

Workers increasingly wary of union membership

Nicolas Van Praet, **Financial Post** Published: Saturday, August 30, 2008

When workers at a privately owned building-products supplier in Sudbury, Ont., decided to stop paying union dues several years ago because they felt the union wasn't doing anything for them anymore, a labour boss was eventually dispatched to the northern city to deal with the situation.

The union official told the company it had to start deducting the dues from its pay-cheques. Employees resisted. They hadn't paid dues in more than 10 years.

The union lost touch with its members, failing to bargain a new collective agreement after it expired in 1997, the workers said. Meanwhile, they insisted the employer treated them fairly, giving them raises and an allowance for clothing. Last year, they voted to cut all ties with the union and decertify.

"I don't think the union could get us more [than we have], not here anyway," said Marcel, a worker at the company who spearheaded the decertification. "I am in agreement with unions at certain other retail outlets. They do need it. But over here, no."

Similar rejections of organized labour are playing out across Canada.

Workers at seven Starbucks outlets in Vancouver voted last year to decertify from the Canadian Auto Workers union, leaving the global coffee goliath with just one unionized company-owned store nationwide.

Workers at roofing manufacturer IKO Industries Ltd. in Hawkesbury, Ont., voted to leave the the United Steel Workers of America, ending nearly 30 years of labour representation there.

Even in Sudbury, historically a labour stronghold, things are changing, said Marcel, who asked that his last name not be used.

"There are a lot of people that are starting to de-unionize too, but you don't hear too much about it," he said. "The unions don't advertise it. And a lot of other companies are scared to advertise that they're de-unionizing because it is a unionized town. They're afraid that if they advertise that, they might lose business."

Unions can certainly claim some big recent victories. The CAW was let in to organize auto supplier Magna International Inc. after years of fighting with the company. But overall, organized labour may be losing favour.

According to a new and comprehensive poll for the National Post/Global National on workplace issues, not only do working Canadians not see unions as the anti-exploitation saviours of years past, roughly half of them wouldn't blink if they didn't exist at all.

During the past five years, the number of employed Canadians who believe unions are no longer needed has increased by 8%, according to the poll.

During the same period, the percentage of current or formerly unionized employees who said they would prefer to be unionized has dropped 17 points, from 81% in 2003 to 64% today.

The survey found 46% of respondents said unions were needed and relevant at one time but are no longer necessary today. That's on par with the 47% of those who said unions were still as relevant today as they ever have been.

Among non-union workers, 77% said they had no interest in becoming unionized. Among those currently unionized, seven in 10 said they were satisfied with their union while 27% stated that if given the choice, they would prefer not to be unionized.

The percentage of Canadian workers that are unionized has fallen steadily since 1991, to roughly 30% today.

Strong regional economies in some parts of the country, such as Alberta, may push workers to downplay the relevance of unions. The argument is: Things are going well, so why do we need them?

But that theory does not necessarily hold for provinces like Ontario and Quebec, both of which have been hit hard by a manufacturing slowdown that has wiped away thousands of jobs. In Ontario, more survey respondents said unions were no longer needed than said they were.

Alan Levy, an assistant professor at the University of Regina and an expert in labour mediation, said one explanation might be found in the notion of "false consciousness." In the service sector in particular, some service workers tend to see themselves as similar to their non-unionized middle-class clientele, when in fact they're not.

He gives the example of shopping at an upscale furniture store in downtown Toronto.

"You meet the working-class salesperson. But he takes on the air of the customer. And if anything, he's somewhat a little haughty. When you ask that person, 'Do you need a union?', he says, 'No.' But when you look at what would truly be in his individual self-interest, he might well need a union. But he doesn't see that because he's taken the ethos and the culture that the organization has put forward."

Overall, 92% of employed Canadians surveyed by Nanos said they were satisfied with their current job. That's unchanged from 2003 levels. Almost nine in 10 said they were satisfied with their relationship with management at work.

"Employees increasingly see themselves as free agents who decide who they're going to sell their service to," said John Mortimer, president of LabourWatch, an employee-rights organization. He said more workers today also believe in merit over the union principle of seniority.

Far from showing that organized labour is in decline, the Nanos poll contains many findings that suggest Canadians' attitudes are positive toward unionization, said Ken Georgetti, president of the Canadian Labour Congress. For example, 20% of non-unionized workers surveyed said they were either "very interested" or "somewhat interested" in being unionized. That's an encouraging number, he said.

"I think you're going to see a lot of growth in unionization," Mr. Georgetti said. "There are advantages to acting collectively. And our employers for the last eight years have done pretty good. And workers that aren't in a union are seeing that they haven't got their share of that prosperity."

A Canadian Labour Congress poll of unionized workers in 2003 found that 44% of those surveyed said they did not need a union to be treated fairly at work. The union has not updated that poll.

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