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**Coalition Building:
A Progressive Strategy for
Canadian Unions**

Tory Mathers

IRC Press

Industrial Relations Centre
Queen's University
Kingston, ON K7L 3N6
Tel: (613) 533-6709
Fax: (613) 533-6812

E-mail:

ircpress@post.queensu.ca

Visit our Website at:

<http://qsilver.queensu.ca/irl/qsirc/>

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Executive Summary

The Canadian labour movement is in a period of transition. Responding to the changing economic environment of the 1990s, labour unions have increased their emphasis on political action through coalition building with independent labour and community groups, in an attempt to increase their membership and strengthen their impact on public policy makers. Drawing on her interviews with key players in coalition building in Canada today, the author of this study reveals the current trends, the difficulties involved, the many advantages for unions and their members, and the probable direction of future coalition-building efforts.

- Coalition building has recently tended to move away from large coalitions like the Action Canada Network towards smaller alliances formed at the organizational level around single-issue campaigns.
- The formation of labour-community coalitions gives the labour movement a broader perspective on social issues and satisfies workers' desire to participate in those issues. It provides an opportunity for more members to become involved in union activities and helps combat their sense of powerlessness in the face of the new global economy.
- Coalition building helps unions to attract new members by reaching beyond the traditional membership base. It helps with the difficult task of bridging the generation gap and bringing young activists into the labour movement.
- Coalition building is an ideal way for unions to improve their poor public image, by demonstrating that in addition to their collective bargaining side they have a social justice side as well.
- Participants in coalition building should be aware of the common problems. Institutional rivalries can be divisive as different organizations compete for status and power. Poorly funded community organizations may resent and fear domination by financially powerful unions, with their solid dues-paying membership base. Community organizations, which attempt to achieve consensus, may become dissatisfied with the

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About the Author

Tory Mathers is a graduate of the Queen's University Master of Industrial Relations program. She is a human resources/ industrial relations professional currently residing in south-western Ontario.

democratic voting process of unions. Unions, conversely, may become impatient with the time-consuming search for consensus.

- The author concludes that coalition building should be a fundamental component of unions' strategic plans for the future, since the formation of labour-community alliances will be the key to ensuring the continued viability of the Canadian labour movement.

Introduction

The Canadian labour movement is in a period of transition. Unions have responded to the new environment of the 1990s with changes to their organizational structures, bargaining priorities, organizing policies and practices, and membership services. They have also increased their emphasis on political action through coalition building with independent labour and community groups, in an attempt to mobilize public support and strengthen their impact on public policy makers. An example of this new strategy can be seen in a 1997 constitutional amendment by the Canadian Labour Congress, which added the following to its goals and objectives: 'to help create and participate in coalitions with groups which share our aims and Principles in the pursuit of social and economic justice.

The current interest in coalition building has its roots in the structural crisis that occurred in the Canadian economy during the 1970s and early 1980s, when many corporations began switching from mass production to more flexible systems. This strategic switch, accompanied by an economic recession and high rates of unemployment, served to compromise the position of the traditional union membership stronghold, thereby posing a serious threat to the continued viability of the labour movement.

Most recently, the emergence of the global economy put growing emphasis on trade liberalization, deregulation, and privatization and led to the increased internationalization of production and of product and financial markets. These structural changes have divided the labour market into 'core' and 'periphery' segments, marginalizing much of the workforce and making the already difficult task of organizing workers even more difficult. At the same time, the influx of women and visible minorities into the workforce, accompanied by the decreased labour force participation of older men, has required unions to change traditional organizing strategies.

Taken together, these factors have precipitated the shift to a new form of unionism. The old 'business' style of unionism is being replaced with 'community' unionism, in an attempt both to foster a greater sense of collective identity among the membership and to attract new members, thereby strengthening and revitalizing the labour movement.

Because these strategies have been adopted only recently, the results have yet to be conclusively determined. This study is intended to begin to fill that gap by analyzing the dynamics of labour-community coalition building and determining its relative success and future prospects.

The first part of the study discusses the historical background to labour-community coalitions in Canada. The second analyzes the results of a series of structured interviews conducted by the author with several key players in the Canadian labour movement and in the social community. The results provide an indication of the direction coalition building between Canadian unions and community groups will take in the future.

Rationale, Origin, and Development

Business Unionism

As mentioned in the introduction, various changes in the social, political, and economic environment over the past few decades have altered the traditional profile of labour unions in Canada. Beginning in the 1950s, the new, postwar prosperity transformed unions from 'social movement organizations' into 'bargaining bureaucracies.' This shift marked the beginning of 'business unionism,' in which services were provided to union members by professional staff who emphasized maximizing individual wages and benefits

The old 'business' style of unionism is being replaced with 'community' unionism.

and eschewed 'a broader appeal to workers who are not members, actual or potential, or to the welfare of society as a whole' (Piore 1991, 389). Eventually, however, business unionism found itself increasingly unable to cope with the new problems of deindustrialization and, more importantly, organizing a changing workforce (Johnston 1995, 41).

The Impetus of Change

By the mid-1970s, the Canadian economy was in a structural crisis. Soaring inflation, plummeting productivity, and economic stagnation, worked against North American corporations. As a result, they began to shift away from the mass-production model of the postwar era, towards more competitive strategies based on flexible production and product differentiation. These structural changes have caused major problems for most Canadian unions, since 'standard union practices, once perceived as consistent with efficient organizational structures, are now seen as in conflict with them, and managerial resistance to unions has grown' (Piore 1991, 394).

As the recessionary gloom of the 1980s set in, the proportion of the labour force that was unionized declined, reducing the bargaining power of workers precisely when Canadian business was becoming more resistant to labour and demanding more concessions in contract bargaining (Banting 1992, 153). Union problems were compounded by the new global economy and the growing emphasis on trade liberalization, deregulation, and privatization which led, in turn, to slow employment growth and persistently high levels of unemployment and to downward pressure on wages and labour standards, all further eroding the organizational and bargaining strength of trade unions (Porter 1991). Yet, as Johnston (1995, 41) has argued, this period of decline and crisis may have created the conditions for the current renewal of the Canadian labour movement.

The Emergence of Community Unionism

Because of the economic changes just mentioned, 'Governments and private employers have shown themselves increasingly willing to extinguish the rights of workers and unions' (Calvert 1987, 312). Furthermore, unions are in a difficult political position, since they are increasingly seen as 'economic monopolies' that promote the welfare of their membership at the expense of others in society. They will therefore be able to 'survive only by explicitly redefining roles which were once taken for granted' (Piore 1991, 388).

Structural changes of recent years now also oblige unions to reconstruct their collective identities. The massive restructuring and work-reorganization initiatives undertaken by corporations trying to maintain a competitive advantage in the new global market have been associated with continued downsizing of the workforce, downward adjustments in wages and benefits, and increased managerial control of the workforce. The labour market has been divided into 'core' and 'periphery' segments: the core enjoys more stable, higher-paid employment, while the periphery is relegated to insecure, marginalized positions (Betcherman et al. 1996, 27).

The labour market has also changed with the entry of new groups, such as women and invisible minorities, into the labour market and with decreased labour force participation by other groups, particularly men and older workers. The social structure in which modern trade unions developed was built upon the ideal of a single (preferably male) family wage earner as the head of a traditional household. But the increasing prevalence of dual-career families, single working mothers, and baby boomers caring for aging parents has radically altered this social structure. Workers are now much more constrained by family commitments and are therefore less likely to be bound to their work and workplace issues than they were in the past (Piore 1991, 402).

Unions are increasingly seen as 'economic monopolies' that promote the welfare of their membership at the expense of others in society.

All these changes challenge the labour movement, confronting it with questions about its representativeness and even, ultimately, its legitimacy (Murray 1992, 47). In response, the labour movement is breaking away from the traditional, financially focused 'business' unionism and beginning to create a more 'social' image for Canadian unions; it has begun to move towards 'community' unionism, which seeks to promote a collective identity, not only within the union itself but within the larger community as a whole. The entrance of new groups into the workforce, combined with increased public concern over various societal issues has made the task of mobilizing community interest and support much more feasible for the labour movement. Unions see the formation of coalitions with community groups as the primary means of achieving labour's goal of fostering a broader, strengthened collective identity.

Why Form Coalitions?

Many trade unions have become much more diversified in recent years, and the heterogeneity and complexity of the membership and its interests have increased. By forging bonds with a wide variety of community groups, the union is likely to satisfy the divergent interests of its membership by enabling them to identify with the community group with which they feel a natural affinity, rather than forcing them to identify solely with other union members, who, due to this increased heterogeneity, may not share their interests (Visser 1990, 40).

In addition, while high and enduring rates of unemployment of recent years have led to a decline in union membership, the anxiety and fears of job loss among members who have remained employed have impaired the union's ability to mobilize its membership. Today, 'Industrial action is more costly under conditions of large-scale unemployment, and the absence of results lessens the value of the union to workers' (Visser 1990, 68).

Unions can deal with this problem by forming with community groups to increase the political pressure they wield, thereby increasing their chances of achieving favourable outcomes and making it easier for them to mobilize their membership.

The shift away from the traditional areas of membership in the male-dominated, 'heavy' industries, towards the relatively less unionized, female-dominated service industries (Kumar 1993, 53), means that unions can use labour-community coalitions as a means of attracting new members from groups, such as women and visible minorities, who have traditionally not joined unions, but who now, as mentioned, form an increasingly large part of the labour market. A coalition-building strategy can also help unions to respond to 'life-style' groups (e.g. multicultural groups, peace organizations, anti-poverty groups, etc.), who compete with unions for the allegiance of their members. With the recent reorganization of the social and economic structure, these groups provide a strong 'alternative to work-based identities for organizational and political activity.' Although individual members of a life-style group may be workers, the group as a whole is not defined in relation to the structure of the economy, as is the case with traditional unions. They therefore pose a distinct threat to the continued viability of unions (Piore 1991, 403). The obvious solution is to attempt to form alliances with these groups, in order to foster a co-operative relationship, thereby avoiding a division of worker loyalties. By allying themselves with a diverse range of community groups, unions can broaden the scope of their perhaps otherwise limited appeal, thereby strengthening their public support. And since both employers and governments must take public opinion into account for their own survival, unions have much to gain by fostering a favourable relationship with the general public (Olney 1996, 82).

By allying themselves with a diverse range of community groups, unions can broaden the scope of their appeal.

Coalition Building in Canada

The Solidarity Coalition

The creation of the Solidarity Coalition in British Columbia in 1983 was the impetus behind the current interest in coalition building in Canada. The coalition was first conceived as a response to the 'legislative onslaughts' of the newly elected Social Credit government, which severely undercut most of British Columbia's social, labour, human rights, and environmental standards. The British Columbia Federation of Labour spearheaded the initiative, rapidly mobilizing a diversified set of interests and implementing a succession of unprecedented political protests (Magnusson et al. 1984, 12).

Although the coalition did not entirely win out against the government, it did manage to reduce the impact of some of the legislation. However, the most important result was the community solidarity that resulted from joint action. As Kube explains, such a strong sense of collective identity was fostered that the participant groups developed a common understanding of each other's problems and were thus 'prepared to stand up and fight for the rights of other groups, not just their own' (1997, 156).

Solidarity Alberta, Solidarité Populaire Québec

Similar, though less spectacular, labour-community alliances developed elsewhere in Canada. Solidarity Alberta, for example, a coalition of unions and community groups, was formed in the mid-1980s in response to conservative legislative changes. Quebec also experienced a burgeoning grassroots movement uniting around labour, women's, senior citizens', and minority rights issues. Solidarité Populaire Québec (SPQ) was created in 1985 in response to the federal Conservative government's threats to end the universal nature of several of Canada's social programs. Anchored by two union federations, the Confédération des syndicats nationaux and the Centrale de l'enseignement du Québec, and supported by some seventy-five other community groups, the SPQ made a significant contribution to the widespread mobilization of support that eventually forced the government to back down on its plans to de-index old age pensions. In her discussion of the success of the SPQ, Simard (1988, 80) underscores the importance of such coalition-building efforts for the labour movement: 'It is more widely understood now that the unions have to 'open up' to other groups that have specific concerns about non-working people, in order to understand and share their social concerns. This will permit unions to have a more comprehensive approach to political and social issues.'

The trend toward coalition building is perhaps best exemplified, however, by the Pro-Canada Network, which developed into the Action Canada Network, Canada's most powerful coalition.

The Action Canada Network

The birth of the Action Canada Network can be traced to the late 1970s, when the growing economic crisis intensified the disappointment of labour and community groups with the Trudeau government, whose primary response to economic problems had been to cut public spending substantially and implement a tight monetary policy. By the 1980s, with a recession underway, economic conditions provided ample incentive for growing cooperation among what Bleyer (1992, 104) calls 'popular sector' groups (e.g. church groups, seniors' groups, women's organizations, etc.).

The Bishops' Statement

However, the main impetus behind the massive coalition-building efforts that would follow occurred in 1983, with an important New Year's statement by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops entitled 'Ethical Reflections on the Economic Crisis.' The

By the 1980s, with a recession underway, economic conditions provided ample incentive for growing cooperation among 'popular sector' groups.

statement criticized the monetarist direction of the government's economic policy and issued two key proposals: the first outlined some of the basic principles on which an alternative economic strategy might be based, and the second, more importantly, suggested a political strategy emphasizing coalition building. As Remi De Roo (quoted in Bleyer 1992, 104), chairman of the Social Affairs Commission of the bishops' conference explained, 'What we hope to do . . . is contribute to the building of a social movement for economic justice in Canada. And these are signs of great hope, signs that people from so many walks of life and such a cross-section of interests can come together to look at what can be done—in solidarity and cooperation—to build this kind of social movement.' Thus, the stage was set for the development of what would eventually become Canada's largest, strongest, and most enduring coalition.

The Macdonald Commission

In the midst of its failed policy response to the economic crisis, the Trudeau government appointed the Royal Commission on Economic Union and Development Prospects for Canada in November 1983. The Macdonald Commission, as it was more commonly known, was to recommend how Canada could best overcome its economic woes. As Bleyer reports, it was the commission's procedural process, in conjunction with its final report, that 'played key roles in the forging of the logic that was eventually to lead to the formation of the Pro-Canada, later Action Canada Network' (1992, 105).

Many labour and community groups objected to the commission's apparent failure to consider the presentations that those groups had made to it. The problem was clearest on the free trade issue: despite being widely criticized by these groups, a bilateral trade agreement nonetheless became the centrepiece of the commission's final report (Bleyer 1992, 105).

The commission issued its recommendations in the fall 1985, by which time the Mulroney Conservatives had come to power. The commission's key suggestion that a radical reduction in state intervention in the market was the solution to Canada's economic crisis was perfectly aligned with the new government's agenda. Combined with the recommendation that Canada pursue 'free trade' negotiations with the United States, the Macdonald Report served to widen the already growing gap between the business community and the 'social movement sector.' As Bleyer explains, 'The final result was the public drawing of clear lines of demarcation between the neoconservative corporate vision of Canada and a "popular sector" perspective' (1992, 105).

The Free Trade Debate

Thus, the need for popular sector groups to take action was clearly established, and the seeds of the anti-free trade movement were sown. In April 1987, the Council of Canadians, an established, well-known nationalist group, convened the Maple Leaf Summit. Close to one hundred representatives from such national organizations as the Canadian Labour Congress, the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, the Churches' Coalition on Economic Justice, and the National Farmers' Union came together to share their concerns about the potential negative effects of the proposed free trade agreement. It was here that the Pro-Canada Network (PCN), the national vehicle for coordination and communication between the various member groups, was born. By the time the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (FTA) had been formulated, in October 1987, a formidable country-wide alliance of over thirty national organizations and associated coalitions in nearly every province and territory had been established (Ayres 1996, 476).

Free trade was the central issue of the federal election campaign that followed in 1988. Although the free trade Conservatives won the election, the PCN's well-established com-

By the time the FTA had been formulated, a formidable country-wide alliance of over thirty national organizations and associated coalitions had been established.

munications system enabled member groups to coordinate and publicize their actions, thereby increasing their effectiveness and garnering even more public support for the anti-free trade issue.

Reorganizing the Coalition

In the aftermath of the election, the network undertook the difficult task of reorganizing the coalition, moving beyond the previous 'single-issue' agenda to a more broadly based focus, in order to maintain solidarity among the member groups (Bleyer 1992, 109). This strategy had the added benefit of attracting new groups to the coalition. Refounded as the Action Canada Network (ACN) in April 1991, the current alliance includes more than forty-five national groups and provincial coalitions.

As always, organized labour continues to play a central role in the ACN's activities. The key benefit for labour affiliates and trade unions is the broader base of support it provides for their own sectoral struggles (Bleyer 1992, 112), which in turn improves the unions' chances of building a strong and dynamic labour movement.

The Current State of Coalition Building

The results of personal interviews conducted by the author with some of the leaders of Canada's labour and social organizations, which are reported in this section, can provide new insights into the relative success and usefulness of coalition building as a solution to the current crisis in the labour movement. The interview questions were designed to elicit information about the economic, social, and political environment that spurred the coalition-building initiative; facilitating factors or barriers involved in establishing coalitions; and the strengths and weaknesses inherent in coalition building. Interview subjects were also asked to reflect on the history of labour-community alliances and to share their own vision of the future of coalition building in Canada.

Interview candidates were selected to reflect the diversity of Canadian unions and community groups (see the appendix). Thus, the sample included, on the one hand, persons from such organizations as the Ontario Coalition for Social Justice, which operates on a shoestring budget, and, on the other hand, representatives from the powerful Canadian Auto Workers Union, with its large dues-paying membership, solid financial base, and history of political activism. Other umbrella organizations, such as the Ontario Federation of Labour and the Canadian Labour Congress were selected in order to provide an overarching view of the coalition movement from a broader perspective. In each instance those interviewed were leaders of their own organization, or they had been designated by the leadership to speak on the organization's behalf.

Change at the Action Canada Network

As previously mentioned, after the campaigns against free trade were finished, the ACN regrouped, moving from a single-issue agenda to deal with several different issues. The feeling was that a multi-issue strategy would strengthen the coalition, since it would appeal to a wider range of labour and community groups.

In the interviews, senior ACN executive member Geoff Bickerton reported that the network has entered into a new phase of development, since many of its member organizations have become more like coalitions themselves. That is, many of the ACN's affiliates have grown stronger and taken on more responsibility, evolving from single-issue organizations into more broadly based groups covering a multitude of issues. As a result of this

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change, the ACN has reassessed its own role in the coalition-building process. While at one time the network was primarily concerned with initiating campaign and protest action in its own name, the new ACN will take on more of a facilitative role, bringing diverse groups together and finding the best means of making these coalitions as effective as possible.

Despite this fundamental change to its original mandate and organizational structure, the ACN has still maintained a fairly strong core of support. However, since the end of the campaign against NAFTA in 1993, dissatisfaction with the new role of the ACN appears to have increased. In fact, one critic has charged that the ACN has 'failed utterly' in its attempt to create a mass base for Canadian socio-political action (Wells 1994, 30).

Dissatisfaction with Broad, National Coalitions

The results of the interviews conducted for this study seem to bear out the dissatisfaction with the ACN. For example, Bob White, president of the Canadian Labour Congress, feels that there is simply no need for a national coalition which functions strictly as a facilitator of other coalitions. And Carol Phillips, a senior policy staff member from the Canadian Auto Workers Union, pointed out that the CAW is proactive in forming its own alliances and is very pragmatic about how it allocates its resources. Thus, the CAW has little need for, or interest in, membership in an organization that facilitates the coalition-building process.

Moreover, it is not only the largest and most powerful of the country's labour organizations that have determined the ACN to be unsuitable for their needs. The leader of another, less prominent Canadian union indicated that the union left the coalition because of the multi-issue agenda. This union's precious few resources had to be dedicated to the narrow set of issues that impacted the membership directly. With the ACN's move to more broadly based strategy, it felt that the issues that were most important to it would not be adequately addressed in the newly structured network.

Personalized Coalition Building

In general, then, there would appear to be a trend among labour organizations to forge coalitions on their own initiative, so that they can select the community groups they wish to work with and determine the specific issues they want to undertake, thereby tailoring their coalition-building activity to suit their own needs. And many have suggested that although it may require greater effort and resource expenditure, this 'personalized' strategy yields much better results for the organization than does membership in a broad, national coalition.

Labour and community groups have indicated that by being proactive and articulating their own coalition-building strategy, they can seek out other like-minded groups who share the same set of general interests or viewpoints on a given issue. This flexible selection process allows them to avoid one of the main difficulties experienced by larger coalitions such as the ACN: the possibility that a portion of their precious resources will be expended on a campaign issue which they care little about or, worse yet, to which they are ideologically or morally opposed.

Duncan MacDonald, programs coordinator for the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL), provided an example of such a situation from his own organization's experience. Over the years, the OFL has allied itself with the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops in various coalitions to campaign on several issues for which they share a common ground. However, on the abortion issue, the OFL and the Conference of Bishops were diametrically opposed, the former being pro-choice and the latter being pro-life. Clearly then, in a larger coalition with a multi-issue agenda one of these organizations would have inevitably been displeased with the position of the coalition on the issue. And because the abortion issue, like many

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other issues coalitions campaign on, is a matter of principles, neither organization would have changed its stance.

The unfortunate result of such a scenario is that one of the two organizations, which otherwise would have much in common with the other coalition members and, indeed, much to contribute to the coalition's goals would be forced to abandon the alliance altogether. This problem can be avoided, however, if organizations form their own coalitions around single issues.

The interviews conducted for this study also revealed a general feeling that the broader the scope of a coalition, the less effective it will be. As Morna Ballantyne, executive assistant to the national president of the Canadian Union of Public Employees explained, 'the most successful alliances are formed around a certain issue, with everyone working under a set deadline, with a set amount of resources, toward the same goal.'

Thus, while in the mid-1980s the renewed interest in coalition building was manifest in the formation of large, national alliances such as the ACN, the more recent trend appears to be toward the formation of a greater number of smaller coalitions developed at the organizational level.

Factors Facilitating Coalition Building

Several factors have facilitated the shift to the more individualistic and 'specialized' coalitions.

Post Experience and Realistic Goals

In his comprehensive study of labour-community coalitions in the United States, Nissen found that 'alliances develop better if there is a lengthy period of time for them to be cemented in struggle or if previous struggles have paved the way' (1995, 167). Thus, prior experience of working with coalitions, or even previous exposure to the coalition-building process serves to facilitate the formation of labour-community alliances. Nissen also found that 'building alliances and mobilizing broad constituencies works best when the common goal seems to be both realistically achievable and highly desirable to the constituencies involved' (167).

Labour Force Changes

Another facilitating factor has been the increased participation of workers in community organizations and activities, resulting primarily from the increased participation of women in the labour force. Unionized women, in particular, who are active members within their organizations also tend to be activists outside the union and serve as 'crucial links in an emerging network [since] overlapping membership means that many members of one group have a direct stake in supporting the struggles of another to which they also belong' (Brecher and Costello 1990, 334). The result has been an increased awareness of broader social and community issues among unionized employees.

Social Awareness Programs

Some unions have also created social awareness programs for their members to facilitate coalition building. The CAW, for example, has developed challenging educational programs that encourage membership to get involved in issues that are broader than those of the union and to help members to see themselves as part of a larger community of workers. Such initiatives are very important, since, as Nissen explains, 'most labour-community coalitions cannot work effectively unless the union actively involves . . . the membership' (1995, 169).

Changing Public Opinion

A fourth factor is, in a sense, strictly cosmetic. Unions know that governments and the general public tend not to have a very favourable opinion of them. Therefore, as CLC president Bob White explains, ‘the raw facts are that sometimes on basic issues the broad-based coalition has not much more political acceptability than the labour movement.’ Similarly, a leader from one of the smallest Canadian unions admitted that it had allied itself with various religious groups to shield itself from government criticism, while projecting a gentler image of the union to the general public, in order to win their sympathy and support.

Barriers to Coalition Building

Unequal Resources

Most trade unions now recognize that they have much to gain by getting involved in labour-community alliances. A dues-paying membership provides unions with a solid financial base, and many are willing to contribute generously to such initiatives. Most community organizations, on the other hand, do not have the resources of the labour movement, especially since the government has essentially eliminated funding for such ‘special interest groups’ over the past ten years. This difference in available resources becomes a key point of contention in many coalitions. As Sam Gindin, assistant to the president of the CAW explained, there is always the potential for resentment where resources are concerned since ‘people without resources always want to know why the people who do have resources don’t contribute more, . . .’

Because they lack the resources of trade unions, many community organizations often feel relegated to a secondary role in the coalition. But Bob White, president of the Canadian Labour Congress, denies that unions naturally assume a dominant position:

In most important coalitions, the vast majority of the money comes from the labour movement, and yet the labour movement has the smallest representation. So it’s not a question of putting your money in and controlling it.

Moreover, he adds that in some cases the labour movement may even be too passive in their involvement in coalitions.

Decision-Making Styles

Another key barrier to coalition building is the difference in decision-making styles between labour and community organizations. As Duncan MacDonald from the OFL describes it,

The labour movement tends to use more the parliamentary approach, where there is an issue, you have a discussion, a decision is made, and then you move on. On the community coalition side there is a long tradition of consensus building, where you try to make sure everyone is completely comfortable with the issue.

On the one hand, unions tend to be natural organizers who use a democratic voting process to make decisions in the most expeditious manner possible. On the other hand, many community organizations devote a lot of time to ensuring that all group members are at least somewhat satisfied with the final decision.

Thus, there is often a feeling of resentment on the part of the community groups who think ‘big labour’ is trying to control things. Similarly, the community groups’ consensus-building approach can be very frustrating for unions, who feel that their method of decision making allows them to mobilize much more effectively. Coalitions must therefore find some sort of middle ground between these two approaches such that the decisions

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are seen to be as representative as possible, while also being made in the most efficient manner possible. Andrea Calver, the head staff member of the Ontario Coalition for Social Justice, thinks there is still much improvement to be made in this area:

One thing we really do have to transcend is the earlier sharing of decision making, and form a real partnership around decision making . . . and we've got a long way to go.

Ideological Differences

Ideological differences between labour and community groups may also cause problems. Some organizations feel that their own sphere of influence will be threatened by participation in coalitions. Others feel that since the interests of workers do not always coincide with the interests of community organizations, coalition building is not possible. In other words, most unions and community groups have quite different climates or cultures, and much depends on the cultural 'fit' between them.

Weaknesses in the Coalition

Even when the barriers to coalition building have been overcome, various problems may weaken the alliance. Institutional rivalries within the coalition, as different organizations compete for status or power, will have a divisive effect. Furthermore, as Duncan MacDonald from the OFL put it, labour-community coalitions often tend to communicate and work with the 'already converted.' That is, once unions have discovered potential bases of cooperation and have expended the necessary resources to form a coalition with community organizations, they tend to concentrate all their effort on working with these groups, rather than seeking out other similar organizations and continuing to build the alliance. Limiting the alliance in this way may be detrimental to unions in the long run. It is in the labour movement's best interest to create as broadly based a coalition as possible.

According to CAW executive assistant Sam Gindin, another source of weakness is the 'looseness' of smaller, informal coalitions which often lack a solid organizational structure, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities and paths of accountability. Here, many coalition members are often left feeling that they are working alone on an issue. As Nissen has suggested, the development of a more formal, 'active committee structure' would address this problem and allow the coalition to progress from a 'tenuous alliance' to an 'effective instrument for social action' (1995, 166).

Members of a coalition may also fail to create lasting organizational structures if the coalition is formed around a single issue. Once the goal is achieved, it becomes difficult to hold the coalition together. As a result, labour-community coalitions often find themselves trapped in an inefficient cycle in which the coalition must begin organizing again from scratch each time a new issue arises. The solution, according to Andrea Calver from the Ontario Coalition for Social Justice, is to 'establish ongoing structures and keep them going. Coalitions will then have a real capacity at the local, provincial and national level to do some effective work.'

Advantages of Coalition Building

Attracting New Members

Labour has already made significant inroads in bringing more women into the ranks, and the movement's most recent efforts have been concentrated on getting the next generation of workers involved in union activities. However, for the most part young people are not entirely sure what unions are about: they know little about the culture of the labour

Labour-community coalitions often find themselves trapped in an inefficient cycle.

movement and its larger commitment to social justice. As Munro explains, ‘Working in ongoing coalitions is one way unions can bridge the generation gap that exists culturally and politically between young activists and the labour movement: a gap that, one way or another, must be overcome if trade unions are to flourish in the coming years’ (1995, 17). Coalitions with youth and other community groups attract new members to the union by making unions relevant in a broader sense, changing their image from that of a dues-collecting agency to one that is concerned with larger social issues.

Fostering Diversity

Coalitions also bring diversity and a broader perspective to member organizations. As one CAW executive member put it, ‘through coalitions [labour and community groups] can get ideas, stimulation, and support from one another.’ Another labour leader explained that coalitions are an important forum for groups with seemingly opposing interests to get together informally. To demonstrate this point, she cited an example from her own organization concerning a campaign for state-funded child care. Their coalition brought together parent groups who could not afford the high cost of child care and an organization of day care workers who could not afford to live on the low wages they received. This coalition enabled two groups, each with fundamentally different interests, to understand the other’s position and to work together towards a mutually acceptable solution.

Creating a Collective Identity

Coalitions also encourage union members to identify with a larger outside social movement, rather than just the trade union movement. CAW executive assistant Sam Gindin explained that this sense of identification is crucial to the way members perceive themselves and also to the way unions are perceived by the public. That is, by engaging in coalition building, unions demonstrate that they want to mobilize with the community, rather than merely being charitable to the community. Thus, the formation of labour-community alliances not only presents a better image of unions to the general public but helps to foster a greater sense of collective identity among the membership itself.

Social Unionism

Increasingly, as the labour force becomes much more diversified, union members are looking to their unions for more than just representation at the bargaining table. The labour movement’s response to these demands has been a shift to ‘social unionism,’ which is ‘rooted in the workplace but understands the importance of participating in, and influencing, the general direction of society’ (Adkin 1998, 227). Coalition building is an ideal way for unions to demonstrate to their members, and to the general public, that in addition to their collective bargaining side they have a ‘social justice’ side as well.

Coalition building with community groups creates a greater awareness of broader social issues among the rank and file and helps them to better understand how these issues affect them as citizens. Participation in labour-community coalitions also encourages workers to become involved in social activism outside the union setting: through coalitions with community groups unions can ally themselves with other workers who are not organized. Union members who would not have been able to participate in the traditional union structure, where only a limited number of positions are available, will now find an outlet for their activism.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, participation in coalitions can help to alleviate the sense of powerlessness and isolation that is prevalent among workers in the current political climate. The strength gained through the sheer increase in the size of their rank builds worker confidence, and the opportunity to be involved in effecting social change empowers each coalition member.

Coalitions bring diversity and a broader perspective to member organizations.

Conclusions

We have seen that coalition building has recently tended to move away from large, high-profile coalitions toward smaller alliances formed at the organizational level around single-issue campaigns. This new strategy has been facilitated by greater worker involvement in the community, which has resulted from the increased participation of women in the workforce in recent years. However, the growth of labour-community coalitions has been somewhat hindered by the different decision-making styles of unions and community groups and the differences in the amount of resources that each group can contribute to the coalition. This study has also revealed weaknesses in coalition building which can prevent labour-community alliances from achieving their peak effectiveness. For example, many unions tend to work with the same community groups all the time, instead of trying to broaden the scope of the coalition and forge alliances with new groups.

Benefits

This study has revealed several beneficial results of coalition building. The formation of labour-community coalitions helps unions to attract new members and gives the labour movement a broader perspective on various social issues. It helps to foster a greater sense of collective identity among the rank and file by also creating an awareness of broader social issues. Participation in labour-community coalitions satisfies workers' desire for more than just representation at the bargaining table and provides greater opportunity for members to become involved in union activities. Coalitions help to combat workers' sense of powerlessness in the face of increasing corporatism and the new global economy.

Future Prospects for Coalition Building in Canada

Because unions have much to gain from coalition building, the future prospects for labour-community coalitions in Canada are promising. Indeed, the results of this study indicate that coalition building will become increasingly popular with many labour organizations, since it will help to ensure the continued viability of the labour movement by increasing union membership. As CAW executive assistant Sam Gindin has argued, labour-community coalitions are 'absolutely fundamental to broadening the membership base.'

Coalition building will also continue to meet the needs of the existing union membership. As Carol Phillips, of the CAW, explains,

Partisanship is breaking down and there is less conviction among members that change can be achieved through political action. More and more people are looking for other ways to start getting involved in protecting what they've got and also affecting change.

Or, as Nissen puts it, 'coalition building is a vital avenue for membership activation' (1995, 176).

Clearly then, coalition building should be an essential component of unions' strategic plans for the future. If the labour movement is to revitalize and strengthen itself in the coming years, it must continue to broaden its coalition-building efforts and foster good working relationships with as many different social groups as possible. In the words of Bob White,

The issues that are coming down both domestically and internationally will demand that groups work with each other. Labour movements that isolate themselves to just their own members will not be able to progress.

Coalitions help to combat workers' sense of powerlessness in the face of increasing corporatism and the new global economy.

Appendix

Individuals Interviewed for This Study

Sam Gindin, Executive Assistant to the President, Canadian Auto Workers Union

Carol Phillips, senior policy staff member, Canadian Auto Workers Union

Robert White, President, Canadian Labour Congress

Geoff Bickerton, Research Director, Canadian Union of Postal Workers and senior executive member, Action Canada Network

Morna Ballantyne, Executive Assistant to the National President, Canadian Union of Public Employees

Andrea Calver, head staff member, Ontario Coalition for Social Justice

Duncan MacDonald, Programs Co-ordinator, Ontario Federation of

Labour *Alexandra Dagg*, President, UNITE

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