



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.

Unionized workers less happy at work

National Post poll

Peter Brieger

Financial Post - Pages FP1 & 3 - Wednesday, September 3, 2003

When Carolyn Egan's workplace became unionized in the mid-1980s, management - employee relations were pretty good, but employees had big concerns about job security and wage gains.

Almost two decades later, the 52-year-old health-care worker at a clinic in Toronto, represented by the United Steelworkers of America, doesn't see much reason for not signing up.

"With budget cuts and salary issues, it just seemed to make more sense to have the protection of a union," she said. "I personally don't see what the downside is. Unionized workers usually make better wages and have better pensions than [non-union workers]. I think any worker would be better off in a union."

However, despite the apparent pay and benefit advantages, rank-and-file union members may actually be less satisfied with their workplaces than other employees, according to a new National Post/Global National poll.

The poll, commissioned by LabourWatch and conducted by Leger Marketing, found that a "staggering" 93% of respondents were satisfied with their jobs. But the poll also revealed that, for the most part, non-union workers are happier than unionized employees.

Union workers were less satisfied when it came to relations with management -- 18% were dissatisfied, double the percentage for non-union workers -- while their feelings toward learning and training opportunities at work were also gloomier with an 19% dissatisfaction level, compared with 12% for other workers.

Union employees also reported a higher level of dissatisfaction with job advancement opportunities.

For questions posed only to union respondents, 79% gave a positive evaluation of their relationships and communication with union leaders. However, 27% reported being dissatisfied with the manner in which their unions represented their concerns.



CREDIT: Peter Redman
National Post

Carolyn Egan, a Toronto health-care worker represented by the United Steelworkers of America, says she is glad that her interests are being represented by a union, especially after watching the collapse of energy trader Enron where thousands of employees lost their pensions.

Even in areas like work safety, fewer non-union employees expressed dissatisfaction (5% versus 10%). The same is true when it comes to the job itself, work responsibilities and being given the flexibility to address family needs.

A recently released Statistics Canada survey of 24,000 workers in 6,400 workplaces found that unionized workers were a lot less likely than non-union colleagues to garner satisfaction from filing a grievance, despite formal systems being in place to address such complaints.

For union critics who argue that organized labour is no longer relevant in today's economy, the results come as little surprise.

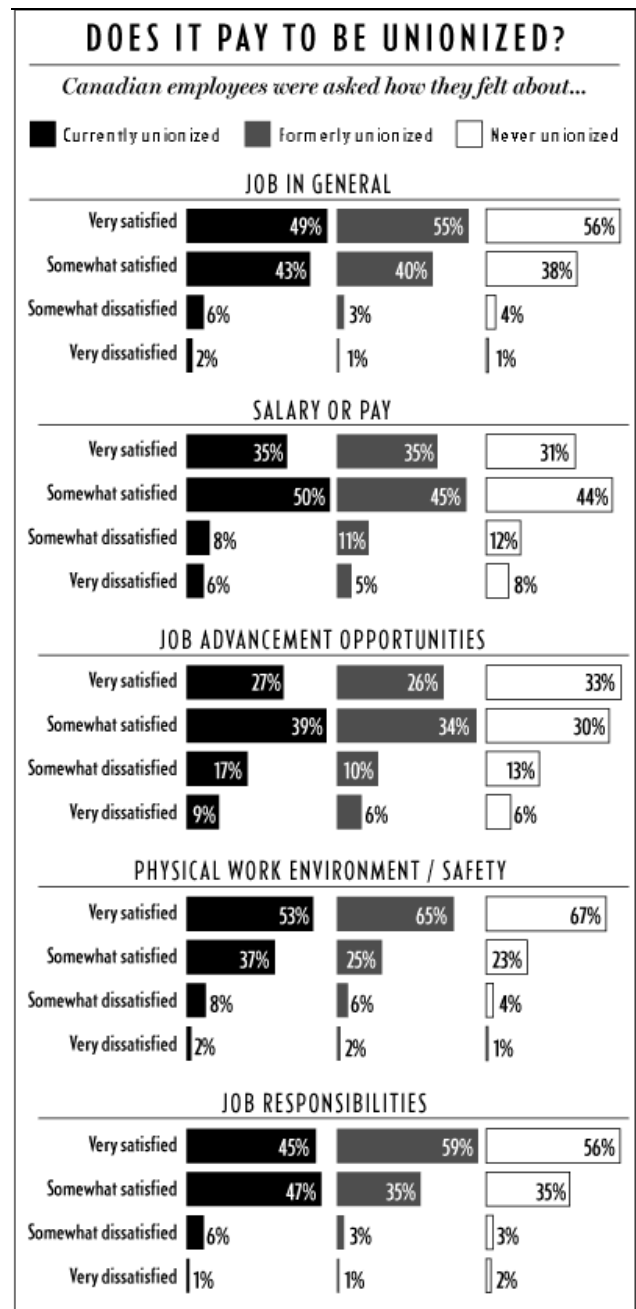
Collective agreements filled with rigid work rules curtail any chance of injecting flexibility into an office or factory, for employers and employees, they say, while fiery rhetoric demonizing management -- especially during contract negotiations -- is an outdated style that results in poor worker-employer relations.

Moreover, they argue that seniority rules quash employee hopes for merit-based advancement. And the survey suggests, even workplace safety is not always guaranteed to be better under union stewardship: Toyota's non-union factories in Canada often record fewer workplace accident than unionized Big Three plants, for example.

Some labour leaders, including Buzz Hargrove, president of the Canadian Auto Workers union, acknowledge that a militant approach to relations with management isn't always very productive, while others concede that rigid work rules can limit flexibility.

However, high job dissatisfaction levels may also be explained by continuous rounds of layoffs and salary cuts, especially in some sectors of the heavily unionized public sector, said Judy Darcy, national president of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, the country's largest union.

"One thing that strikes me is that there has been a lot of change in workplaces over the last few years and employees are incredibly more stressed than they ever were before," she said.



SOURCE: NATIONAL POST / GLOBAL NATIONAL POLL

NATIONAL POST

In fact, the high-profile collapse of big employers may actually drive organizing, especially in non-traditional workplaces, she said.

"There were a lot of people left high and dry without any pension or pay," she said of Enron's demise. "At least with a union, they might have had a chance to get something.

"With a lot of people feeling insecurity at work and being asked for concessions on things like health benefits, I think there are many cases where people who didn't see themselves as organized workers are now looking seriously at unions."

Part two 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 and www.infotravail.ca. pbrieger@nationalpost.com

© Copyright 2003 National Post