



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.

Labour gets more than its due

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Canadians are free to join a union and pay union dues. But thanks to some convoluted Supreme Court rulings, Canadians are not free to not join unions, nor are they free to not pay union dues.

The result of this warped distortion of freedom of association -- which forces people to do something against their will -- is a compulsory money machine that transfers hundreds of millions of dollars from workers to union leaders.

The vast majority of the money, collected tax-free, is used in collective bargaining and union operations related to members. But substantial sums -- nobody knows precisely how or how much -- are spent each year on political, social and economic causes many union members would not voluntarily support.

When masses of anti-WTO demonstrators stormed the streets of Seattle and Quebec City, Canadian union money helped foot the bill. When NDP Leader Jack Layton marched at the head of the union-organized Labour Day parade, he marched as a politician who receives funding from union dues. When the Centre for Policy Alternatives in Ottawa issues a report urging massive increases in government spending, union dues are behind the report. When groups with high-sounding names like the Canadian Health Coalition mount opposition to for-profit health care, few Canadians know the group is a union front funded by union dues.

The list of union causes outside bargaining and operations is in fact endless, running from pro-abortion campaigns to anti-privitization jihads to war missions designed to defeat specific politicians during elections -- not to mention labour's relentless crusade against all forms of free trade.

All of this takes place even though, as found by the National Post/Global National poll on work and unions, most working Canadians disagree with the political use of union dues. When asked whether dues should be used to support political parties, advocacy groups, and advertising campaigns, 76% of union members disagreed to some degree. More than half said they "completely disagree" with such union spending. The majority of Canadians also appear to believe that it is inappropriate for unions to spend dues on political and other causes without member support.

Few politicians are willing to take on union freedom to use union dues for political and ideological causes. Ontario's Progressive Conservatives have an election platform clause that appears to promise legislation that would force unions to submit spending on non-

union operations to a binding membership vote. But the clause is vague, and does not appear to subject extracurricular spending to a full majority membership vote.

As any union member who has seen his dues spent on moral and political causes he disagrees with, even abhors, there's not much individuals can do. Union politics, with its subtle and not-so-subtle coercion techniques, usually doesn't leave a lot of room for minority action. But in this modern world of computers and sophisticated technology, it should be possible to return union dues to the control of individual members.

One technique would give each union member a choice, a check-off form with a list of options. Members could chose to support or not support funding of the NDP, anti-free trade campaigns, anti-poverty groups, abortion movements, the Oregon Farmworkers Union and government procurement regulations that drive up taxes that union members also pay. If members support such programs individually, let them make that choice individually.

Union leaders, however, are unlikely to support individual choice. They prefer collective systems and mass votes, often under difficult conditions, that limit options. Anything that smacks of member freedom is a threat to union control over dues. And with control over dues goes control over the union movement, the vast powerful force that shapes so much of Canadian political and economic life.

With membership dues, unions amass war chests that allow their leaders to retain significant influence over the education system, health care, all government services and contracts, garbage collection, water systems, and scores of major industries. In sector after sector, change and improvement that would improve service and efficiency are impossible. New ways of service and product delivery are resisted and denied because of union opposition.

Until the laws that force Canadians to join unions they might not want to join, and pay dues they would rather not pay, are changed, unions and the dues they collect will remain the entrenched power bases of Canada's union leaders.

Part three of a four-part series. tcorcoran@nationalpost.com

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