

Right to fight?

Critics question whether unions should save their voices for the bargaining table
James Cowan, National Post

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The Ontario branch of the Canadian Union of Public Employees describes itself on its Web site as a "powerful political voice." The voice quavered this week when a call to bar Israeli academics from Ontario schools drew condemnation from a number of sides -- including some of the union's own members.

The public outrage surprised no one; similar anger erupted in 2006 when CUPE Ontario passed a resolution calling for an international boycott of Israel and again last spring, when the Canadian Union of Postal Workers approved a similar motion. Labour groups asserting themselves politically is not novel, but even ardent supporters are now questioning whether unions should save their voices for the bargaining table.

"Union members pay dues and I would expect those dues go towards bargaining wages and benefits and working conditions," said Bob Dale, a former chief economist for the National Union of Public and General Employees. "I think it is a total abuse of dues money for it to be used to promote hate."

Public debate over the past week has prompted CUPE Ontario to modify its method of protest, according to president Sid Ryan. Members will now be asked to support a ban on collaborations with Israeli universities on conferences, research and other projects, rather than an action targeting individual academics. The change has done little to mollify CUPE members who wonder why their union is taking sides in a distant international dispute.



Debate over a call by CUPE president Sid Ryan, pictured, for a ban on Israeli academics from Ontario schools has prompted the union to modify its method of protest. "This resolution isn't helping ...

"Unions are suppose to help by bringing people together, by understanding common goals," said Aldo Di Carlo, president of CUPE Local 1393, which represents University of Windsor technical workers. "This resolution isn't helping anybody, it's creating further division."

Beyond the Gaza conflict, labour groups frequently take sides in domestic and international conflicts. Many of the rallies that took place across the country in support of the proposed coalition between the Liberals and NDP were organized by organizations such as the Canadian Labour Congress. Meanwhile, CUPE Ontario is also mounting a campaign against the bottled water industry.

"I would think most union members don't follow what happens with their dues," Mr. Dale said. "Only a small minority become union activists. Some of them are out to bargain wages and benefits, but you also get people who are interested in causes that most Canadians aren't interested in."

Fights over the use of union dues for political purposes have been fought before, making it in one instance to the Supreme Court of Canada. In the late '80s, Merv Lavigne, an instructor at the Haileybury School of Mines in Northern Ontario, objected to the Ontario Public Service Employees Union using his dues to support striking

mine workers in the United Kingdom, disarmament campaigns, the NDP and other left-wing political causes. The court dismissed his case in 1991, finding that limiting how unions spend dues would undermine their ability to represent their members.

"Given the difficulty of determining whether a particular case is or is not related to the collective bargaining process, the courts should not involve themselves in drawing such lines on a case-by-case basis," wrote Justice Gerard La Forest.

Furthermore, there is ample recourse available to individuals displeased with their union's position or involvement in a particular political matter, according to Larry Haiven, a management professor at St. Mary's University.

"Unions are fairly democratic organizations, believe it or not," he said. "If the membership doesn't like what the union is doing, they can remove the person that is doing it, vote against the action ... members get a say and they get a chance to raise hell."

Labour leaders say their members do not just tolerate their involvement in social advocacy -- they expect it. The constitution of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), for example, requires the organization's president to advocate for peace.

"The culture of our union, the history of our union is well-documented -- it's a human rights issue," said Ken Lewenza, the current president, adding later, "I think the labour movement plays an integral role in influencing government."

Unions continue to assert themselves even as their overall membership declines. The unionization rate on Canadian workers fell to 31% in 2004 compared with 38% in 1981, according to Statistics Canada. Furthermore, only a few of the country's unions -- CUPE Ontario, CUPW and the CAW among them -- engage in issues beyond their bailiwicks, Prof. Haiven said.

"Most Canadian unions do the straight meat-and-potatoes bargaining," he said. "Even CUPE and CUPW, which are known as political unions, are not particularly political by South American standards or European standards. Our unions are pretty tame."

Mr. Ryan argues that unions around the world have always been at the forefront of social issues. He argued British unions were among the first instigators of the boycott of South Africa during apartheid and that Polish unions led the fight against Communism in that country.

"It was trade unions that made it happen," he said. "There's a rich history. As a matter of fact, the state of Israel, [David Ben-Gurion] the first prime minister, was a trade union leader."

Mr. Ryan's critics question the parallels he draws between his union's current actions against Israel and labour's previous victories. And even if there is something to be gained, observers say it is not CUPE members who will benefit.

"There's no advantage for the union, per se," Prof. Haiven said. "It's just more trouble."

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