



In this exclusive series, National Post looks at the role of unions in the Canadian workplace. Much of the content is based on a poll of Canadians commissioned by the Canadian LabourWatch Association and conducted this August by Leger Marketing. The series ran September 2 to 5, 2003.

Canadians prefer the My Way ethos

Non-union workers more satisfied with jobs than unionized

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Job satisfaction is not as high among unionized employees as it is among non-unionized workers. This news will come as a surprise to some readers and not to others.

Surprise or not, a National Post/Global National poll commissioned by LabourWatch and conducted by Leger Marketing makes for interesting reading on the state of mind of union workers compared to their non-union counterparts.

With the exception of the benefits package, on most other factors that make their jobs satisfying, many more non-union workers are happier than ones with union cards.

While 53% of unionized workers are "very satisfied" with the level of safety in their workplace, 66% of non-union workers are "very satisfied."

When it comes to flexibility at the office or factory to address personal and family needs, 55% of union members were "very satisfied." Sixty-six per cent of non-union workers, however, were "very satisfied" with how their firms help them balance work and home chores.

Going down the list -- job responsibilities, relationship with managers, training opportunities and job advancement -- many more non-union workers are happier than are unionized ones.

And when overall job satisfaction is compared, more non-unionized employees feel much better about their jobs and workplace than do unionized workers.

There are some very good reasons for these poll results, some related to union rules and some not.

First, there has been a cultural shift in our society. That shift can be best captured by Paul Anka's song My Way. This individualistic ethic goes against the collective ethos preached and practiced by unions.

Today, employees want customized solutions at their workplace so that they can better balance work and family. These kinds of arrangements are not something that rigid union contracts are able to provide as easily as non-union ones can.

Part of this change in culture comes across clearly in the poll. Only 28% of union members are "very satisfied" with their own union's representation of their interests.

The increase in the number of workers who are filing grievances against their own unions for not representing them fairly is another indication of the clash between the individual and collective ethic that is at play.

In Ontario alone, the number of complaints by employees against their own unions has increased by 50% since the mid-1990s, and they outnumber the number of unfair labour practice complaints filed by unions against employers.

Second, most unionized employees work at some of the largest firms in the country. So it is easy to feel like just one cog in the wheel, under appreciated and under valued. Contrast this state of affairs with a lot of non-union employees who work in small and medium-sized enterprises, where they feel like somebody and for the most part appreciated and valued for their contributions.

Third, a majority of union workers are employed in the broad public sector -- civil service, hospitals, schools and universities. Arguably, these are not exactly work environments where dynamism, risk-taking and success is celebrated. In the private sector, however, these are the very things that are looked upon with considerable favour.

Fourth, seniority-based promotions, wage increases and lay-off decisions that predominate unionized workplaces don't meet the My Way sentiment of employees. That is why over 70% of those surveyed would prefer that merit and performance guide promotions, wage packets and layoffs, all of which the private sector offers.

Fifth, a lot of collective bargaining agreements don't allow for flexible work arrangements -- moving from one job to another or doing several tasks at once. Workers who desire to be challenged, learn something new and move up the ladder get frustrated in such circumstances -- not the right conditions for boosting employee morale.

For business purposes, having a group of employees who are happy is not an end itself. It's a means to an end. And that end is a growing business that is increasingly profitable.

When satisfied workers are combined with the latest and best machinery and equipment as well as state-of-the-art research and development, they tend to be more productive and produce more profits.

In fact, a study from the World Bank titled "Unions and Collective Bargaining: Economic Effects in a Global Environment" suggests that non-union firms are much more competitive and profitable than unionized ones.

A winning firm -- capturing more market share, making larger profits and increasing the share price -- is also one that can provide better wages and benefits to its employees over the long-term.

So who can blame the many Canadians who feel much more satisfied in a non-union setting as opposed to a union shop?

Part two of a four-part series

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