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CANADIANS AND UNIONS
A NATIONAL READING AT THE
BEGINNING OF THE NEW CENTURY

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1 INTRODUCTION

In the late fall of 2001, the Work Research Foundation commissioned a national survey to update Canadian attitudes towards labour unions, building on its previous surveys in 1997 and 1999.¹ The new survey continued to monitor the views that people have towards unions generally as well as their attitudes towards three specific issues: (1) union-related restrictions on bidding for jobs, (2) mandatory union membership, and (3) the necessity of unions and employers having a confrontational style in their dealings with one another.

Beyond monitoring these ongoing issues, the survey included new items that sought the input of Canadians on two additional questions: (a) where does the best hope for the improvement in pay and working conditions lie? and (b) would greater competition between unions improve the quality of union representation?

To ensure an objective and credible reading of public opinion, the Foundation asked experienced sociologist and social trends analyst Dr. Reginald Bibby of the University of Lethbridge to oversee the project—as it had done in 1997 and 1999. Arrangements were made with the Environics Research Group in Toronto to carry out the data collection as part of Environics' December 2001 national omnibus survey.

A total of eight questions were asked. Three items from the earlier WRF surveys were again included to permit the monitoring of attitudes over time; each of the three also had appeared in earlier Gallup polls. Four new items were written by Dr. Bibby in collaboration with Work Research Foundation and Environics personnel. The eighth question was a background item inquiring about current and previous union involvement; it also appeared in 1997 and 1999.

Environics collected the data by telephone between December 17, 2001 and January 6, 2002, generating a representative sample of 2,030 Canadians 18 and over. A sample of this size permits highly accurate generalizations to the adult population—plus or minus 2.2% 19 times in 20.

¹The findings from the two previous surveys are summarized in Bibby, Reginald W., *Canadians and Unions: A National Survey of Current Attitudes* (Mississauga, Ontario: Work Research Foundation, March 1997), and Bibby, Reginald W., *Canadians and Unions: A National Survey at the Turn of the Century* (Mississauga, Ontario: Work Research Foundation, May 1999). All three reports are available on the Foundation's website, www.wrf.ca.

The new survey continued to monitor the views that people have towards unions generally as well as their attitudes towards three specific issues.



2 ONGOING ISSUES BEING MONITORED

2.1 THE APPROVAL OF UNIONS

The new poll has found that 64% of Canadians say they approve of labour unions, while 32% disapprove. The approval level represents a slight increase from levels that had remained fairly steady at 54–58% between 1970 and 1999. The current level is the highest found in known polls since 1961, when approval stood at 66%. Explicit disapproval of unions is also down somewhat from levels found in the late 1990s.

These days, Canadians are not hesitant to say what they think about unions, in contrast to the 1960s and 1970s when as many as one in seven people told the pollsters they had “no opinion”; the subsequent surveys suggest that most of those who were reluctant to express their views in fact disapproved of unions.

The modest jump in the approval level of unions appear in part to reflect the aging of the population: younger adults in 1997 were more approving than older adults who they are beginning to replace.

The slight increase in union approval is fairly pervasive: it has occurred in all regions with the sole exception of Quebec, among both women and men, and characterizes people of all education and income levels. Approval is up slightly among those who

Table 1. Union Approval: 1961-2001

Year	Approve	Disapprove	No Opinion
2001	64%	32	4
1999	58	38	4
1997	57	39	4
1970	54	30	16
1961	66	23	11

Table 2. Approval of Unions by Select Characteristics: 1997-2001

	% Approving Unions	
	1997	2001
Nationally	57%	64
British Columbia	60	66
Prairies	54	63
Ontario	51	61
Quebec	63	64
Atlantic	66	73
18-34	63	63
35-54	56	66
55+	51	61
Men	55	63
Women	59	65
University	58	66
Some post-secondary	59	63
High school	56	65
Less than high school	53	60
\$60,000 and over	54	60
\$30,000-59,000	61	64
under \$30,000	58	68
Union member currently	83	85
<i>private sector</i>	--	91
<i>public sector</i>	--	82
Union member in past	53	63
Have never been a member	50	56

The new poll has found that 64% of Canadians say they approve of labour unions, while 32% disapprove . . . the highest found in known polls since 1961.



have never been a union member as well as people who previously were members.

Regional differences in the approval of unions remain fairly small, although support continues to be somewhat higher in the *Atlantic* region than elsewhere.

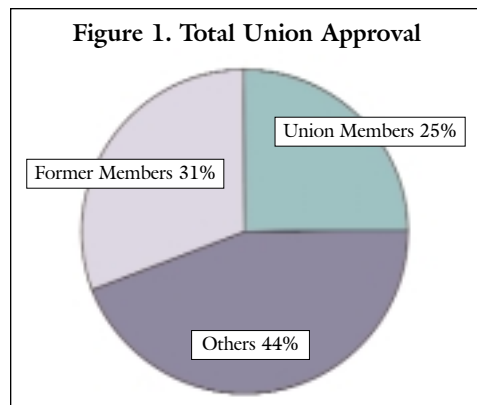
Union approval differs little by *age*, *gender*, and *education*, and there is only a slight negative relationship between approval and *income*.

As would be expected union members—led by people working in the private sector—continue to be considerably more likely to approve of unions than both former members and people who have never been union members.

It again is important to note that, although union members are much more likely than others to approve of unions, approval is hardly restricted to members.

Current members and former members continue to comprise just over half of all Canadians who express approval of unions.

The rest of the support for unions comes from people who personally have never been members of labour unions. Their 44% share remains virtually unchanged from 1999 (42%) and 1997 (44%).



Union approval differs little by age, gender, and education, and there is only a slight negative relationship between approval and income.

2.2 RESTRICTIONS ON BIDDING FOR JOBS

The 2001 survey continued to explore how Canadians view current laws permitting unions to limit the bidding for some jobs. As in 1997 and 1999, the item read,

Currently, under the law, unions can restrict the bidding for some jobs to companies that have contracts with a particular union.

Interviewers once again explained the practice, saying, “For example, a



construction company must award the plumbing contract to companies whose workers belong to a particular union.” They then asked respondents if they “agree” or “disagree” with such restrictions.

Only 29% of Canadians feel that unions should be able to restrict bidding on jobs—up slightly but still fairly similar to 1999 and 1997 levels.

Such a pro-restriction position is held by a minority of people in all *regions* of the country, with very small variations between regions.

Similar to previous findings, restriction sentiments are more common among *union members* than others, especially those 35 to 54; gender differences are insignificant.

However, *former union members*, if anything, are less likely than people who have never been members to approve of bidding restrictions.

Among those who have *never been union members*, sympathy for the right to restrict bidding is highest among those under 55.

2001	29%
1999	23
1997: <i>publicly-funded projects</i>	25
1997: <i>privately-funded project</i>	28
Regionally	
British Columbia	30%
Prairies	27
Ontario	31
Quebec	27
Atlantic	30
Currently a union member	
Private Sector	49
Public Sector	44
18-34	44
35-54	51
55+	39
Men	48
Women	45
Previously a union member	
Have never been a member	
18-34	30
35-54	28
55+	20
Men	26
Women	28

Former union members, if anything, are less likely than people who have never been members to approve of bidding restrictions.

2.3 MANDATORY MEMBERSHIP

An issue that has been monitored now for almost 50 years is mandatory union membership. In 1957, Gallup asked Canadians, “*Do you believe that you, as a qualified worker, should be able to work for anyone willing to hire you, whether or not you belong to a union?*” At the time, 80% said “Yes.” In 1997, when the item was repeated in the WRF survey, the figure was found to have risen to 90%. Significantly, Canadians who agreed with the statement in 1997 included not only 95% of those who had never belonged to a union but also 80% of those who were members at the time.



In the Union of the Majority

In 1966, Gallup addressed the mandatory membership issue again with a slightly different item: “Do you think a person should or should not be required to join a union if he works in a unionized factory or business?” Canadians were almost evenly divided with 52% maintaining that under such circumstances a person should be required to join a union.

In the three WRF Surveys, a slightly different item has been used to probe the same issue. The item attempts to retain a similar meaning to the original Gallup item, while being both more current and more inclusive. It reads as follows:

Present law allows unions to require that all workers in a company join a union if the majority of workers have chosen that union. Should workers in this situation be required to become a member of the union?

Today, the proportion of the population agreeing with the statement stands at 42%—the same as 1999 and similar to the 39% level of 1997.

The expectation of union membership is slightly higher in *British Columbia* and the *Atlantic* region than elsewhere.

As noted in the two previous surveys, a sharp difference exists between *union members* and others. More than 6 in 10 members, younger and older, maintain that workers should have to join the prevalent union, compared to just over 4 in 10 *former members* and 3 in 10 people who have *never been members*.

Such sentiments are more common among *male* union members (69%) than *females* (59%).

Nationally	
2001	42%
1999	42
1997	39
1966	52
Regionally	
British Columbia	46
Prairies	39
Ontario	42
Quebec	41
Atlantic	45
Currently a union member	
Private Sector	75
Public Sector	63
18-34	61
35-54	67
55+	64
Men	69
Women	59
Previously a union member	
Have never been a member	43
18-34	34
35-54	36
55+	30
Men	32
Women	35

A sharp difference exists between union members and others of whom more than 6 in 10 members, younger and older, maintain that workers should have to join the prevalent union, compared to just over 4 in 10 former members and 3 in 10 people who have never been members.



In the Public Sector

The 2001 WRF survey included a new item that probed how Canadians feel about mandatory union or association membership in the public sector.

As you may know, legislation exists that requires some public sector workers—such as teachers, doctors, and government employees—to join a union or association in order to work.

Survey participants were asked the extent to which they agree with such a requirement.

The country is divided right down the middle on support legislation calling for mandatory union and association membership in the public sector: 49% agree it should exist, 49% disagree, and 2% are undecided.

Regional differences are minor, with people from Quebec slightly more inclined than others to support such legislation.

Unions members (71%) are considerably more likely than *previous members* (47%) or people who *have never been union members* (42%) to favour legislation.

Support is almost equal among Canadians who are members of unions in the *private sector* (73%) and those who are members of unions in the *public sector* (71%)—indicating that *7 in 10 people in the public sector are not troubled about union and association membership being a requirement of employment. Conversely, about 3 in 10 public sector workers are not happy with such a legislated demand.*

Among *union members*, support for legislation tends to be lowest among

The country is divided right down the middle on support legislation calling for mandatory union and association membership in the public sector.

Table 5. Mandatory Membership in the Public Sector

% Agreeing With Legislation Requiring Public Sector Workers to Join a Union or Association

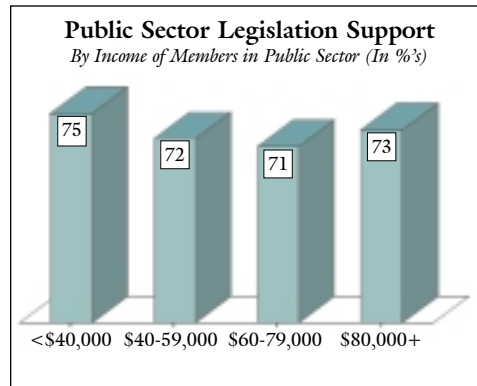
Nationally	49%
Regionally	
British Columbia	47
Prairies	47
Ontario	46
Quebec	55
Atlantic	49
Currently a union member	71
Private Sector	73
Public Sector	71
18-34	66
35-54	74
55+	54
Men	71
Women	66
Previously a union member	47
Have never been a member	42
18-34	47
35-54	46
55+	33
Men	42
Women	43



people 55 and over (54%); that same age group also is the least supportive among people who have *never been union members* (33%).

There are only minor differences between the views of *men* and *women* on such legislation, regardless of whether or not they are or have been union members.

Of interest, an examination of support for mandatory union and association membership in the public sector by the *income* of Canadians who are union members within that sector reveals little variation. Regardless of income level, some 3 in 4 public sector union members favour legislation making membership a requirement of employment while 1 in 4 do not.



Only 7% indicated that they feel a confrontational approach is always necessary, while 51% say it is sometimes required. Another 24% maintain confrontation is rarely necessary and 16% that it is never needed.

2.4 A REDUCTION IN CONFRONTATION

Each of the three WRF surveys have examined Canadians' views about the kind of posture unions and employers should have towards each other. In the 1997, survey participants were reminded, "Historically, unions and employers have often had a confrontational approach to each other." They then were asked, "Do you think such a style is still necessary, or do you think that unions and employers can cooperate?"

The item, because of its second clause, **accentuated cooperation**—and 86% of the nation agreed that unions and employees *can cooperate*. In an attempt to clarify the public's mood, we decided to delete the cooperation emphasis in the 1999 survey, emphasizing instead the issue of whether or not **confrontation is still necessary**. The new item read,

Historically unions and employers have often had a confrontational approach to each other. Do you think such a style is still necessary?

Some 64% indicated that they did not believe confrontation is still necessary, while 31% said it is still is required; 5% were undecided.

In the 2001 survey, the issue was approached slightly differently.



Canadians were read a very similar statement, but the emphasis was not on whether a confrontational style is or is not necessary but rather on the extent to which it *is* necessary in labour relations:

In the past, unions and employers have often had a confrontational approach to each other. Do you think such an approach is always, sometimes, rarely, or never necessary?

Only 7% indicated that they feel a confrontational approach is always necessary, while 51% say it is sometimes required. Another 24% maintain confrontation is rarely necessary and 16% that it is never needed; the remaining 2% said they don't know.

It might be expected that some noteworthy variations on this topic would exist among Canadians, especially when comparing union members and others. Such is *not* the case.

An examination of responses to the question by *region* shows very little variation across the country in how often people think confrontation is necessary.

People *who belong to unions* in the private sector are only slightly more likely (13%) than others (7%) to think that confrontation is always necessary; those who belong to public sector unions differ little from previous members and those who have never been members in their views as to how often confrontation is required.

Differences by *age* and *gender* among union members and people who have never been members are generally very small; what is far more apparent is the widespread agreement on the relative amount of confrontation that needs to be characterizing relations between unions and employers.

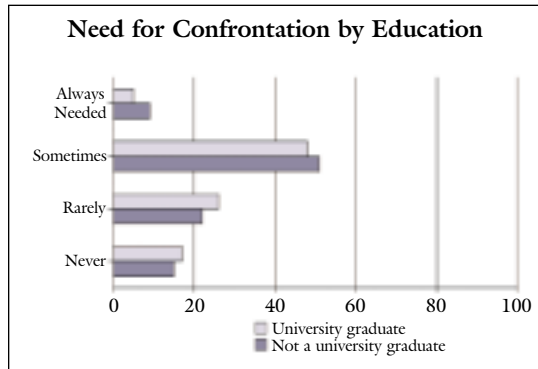
Table 6. Extent to Which Confrontation is Necessary

	Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Totals
Nationally	7%	52	25	16	100
Regionally					
British Columbia	6	57	21	16	100
Prairies	7	49	29	15	100
Ontario	8	52	25	15	100
Quebec	8	51	23	18	100
Atlantic	6	54	27	13	100
Currently a union member	9	54	25	12	100
Private Sector	13	57	20	10	100
Public Sector	7	52	28	13	100
18-34	5	55	29	11	100
35-54	12	54	22	12	100
55+	6	50	30	14	100
Men	10	54	20	16	100
Women	8	55	30	7	100
Previously a union member	7	53	24	16	100
Have never been a member	7	51	25	17	100
18-34	5	55	26	14	100
35-54	9	48	25	18	100
55+	9	48	24	19	100
Men	9	48	25	18	100
Women	7	51	25	17	100



In short, 2 in 4 Canadians see confrontation as *sometimes* required, while 1 in 4 think such an approach is *rarely* needed. Relatively few Canadians, union members and otherwise, take the polar positions of saying a confrontational style in labour relations is *always* or *never* necessary.

To the extent that people are university graduates, they are somewhat less inclined than others to think confrontation is necessary—but not by very much.



3 NEW ISSUES BEING EXPLORED

3.1 BEST POSSIBILITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

The 2001 survey asked Canadians what they see as the best possibility for job improvement:

To the extent employees are not being treated as well as they might be in terms of things like pay and working conditions, do you think the best hope for improvement lies with government regulations, union involvement, or market forces?

Government regulations are seen as the best hope for improvement by 34% of Canadians, union involvement by 30%, and market forces by 25%. Some 5% think a combination of the three factors is involved while 1% cite other factors; 5% said they don't know.

An examination of the three dominant possibilities reveals some important variations across the country. People in the *Atlantic provinces* are slightly more likely than others to see the best hope for improvement lying with government and unions rather than market forces. *Ontario* and *Prairie* residents are somewhat more inclined than others to see “the best hope” as lying with government rather than unions.

Current *union members* differ fairly markedly from *previous members* and especially those who have *never been members* in seeing union involve-

Government regulations are seen as the best hope for improvement by 34% of Canadians, union involvement by 30%, and market forces by 25%.



ment as the best possibility for job improvements. However, public sector members differ from private sector union members in also tending to give importance to government regulations over market forces.

Age and *gender* differences are important: younger adults and women—union members and “never members”—are more likely than others to see government as playing a positive role as well as to downplay market forces.

For example, some 45% of *university graduates* under 35 see government regulations as “the best bet” for improvement, compared to only 23% of people 35 and older who also have degrees.

Table 7. Best Hope for Improvement

	Govt Regs	Union Involvet	Market Forces	Totals
Nationally	38%	34	28	100
Regionally				
British Columbia	34	37	29	100
Prairies	39	30	31	100
Ontario	39	32	29	100
Quebec	37	35	28	100
Atlantic	41	38	21	100
Currently a union member	29	51	20	100
Private Sector	21	54	25	100
Public Sector	31	53	16	100
18-34	48	42	10	100
35-54	20	57	23	100
55+	26	48	26	100
Men	25	53	22	100
Women	35	49	16	100
Previously a union member	35	34	31	100
Have never been a member	44	26	30	100
18-34	51	23	26	100
35-54	37	29	34	100
55+	38	29	33	100
Men	40	24	36	100
Women	47	28	25	100

3.2 GREATER COMPETITION BETWEEN UNIONS

One further new item in the 2001 WRF survey asked Canadians about the possible impact on the quality of union representation if competition existed between unions:

Unions do not typically compete with each other for the right to represent workers. Do you think that if unions could compete with each other, the quality of union representation of workers would improve?

Some 62% offered the opinion that representation would improve if unions could compete with each other while 33% feel it would not improve;² 5% said they do not know.

Support for union competition tends to increase somewhat as one moves eastward across the country, ranging from 52% in *British*

²The response options were 4-point: 21% indicated representation would “definitely improve,” 41% “probably,” 22% said “probably not,” and 11% that it would “definitely not.”



Columbia to 67% in *Quebec* and the *Atlantic* region.

The inclination to think competition would improve the quality of representation differs little between *union members* (64%), *previous members* (62%), and people who have *never been union members* (61%). There also is very little difference in the views of *public sector* and *private sector* members (65% and 61% respectively).

Age and *gender* differences likewise are minor: union members 35 to 54 are a bit more likely than others to think competition would be a good thing, while—among those who have never been members—older adults are not as convinced as others that competition would result in improved representation.

What is interesting here is that the belief that union competition would enhance representation is held by about 60% of Canadians. Yet, within regions and union and social subcategories, the 60-40 split remains remarkably uniform. An examination by *education* further documents such uniformity: 61% of university graduates think competition would be a plus, compared to 63% of people with some post-secondary, 60% of high school grads, and 63% with less than high school.

Table 8. Support for Competition for Union Representation	
<i>% Indicating Quality of Union Representation Would "Definitely" or "Probably" Improve if Unions Could Compete with Each Other</i>	
Nationally	62%
Regionally	
British Columbia	52
Prairies	60
Ontario	61
Quebec	67
Atlantic	67
Currently a union member	64
Private Sector	61
Public Sector	65
18-34	60
35-54	67
55+	59
Men	65
Women	62
Previously a union member	62
Have never been a member	61
18-34	64
35-54	63
55+	54
Men	60
Women	62

Within regions and union and social subcategories, the 60-40 split remains remarkably uniform.

4 CONCLUSION

The level of approval of unions is currently higher than it has been in some forty years. While approval levels are understandably high among people who are union members in both the private and public sectors, there also have been increases in approval levels in recent years among both former members and people who have never been union members.



This is not to say all Canadians are enamoured with unions. Despite the approval gains, one in three people across the country say they do not approve of unions. Significantly, rather than such people coming from a particular region or a single demographic, they are fairly evenly distributed across regions and key social categories—age, gender, education, and income.

The fact of the matter is that those who are most positive about unions are members; presumably most feel that they know significant benefits from being represented by their unions.

But it is somewhat disconcerting to see high levels of disparity over time between the approval levels of members and former members—83% for members and 53% for former members in 1997, an improved but still disparate 85% and 63% respectively as of the latest survey.

Table 9. Attitudes Toward Union Policies by Approval and Disproval of Unions

	% In Agreement	
	Approve of Unions	Disapprove of Unions
Legislation requiring public sector membership	63%	22%
Mandatory membership in union of majority	55	19
Restricting bidding to union-related companies	39	11
Confrontation always or sometimes needed	65	47
Improvemet in representation if unions competed	66	55

Disenchantment with unions on the part of many former members and those who have never been members in part seems to be associated with some longstanding practices and approaches that are out of touch with the freedom and civility themes pervasive in today's culture. They include (1) mandatory union membership, (2) the restricting of bidding to union-related companies, and (c) the use of a confrontational style in dealing with employers. It also is noteworthy that a majority of people who both approve and disapprove of unions think that competition between unions would contribute to better representation.

It's clear that Canadians are not looking in the same places for job improvements. *Union members* are inclined to see their best hope for change as lying with their unions. People who have *never been members* think "the best bet" rests with government regulations. *Past union members* are equally inclined to see the best hope for improvements lying with government, unions, and market forces.

Disenchantment with unions on the part of many former members and those who have never been members in part seems to be associated with some longstanding practices and approaches that are out of touch with the freedom in today's culture.