

Workers' unions on strike in Canada

Lofty ideals or dread disease corrupting the land?

By IAN MULGREW

"Do your parents work? - No, they are teachers."

That slogan, emblazoned on the T-shirt of a Toronto high school student, appeared in a photograph above the fold on the front page of the *Globe and Mail* last Thursday. It expresses a lot of the ill-will that has been aimed at Toronto high school teachers during and in the aftermath of their two-month long strike.

Public reaction to that strike has been the focus of a growing resentment in Canada of strikes in particular and of unions in general.

Recently, we have witnessed the postal service disrupted to the point where many small businessmen were forced into bankruptcy. We have seen major construction projects grind to a halt. We have seen industry, trade and the economy seriously hampered by work stoppages. And now we are faced with the prospect of a wide-range of white-collar professionals banding together into unions. University professors, doctors — what next?

GUILD FORMATION

Unions have been around since the middle ages, when tradesmen got together to form guilds in order to set professional standards for themselves. It was not until the industrial revolution, however, that unions in a more or less modern form appeared. Workers felt they could receive fairer treat-

ment from their managers if they presented a united front. Collective bargaining was born.

Originally, unions in Canada were intended to protect the worker from wage cuts and to provide him with job security. Today, many people see unions as unruly mobs out to rifle the company for all they can get.

Organized labour has been present in Canada since the early 1800s. However, it was not until 1872 that Canadian unions started to pressure management for better conditions: the Toronto Printers Union waged a campaign to gain a nine-hour work day and a 54 hour work week. (Today, the postal union wants a 37 hour work week.)

STRONGER TIES

The strike that erupted in 1872 had at least one major consequence — it led to a strengthening of ties between different unions, resulting in the formation of the Toronto Trades Assembly in 1873. Out of this activity, the Canadian Labour Congress was born.

Today, over one-third of the Canadian work force is unionized. The CLC has 2,500,000 members. But, while unions undoubtedly serve many interests of their members, do they also serve the larger interests of Canadian society?

Lynn Taylor, an officer of the CLC, denies that unions have faults.

"I don't see any drawbacks to

unions," she says, "but, then, that's a biased opinion. I do, however, see all of the benefits that a union offers. The biggest by far is collective bargaining. This allows for a written contract and eliminates any argument that could arise. The worker is no longer dependant on the whims of the management for raises and benefit.

"A union also allows for a fair agreement. With the written contract the company cannot renege on its promises and a fair bargain is always found."

WORKER BENEFITS

Unions have other benefits for the worker. They eliminate favoritism and enforce the seniority system.

Taylor adds, "Merit is often brought out as a reason against unionizing, but how do you measure merit? What yardstick do you use? For example, a man has been at his post for ten years; another man has been at his post for two years. The man who has been there for two years has a better education because he is from a better family and had a better opportunity — should he be promoted before the ten year man? The ten year man given the same training and opportunity would be just as good. Who gets the job? They both have to buy groceries at the same store."

Strikes seem to be the worst aspect of unions. No one seems to like them. The worker forfeits his



Metro teachers on strike.

paycheck, the consumer his goods. "Unions do not want strikes," says Taylor "A union only goes out on strike after all other methods have been exhausted."

A big misconception that most members of the public operate under, according to Taylor, is that unions and the higher wages that they demand and receive are major causes of inflation.

"It's not wages that cause inflation," she says. "It's prices. If bill C-73 is past as it stands then we will follow the path that Britain did. It is imperative that we add clauses which will put a ceiling on profits."

COMPANY PROFITS

"It's not that workers are against companies making profits, but simply that these profits should not be made at the expense of the worker."

Security seems to be the major benefit of the union. However, what about people who do not want to be members of the union? Can workers be forced to join unions? This would be a direct infringement upon the rights of the individual. Most union members agree that the worker should have the right to be outside the union if he so wishes, but he must pay dues. Since the union is bargaining for member and non-member workers alike and since the non-union workers are going to receive the benefits of the contract, they should pay dues.

The various teachers unions have come under attack from almost all quarters of society recently and many people feel that the teachers should not be unionized. But Jack Hutton, communications director for the teachers union offers this argument.

NORTH BAY MARRIAGE

"In 1932 my father was a principal in North Bay and he felt that he had enough money to marry my mother, who was also a teacher. But in 1933, the government decided in a cost cutting programme that each teacher should lose between \$100 and \$200 in salary. In the 1940s my father was asked for his opinion. He gave it and it was subsequently picked up by a political party and used in

some of its literature. My father was asked to resign. He had been a principal for 15 years and just like that he was dropped. This is why we needed a union."

WHIMS AND OPINIONS

"As a union teachers have security. They no longer are dependant on the whims and opinions of their employers."

Unions are set up today as collective bargaining units. As such, they can enter into bargaining with the employer on behalf of the workers. Under labour relations laws, employers are required to negotiate with unions in "good faith".

The central objective that most unions aim for is providing their members with adequate benefits to ensure a satisfying, secure life. Some typical union demands are provision of health benefits, the establishment of pension plans, the elimination of wage disparities.

UP IN ARMS

These demands appear fair and just. One asks, then, why people are so up in arms about the whole idea of organized labour. Perhaps, the answer lies in the image of unions which has been painted in recent years.

Taylor claims that "for years, people have been told by the mass media that unions are these horrible creatures that are the cause of all social evils."

Unions have certainly received their share of bad press. When one picks up the paper or listens to radio news, it sounds almost like a return to the red-scare of the early 50s — except that now the ranting concerns unionists rather than communists. In the eyes of editorials, pundits and, inevitably, their audience, a dread disease — galloping unionism — is corrupting the land.

How much truth is there in this view? What, if anything, has happened to the fine ideals which attended the birth of the modern workers' union: equality of opportunity, excellence of craft, a good wage, a decent life?

If these ideals are dead, who is to blame? How can they be revived?

We are facing these questions now.

Professors oppose unionization, call for a vote by secret ballot

The following is from a newsletter, dated January 15, produced by a group of York faculty members calling itself, quite simply, Independent Faculty Members. The group opposes the imminent certification of the York faculty association as a union.

The question of the unionization of the faculty and librarians at York University is by no means settled. Before unionization becomes a reality YUFA must obtain interim certification from the Ontario Labour Relations Board (OLRB), it must negotiate an agreement with the University, and this agreement must be ratified by a majority of the faculty and librarian employees of the University.

On December 8, 1975 the OLRB announced that it would hold a hearing regarding YUFA's application to become a union. The Board's notice was posted at York on Wednesday, December 10 specifying that all those desiring to make representations to the Board should advise it of that fact by Tuesday, December 16.

In three working days (Thursday, Friday and Monday) during the hectic end-of-term period, Independent Faculty Members of York University obtained 191 signatures on formal petitions in opposition to the unionization of the faculty. This is in contrast to the two months YUFA took to mount a major promotional campaign which resulted in about 640 membership cards being signed.

The numbers alone would indicate that a majority of faculty members support unionization, but we feel that



Independent professor James Goodale.

the numbers were heavily influenced by the relative time periods involved. Indeed, some of the 191 signatures on our petition were from faculty members and librarians who had signed YUFA cards but later changed their minds about the desirability of unionization.

Independent Faculty Members attended the OLRB hearings on the YUFA application on December 22, 1975. The aim of our participation was to have the OLRB conduct a secret representation vote on campus to see if in such a secret vote more than half of those voting would indeed support YUFA's unionization bid. The OLRB has yet to issue its decision on this matter. We hope the faculty and librarians will be allowed the fundamental underpinning of a democracy — the secret ballot — to express their individual preferences on this crucial matter.

Even if interim certification

is granted by the OLRB there will be a long period of negotiation over the many terms of the collective agreement. Some points to be considered when evaluating the agreement are:

1. Must all faculty members and librarians be required to join the union? Those who do not wish to join should be allowed to retain their independence rather than being coerced into joining. At the same time it would be reasonable to require such independent faculty members to contribute an amount equivalent to the YUFA dues to a recognized charity.

2. Can individuals be fired for not joining the union? A closed-shop agreement would require the University to fire faculty and librarians whose convictions prevent their joining the union. This is a violation of a fundamental academic freedom. Is this hard-won right to be sacrificed for the unknown benefits of unionization?

3. What will be the Senate's power after unionization? The Senate already has the power to help YUFA achieve its substantive goals (read the York University Act, 1965). Would you rather have the Senate or YUFA provide academic leadership?

4. Will the collective agreement contain a requirement for effective merit pay awards? Salary by seniority is unacceptable in a university seeking excellence.

5. In case of strike, will researchers have access to their offices and laboratories, or will months of work be lost or seriously interrupted?