



STATE of the UNIONS

A NATIONAL POST / GLOBAL NATIONAL LABOUR DAY POLL

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.

Fertile new ground difficult to find

Peter Brieger

Financial Post - Page FP 1 - September 2, 2003

The influence of Canada's unions is waning and membership is on the decline. Can the trend be reversed? In the first of a four-part series, the National Post unveils one of the most comprehensive polls ever conducted on Canadians' attitudes toward organized labour.

When employees at a Wal-Mart Stores Inc. outlet in northern Manitoba rejected union representation last month, it was a bitter pill for labour leaders to swallow.

For months, the union had been trying to break into the world's largest retailer -- only to be stymied by staff who didn't see the need for representation.

Some staff members in Thompson, a long-time union town, wondered aloud at the sense of paying dues for what they claimed to already have: competitive wages and benefits, plus good working conditions.

As the new economy continues to shed thousands of jobs in labour's traditional manufacturing base -- shrinking its share of the working population to 26% from more than 40% three decades ago, according to Statistics Canada -- service-sector employees, such as Wal-Mart associates, represent new and fertile ground.

However, not all employees appear willing to accept labour's overtures, according to a new National Post/Global National poll commissioned by LabourWatch and conducted by Leger Marketing.

In the telephone poll of 1001 working Canadians, Leger Marketing found that 81% of non-union employees had no interest in becoming unionized. About the same percentage of unionized respondents wanted to keep their workplaces organized.



CREDIT: Peter Redman, National Post

Michael Fraser is national director of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union, which led the Wal-Mart union push in Thompson, Man.



CREDIT: Glenn Lowson, National Post

Unions have been trying and failing to break into such huge service-sector employers as retail giant Wal-Mart.

The study noted that employees in the first group, one-third of whom had been in a union before, tended to be younger than unionized participants, were less educated and more likely to be employed in sales or administrative jobs at small, private-sector employers (those with less than 50 staff).

"These are people who are individualists and they don't think they should surrender any of their individual rights in favour of group rights," said Anil Verma, an industrial relations professor at the University of Toronto's Joseph L. Rotman School of Management. "This is a group that believes a union is an infringement of their own rights and ability to deal with employers directly."

Mr. Verma noted that such "individualists" have always formed a portion of the working population. A new group of knowledge-based workers has also emerged, such as those in the high-tech industry, who feel they are mobile with enough marketable skills that they can walk out the door if a company doesn't treat them fairly, he said. Such workers tend to see labour laws as a sufficient guard against unfair labour practices, he added.

"Those people feel that if they can't work things out with their employer, they can always quit and find another job," he said. "All of this makes the case that unions are not necessary."

Mr. Verma, however, cautioned that most Canadian workers don't share that experience.

"It's a good principle, but in practice I don't believe that is the reality," he said. "Even though some workers feel they can deal with employers on their own, there is always a power balance in favour of the employer."

That is a key selling point for unions as they try to build up membership decimated by sweeping job cuts, according to Michael Fraser, national director for the United Food and Commercial Workers Union, which spearheaded the Wal-Mart organizing campaign in Thompson.

Mr. Fraser noted that most fired workers don't realize they have little recourse against employers under provincial labour laws, except to guarantee severance pay.

Moreover, unionized workers in comparable industries tend to make more than their non-union counterparts, while gaining access to a process for workplace grievances, the union leader said.

As well, some knowledge based workers, especially those in high tech who were left with nothing when their employer went bust, might begin to view unions differently now, labour leaders say.

"The [survey] results don't surprise me that much," he said. "If you ask someone whether they want to join a union -- yes or no -- a lot of people don't think they need a union and haven't put much thought into it."

Some companies have also moved in on labour's traditional turf by installing on-site grievance procedures to placate disgruntled employees. Meanwhile, employers often match pay and benefits at unionized rivals, either to stay competitive or keep union organizers at bay.

"Unions no longer have monopoly over good wages and benefits," Mr. Verma said. "Over the years, that hold has eroded."

The total margin of error for 1,001 respondents is plus or minus 3.10 percentage points 19 times out of 20.

Part one of a four-part series.; For more information on the National Post/Global National poll please go to www.nationalpost.com; The not-for-profit Canadian LabourWatch Association provides information about unionization for employees and employers. The association's Web site can be found at www.labourwatch.com.; pbrieger@nationalpost.com

© Copyright 2003 National Post