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Are unions still necessary for working people?

In this study, Charlotte Yates shows why unions are still an essential tool for economic justice.

## About the CSJ Foundation for Research and Education

The CSJ Foundation for Research and Education conducts original research, produces training programs, and publishes reports and educational materials on social and economic issues. The Foundation conforms to Revenue Canada's guidelines for charitable activity. Its current program involves research on the growing gap between rich and poor, investigating the corporate influence on public policy, and the search for policy alternatives. It brings together people from universities and unions, faith communities and other community organizations. Its sister organization, the Centre for Social Justice, focuses on similar issues and uses an advocacy approach to effect social change.

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The Ontario Federation of Labour is the province's "house of labour", or central labour body. Just as workers unite in a union to protect their rights, so also do unions unite in central labour bodies to further their aims and objectives. From its inception in 1957, the OFL has grown to represent 650,000 Ontario workers in more than 1,500 affiliated local unions. Provincial labour federations are directly chartered by the Canadian Labour Congress.

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# Making It Your Economy: Unions and Economic Justice

Charlotte A.B. Yates

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This is the fourth pamphlet in the Social Justice series.

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their customers while avoiding striking workers. Moreover, many unions have learned that in industries such as hotels, restaurants and retail stores strikes are a double-edged sword, putting pressure on the employers while also angering customers. Unions have begun strategizing how to mobilize popular and customer support behind their workplace actions. Hence, during the Starbucks UnStrike, workers continued to provide the customer with her espresso or his latte while simultaneously raising popular awareness of the issues in dispute. For its part, HERE (Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union) created a festive like atmosphere during a strike at one downtown Toronto hotel. Deciding to launch occasional one-day strikes to put pressure on the employer, the union contacted hotel customers asking that they desist from using the hotel for the day of strike action. With bands playing and a party-like atmosphere on the picket line, workers' spirits were boosted, the media had a field day and public awareness of issues in the dispute was raised. Shortly thereafter a contract was signed.

### **An Important Part Of Making A Better Society**

Advertisements, soap operas and real TV such as "Survivor" remind us of the joys of being rich and that the road to wealth is paved through beauty, cunning and individual competition. The poor have only themselves to blame. Yet, flooded with these images and messages as we are, the reality is that a growing number of us work hard but are paid badly and wake up for work filled with dread. While unions are not a panacea for change, they are an important part of making a better society in which we are rewarded for our labour and recognized for our contribution to society and the economy. While filled with contradictions and ambiguities, unions are a potent force for progressive change in our society. Through their recent organizing efforts unions are trying to reach out to new groups of workers and offer them the benefits of a voice in the workplace, improved wages and benefits and institutions through which workers can regain control over their work lives and, in the end, the lives of their families and communities. But change is a two way street. Just as unions need to reach out to workers and new communities, these same workers and communities need to become active in unions, working both to change the unions themselves but also to work with unions as vehicles for broader social and economic justice.

to having to use innovative tactics to organize and represent new groups of workers, unions have often had to find new and creative ways of putting pressure on employers. Although support workers at McMaster University mounted a successful five week strike, long strikes are not an effective tool for many groups of workers whose employers can shut down stores or restaurants or find new ways of offering services to

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<b>Before Union</b>	<b>After Union (1993)</b>
<b>Wages:</b> (starting wage only) Oct 1, 1995 employer reduces hourly wage from \$7.50 to \$7	-July 1997 - 75c/hr increase -July 1998 - 12c/hr increase -July 1999 - 15c/hr increase -July 2000 - 25c/hr increase -Performance pay appeal procedure
<b>Employee say in shifts/hour:</b> Employer discretion	- <b>Seniority</b> is key factor in assigning shifts and hours  -Employer required to maximize length of shifts available to ensure workers get adequate hours  -Expedited resolution of disputes over shift scheduling
<b>Benefits:</b>	-Dental Plan - 100% preventative, 80% periodontics & endodontics, some for restorative.  -Vision Care - \$150 every 2 years
<b>Vacation scheduling:</b> Employer discretion	-Vacations assigned by seniority with appropriate notice
<b>Training:</b> Employees train while working	-Training hours designated over and above regularly scheduled hours
<b>Human Rights:</b> weak	-Anti-harassment language

These are but two examples of how unions are breaking through the barriers to organizing workers who want unions, in cases where their multinational employers are determined to keep unions out. In addition

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<b>Figure 3 Security Guards in Ontario</b> (12,000+ organized by USWA in early 1990s)	
<u>Before Union</u>	<u>After Union (1993)</u>
<b>Wages:</b> \$7/hr*	-1993-95 Coll Agreement \$7.35/hr -1996-99 Coll Agreement \$7.67/hr -1999-2002 Coll Agreement 20c/hr/yr = \$7.97/hr 1999; \$8.17/hr 2000
<b>Benefits:</b> None or at employer discretion	-1st contract 30c/hr of benefits = incl Dental -Benefits, drug plan, insurance (disability, life etc.) -2nd contract additional 15c/hr of benefits -3rd contract additional 15c/hr benefits - extended health care (e.g., physiotherapy and oral dental surgery)
<b>Seniority:</b> None. Client of security firm has complete discretion on hiring, job posting, etc.	-Strong and detailed seniority language in contract -Lay-offs with seniority -Job posting with seniority (extends to other workplaces of same employer)
<b>Health and Safety:</b> poor	-Health and Safety Committee - union has engaged in litigation to protect health and safety
<b>Human Rights:</b> weak	-Human rights protection in contract against sexual and racial harassment
<i>*As wages vary between clients, one example is used to illustrate wage gains through unionization.</i>	

with benefits at a cost that all employers could afford? The USWA developed an innovative scheme for providing dental benefits. Dental offices have been set up in several USWA union halls. The union employs dentists to staff these offices. Workers come to the union hall and get dental care for significantly lower cost than fees set by the Ontario Dentists Association. Not only does this provide a means for supplying reasonable cost dental care for security guards, but the USWA has opened these dental offices up to anyone in the community! The USWA's determination to organize and represent low paid workers in the service sector has proved that necessity is the mother of invention. And that unions are capable of adapting to challenges and pressures arising from the new economy.

By 1997, the CAW in British Columbia had organized eight Starbucks stores as well as the Starbucks distribution centre, which together had over 100 employees. When faced with an impasse in bargaining their first contract, and in recognition of the large number of non-unionized establishments, the workers and union knew they needed a way of putting pressure on the employer without resorting to full strike action. What developed was the Starbucks UnStrike. Workers turned up to work in street clothes, rather than in their uniforms, donning buttons to advertise their actions. Information pickets which informed customers of the dispute were established outside the stores and information was widely distributed on the Web. In the meantime, the CAW continued to organize other Starbucks locations. After several weeks of mounting pressure on their employer using popular publicity tactics, Starbucks workers achieved their first contract, which covered all Starbucks locations represented by the CAW in BC, in July, 1997. The benefits won by these workers through this contract dispute and a subsequent one in 1999 are enumerated in Figure 4. The 1997 contract was the first union contract signed with Starbucks, a North American coffee retail giant. But it is not the only foray the CAW has made into organizing low paid restaurant workers. The CAW represents workers at more than 50 Kentucky Fried Chicken outlets and several White Spot restaurants, a family restaurant chain in BC. With all three of these employers, the CAW used provisions in the BC Labour Code to negotiate one master agreement covering all the work sites of each employer. Such master contracts have the advantages of strengthening the bargaining position of workers while simultaneously weakening the employer's ability to pit one location against another or close one location in a bid to circumvent the union.

*It is midnight on a Friday night. Ten workers, mitts, hats and long underwear donned to brace a cold March night, huddle around a burning barrel. Some chat and drink coffee as they warm their hands and try to stay awake until 1:30 when the next shift comes on. One worker silently cries in the arms of another, comforted and soon laughing at the latest antics of their employer. The occasional car drives up to the picket line, setting off a flurry of activity as workers begin their "ring around the rosy" meant to slow traffic and prevent late night deliveries of food, construction materials and mail.*

*Security guards come up to chat to the workers, also telling them of the collective agreement that they concluded that day. With tailights receding, the huddle around the burning barrel resumes. This time talk turns to the support pouring in from other workers, the abuse from one passer-by who threw jello and jeers at the picketers and of the latest picket line incident. A truck drove through the picket line, injuring one worker and nearly running over a police officer. Talk turns to the firm hired by their employer to photograph and film picketers. Rumours circulate that people have been followed by men with walkie talkies. Each ponders what might happen next. The night shift finally arrives. With a sigh of relief, picketers drift towards their cars to go home. Tomorrow it is Saturday. With little or no strike pay after two weeks on the picket line, grocery shopping will be difficult. But there are always house cleaning and looking after the children in between phone calls about the strike to pass the day. "See you Sunday" is the last refrain of many as they disappear in pairs into the night.*

*At first glance, this scene is a throw back to another era of burly men from auto plants and steel mills whose unions are as out of step with the times as is the work that these workers do. Shadows of the past when big guys took on corporate employers illuminate the present. The scene described above was one played out on the picket lines at McMaster University, in Hamilton, Ontario, in March 2001, where 1600 support staff workers, the majority of whom are women - mothers, grandmothers, single mothers - walked the picket line for five weeks, often staffing picket lines for 24 hours a day, to get a first contract. These workers work as secretaries, lab assistants and library cataloguers. While many work full time with more than two decades of experience at the University and many have spouses that also work, others work on contract and part-time and many are sole supporters of their families. This is the new face of work and unions.*

*Whereas many from the left and right have proclaimed that unions have outlived their usefulness, the story of these workers on the picket line and in their workplace tells a different tale of the continued need for unions. Why do workers need unions? What can unions offer women and men workers in a climate of individual responsibility, competition, and changing work and workplaces? Can the unions present in our economy today meet the needs and demands of a changing workforce, changing employers, and changing workplaces? These and other questions are answered in the following discussion. Unions are one of the few remaining institutions in contemporary society able and willing to champion the needs and interests of men and women in their workplaces, and join in the fight for broader social and political rights.*

Unions, and in particular industrial unions such as the USWA and the CAW, have shifted their organizing priorities dramatically, investing their energies and resources into organizing workers outside their traditional membership base, including security guards, workers in hotels and restaurants, community health care workers and so on. Workers in these workplaces have reaped significant benefits from unionization. Figures 3 and 4 examine in brief the benefits of unionization achieved by just two of these groups of workers.

The security guard industry is a rapidly expanding one, although the nature of their work is often invisible and seriously undervalued. This is an industry built on the backs of low wage labour. Large numbers of workers employed in this industry are paid at or just above minimum wage. Based on USWA membership figures amongst security guards, the industry employs a large number of women (about 40% of the workforce are women) and people of colour, especially new immigrants trying to gain entry into the paid labour market. About 30% of the USWA security guard membership is employed on a part-time basis and many workers are students, and hence presumably young people trying to put themselves through school. Due to poor working conditions and pay, turnover in the labour force is high. Unionization has begun to stem the tide of people flowing out of this workforce as better pay and benefits mean that workers have a reason to stay in the industry, rather than leaving in search of better employment elsewhere. While Figure 3 offers a snapshot of the gains made by these workers through unionization, it is worth elaborating on some of the conditions in these workplaces prior to unionization and the innovative ways that the USWA has found to deliver union benefits to these workers. Employers in this industry have argued that to compete, they must cut costs - this meant low wages, no benefits and almost complete employer flexibility in determining the conditions of work. Health and safety conditions were in many cases dreadful. Imagine working outside in the middle of winter in Ottawa, where temperatures regularly drop to -25C, with only a candle in a shack to provide any heat and comfort! It is not surprising that these workers turned to the USWA, which for the last several years has steadily bargained improvements for security guards. The security guards also point to innovative ways that unions are providing benefits. The varying size and scattered nature of workplaces and the multiple firms in which security guards are employed presented the USWA with a serious challenge. How could the union find a way of providing these workers

people and people of colour are more likely to support unions than older, white men!

To reach out to new groups of workers, unions need to mount organizing campaigns in growth sectors of the economy, in particular the private service sector. There is plenty of evidence that unions have adjusted their goals, their strategies, and their organizing targets to organize the private service sector. Breaking down union certification data by sector for Ontario from 1981/82 to 1998/99, we find a dramatic shift in organizing activity in favour of the private service sector. If we use union applications to the Ontario Labour Relations Board (OLRB) as an indicator of union organizing activity, what we find is that the second largest number of applications for certification was filed for workplaces in the private service sector. Organizing in the private service sector accounted for the second largest number of employees organized, with the first still being in the manufacturing sector. If we compare the proportion of applications for certification submitted to the OLRB across sectors in two different time periods (1981/82 to 1989/90 compared to 1990/91 to 1998/99), we find a dramatic increase in the proportion of organizing drives in the private service sector. In the first time period (1981/82 to 1989/90) the manufacturing sector accounted for an average of 23% of all applications to the OLRB compared to an average 17.3% of the total in the private service sector. But in the second time period (1990/91 to 1998/99), the proportion of organizing drives in the manufacturing sector dropped to an average of 16% compared to a rise in the private service sector to an average of 30.3% of the total organizing drives (Yates, 2000b, pp. 660-662).

**Women are more likely to support unions than men!**

**In Ontario, workplaces where women constitute the majority of workers are 14% more likely to vote in favour of a union than are workplaces where men are the majority of workers.**

**Small female majority workplaces (up to 16 employees) have a success rate in organizing of 89%!**

**Source: Yates, 2001**

## Unions and Economic Justice I

Not so long ago, some futurists predicted that work would become a less defining feature of our lives as new technology opened up new opportunities for leisure time, both by replacing "man with machines" and by eliminating drudgery work, whether that meant turning screws in an auto factory or washing dishes in the home (Rifkin, 1995; Gorz, 1985; Jenkins and Sherman, 1981). While thousands of men and women have been replaced by machines, and plenty of house work has been off-loaded, whether onto machines or onto low-paid immigrants and refugees whose only entry point into the paid labour market is often through domestic service, a new leisure-based society has not emerged.

Thousands of the men and women laid off as a result of technological change join with a growing number of young women and men who have never had the chance at a job. They share, not in the resulting wealth and more leisure time, but rather in unemployment or the growing number of "bad" jobs with low pay and benefits, unpredictable hours, little or no job security and few prospects for building a future (Economic Council of Canada, 1990). For other workers, technological change has meant more work and demands to work faster.

While the advent of e-mail and the widespread access to cell phones have been a boon for social activists, these same technologies alongside computers and voice mail have, in many workplaces, resulted in a downloading of increased responsibilities onto workers. A growing number of these workers work longer hours with no extra pay or time in lieu of the extra hours worked. Telecommunications breakthroughs have been used to establish call centres where a growing army of low paid workers toil on the assembly line of the present. A climate of competition and job insecurity makes resistance to these developments more difficult. Ever growing amounts of our daily physical and emotional energies are consumed in feeding and clothing ourselves and our families.

Futurists who predicted the coming of a time of leisure ignored the fact that technology and technological change are embedded in relations of power. Who controls the development and deployment of technology, benefits from that technology (Noble, 1995). In contemporary society, as in earlier times, the primary benefactors are employers, both private and public.

Thus, work in the paid labour market has become more, rather than less, consuming of our time and energies. The ties that bind us ever more closely to the paid labour market affect all of us - young, old, men, women, teens and children, the unemployed and the welfare recipient. Teens not only work to buy their clothes and education, but are exhorted through new school curriculum to gain experience in the real world of work. Work is not only a means to an income and hence food and clothing, but has also been granted growing moral stature.

Governments, joined by many others in our neo-liberal society, increasingly define work in and attachment to the paid labour market as a measure of people's worth and their right to recognition and benefits in our society. Societies increasingly distinguish between the deserving and the undeserving, defined according to their readiness and willingness to work in the paid labour market, whether in exchange for a welfare or a pay cheque (Little, 1998). Governments, whether social democratic or conservative, have added force to these arguments with their insistence on individual responsibility (Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario, 1995; Giddens, 1998) for life chances, a responsibility that seems largely to be met through participation in the paid labour force.

### Who Sets Terms and Conditions?

As having and holding a job in the paid labour market becomes paramount for people's survival, both in terms of material wealth and social recognition, the question remains as to who sets the terms and conditions for people's entry and participation in the labour market. Simply put, who determines whether someone gets hired, how much they are paid and the conditions under which they work? In the not so distant past, government social policies in Canada reduced people's utter dependence on the labour market and set the minimum terms and conditions for employment. Welfare programmes, mother's allowance and unemployment insurance, as well as public healthcare and education, all acted to reduce people's dependence upon the labour market.

These programmes provided them with a buffer against the harshness of the marketplace in recognition of difficult and different life experiences. Similarly, government regulation of minimum wage, hours of work, and health and safety standards established socially acceptable minimum standards for employment. With these policies, society, through

another which provide the basis for coordinated issue campaigns. The CAW has adopted what it calls "community unionism" as its way of reaching out to new communities. This means building links with social movements and coalitions in communities where the CAW has a strong presence. It means training its own members as organizers so that, in their day-to-day volunteer and political/community activities, they act as the ears and eyes of the union in the community, always mindful of those that want and need union protection.

**3. Internet.** A growing number of people, both at home and through their workplaces, have access to and are required to use the internet and the Web in their daily work lives. This is particularly so for office workers. But it is also true that youth are more comfortable with and are heavier users of internet-based forms of communication. Unions are increasingly contacting workers through the internet and learning lessons from social activists on how to deploy the internet and the Web as organizing tools (Freeman and Diamond, 2001). Daily communication and rapid response to employer tactics are but two of the advantages for unions and workers of using the internet to unionize.

In addition to these specific organizing tactics, unions spend more time and resources reaching out to and trying to understand groups of workers and workplaces that at one time were invisible in the union. This includes youth, women, people of colour, and those employed on a contingent basis, particularly in the private service sector. For example, in the summer of 1999 the UFCW surveyed all of its members who were under 30 years of age to discover what issues were important to the young union members and how the union could better respond to their concerns. One immediate result was the creation of youth committees in UFCW locals 175 and 633 (*Our Times*, Dec.1999, pp. 30-35). Beginning in 1997, the CAW placed youth at the top of its agenda, the immediate result of which was a May 2000 National Youth Conference where young members of the CAW met to discuss their concerns and plan new strategies for reaching out to other young workers in their communities. Many unions now have women's action committees and special leadership training courses for women and visible minorities in recognition of the need to mobilize and better represent these groups within the union and the broader community. These strategies are a must if unions are going to reach out successfully to new communities of workers. And they are a must if unions want to grow. Women, young

Although unions initially focussed their organizing on traditional areas of membership strength and built on existing know-how and networks, in the 1990s unions came to recognize that this approach to organizing was fraught with dangers. Job growth in the 1990s was especially strong in the private service sector where unions were weakest. Moreover, by building on existing networks and know-how, unions were reproducing themselves as narrowly conceived organizations which tended to privilege older men who worked full-time. For unions to survive, unions have to find ways to reach out to new groups of workers. Three of the ways in which unions have risen to this challenge are:

**1. Rank-and-file organizers.** More and more unions are training rank and file members to become organizers, although there is still work to be done in this area. 26% of organizing drives that resulted in applications to the Ontario Labour Relations Board between Sept. 1996 and August 1998 used rank-and-file organizers. Unions identify and train activists from their own ranks who come from diverse communities and backgrounds. They encourage these organizers to use their own networks to develop contacts and organizing drives, while also providing them with the resources needed to do the job. Most often these organizers work on a temporary basis; they are paid for time off the job to work in a particular organizing campaign, upon completion of which they return to their workplaces. Most unions try to match these rank-and-file organizers with the characteristics of the workplace being organized. Retail clerks help organize other retail clerks; women organize women. This "mirror" organizing tactic offers the union a better chance of understanding the issues of workers and workplaces and establishing effective and responsive two-way communication - from the union to the workers and from workers to the union.

**2. Social and Community Activists.** Many traditional male unions do not have a diverse enough membership from which to train and build a new core of activists to go out and organize. Several unions, as well as the BC Organizing Institute, have broadened their reach into new communities by hiring social and community activists as organizers. These activists have well established networks and organizing skills, and offer unions entry into communities of workers who might otherwise remain closed to unions. While this serves the immediate purpose of organizing the unorganized, it also encourages alliances between social movements and unions, providing them with valuable links to one

governments, took some responsibility for setting the terms and conditions under which people had to work in the paid labour market, and hence for people's life chances. Unions played an important role in this process, improving upon the terms and conditions of employment, offering workers a voice in workplace decisions to counterbalance the power of employers, and pressuring governments to establish and improve upon policies and regulations governing the labour market (Drache and Glasbeek, 1992).

Since the 1980s, the role of governments in establishing the terms and conditions of employment has changed. Under the rubric of the need for greater individual responsibility, free reign of the marketplace, and less government, governments have shifted their policy attention away from establishing minimum terms and conditions of employment. Governments are less concerned with protecting citizens from the excesses of the marketplace and bad employers, and more concerned with guaranteeing a ready and adequate supply of labour, often at low wages. This has been accomplished by reducing unemployment insurance coverage and earnings, freezing minimum wages, weakening employment standards regulations, and tying welfare to work (Jackson et al; 2000).

## Flexibility Mantra and Market Forces

Despite the rhetoric of flexibility, individual responsibility, and opportunity that governments use to champion these public policy changes, these shifts in public policy have laid bare people's dependence upon market forces and the decisions of the powerful in the market, namely, large corporations and employers. At the same time that we have been made more dependent upon the marketplace without benefit of government protection and regulation, conditions in the labour market have deteriorated. Unemployment reached double digit levels in the 1980s, and only fell below 7% at the end of 1999. Young workers (aged 15 to 24) bore the brunt of unemployment, with unemployment amongst this group reaching a peak of 17.8 % in 1992. While these rates of unemployment declined throughout the remainder of the 1990s, by 1999 youth unemployment still registered 14% - almost double the national average.

Unemployment was also regionally uneven, with the Atlantic provinces sustaining significantly higher rates of unemployment than the national

average (Jackson and Robinson, 2000, p.51-52). High rates of unemployment combined with few government restraints on employer behaviour tilt the balance of power in favour of employers who have used this as an opportunity to undertake rapid restructuring of the labour market. The hallmark of this restructuring has been increased job insecurity - seen in the growing incidence of contract, casual and part-time work, and widespread fears of job loss - and declining real wages (Yalnizyan, 1998; Jackson and Robinson, 2000; Lowe and Schellenberg, 1999). While many workers cobble together multiple jobs to gain enough work hours to make a living, other workers face ever growing demands from employers for overtime and long hours of work - some paid, some unpaid. Some people have too little work, while others have too much.

Under these labour market conditions, and in light of governments' unwillingness to act in support of workers' needs and demands, unions have become more, not less, important in our society. Unions themselves are market actors. They regulate the labour market through collective bargaining with employers. Unions also pressure governments for policies that establish decent terms and conditions for work, prioritize employment over tax cuts, and ultimately improve workers' quality of life. At a time when governments have stripped away the institutions and regulations protecting individual workers, unions are one of the only remaining collective institutions which champion people's rights in the workplace and labour market more broadly. As membership-based organizations, unions also have the capacity to give workers a voice in their workplaces and hence some control over their daily workplace lives. This view of unions, at one time commonplace, challenges contemporary, popular conceptions of unions as out of step with the new economy. To dispel the myths that unions have outlived their usefulness, it is important to return to answers to the most basic of questions. What do unions do for workers?

As Gary Steeves, Director of Organizing for the BC Government and Service Employees Union (BCGEU), recently stated at a conference on union growth in Toronto, "The union movement is changing. Organizers used to be white, male with large bellies like my own. Today, they are young, women, Asian, Aboriginal..."(Toronto, May 1, 2001). In between these training sessions, the Organizing Institute holds regular meetings of member unions which encourage sharing of information and collaboration between unions. In regular reports to the BCFL Executive, the Organizing Institute maintains a high profile for organizing amongst union leaders. This experiment in central coordination of organizing is working well in BC. Yet, the conditions for this role for the central labour body are absent in most other jurisdictions. This means that individual unions play the primary role in organizing the unorganized.

Unions across Canada have undergone a radical transformation in their orientation towards membership expansion through organizing the unorganized. From the Canadian Autoworkers (CAW) and United Steelworkers of America (USWA) to the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) and Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union (HERE) to the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America (UBCJA), unions have increased the resources they dedicate to organizing the unorganized. Resources include money, investment in training of organizers and hiring of staff dedicated to organizing workplaces.

**United Food and Commercial Workers has spent more than \$2 million in the last decade training more than 100 rank and file organizers!**

**In 2000, the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America in Ontario committed itself to training every new member in rudimentary organizing tactics. This builds a growing cadre of organizers and breaks down internal membership opposition to organizing the unorganized.**

To reverse the recent membership declines and to restore unions as a potent and progressive force in society, unions need to expand the scope of their membership. This can only be done in the immediate future through increasing union efforts to organize the unorganized.

Unions need new and expanded memberships, not just to shore up failing union coffers through expanded dues, but to better connect unions to their communities and current issues, and concerns of workers. New members breath new life into unions. Only by more workers from diverse communities joining unions will unions continue to be agents of progressive social and political change.

Support for unionization amongst presently non-union workers is highest amongst women, youth (ages 15 to 24), and people of colour. These are also the workers most likely to be found in restaurants and hotels and in part-time and casual jobs where unions have a weaker presence. The issue then becomes how unions reach out to these workers to offer them the benefits of unionization and, in so doing, benefit themselves from the diversity and activism of these workers.

### BC: An Organizing Institute

Central labour federations (e.g., Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL), Canadian Labour Congress (CLC)), have neither the resources nor the strategic capacity to play a significant role in organizing. The exception to this is British Columbia where the B.C. Federation of Labour (BCFL) with the support of member unions has established an Organizing Institute. The Institute's mandate is to train organizers, coordinate organizing amongst the various unions and facilitate communication and planning among unions, which in other provinces often compete with one another in their organizing efforts. Although the Organizing Institute does not itself organize workers, its role in facilitating and encouraging organizing amongst member unions has been important for raising the profile and coordinated success of organizing in British Columbia. The Organizing Institute holds two intensive training sessions a year, thus training dozens of new organizers per year. There is a strong commitment by the Organizing Institute and member unions to train young workers from diverse backgrounds, often with experience in community and social activism.

## Unions and Economic Justice II:

### What Do Unions Do?

Unions represent approximately a third of the workforce in Canada today, with men's rates of unionization registering as slightly higher (30.6%) in 1999 than that of women (28.9%). But amongst part-time workers, unionization is higher amongst women (23.7%) than amongst men (15.9%) (Statistics Canada, Autumn, 2000, p.40). Through collective bargaining and their role of representing workers day-to-day in the workplace, unions have a significant positive impact on workers' wages, benefits, and working conditions, while also providing them with a voice in their workplace. Having a voice means having a say in how the workplace is organized, how managers treat workers and having greater protection against arbitrary dismissal.

Table 1 demonstrates the effect unions have on wages for full-time and part-time workers by sex. While some of this effect can be explained by factors other than unionization, including age, job tenure, industry, occupation, firm size, location and distribution of union membership,

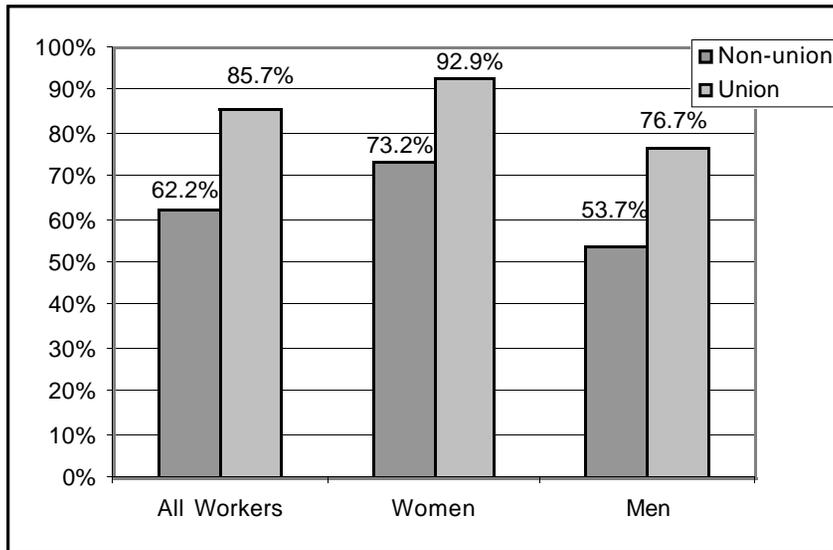
**Table 1 - Wages - Average Hourly Earnings, Union vs Non-Union, Canada 1999**  
by Sex and Employee Status (full-time vs part-time)

Employee Status/Sex	Union	Non-Union	Union Premium*
Women Full-Time	\$18.24	\$13.86	24%
Women Part-Time	\$16.95	\$10.14	40.2%
Men Full-Time	\$20.39	\$17.65	13%
Men Part-Time	\$15.57	\$9.47	39.2%

\* Union Premium calculated as difference between average union and non-union wage divided by union wage  $\times 100$   
Source: Statistics Canada Cat.71-001. *Perspectives on Labour and Income* Autumn, 2000, Table 3.

the fact remains that unions increase workers wages. The "union premium", referred to in Table 1, illustrates the impact of unions on wages by measuring the percentage by which workers hourly wages are increased through membership in a union. As can be seen from Table 1, the effect of unionization is greatest on part-time workers of both sexes and women.

**Table 2 - Part-time Hourly Wage Gap, Canada 1999  
by Union/Non-Union and Sex**  
expressed as part-time wage as % of full-time wages



Source: Calculations of data gathered from Statistics Canada Cat.71-001, *Perspectives on Labour and Income Autumn 2000, Table 3.*

Not only do unions increase the average hourly earnings of part-time workers, they reduce the wage differential between part-time and full-time workers. Part-time workers tend to be paid lower wages for doing comparable work than those who work full-time. This reflects an undervaluing of part-time work in terms of the contribution that part-time workers make to profits and productivity. These lower wages combine with the lack of benefits paid to part-time workers to make part-time labour, cheap labour. This provides employers with strong incentives for hiring part-time workers, and where possible replacing

Unions are changing. But this change process will only be sustained by active members, more of whom need to come from all corners of the country and a diversity of workplaces.

**iii. Are Unions Concerned Only With Collective Bargaining?**

The bulk of a union's time and resources is spent on negotiating, administering and defending collective agreements with employers. This focuses their attention on the workplace and membership concerns and reinforces a notion that unions have little interest in promoting issues of social and economic justice. Why would union members agree to spend their dues on defending the rights of the unemployed and poor or advocating for legislation to promote environmentally responsible behaviours? Yet, unions have also been in the vanguard of issues concerning social and economic justice, championing women's equality issues including pay equity and the right to paid maternity leave, negotiating investment in new jobs in exchange for various changes to existing work rules, and most recently mobilizing alongside social movements against unfair and secretive free trade regimes. This speaks to an enduring tension within unions between representing and servicing their own members and mobilizing for broader social and economic change. And tensions provide opportunities, opportunities that need fertile ground to grow and prosper. Such growth and prosperity, in part, lies in unions expanding their memberships to include a larger proportion of the workforce and a more diverse group of workers, representative of the entire spectrum of our communities. This in turn means organizing the unorganized.

**Unions Need YOU!**

**Organizing the Unorganized**

In the present climate of conservative governments and hostile employers determined to produce goods and services at the lowest possible labour cost, the only way forward for unions and those workers who want and need union protection in their workplace is to organize the unorganized. If union membership continues to slide, workers will be more vulnerable to the market, unions and other social movements that struggle for economic and social justice will be severely weakened.

towards squashing rather than encouraging dissent and debate. Union cultures have been built on and often reinforced the dominance of these traditions.

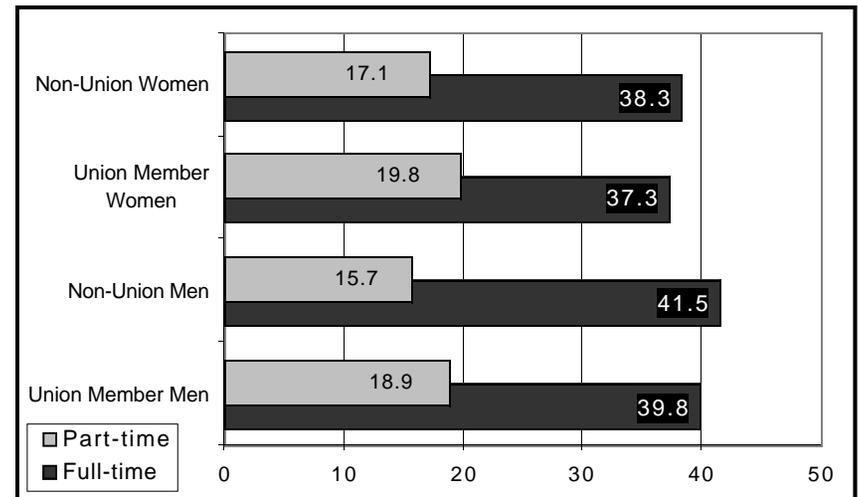
Yet the fact remains that unions are democratic and reliant upon membership activism. This makes them open to change. And the signs of change are everywhere, from CUPE's commitment to "organize the organized" and empower their "Rainbow" committees, to the USWA's active promotion of human rights, both within the union and the workplace, to local union experiments with opening themselves up to their members and the broader community. One such experiment undertaken by IWA Local 1000 in Northern Ontario illustrates the gains being made in breaking down barriers to membership voice and participation. Like most unions, Local 1000 meetings were dominated by reports from union officers and formal proceedings, which had hitherto always been attended to first in union meetings and consumed much of the meeting time. Only at the end of meetings could members raise their concerns. And by this time, many members were already turned off from the union or had to rush home to attend to family affairs. Concerned about low membership attendance at membership meetings and the need to represent an increasingly diverse membership, including women, service workers and people of colour, Local 1000 restructured local union meetings to give their members more opportunity to participate in and influence union decisions. The local began each meeting with membership concerns and what had always been termed "Other Business" i.e. business and issues generated by members. Only once these concerns had been attended to did the meeting turn its attention to official reports. The result of this restructuring was a rapid turnaround in membership attendance and activism.

A second example can be found in the workings of certain local labour councils, such as the Windsor and Victoria labour councils. These councils have invited representatives from many different community and social activist groups, such as the unemployed and retired, to participate in local labour council affairs, bringing to council meetings the concerns of their constituents. In so doing, these labour councils have succeeded in building enduring links among labour, community organizations, and social activists. The labour councils now look outward to the community and focus less on the minutiae of their own internal affairs.

full-time workers with part-timers. As can be seen in Table 2, unions reduce the wage difference between full-time and part-time workers. In so doing, unions reduce the cost advantages to employers of hiring workers on a part-time basis, while simultaneously improving the wages of part-time workers.

Union membership is also associated with a change in the distribution of hours worked, with unionized full time employees tending to work fewer hours and unionized part-time workers tending to work more hours (See Table 3). This redistribution of hours of work between non-union and union workers is to some degree the outcome of negotiations by unions. Whereas non-union workers may be hired to work a certain number of hours or shifts per week or pay period, there is no contract and few if any legislative restrictions which prohibit employers from scheduling additional or fewer hours of work or shifts based on their own discretion. Hours of work were one of the major issues in the dispute between McMaster University and its support workers and highlight the issues raised here. One woman at McMaster University lamented that she had worked loads of extra hours over the years. She

**Table 3 - Average Usual Weekly Hours, Main Job, Canada 1999**  
by Union Status, Sex and Employee status (full-time vs part-time)



Source: Calculations of data gathered from Statistics Canada Cat.71-001. *Perspectives on Labour and Income Autumn, 2000, Table 3.*

didn't get paid for these extra hours and there was too much work to take time off in lieu. She was afraid to go back to work without a contract because she feared that her manager would expect her and her co-workers to make up the work that they missed while on the picket line. The threat of job loss made resistance to these demands extremely difficult.

A different refrain is often heard from non-union workers working in fast food restaurants. More often than not, their problem is that they are promised a certain number of shifts and hours of work per week, but rarely get scheduled to work these hours. Many of these workers find that hours and shifts are assigned by managers on the basis of favouritism. Reportedly, one of the biggest issues of concern to workers in the private service sector who are involved in a union organizing drive is scheduling of hours of work and shifts (Yates, 2000a).

Unions affect the distribution of hours through negotiations with employers in a number of ways:

- contract language which specifies the number of hours of work in a regular work week;
- developing an orderly and systematic process for assigning shifts and hours, often on the basis of seniority;
- wage premiums for overtime;
- negotiating a system, including time lines and a mechanism for redressing problems, whereby advance notice of shift schedules and hours is posted. These provisions will also often include specific time lines when shifts must be posted and a grievance process for redressing problems.

Thus, unions influence the distribution of hours of work, by increasing the number of hours worked by part-time workers and decreasing the average weekly hours for full-time workers. Further, they reduce management's discretion in assigning hours of work and shifts, thus allowing workers more predictability of their hours, and, for those on an hourly rate of pay, their income.

Unions also improve the benefits available to workers. At a time when government income supports are being reduced and social programs eliminated, the reliance upon "private" benefit schemes increases. While managers and highly paid professions may have these benefits provided as part of their employment or can afford to buy these benefits in the marketplace, the bulk of people in society cannot afford such benefits (Stanford, 1999, chapter 12). As can be seen in Tables 4a and 4b, through

wealthy! Thus ending the privileges of unionization accelerates a race to the bottom.

Yet, as long as unions represent a small proportion of the workforce and focus primarily on collective bargaining gains for their members, there is some truth to accusations that they privilege a few in our society. Many unions are responding to this challenge by changing the focus of their organizations in favour of social movement unionism. Social movement unionism, according to Chris Schenk, Research Director of the Ontario Federation of Labour, "refers to a democratic unionism that is oriented toward social change, emphasizing broader working class and societal issues, rather than an exclusive focus on collective bargaining interests" (Schenk, 2001). By improving their own internal democratic processes and accountability, and by building links to social movements and social issue campaigns, unions are mobilizing their resources and bargaining power behind broader issues of social and political-economic change. In this way, unions become part of a progressive force for change amongst union and non-union members alike.

## ii. Are Unions Too Compromised With the Existing Order?

Unions are also often criticized by social activists, youth, and women as being large bureaucratic organizations dominated by union leaders, most of whom are middle-aged and men. The day to day activities of unions, while formally democratic, seem boring, lifeless and rarely concerned with the burning issues of the day. How many union members and observers alike have been part of union meetings dominated by leadership reports and formal rules of participation that seem designed to silence the voices of workers rather than promote democratic participation and inclusion? Whereas social activists take to the streets and champion the causes of women, the poor and the homeless, union leaders seem as likely to be found inside the halls of power negotiating compromises and solutions that social activists see as restoring the privilege of the few and undercutting broader struggles.

Such criticisms of unions are not new. In the 1970s, women began struggling against the bureaucracy and formal and informal rules of unions that silenced their voices and limited their influence and recognition as equal partners. At the root of these criticisms lies a solid kernel of truth. Unions are bureaucratic, reliant upon formal rules and structures of representative democracy and, often times, oriented

**i. Whom Do Unions Protect?**

There is a growing perception that union members and their leaders are a privileged group. Standing at the street corner, having dropped your child at school, how often do you hear the complaint that teachers are paid too much, do little more than babysit our children and still get two months off in the summer? When reading about the latest strike at an automobile assembly plant, how often do you find yourself saying, how can these unskilled workers be paid \$22 per hour and be striking for more, while I work for so much less? Or upon reading *The Globe and Mail* article about labour leaders who made the \$100,000 salary club, did you find yourself asking how such highly paid union leaders had the gall to talk about social and economic justice for the poor? Why should union members do so well while the rest of the work force experiences declining wages and struggles to make a living? Why should they do better than I? These views reinforce the argument that unions privilege a few at the expense of the many. The result is growing resentment towards unions and their members. Unions become viewed as part of the problem rather than as part of the solution. Through the pursuit of business unionism, whose primary purpose is to advance and protect the cause of union members, unions have often fed these views of themselves as bastions of privilege and the status quo.

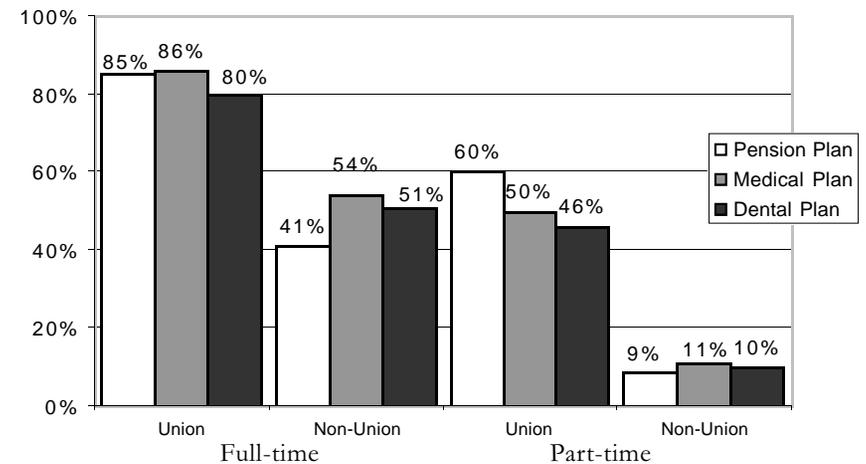
Yet, what would happen to wealth distribution in workplaces and society more generally if unions were eliminated? Would savings achieved from cutting autoworkers wages end up in the hands of other workers? Would savings from reduced wages in the public sector be reinvested in the provision of better health care? Education? Or social welfare? The answer to both of these questions is “no”. If auto workers or others in the private sector ceased to be represented by unions and found their wages determined by corporate employers, the savings would end up either as profit for corporate employers or as investments outside our communities, with no guarantee that these investments would benefit workers or the poor. With regard to public sector workers, governments have for several years frozen or cut public sector wages. The resulting savings have more often than not gone into business subsidies or tax cuts, which disproportionately benefit the rich (Alternative Federal Budget, 2000; Ontario Alternative Budget Working Committee, 2001). By eliminating the privileges of union membership through restricting the scope of union influence, wealth is redistributed but not in favour of the poor. It is instead redistributed upwards into the hands of the

collective bargaining, unions provide workers with a range of benefits that non-union workers are much less likely to have. Women who work part-time and are unionized benefit most from union negotiations of benefit provisions, increasing their likelihood of inclusion in a private pension plan by 51%, in an extended medical plan by 39%, and in a dental plan by 36%.

And these are but three of the benefits negotiated by unions. Job security and stability tend to be higher for unionized workers, measured as the length of time that unionized workers versus non-unionized workers are employed in their current employment, dis-aggregated by age (Macredie and Pilon, 2001, p.25). As a whole, unionized workers are entitled to significantly better paid vacation entitlements. In summarizing their data on paid vacation entitlements, Jackson and Robinson state that “More than one in three union workers received more than 20 days per year, compared to just one in six non-union workers” (Jackson and Robinson, 2000, p. 83). Moreover, unions negotiate the terms and conditions under which vacation times are

**Table 4a - Non-Wage Benefits, Women, Canada 1995**

by Union Status, Sex and Employee Status  
(full-time vs part-time, % of workers with each benefit)



Source: selected data from Jackson and Robinson, *Falling Behind* (2000), Table 4.7, p.104.

assigned, once again reducing management's discretion and use of favouritism in assigning holiday times. These union-negotiated rules have become even more important in provinces such as Ontario, where the Conservative provincial government has revised the employment standards legislation to facilitate the taking of vacations on a day-by-day basis, rather than in week-long blocks. Although the new Ontario Employment Standards Act (ESA) specifies that managers and individual employees must negotiate such changes, the power of managers over employees weakens the latter's ability to make their voices heard and have their preferences influence decisions.

Besides the material gains associated with union membership, one of the most important reasons that workers join unions, and one of the most important benefits gained by unionized workers, is a voice in the workplace. In gaining a voice in the workplace (see Figures 1 and 2), union members have a means of influencing their day-to-day experiences at work and of curbing management discretion and control over working conditions. Non-union workers have few means of changing their

rather than the “new” economy. Unionization in the private service sector and other growth areas of employment remain extremely low. Given that we know that unions have a positive impact on wages and working conditions, and on social and economic justice in our communities, why are unions not more successful? How can this situation be changed?

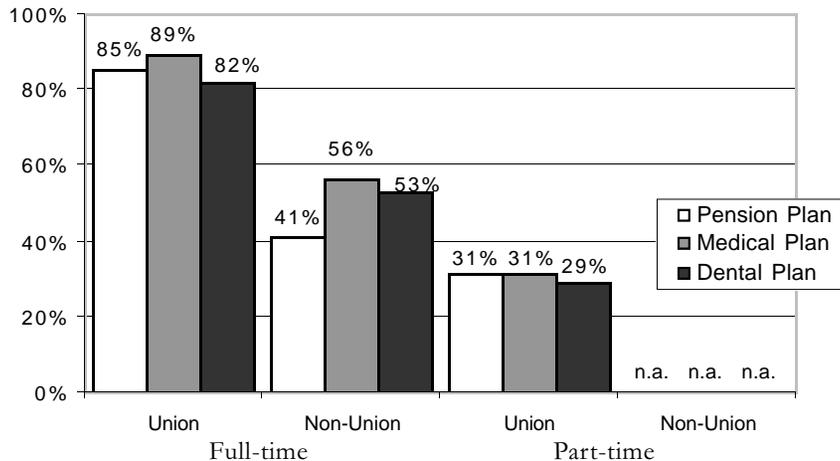
### Why Aren't Unions More Successful?

Given all the benefits of unionization to workers themselves and society more broadly, why aren't unions more successful? Part of the answer to this question lies in the current political and economic climate which is hostile to unions. Under conditions of growing economic competitiveness and globalization, employers, both public and private, have gone to ever greater lengths to keep their workplaces non-union. Whether through sophisticated Human Resource Management policies which claim to offer workers a voice in their workplace while maintaining their individual freedom to rise to the top, or whether through coercive measures such as threats of workplace closure, the hiring of union-busting firms or firing of union activists, the incidence of anti-union activity amongst employers has risen over the last ten to fifteen years. Employers, are in turn aided by neo-liberal governments which have restricted the influence of unions through changes to labour law which make it harder for workers to join a union. These governments have resisted policy input from unions. Employers, governments, and media paint a picture of unions as belonging to a time in the past and as out of sync with new workplace and social developments. Rather than being part of the solution to issues of social and economic justice, unions are identified as a source of economic problems, reducing competitiveness through "rich" wage and benefit packages, inflexible work rules and strike-happy union leaders.

Although employers and governments play an important and active role in diminishing union popularity and influence, unions have unwittingly reinforced many negative views about their practices. Three such views need to be tackled here.

**Table 4b - Non-Wage Benefits, Men, Canada 1995**

by Union Status, Sex and Employee Status  
(full-time vs part-time, % of workers with each benefit)



*n.a. - sample size too small to provide reliable estimate*

Source: selected data from Jackson and Robinson, *Falling Behind* (2000), Table 4.7, p.104.

**Table 6 - Union Coverage in 2000  
as % of Paid Employees**

Category	Density	Category	Density
Both Sexes	30.4%	<b>Industry</b>	
Men	31.1%	<b>Goods-producing</b>	<b>32.0%</b>
Women	29.6%	Agriculture	2.1%
<b>Sector</b>		Natural resources	28.2%
Public	69.9%	Utilities	64.6%
Private	18.7%	Construction	30.8%
<b>Age</b>		Manufacturing	32.5%
15 to 24	12.6%	<b>Service-producing</b>	<b>29.8%</b>
25 to 44	30.7%	Trade	13.3%
45 to 54	42.1%	Transportation and warehousing	42.4%
55 and over	33.9%	Finance, insurance, real estate	8.8%
<b>Education</b>		Professional, scientific, technical	4.2%
Less than grade 9	30.9%	Management, admin, support	11.8%
Some high school	24.1%	Education	67.9%
High school grad	28.2%	Health care & social assistance	51.1%
Some post-secondary	22.7%	Information, culture, recreation	26.6%
Post-secondary certificate/diploma	34.0%	Accommodation & food	7.6%
University degree	34.7%	Public Administration	65.0%
<b>Province</b>		<b>Workplace Size</b>	
Newfoundland	39.2%	Under 20 employees	12.4%
PEI	28.2%	20 to 99 employees	30.4%
Nova Scotia	28.8%	100 to 5000 employees	44.7%
New Brunswick	28.0%	Over 500 employees	53.9%
Quebec	36.1%	<b>Job Tenure</b>	
Ontario	27.3%	1 to 12 months	14.0%
Manitoba	34.3%	Over 1 year to 5 years	21.6%
Saskatchewan	32.9%	Over 5 years to 9 years	31.8%
Alberta	21.1%	Over 9 years to 14 years	43.0%
British Columbia	35.0%	Over 14 years	55.1%
<b>Work Status</b>		<b>Job Status</b>	
Full-time	32.2%	Permanent	31.2%
Part-time	22.0%	Non-permanent	23.5%

conditions of work or objecting to arbitrary management decisions that negatively affect their work lives. Workers in non-union workplaces may attempt to persuade their managers to alter the terms and conditions of work, but they have little or no protection against dismissal by their employers. Alternatively workers can quit their jobs and seek others in the hope that they will end up working in a better environment. This option is often not a real choice, however. In times of high unemployment, workers are leery of quitting their job as finding an alternative one may be difficult and result in periods of unemployment. This is a particularly powerful factor for young workers, whose unemployment rates over the last ten years and more have been exceptionally high. Further, changes to employment insurance regulations mean that workers who quit their job to find a better one are ineligible for employment insurance benefits. Secondly, quitting one job and finding

**Figure 1  
Voice in Union  
Workplace**

- Collective bargaining
- Grievance procedure
- Seniority
- Shop stewards
- Just cause for dismissal/discipline
- Human rights protections from abuse
- Internal union democracy e.g. elections, conventions, union meetings
- Health and safety committees

**Figure 2  
Voice in Non-Union  
Workplace**

- Employment Standards Act
- Employee must lodge complaint against employer
- Unfair dismissal - requires that workers sue employer in the courts using Common Law Human Rights (up to 5 yrs or more to process a claim).
- New barriers to getting hearing
- Say in workplace at discretion of employer.

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the various means by which unions offer workers a voice in their workplaces and compare this to the limited avenues available for non-union workers to exercise their voices in the workplace.

another non-union job is no guarantee that the same problems with arbitrary management decisions will not persist. Finally, many workers put up with poor conditions of work in the hope that somehow this job will provide the basis for a better one in the future, i.e. workers often hope that there may be some career opportunities if they stick with the job for a long enough period of time. Quitting means giving up these possibilities. Unionization offers workers a say about how their workplace is run and about the terms and conditions under which work is done, thus offering them the chance of improving their present work rather than quitting in the hope that the next job will be better.

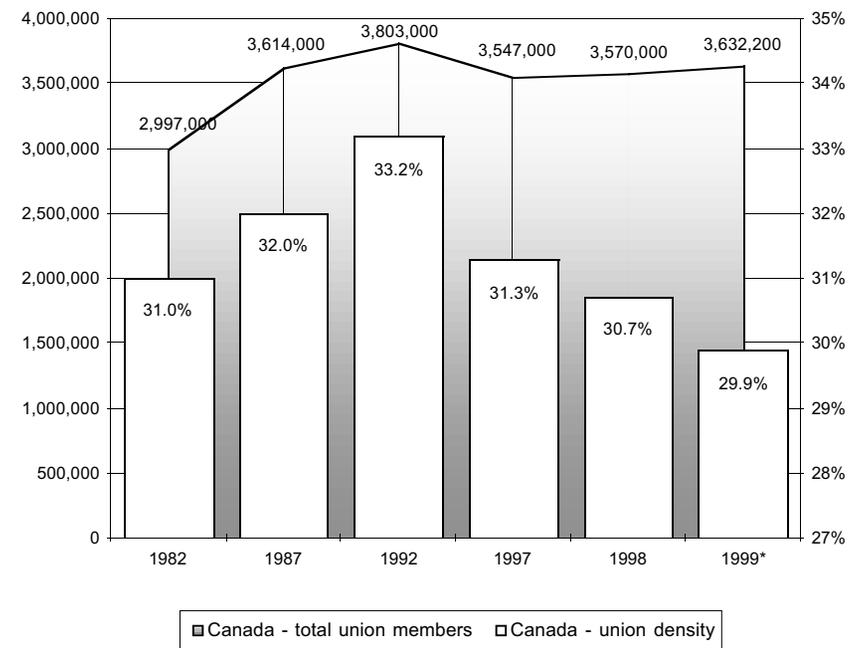
Collective bargaining provides workers with the means by which to bargain over the conditions of their employment. Workers have the chance to vote on whether they accept the agreement negotiated by representatives or reject it, thus sending union representatives back to the bargaining table to get a better deal. Shop stewards and grievance procedures provide workers with the means by which to monitor and enforce management's compliance with the terms and conditions of an agreement. If a unionized employee thinks his/her boss is playing favourites in assigning vacation times or that he/she has been unjustly disciplined, this worker can use the grievance procedure to correct the injustice. No such similar mechanism of control exists for non-union workers. Whereas it is standard for a collective agreement to include "just cause" protections for workers against arbitrary discipline and dismissal, the only protection for non-union workers comes from common law, a right which can only be exercised through a lengthy and costly court case. Few non-union workers have any type of job security guarantees. Management has complete discretion to lay-off, transfer or terminate people based on business decisions. Through collective bargaining, unions have been able to offer workers greater job security through clauses on seniority, advance notice of lay-off, restrictions on contracting out and language on technological change. At times of economic insecurity and competitiveness and as businesses engage in rapid restructuring of their operations, these provisions become ever more important in providing people with some degree of control in their employment situation.

The above discussion provides some answer to the question of what unions do. In addition to the tangible benefits to workers covered by a collective agreement, high rates of unionization are also associated with

reduced income inequality in society more generally, better regulations protecting non-unionized workers and improved government social programs (ILO). To have this effect, however, unionization rates need to remain high. In Canada, union membership (Table 5) has been on the decline, albeit in very modest terms, since the early 1990s. Such declining membership is reducing the capacity of Canadian unions to have broadreaching effects on income distribution, the protection of key social programs, and the equitable functioning of the labour market.

And as Table 6 illustrates, union membership (expressed as a percentage of the paid labour force, popularly known as union density) is concentrated in the goods producing and public sectors, and amongst older, full-time workers with longer periods of job tenure. This pattern of union membership restricts union influence to traditional areas of strength, and to those sectors of the economy associated with the "old"

**Table 5 - Union Membership and Density in Canada, 1982-1999**



Source: Statistics Canada, 1997, 1998; CALURA, 1992. \* Figures for 1999 based on 11 month estimates. Density is calculated as union members as percentage of total paid employees.