

When in doubt, blame unions

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Canada's economic evolution in recent years has demonstrated two personalities. For business it's been all sunshine and optimism. Business-friendly policies and record corporate profits (the highest ever as a share of GDP) spark celebrations in the boardrooms.

For workers, however, real median labour earnings have hardly budged in a quarter-century. Inequality is growing, and many employees, such as contract and temp workers, feel desperately insecure despite low unemployment. The share of wages and salaries in GDP has been falling for 25 years.

Workers' more humble condition clearly reflects the erosion of trade-union power in Canada. Union density is falling, reflecting legal hurdles to union organizing and aggressive union-avoidance by employers, who can fire union agitators with virtual impunity. Strike frequency has plummeted, averaging 23 minutes of lost time per employed worker in 2006, down 96% in 30 years. With unions on the defensive, it's hard to believe that our industrial-relations system is the root of economic evil. Yet that doesn't stop antiunion crusaders from trying.

Research released this week by Labour Watch -- an antiunion organization supported by several business groups and the National Citizens Coalition -- reflects this determination to kick the labour movement when it's down. The report clearly aims to lay the political basis for another attack on unions -- this time challenging unions' fundamental ability to collect dues from their members, and hence their ability to exist in the first place.

The Labour Watch survey suggests 20% of non-union employees are interested in joining a union. (In contrast, other polls, asking the question differently, have found that 30% to 35% of non-union workers want a union.) Even Labour Watch concedes that most union members (about 70%) are satisfied with their union. Most nefarious, however, is Labour Watch's calculated effort to light a fuse under the issue of so-called "mandatory unionism." Carefully worded questions foment outrage over the prospect of innocent Canadians being press-ganged into unions. Leading questions nod favourably to "right-to-work" jurisdictions (such as Australia, New Zealand and the U. S. South) and suggest Canadians support those models. The end goal is to eliminate provisions (like Canada's Rand Formula) that provide organizational and financial security to unions, once a majority of workers in a workplace has decided to unionize.

What is "mandatory unionism," anyway? To form a union in Canada, workers must collect cards and/or secret-ballot votes from a majority of workers in a workplace, overcoming active employer opposition and, often, threats. Objectors can opt out of union membership in favour of charitable contributions. Dissatisfied union members are free to decertify. No one is compelled to work in a unionized workplace. It's hard to see anything "mandatory" about Canadian unions.

Far from further weakening workers' ability to form unions, it's time to push the pendulum back the other way. Without strong unions, no society has ever achieved truly mass, inclusive prosperity for average working people. Workers need unions to ensure a decent share of the wealth they produce.

But unions cannot effectively exist under a system in which free-riders are given the legal right to undermine the democratic, majority decisions of their co-workers. The fight against so-called "mandatory unionism" is in reality a fight against unions, period.

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