

Give Labour Day back to the workers

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Most job-holding Canadians do not belong to unions and express absolutely no wish to join. That's the most striking and (in numerical terms) the most convincing conclusion that emerges from the Nanos Research national survey of 1,000 employees.

Behind that single fact we can glimpse a major change in Canadian society, the slow but apparently inevitable death of a once-vibrant force in national life. Unions see themselves as a key to the good life: high incomes, job security, decent pensions, workplace safety. But for some reason this attractive package attracts few buyers. In a service economy unions are now offering a service that relatively few citizens want.

The shrinking of union membership, everywhere except in the government sector, has been noticeable for years. Those old enough to remember the powerful and terrifying unions of the mid-20th century have found it astonishing to watch unions lose battle after battle -- especially the battle against foreign manufacturers and their branch plants in Canada and their own struggle for political influence. The impact of the unions has shrunk even within the New Democratic Party, which they helped found.

The Nanos survey shows that the downward trend in membership persists. Non-union workers fill about three-quarters of the jobs in Canada, an increase of 6% since 2003. Only about a quarter of Canadian employees now belong to unions, a relatively lonely minority.

Given this trend, we can easily imagine a time when unionism will retreat to the one place it remains comfortable, government offices, where nervous politicians take great care to protect it.

When the pollsters asked non-unionized workers whether they hope to be represented by a union someday, nearly eight out of 10 said "No". They apparently don't listen to, or aren't influenced by, neighbours and friends who belong to unions. Most union members say their union helps them get fair treatment from employers. They want to remain unionized. (A minority, amounting to about a quarter, say that if given the choice they would prefer not to be).

But why has union membership lost its allure? Non-unionized workers are, after all, outside the collective bargaining system and must often envy its achievements. Moreover, they are unable to call on union representatives when they have a quarrel with employers. Uncaring managers can dismiss them much more easily than if a union existed to protect them.

Traditional logic suggests that they need unions.

Their rejection of this notion must result from observation of unions in public and perhaps the experience of friends, picked up in conversation. Perhaps they believe that the benefits simply don't justify the aggravation or the cost. Perhaps they shudder at the prospect of having their working lives permanently locked within the rules created by professional bureaucrats in unions. Perhaps they are repelled by the persistent anger and suspicion that seems to be a part of union-management relations, and by the cavalier indifference with which many unions

treat the withdrawal of essential public services. These are questions arising from the cultural atmosphere of society -- questions of morality, taste and independence of spirit.

My own experience will seem purely marginal to, say, workers who produce auto parts. Others may find them relevant.

My lifelong observation suggests a simple rule: Craft unions, once established, are soon dominated by ambitious, bureaucracy-minded members who care not at all about whatever craft provides the foundation for the work everyone in the union does.

I remember the establishment of the newspaper guild in Canada and the fairly swift takeover of power by people who weren't journalists but came from the non-journalistic part of the business and showed no interest in what the newspapers did for readers and communities. I remember when the mediocrities took over the performing arts unions and those who were either performers or artists of quality were pushed into the background. I recall joining the Writers' Union in Canada in 1973 when it was founded by distinguished authors, then watching as the board of directors came under the control of people whose relation to literature was at best marginal. We reached the nadir in the 1990s when our chairman announced one day that he was against Shakespeare, who, he said, was being produced too often in Canada.

With Labour Day arriving on Monday, it's worth noting that the very word "labour" has been kidnapped by union leaders and propagandists. Nine times out of 10, when you see the word "labour" in a headline, it relates to workers' organizations and their reigning bureaucracies. Look up "labour" in the Canadian Encyclopedia and you'll find 11 entries, from Labour Canada to Labour Relations, none of them having anything to do with physical toil, childbirth, labours of love, the difficulty of climbing a hill or the habit of labouring a point in an argument. Labour Day has always had one purpose -- to honour and flatter "organized labour." Since the unions are dying, maybe we should change the meaning of the holiday. Make it, instead, a celebration of that much larger and, therefore more important entity, the people who work.

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