

Union relevance waning among younger generations

Public Offerings: Timothy Renshaw

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While we're on the subject of union disaffection: more insights from outside.

Last year around this time, employee rights group LabourWatch squired London-based Westminster Business School dean Len Shackleton around the country on a speaking tour aimed at generating discussion about labour law and the economy and the contrast in how the two work together in Great Britain and Canada.

Colonials not up-to-date on Britain's organized labour experience might have been excused for dismissing the dean as a toffee-nosed meddler parachuted in from a land where at various times during the 20th century, intractable labour union bosses had the country by the economic throat.

But, as it turns out, Britain's organized labour environment, courtesy of a firm guiding hand initiated by Margaret Thatcher and the Iron Lady's 1980s labour law reforms, has largely progressed beyond seniority, work to rule and other union featherbedding.

As recorded in this space, Shackleton, one of Britain's leading experts on labour laws and the economy, was surprised by how much those laws in Canada infringe on liberties and inhibit employment development.

This year, LabourWatch travelled into the socialist heartland of Scandinavia to bring more curious Euros to behold the panoramic wonders of the organized labour landscape in B.C. and elsewhere across the country.

Swedish human rights lawyer Jan Södergren has spearheaded legal challenges in European courts to closed shops, in which union membership is a condition of employment, and the use of union dues to bankroll political agendas.

He has successfully argued that closed shops violate the UN's declaration of human rights and consequently helped pull the plug on the 15,000 that were in his homeland. However, in Canada, unlike most other countries, union membership as a condition of employment is still supported by collective agreements and legislation like the BC Labour Code.

It's an issue, as Södergren argues, of freedom from forced association rather than anything economic.

It's also one of union relevance and practicality.

Banning closed shops in Sweden in 2005 has provided a reality check for Scandinavian organized labour. Södergren said that in 2007 alone, Swedish blue-collar unions lost 97,000 members.

That's proved hard on organized labour's job marketplace muscle and membership fees bank balance in Sweden.

But in the long run, I'd wager it's good for that country's unions.

As Shackleton pointed out in the Public Offerings column chronicling his visit to B.C. last year, the drop in union membership in Britain to six million today from 13 million prior to Thatcher's reforms has forced unions to be more agile, economically responsible and responsive to the needs of younger members.

Södergren likewise predicts that Swedish unions, if they're to remain relevant in the long run, will have to be more attuned to the needs not only of their membership but also of the wider economy. Because confidence in unions, as he points out, is declining, especially among young people.

"In 1994, we had 77% of young people [in the under-25 demographic] joining the union; today it's 52%."

Mandatory membership and the use of union dues to fight political battles members might disagree with are likely not building much confidence in organized labour among today's younger Canadians either.

Many already don't get the brothers and sisters dogma or the need to be a part of the union.

They especially won't get it in cases like the 2007 Vancouver civic workers strike, which, as of this writing, has kept union members on picket lines and disrupted city services for close to three months to further the cause of such antidotes to excellence and initiative as seniority and guaranteed employment.

Young Canadians wouldn't be alone in not getting that. •

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