficient response to the changing environment. Pro-active strategies are clearly central to the continuing renewal of labour organizations in Canada and their ability to respond to this new environment on behalf of their members. While such pro-active strategies promise to break new ground, they also risk greater resistance from both the external environment and from within the unions themselves.

*Larger unions are pursuing a broader social agenda involving political action.*

## References

- Drolet, Marie and René Morissette. 1997. Working more? Less? What do workers prefer? *Perspectives on Labour and Income* 9, 4: 32-8.
- Human Resources Development Canada. 1997. *Directory of labour organizations in Canada, 1997*. Ottawa: Canadian Government Publishing.
- International Labour Organisation. 1997. *World labour report: Industrial relations, democracy, and stability*. Geneva: International Labour Office.
- Kumar, Pradeep. 1993. *From uniformity to divergence: Industrial relations in Canada and the United States*. Kingston, ON: IRC Press, Industrial Relations Centre, Queen's University.
- Kumar, Pradeep, Gregor Murray, and Sylvain Schetagne. 1998a. Adapting to change: Union priorities in the 1990s. *Workplace Gazette* 1 (fall): 84-98.
- Kumar, Pradeep, Gregor Murray, and Sylvain Schetagne. 1998b. Workplace change in Canada: Union perceptions of impacts, responses and support systems. *Workplace Gazette* 1 (winter): 75-87.
- Lévesque, Christian, Gregor Murray, Stéphane LeQueux et Nicolas Roby. 1996. Syndicalisme, démocratie et réorganisation du travail. Dans *Le travail en mutation: De nouveaux enjeux pour la démocratie*, Actes du colloque Gérard-Picard V, pp.29-72. Montréal: Confédération des syndicats nationaux.
- Lewchuk, Wayne. 1997. Human centered benchmarking: Work reorganization and the quality of worklife in the clothing, textiles, primary textiles, box, paper, aluminium, electric and electronic products. Hamilton, ON: Department of Labour Studies, McMaster University, mimeographed.
- Lewchuk, Wayne and David Robertson. 1997. Production without empowerment: Work reorganization from the perspective of motor vehicle workers. *Capital and Class* (autumn): 37-64.
- Lewchuk, Wayne and David Robertson. 1996. Working conditions under lean production. *Asia Pacific Review* 2: 60-81.
- Olney, Shauna L. 1996. *Unions in a changing world*. Geneva: International Labour Office.
- Policy Options* 16, 8 (1995).
- Statistics Canada. 1994. *Health status of Canadians: Report of the 1991 general social survey*. Chapter 6. Ottawa: Canadian Government Publishing.
- Wever, Kirsten S. 1997. Unions adding value: Addressing market and social failures in the advanced industrialized countries. *International Labour Review* 136: 449-68.

# INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS CENTRE

## *Serving the IR/HR Community*

**T**he Industrial Relations Centre at Queen's University is committed to serving the needs of the IR/HR community through its continuous learning, research, and publishing programs.

### **TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

- We offer four and five day seminars on current and emerging issues in industrial relations and human resources management. These cutting-edge seminars are held on Queen's campus at the Donald Gordon Centre, a total conference facility. For information on our seminar program please call our Conference Administrator, Elaine Clark, at 613 533-6628.
- We also offer seminars and training sessions customized to meet your needs. These sessions can be held at your facility. To discuss your training needs, please call Brenda Barker at 613 533-6000, ext. 77086.
- We are specialists in the management of change and team building. We offer a special on-site training and benchmarking program in high performance teams. For information on the Team program, please call Brenda Barker at 613 533-6000, ext. 77086.

### **RESEARCH**

Our research staff maintains close links with industry, government and labour and is up-to-date with the ideas, concepts, and prevailing practices of the IR/HR community. Our research covers, for example, issues in the areas of workplace transformation, strategic HR management, collective bargaining, workers' compensation, employment and labour market developments. To discuss our current research program and your information needs, please call Mary Lou Coates at 613 533-6000, ext. 77082.

### **PUBLISHING**

The IRC Press of the Industrial Relations Centre is the only publisher in Canada specializing in the broad field of industrial relations and human resource management. We offer the community of academics and practitioners in the field an avenue for dissemination of research and reports on workplace relations and issues. Our publications are available individually or on an annual subscription basis. For information, please call our Publications Assistant, Christine Salmon, at 613 533-6709. For editorial information and guidelines for authors, please call Carol Williams at 613 533-6000, ext. 77077.

1999 IRC Press

*For information contact:* Publications Secretary, **IRC Press**,  
Industrial Relations Centre, Queen's University, Kingston, ON K7L 3N6  
Tel: 613-533-6709, Fax: 613-533-6812,  
**E-mail [ircpress@post.queensu.ca](mailto:ircpress@post.queensu.ca)**