



# 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.

## Union members don't want dues going to politics

*76% oppose party support*

### Wojtek Dabrowski

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New data suggest that most unionized workers don't back their leaders in spending their union dues on supporting political causes.

Instead, they want the money spent on shop issues -- namely bargaining for compensation and working conditions -- at their place of work.

A National Post/Global National poll commissioned by LabourWatch and conducted by Leger Marketing found that 76% of unionized workers don't want their contributions being shuffled into political-party coffers or advocacy groups and advertising campaigns.

"[Unions] should not align themselves with any political leanings," said a sales consultant at a Toronto-area The Brick furniture warehouse who is represented by the Canadian Auto Workers.

"We can express our concern but not use our money directly," he said. "I can understand that, but not more than that."

Instead, almost 90% of Canadians overall -- including the sales consultant -- agree that the bargaining and employee needs of the workplace which the union local serves are an appropriate way to spend dues.

Recently, Canada's unions have been involved in political causes ranging from the elimination of child poverty and improving workers' rights in developing nations.

Canadian Auto Workers president Buzz Hargrove was surprised by the strong opposition of currently unionized workers reported in the poll.

"I reject the finding," Mr. Hargrove said in an interview.



**CREDIT: David Clark, CanWest News Service**

**Labour leader Ken Georgetti defends the donation of union dues to political parties saying it's not done based on "the whim of the individual."**

"I believe as long as the union leadership goes to membership for approval of expenditures, there is absolutely nothing wrong," adding his union continues to support "progressive candidates," including NDP politicians in Ontario.

His comments yesterday came more than 10 years after a large CAW local at a General Motors plant in Oshawa, Ont., voted to cut its affiliation with the NDP.

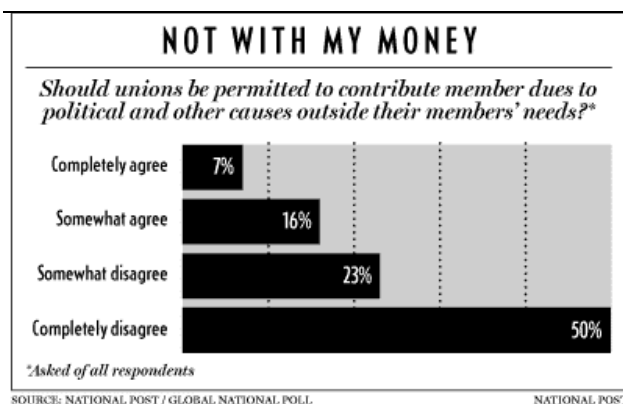
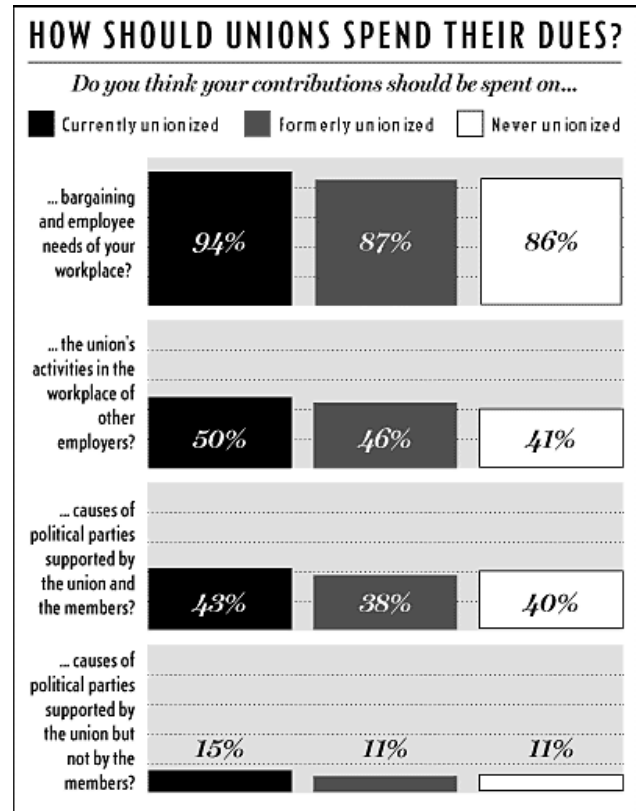
Workers complained their contributions were being spent on helping the party. Others accused the local of paying certain members to "hustle" votes for the NDP during the federal and provincial elections.

While union leaders say the process by which spending decisions are made is democratic, critics of organized labour say the issue is one of workers' choice.

In Canada, those wishing to work where a union exists have little choice but to join and/or pay dues to the existing union, depending on the region in which the workplace is located.

Jason Clemens, an analyst with the Fraser Institute, said this simply guarantees membership, often along with dues, thus putting little pressure on unions to be "responsive or representative of members."

The unions can thus end up representing causes which clash directly with the politics of their members, he added.



Mr. Hargrove fired back by saying that "only 19% of private-sector workplaces are organized in Ontario and it's even lower in the national average" -- so there's plenty of choice for those who don't like unions.

Ken Georgetti, president of the Canadian Labour Congress, added that "when [unions] decide to donate money to a political party, it goes to their membership" for a vote. "It's not by the whim of the individual."

Mr. Georgetti also disagreed with the poll's findings on the use of dues, saying "generally, our members are satisfied. Are there individual members with different views? Of course."

And if enough members are dissatisfied with the union's actions, "there are votes," said federal NDP leader Jack Layton in an interview.

"The thing about joining a union is ... that you're becoming part of a democratic structure."

Part three of a four-part series.

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](http://www.labourwatch.com) and [www.infotravail.ca](http://www.infotravail.ca). [wdabrowski@nationalpost.com](mailto:wdabrowski@nationalpost.com)

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