

Membership and organization

Canadian labour unions have grown steadily to their present strength of some 3.3 million members. This figure represents 39 per cent of non-agricultural paid workers and 31 per cent of the civilian labour force of the country.¹

Union members are widely dispersed throughout Canada, although they are, of course, concentrated in the most industrialized areas. Nearly two-thirds of the total membership is in the provinces of Quebec and Ontario.² Of the urban centres, Toronto leads with 459,000 union members, followed by Montreal with 439,000 and Vancouver with 269,000.

Among the industries, the largest numbers of union members are employed in manufacturing, followed by community, business and personal services, although, in the proportion of its employees belonging to unions, public administration leads the way at 69.9 per cent, followed by construction (68.7 per cent) and forestry (64.1 per cent). Membership strength is lowest in agriculture and in finance, insurance and real estate.³

Union organizations have existed in Canada since the beginning of the nineteenth century but the movement was fragmentary until the latter part of that century for various reasons. First, the economy was largely agricultural

and individualistic in nature. Second, the population was thinly dispersed over a vast territory and transportation and communication systems were only partially developed. Third, the work force was made up of people having significant racial, religious and linguistic differences. Fourth, union activity was hampered by the British common law doctrine that held unions to be conspiracies in restraint of trade.

It was only in the last three decades of the century that unified bonds were formed in the shape of national and international unions covering the whole country, local central organizations linking unions in a locality, and a national central organization. Even then, and even after certain legal restrictions had been removed, unionization proceeded at a slow pace. Unions tended to concentrate on the organization, by craft, of skilled workers and, for the most part, the fast-growing work force of semi-skilled and unskilled workers remained outside the movement until well into the twentieth century. In the late 1930s, spurred on by the organizing efforts of newly-formed industrial unions, a period of expansion began, which, apart from a slackening off in the early 1960s, has continued to this day.

From its beginnings, the Canadian labour movement has had close ties with that of the United States; in its formative years, immigrant workers from Britain contributed substantially to the organization of employees in

1 See Table 1, p. 10.

2 See Table 5, p. 14.

3 See Table 6, p. 15.