



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.

Poll finds deep divide on unions

Those who are in want to stay in; those who are out want to stay out

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Another Labour Day gone, off into the oblivion of annual non-events along with the usual load of rhetoric from Big Labour about the oppression of the Canadian worker and the crucial role of the union movement. Ken Georgetti, head of the Canadian Labour Congress, said in his Labour Day message to the nation that unions plan to refocus their efforts and spend the next couple of months assisting workers in getting the economic respect they deserve. The CLC slogan: "Is your work working for you?"

Not a winning marketing strategy, judging by the first major National Post/Global National poll on work and unions in Canada commissioned by LabourWatch and conducted by Leger Marketing. As Canadians head off to work today, they'll be whistling a surprising tune: "Take this job and love it." When asked if their work is working for them, a stunning 93% of working Canadians said yes. More than half -- 53% -- said they're very satisfied with their work; another 40% said they are somewhat satisfied.

Canadians, in other words, aren't exactly toiling away in exploitation hell waiting for the union organizer to come to the rescue. Despite union rhetoric, the poll also shows a staggering number of Canadians know exactly what they would say if a union organizer did come knocking: "Take your union and shove it." Among the 68% of Canadians who are not now members of a union, 81% said they do not want and do not need a union.

Even more surprising, perhaps, is the revelation that non-union employees are more likely to be very satisfied with their jobs than unionized employees.

Non-union employees like their work environment better and enjoy greater flexibility in addressing personal and family needs, better job responsibilities, better relationships with management, better training and better job advancement opportunities.

The broad and deep union-free sentiment revealed in the poll may explain why unions are having such a tough time organizing even the least-well-paid retail and service workers. After years of effort, millions of dollars and despite labour laws that favour union organization, the United Food and Commercial Workers has failed to get its nose into the Wal-Mart tent. Even in a union town such as Thompson, Man., Wal-Mart employees voted against union membership.

But there's more to worry unions here than general worker crankiness about the usefulness or desirability of union membership. The poll highlights the great fallacy behind the historical rise and entrenched power of organized labour.

After decades of mythical struggles based on slogans of class warfare, worker oppression and exploitation, the entire union movement shows up in the poll as an ideological sham.

Self-portrayed as the champion of downtrodden masses of working men and women, the union movement emerges today as the iron protector of a privileged minority. The alleged saviours of a struggling underclass are in fact the armed guardians of the fortresses of a relatively wealthy overclass.

The poll shows only 32% of Canadians are union members, and the vast majority of those union members (81%) want to hold on to union status. They are generally better educated (more likely college or university) than non-union workers, are members of well-paid professional and service organizations such as teachers and nurses, and are significantly older. More than 45% of union members are more than 45 years old. And they mostly work for big government (72%) and big business.

None of this is unexpected. All of the figures roughly correspond to other workplace statistics. What is surprising is the degree to which union members want to hold on to union status compared with the large proportion of non-union Canadians who want nothing to do with unions. Few Canadians pine for union rescue, perhaps because they see fewer benefits of membership than they already enjoy.

But there are other reasons non-union Canadians have little use for unions. The poll shows Canadians have a deep sense of fairness and principle when it comes to their jobs and workplaces. They don't care much for union seniority and prefer instead job advancement and layoff policies that are based on merit. A large majority of all working Canadians (76%) oppose government contract rules that favour unionized companies. Canadians want secret ballots on union certification and de-certification. They generally oppose the use of union funds for non-union activities.

These aren't the views of a nation of union collectivists and socialists who see their work and living conditions in constant deterioration and in need of union rescue.

In fact, almost nobody thinks unions are a "very positive" force behind Canada's growth and economic success. Nor are they much taken with governments as national economic saviours. Canadians see business as the engine of growth, especially small business.

While only 12% of Canadians view unions very positively, 67% see small business as the nation's most positive economic driver. Combined, 96% of Canadians look to small business and 79% to big business as the major contributors to economic well-being, well ahead of governments and unions.

Mr. Georgetti's message to workers is that "organizing workers into unions gets results." He said they are "tried, tested and true." Few Canadians believe him, however.

The National Post/Global National poll paints a post-Labour Day portrait of Canadians who love their jobs, respect and have good relationships with their mostly private-sector employers, and who are more than happy to make their way in the work world without having a union boss by their side.

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