



STATE of the UNIONS

A NATIONAL POST / GLOBAL NATIONAL LABOUR DAY POLL

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

No market for unions? Ask Gencie Marshall

A receptionist's dismissal from a private school two years before her retirement date illustrates why we still need unions, says Canada's top labour boss

Ken Georgetti

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True to its neo-conservative form, the National Post marked Labour Day by launching a week-long journalistic feeding frenzy on organized labour.

Day after day, Post readers were told unions were a spent force -- out of step with their members and shunned by workers not yet unionized. The evidence that unleashed this print avalanche? A dubious poll sponsored by a laughably partisan client (more about that below).

Pity no one told all this to Gencie Marshall. After a decade as a loyal employee of Havergal College (the private Toronto girls' school), the 63-year-old receptionist was summarily dismissed two years before her retirement. A woman of colour, Ms. Gracie had complained about the lack of visible minority staff.

In a delicious irony, her story appeared on the front page of the National Post the day it concluded its week-long assault on labour. I could hear the grinding of teeth in the editorial boardroom all the way to Ottawa. Nothing like the truth to get in the way of a good story!

Sadly, Ms. Marshall had no union to protect her. A union would have provided a grievance process, representation and an anti-discrimination clause in a collective agreement. Instead, she mounted a one-woman picket in an attempt to embarrass Havergal. In gaining media attention, it didn't hurt that her daughter is pop singer Amanda Marshall. However, not everyone can draw on such connections to publicize or redress workplace problems.

As for the Post's poll, readers are served up more ideology than information. First of all, who is this virtually unknown "LabourWatch" that drew up the survey? The Post fails to identify it in its front-page article kicking off the series.



CREDIT: Peter Redman, National Post

Gencie Marshall outside of Havergal.

LabourWatch turns out to be a virtual Who's Who of vehemently anti-labour organizations -- the National Citizens Coalition, provincial contractors associations, small business coalitions and dozens of management-side law firms. These groups are united in their determination to deny workers their fundamental right under the Charter of Rights to join a union.

LabourWatch trumpets that it "strives to be neutral." It appears to misunderstand the meaning of the word. My Oxford Dictionary defines neutral as "taking neither side, or impartial." However, LabourWatch proudly offers advice on "how to revoke a union card, how to decertify a union and what unions cannot guarantee." It provides downloadable information on decertification and cancellation of a union card. Such "neutrality" gave birth to the Post's poll.

And what of the Post's own conflict of interest? Its newsroom, alone among the four Toronto-based daily newspapers, is unorganized. Enough said.

It is a truism that any poll can get the answers it wants if you cook the questions. Media outlets rightly demand the full methodology, complete list of questions and cross-tabulations of any CLC-commissioned poll that we take public. Yet, we have been refused access to this information in your own poll.

A careful reading of your series also fails to find any comment from Leger Marketing, the polling firm that fielded the poll designed by LabourWatch. Pollsters are not known for their media shyness. Lack of comment from the professionals at Leger is conspicuous by its absence.

Interestingly enough, there were some pro-union responses that not even the most slanted questions and biased editing could squelch. More than four out of five union members were satisfied with their union. In fact, almost one in three Post poll respondents said they were "very satisfied" with their union. This hardly sounds, as the Post claims, that labour is out of step with its members.

Given the heightened public cynicism prevailing with regard to all organizations, that is a phenomenal level of satisfaction. Stephen Harper -- Alliance Party leader and past head of the aforementioned National Citizens Coalition - would likely sell his soul to Karl Marx to reach half that approval rating!

The Post poll reported that the vast majority -- 79% -- of union members say they receive good communications from their leaders. Investors should be so lucky. Organized labour is democratic and transparent in a way shareholders could only wish Canadian corporations were. And, unlike big business, we obtain a mandate for all our activities.

Anil Verma, the University of Toronto industrial relation professor, was quoted in one of the articles as noting: "There is always a power balance in favour of the employer." Are we to say that it's fine for the already-dominant corporate community to throw its political weight around, but not so for organized labour?

The Post also relishes in the fact that only one in five unorganized workers is interested in joining a union. Given the general anti-union media bias and our own lack of such tools of mass communication, it is remarkable that more than two million Canadians who would sign up if given an opportunity. This number does not begin to consider the many more

who keep an open mind and would probably join after a full and fair discussion of the issue.

Joining a union is an individual decision. A choice made by thousands of Canadians every year. Individuals like Gencie Marshall. And that will ensure the continued vitality and strength of organized labour.

The Canadian Labour Congress has been here for well over a century. And we'll still be here long after the National Post has disappeared -- sunk by an imported neo-conservative agenda out of step with the fundamental decency and sense of fair play of the Canadian people.

Ken Georgetti is president of the Canadian Labour Congress.

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