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The 1990 Don Wood Lecture in Industrial Relations

The Canadian Labour Movement in the 1990s: Challenges and Opportunities

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The Annual Don Wood Lecture in Industrial Relations was established by friends of W. Donald Wood to honour his outstanding contribution to Canadian industrial relations. Dr. Wood was Director of the Industrial Relations Centre from 1960 to 1985 and first Director of the School of Industrial Relations established in 1983.

The Annual Lecture brings to Queen's University 'distinguished individuals who have made an important contribution to industrial relations in Canada or other countries.'

John Fryer delivered The Don Wood Lecture in Industrial Relations on 8 November 1990 at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario.

John Fryer

John Fryer, a graduate of the London School of Economics and the University of Pittsburgh, is Canada's leading trade unionist, active in the Canadian Labour Movement for over 25 years. Until August 1990, he was the National President of Canada's second largest union, the National Union of Provincial Government Employees, and a general vice-president of the Canadian Labour Congress.

I was greatly honoured to have been asked to visit the internationally known Industrial Relations Centre at Queen's and to deliver this year's Don Wood Lecture in Industrial Relations.

It was back in 1962 that I first met Don Wood at an industrial relations seminar here. We have been friends ever since and his contribution to the field of industrial relations in Canada is one for which I have the greatest respect and admiration.

When Pradeep Kumar, the present Acting Director of the Queen's Industrial Relations Centre suggested the topic of 'The Canadian Labour Movement in the 1990s: Challenges and Opportunities' for this year's lecture I was immediately excited as well as intrigued.

Excited, because here I was being given a made-to-order opportunity to share with an interested audience many of my ideas about the future of Canadian unionism. And intrigued because I have

long held the view that the future belongs primarily to those who are willing, even eager, to confront the challenge of change and seek within it the opportunity to make progress.

Until 15 August of this year I was a full-time trade union official. In both an elected as well as a staff capacity I had served the trade union movement in both Canada and the United States for almost thirty years. Prior to that I grew up in the United Kingdom fully believing, from a very young age, that trade unions and trade unionism offered working men and women their greatest opportunity to improve their lives at work, as well as the chance to have a meaningful say in the political, economic and social life of their nations.

I still hold to these basic precepts but, upon reflection, it has been something of a disappointment that we have not made greater progress and that so much still has to be done.

Others would be quick to argue that the reverse is true and that we should exult in even small victories considering that they have been achieved against the backdrop of a North American climate that for the most part is openly hostile to everything that trade unionism stands for. I have absolutely no desire to belittle the accomplishments of the North American trade union movement to date but it's difficult to argue with my basic assumption that 'much remains to be done.'

It is also my belief that during the 1990s much *will* be done that the decade *will* witness a variety of significant and important changes for Canadian workers and their unions. My plan is to explore some of those predictions with you today.

Union Growth Canada/US

Many former British colonies relied heavily for their early progress upon the contributions to economic growth generated by slavery or some other form of peonage. Canada's development, by way of contrast, has depended from the outset on the efforts of successive generations of working men and women. And since pioneer times Canadian workers have joined together in an effort to secure for themselves and their families a fair share of the nation's wealth while at the same time seeking protection against exploitation.

'There is a story that a group of Quebecois voyageurs staged the first strike in Canada, taking their paddles from the water of Lac la Pluie in 1794 in protest at low wages.¹ It's a great pity that so few union records have survived in Canada but an understandable exception is the Toronto Typographical Union. Originally launched in 1832 as the York Typographical Society it

¹ Jack Williams, *The Story of Unions in Canada* (Don Mills: J.M. Dent, 1975), p. 1.

continues to operate today as a local union of the Communication Workers of America.² The motto of the Toronto printers and of many other early unions was 'United to Support, Not Combined to Injure.' This notion of joint action was as simple as it was effective. Since those early union beginnings literally millions of Canadians have joined trade unions in order to pursue their interests as workers in a collective way.

Today there are more than four million union members from coast to coast. Membership concentration is not distributed evenly. Newfoundland and British Columbia are the two most highly unionized provinces while Alberta is the least organized. Overall some 36.2 percent of Canada's non-agricultural workforce is unionized³ This rate of unionization compares favourably with many other industrial nations but it differs dramatically from the situation in the United States. There the percentage of the workforce that is unionized has been declining steadily for thirty years. Back in 1952 the US unionization rate was 33 percent when Canada's was only 21 percent. Today only slightly over 16 percent of the US workforce is unionized, leading some observers to suggest that the US labour movement will 'not survive into the next century as a significant economic and social force.'⁴

There has been much speculation and thoughtful study about the reasons for this startling divergence in US/Canadian unionization trends. Maybe I could suggest that this might be an appropriate subject matter for a future Don Wood Lecture in Industrial Relations. But in view of my own experience and career perhaps you will forgive me when I draw attention to the fact that one major reason for the difference has been our success in Canada in achieving one of the highest levels of unionization in the world amongst public sector workers. While the rate in the USA is just over 20 percent, in Canada it is approaching 90 percent.

In Canada, public sector union growth has been steady and spectacular. From the creation of the Canadian Union of Public Employees in 1963, the passage of the Public Service Staff Relations Act in 1967 extending collective bargaining for the first time to federal government employees, to the 1976 founding of the National Union of Provincial Government Employees, public sector workers have flocked to the union banner and now account for nearly half of all Canadian Labour Congress membership. The three unions I have just referred to are the three largest affiliates of the CLC — indeed they are the three biggest unions in the country.

During the past several decades, then, the Canadian Labour Movement has been growing while that in the United States has been shrinking. Therefore, the first challenge facing the Canadian trade union movement in the 1990s is to make sure that we continue to develop along distinctly

² A number of interesting accounts of early unionization in Canada can be found in Chapter 2 of *Working People* by Desmond Morton with Terry Copp (Toronto: Deveau, 1984). The chapter is entitled 'Getting Organized' pp. 9 to 16.

³ Labour Canada, *Directory of Labour Organizations* (Ottawa, 1990).

⁴ Thomas Kochan, Harry C. Katz and Robert B. McKersie, *The Transformation of American Industrial Relations* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), p. 3.

different paths from our colleagues south of the 49th parallel. My own view is that is precisely what we can expect to see happen.

The Challenge of 'Bringing Home the Bacon'

The first sentence of Freeman and Medoff's classic study entitled *What Do Unions Do?* reads as follows 'Trade Unions are the principal institution of workers in modern capitalist societies.'⁵

That means that workers join unions expecting to receive economic benefits as well as a greater degree of industrial democracy on the job. In the vernacular they pay their union dues each month in the full expectation that the union that receives them will 'bring home the bacon,' especially at contract negotiation time.

Therefore, the greatest challenge facing the Canadian Labour Movement in the 1990s will be its ability to make sure that collective bargaining remains relevant and responsive to a changing workforce living through rapidly changing times. The challenge extends to making collective bargaining a truly valid and effective problem-solving process. The goal should be to create a climate in which collective bargaining serves to develop a highly skilled, well-trained workforce working in a healthy, safe environment - a workplace environment in which Canadian workers produce efficiently and are able to compete with the best in the world. Obviously unions cannot do this alone. There will need to be active cooperation from both employers as well as governments. Nor can these worthy goals be achieved without being a little daring ... without being willing to take some risks.

Employers could help the process through a willingness to see the scope of bargainable issues expanded somewhat rather than seeking to restrict the issues under discussion by hiding behind rigidly legalistic interpretations of management rights clauses. Training and retraining programs should be on the bargaining table, so should all aspects of technological change, together with the whole field of pensions including pre-retirement planning programmes and the joint monitoring of all benefit plans.

To be most effective there should be no issue too small to put on the bargaining table to submit to the problem-solving process. Making bargaining a year round process would also help. Problem areas arising between collective agreements could be dealt with and 'signed off' for incorporation into the next agreement. 'Year round' bargaining has the further advantage of helping to defuse the tendency to develop an 'explosive climate' at contract expiry time.

As for government - they should learn to resist the temptation to meddle in labour relations for what they perceive to be short run partisan political advantage. It seems as though its always fair game to make life as difficult as possible for the postal workers because of the low public

⁵ Richard B. Freeman and James L. Medoff, *What Do Unions Do?* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), p. 3.

esteem in which they are thought to be held since their former leader Joe Davidson was taken out of context to tell the public they could 'go to hell.'

Recently, in British Columbia, the government pushed through a 'Bargaining Disclosure Act' designed to try and publicly embarrass public sector unions in that province. Academic experts across Canada and US have soundly condemned this legislation. Even doctors now seem fair game for politicians of all complexions. In my view their political interference damages the process and dramatically reduces the ability of governments to act in the impartial public interest when and if the need truly arises. It is the proper role of government to constantly observe the industrial relations scene and, as a matter of public policy, to create a legislative framework for the exercise of labour-management relations that will be seen to be even-handed in design and implementation.

During the '90s there will be no shortage of opportunities for government to address critical industrial relations issues. We need to outlaw the hiring of replacement workers or 'scabs' in both federal and provincial jurisdictions. Picketing rights need to be guaranteed as do 'successor rights' when an operation changes hands. And governments at both the federal and provincial level would be well advised before the twenty-first century is upon us, to abolish the separate and inferior public sector bargaining legislation that currently gives them rights as employers that they deny to employers in both the private as well as municipal government sectors. Little wonder that people are upset at governments that say 'Do as we say, not as we do!'

Unions, too, must be sure to respond promptly and with adequate resources to the changes required in the bargaining agenda by a workforce seeking to cope with a labour market that is changing fundamentally. As the Economic Council of Canada has observed, more and more of today's and tomorrow's jobs are being created in the service sector.⁶ Today 71 percent of all jobs in Canada are in the broadly defined service sector. Increasingly these jobs are part-time, short-term, temporary, low-wage and non-union. In addition to decent wages the bargaining priorities of such workers include the desire for better benefits for part-time and temporary employees - more flexible work patterns such as job sharing and home/work - greater attention to the so-called 'woman's issues' such as:

- child care at the workplace
- elder care recognizing the growing responsibility for care of elderly relatives
- pay equity - now in eight provinces - only two to go - Saskatchewan and Alberta
- employment equity
- paid parental leave

⁶ Economic Council of Canada, *Good Jobs: Bad Jobs — Employment in the Service Sector* (Ottawa: Supply and Services Canada, 1990).

I have already made the point that we should seize the opportunity to expand the scope of collective bargaining in order to meet the challenge of making the process both more relevant as well as more responsive. And I have pointed out that we need to be prepared to take some risks. Our chance of success will be further enhanced, I feel, if we find ways to further democratize life at the workplace.

One such way would be to take a major step towards increasing worker involvement and participation in union affairs. How many times have I been involved in the discussion where the topic got around to 'How do we get more workers to come to union meetings?' It occurs to me that one sure fire way would be to negotiate that union meetings should be held at work during working hours. Employees could be given a choice of attending the union meeting or remaining at their workstation. Somehow, I'm sure attendance would improve. Of course, there are logistical niceties to finalize such as how often? How long? Let's share the costs, etc. But in the final analysis the process of problem-solving at the workplace would be enhanced in a significant way. Unions would get input from the overwhelming majority of their rank and file members rather than the corporal's guard that too often show up to evening or weekend meetings. Employers would no longer have reason to wonder whether the union leaders were effectively representing the wishes of the whole workforce. 'Union meetings on the job.' It's an idea whose time has come and if implemented it will do much to enhance the effectiveness of the collective bargaining process in the years ahead.

The Challenge of Union Growth

The greater the responsiveness of the collective bargaining process to the needs of union members during the rest of this decade, the greater will be the opportunity for significant growth in union membership.

Freeman and Medoff observed that, 'Historically unions have rarely grown at a moderate steady pace. Instead they have advanced in fits and starts. ... These spurts have been spurred by organizational innovations, new unions led by new unionists along somewhat different lines than the, traditional unions. If unionism is to grow in the future, history suggests that the growth will occur suddenly, among groups new to unionism.'

The organizing challenge for Canadian labour is very clear. Will we, or will we not, succeed in bringing into our ranks significant numbers of workers in the rapidly growing trade, financial and commercial services sectors of the economy. Indications are that the opportunities exist for major gains but in my view these gains will only be achieved if the leadership of the trade union movement is prepared to change both its thinking as well as its tactics when it comes to organizing. In June of this year the Canadian Federation of Labour commissioned a poll by Decima Research.' Among its interesting results was one indicating that 31 percent of Canadians who do not now belong to unions or professional associations would favourably consider joining one.

To translate this demonstrated interest into a 'wave' of organizational victories will be no easy task but what challenge can be more basic to trade unionists than that of 'organizing the unorganized.' The goal must be to create a 'wave' of new unionization in the service sector of the economy reminiscent of the CIO/CCL surge among manufacturing workers in the late '30s and '40s and the public sector surge of the '60s and '70s.

The disappointing rate of organizational growth amongst service workers to date means that to have a hope of success there must be some pretty big changes made.

First and foremost unions should cease the widespread practice of reorganizing the already organized. The 'raid' ... taking members from union 'A' and giving them to union 'B,' needs to stop. The most celebrated case is, of course, the CAWs 'liberation' of the Fisherman's Union in Newfoundland from the UFCW. Regardless of the merits of either side of the case the event itself has done more to undermine inter-union solidarity than anything else during the last decade. And the CAW-UFCW raid is no isolated incident - it just happens to be the most widely publicized.

Almost as problematic to internal labour movement solidarity has been the breaking down of traditional union jurisdictions.

This has been caused only in part by inter-union raiding. More important causes have been the decline of some unions and the rise of others together with privatization and corporate mergers which have led unions to 'follow' their members into new jurisdictional areas. I believe this jurisdictional breakdown to be irreversible because workers will always prefer to join a well-resourced, growing union rather than one that is dying on the vine. It borders on heresy, I know, but in service sector organizing we should take a leaf from the history of the CIO when, as you will recall, the impetus, money and staff for organizing in a host of industries came from a single dynamic individual and union ... John L. Lewis and the United Mineworkers of America simply put, the Canadian Labour Movement must give a much higher priority during the rest of this decade to the task of organizing the unorganized with all that this implies. Much more staff, money and technical resources must be assigned and new organizing techniques must be developed to carry the union message to the target audiences. Service sector workers are predominantly female, young and immigrant. Too many of them work part-time for low wages with little or no job security. Unions have a powerful message for such workers but we need to dramatically improve the way in which we communicate it. Statistics Canada figures reveal that on an overall basis, weekly wages for unionized workers are 47 percent higher than for nonunionized workers' For men, the variation in weekly wages in services is 107 percent with non-union rates of \$217 weekly versus \$450 for organized employees. For women the difference is 81 percent or \$153 weekly versus \$277. For part-time workers the statistics show an average hourly rate of \$10.33 in the unorganized environment versus \$5.50 where the union is absent. These numbers surely form the basis of a potentially very attractive organizing message. To be

effective, however, this message must be properly communicated to Canada's service workers. Unattractive leaflets, heavy with print and distributed by heavy set men in union jackets standing outside the entrances of fast food outlets will probably not work. Regretfully, but realistically we are now living in a 'post-literate' age. Electronic communication is the name of the game and to be successful organizing campaigns will have to use these media. Furthermore unions will have to secure the services of imaginative, sympathetic people who understand how to produce a 30-second TV ad for unionism that will work. A few unions are beginning to use these new techniques. The CAW has produced a 'rock video' aimed at younger people but they have had difficulties getting air time. The Public Service Alliance of Canada produced a half hour programme on Global TV. In documentary format it sought to take an objective look at several union issues and the PSAC leadership received internal criticism for allowing members critical of the union administration to air their views on TV. Our own union's Brewery division in Toronto is right now using a series of radio ads to solicit organizing contacts. The response calls are only just beginning to come in.

Canadian labour's goal should be to achieve a unionization rate of more than 50 percent by the year 2000. Difficult though it may be to achieve, the benefits of its attainment would be enormous.

The Challenge of Shaping Public Policy

In a democratic society, majorities matter. Consequently the legitimacy of Canadian labour would receive an enormous boost in the public eye if we could honestly claim the tangible support of more than half the Canadian workforce.

Since the very early days of trade unionism, unionists and their leaders have realized that collective bargaining at the workplace could not alone resolve the concerns of their members as citizens of a complex and ever-changing society. True, some unions have traditionally placed greater emphasis on their role at the workplace ... the so-called 'business unions' while others have always worked hard to influence overall social and economic policy ... the so-called 'social unions.' To be sure, today these different tendencies exist within every single union in varying proportions. All unions now realize that in order to truly represent their members they must be involved in public policy debates beyond the plant gates. That legendary US labour leader Walter Reuther said it best in his presidential address to the delegates at the 1968 UAW Convention.



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