



INTERNATIONAL UNIONS

WHAT ARE THEY?

Less than one-third of the paid labour force in Canada and the United States is unionized. In Canada this represents about 2.9 million persons, just over 50% of whom belong to international unions. Overwhelmingly American, with their entire headquarters and 92% of their membership in the U.S.A., these unions are another example of the interdependence that characterizes the U.S.-Canada relationship. Concurrent with the rise in Canadian nationalism and the call for more economic and cultural independence has been a similar demand in union circles for either independent Canadian unions or increased autonomy from U.S. dominated labour organizations.

SIX DAYS SHALT THOU LABOUR

Canadian people have been attempting to improve their working conditions as far back as the 18th century. In 1794 a group of Quebec voyageurs staged the first strike in Canada to protest low wages. There were unions of skilled workers in Saint John and Halifax during the War of 1812. Quebec City had a printers' union in 1827, as did Hamilton in 1833. However in those early days most unions were local and short-lived, hardly surprising considering the atmosphere of the times. Employee treatment was often not very different from that of slavery, a practice abolished by Britain only in 1807.

In their efforts to establish unions, Canadians followed an example already set in Britain and the U.S.A. Large numbers of skilled tradesmen immigrated to Canada and the British especially brought with them the traditions of an established trade union movement which had grown from the Industrial Revolution.

COME INTO MY PARLOUR

The first "internationals" were British with the Amalgamated Society of Engineers organizing its first branch in Montreal in 1853. The first American union was the Iron Molders (1861) which had members in Montreal, Hamilton, Toronto, London, and Brantford. Printers worked both sides of the border and established ties at an early stage. Railway workers also formed a union alliance.

American internationals were often invited in by Canadian local unions who wanted to join organizations with money, members, and clout. Also the work force was highly mobile and membership made it easier to get jobs on either side of the border. There were many other local Canadian unions that did not join, from shipyard and port workers to those in construction and the service trades, from St. John's to Victoria. With the adoption of the Federal Government's national policy in 1879 and the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway,

Canadian industry—with its reliance on both British and U.S. investment—began to expand and unionism with it.

SOUTH OF THE BORDER

In colonial America, slaves and indentured servants were the primary sources of labour, the latter being men, women, and children who worked off their passage by selling their labour. Once done, they could follow their own trades as there was a great need for trained artisans and mechanics. With the formation of cities and towns, itinerant labour settled down, one-man bands gave way to employer-employee concerns, and the industrial society was born. As in Canada, trade organization at first tended to be small, local and temporary, but with the development of transportation, trades became organized along national lines.

HERE TODAY, GONE TOMORROW

In 1873, a depression hit the country and most unions collapsed. Unemployment rose to 20%, wages fell, longer hours came in, and labour again renewed its activities with the formation of the Knights of Labour. This organization grew from a little group of nine garment workers in Philadelphia to over 700,000 members, 12,000 of them Canadians. The Knights were mainly responsible for the organization of unskilled men and women—hitherto ignored—although they did not neglect the skilled and often had mixed assemblies. They disappeared of strikes in principle, but in 1883 one of their unions, the United Telegraphers, conducted the one genuinely international strike in North America against the big telegraph companies on both sides of the border.

Many craft unions opposed the Knights and formed the Federation of Organized Trades and Labour Unions of the United States and Canada (FOOTALU). The organization included skilled and unskilled, but with power in the hands of the skilled. Eventually strike failures, a weak leadership, and continued conflict with FOOTALU led to the Knights' demise. However, although they failed, they revealed the strength of labour solidarity as a challenge to industry.

The Knights remained a little longer in Canada, particularly in Quebec where they enjoyed the support of the Catholic Church. They were largely responsible for organizing the first trades and labour councils where the trades made way for the unskilled. Out of these in 1883 came a national central body to speak collectively for labour, the Trades and Labour Congress (TLC).

HERE TO STAY

The AFL In 1886, the American Federation of Labour was formed which

FOOTALU joined, as well as numerous other national trade unions. It established a full-time salaried post of president and a permanent labour organization was at last established. In time virtually all unions except the brotherhoods, whose members were employed in the service trades such as the railroads, affiliated with the AFL.

The CIO Henry Ford's mass production techniques, mechanization of basic industries and communications, eventually led to rumblings for a new kind of unionism, industrial versus craft. Conflict arose between the AFL and the new Congress of Industrial Organizations whose members were organized by industry. For example, in Detroit the CIO organized the Big Three—General Motors, Chrysler, and Ford. Eventually the AFL was forced to recognize the changing times and an organic merger of the two organizations was achieved in 1955.

NORTH OF THE BORDER

In Canada, with the support of the TLC, the AFL under its American president, Sam Gompers, pursued a vigorous organizing activity. Canadian unions and the TLC were not strong. American industry was spreading into Canada because Canadian labour was cheap. Industrial unionism, compulsory arbitration and socialist talk was in the air. There was also the threat of dual unions. By 1902 the AFL was strong enough to expel these rival organizations and weld the mass of Canadian unionism into the AFL international system.

It destroyed the unity of Canadian workers, pitting the conservative East, mostly Ontario, against the more turbulent West where socialism and industrialism were taking root. French-Canadian workers, with their different language and culture, were of no interest to Gompers.

HOW THE WEST WAS NOT WON

Working conditions were worse in the West. The boom was on and over one million immigrants arrived from the industrial slums of Britain and the pogroms of Eastern Europe. Working class politics and trade unionism came with them. In the post World War I depression, radical elements attempted to organize the One Big Union and secede from the TLC, considered to be under the thumb of the AFL.

In the Great Winnipeg Strike of 1919, the AFL, abetted by the TLC, specifically instructed Canadian members to act as strike-breakers, and refused to allow sympathy strikes in other parts of Canada. When the strike was broken radicalism was crushed but the militancy remained.

1 FOR THE MONEY, 2 FOR THE SHOW, 3 TO GET READY

New labour organizations came on the scene. In Quebec, the Canadian Catholic Confederation of Labour (CCCL) was formed in 1921. Dominated by the Catholic Church, the CCCL, strongly nationalistic and opposed to internationalism, attracted many workers ignored by the TLC and the AFL. In other parts of Canada, those unions expelled in 1902 formed the All-Canadian Congress of Labour (ACCL).

As in the U.S.A., mass production industries were coming on line requiring a different union organization, which was strongly opposed by the craft-obsessed TLC and AFL. The CIO was asked to come in but was busy organizing industrial unions in the U.S.A. Finally Canadian workers began organizing CIO unions on their own. In 1937, following a successful strike at the GM plant in Oshawa, the CIO moved in and organized unions in steel, automobile, electrical, rubber, and pulp and paper industries. The workers flocked to join.

In 1939, the CIO merged with the ACCL to create the Canadian Congress of Labour (CCL). Thus by 1940 there were three major labour centres in Canada: the TLC, dominated by the AFL, the CCL, less obviously by the CIO, and in Quebec, the CCCL, from above by the Catholic Church. Years later, in 1960, the CCCL was revamped, revitalized—all clerical ties severed—and renamed the Confédération des Syndicats Nationaux (CSN).

AND 4 TO GO

Following the lead of the AFL-CIO, in 1959 the CCL and the TLC merged into the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC). The executive had hoped to bring in the Quebec-based CSN to form a truly national body but, leery of U.S. domination, the CSN held off.

THE POLITICS OF UNIONISM

In the United States, the AFL-CIO has wielded considerable political influence but supported no particular party. The basic principle in U.S. trade unionism is non-participation. This was the philosophy of AFL President Gompers, that is to "reward your friends and punish your enemies". He believed that unions should "fit into the American System", that workers should defend their immediate economic interests without challenging the capitalistic system. Top union leaders identify with corporate leaders and practice "business unionism". Still craft-oriented, there is no great drive to organize others as the American workers, on the average, earn more than