

Labour Unions in Canada Today

A Conversation with Bob White

**An interview with
Bob White**

**Interviewed by
Pradeep Kumar and Bryan Downie**

Labour Unions in Canada Today

A Conversation with Bob White

In spring 1995, Bob met with Pradeep Kumar and Bryan Downie of the School of Industrial Relations at Queen's University for a conversation on the labour movement in Canada, where it is and where it is going, and on Bob White's vision of the role and future of the movement.

Bob White was elected President of the Canadian Labour Congress in June 1992 and re-elected in 1994. Today, as president of the CLC he is the chief spokesperson for 2.2 million working Canadians. Bob White's journey through the movement and the workforce has put him on picket lines and at parliamentary committees. He got his start in union politics and organizing with the United Auto Workers. By 1959 he was president of UAW Local 636 and in 1960 was appointed UAW international representative and assigned to organizing duties in Canada. In 1972 he became administrative assistant to the UAW director for Canada. In 1984 he was at the centre of one of the most dramatic moments in Canadian labour history when the UAW was restructured and the Canadian Auto Workers union emerged to reshape the Canadian labour landscape. The founding convention for the new union took place in 1985 and Bob was acclaimed the first CAW-Canada president, serving three terms. Bob White has been awarded doctor of law degrees from York University, the University of Windsor, and St. Francis Xavier University. The City of Toronto gave him its award of merit. He was made an Officer of the Order of Canada for his exceptional service to Canadians.

Most people think of the Canadian labour relations system as an adversarial system compared to more consensus-based cooperative systems in Europe. In your opinion, is this an accurate characterization of the Canadian system of labour relations?

I think the term 'adversarial' is misunderstood by many people who believe, somehow, that there's always constant confrontation between labour and management. To me the term 'adversarial' means you reflect a certain point of view on basic issues that may or may not be shared by the other person or party. Most labour relations systems around the world are characterized by adversarialism. Take for example the German system, which many people call non adversarial. But they've had some major confrontations around important fundamental issues like shorter work time, etc. Look at France, another non adversarial labour relations system;

recently they have had more strikes across the country than we've ever seen in the history of Canada. My experience with the auto industry suggests that an adversarial system does not automatically lead to confrontation; many people may not know that we have had only one strike at General Motors during the past twenty-five years. We have had an adversarial system, but ultimately that system requires that we reach a solution and work out the problems. Therefore, I think 'adversarial' means that you represent a certain point of view, but you try to solve the problems with the least amount of interruption in work time. There's been more adversarialism between political parties in this country, between the provinces and the federal government, than there has been in labour relations. I think it's healthy. I think some of the cooperative models try to smother the real concerns of people in the workplace and some of them, quite frankly, are models for buying into management rights.

What about the mutual suspicion and distrust that exist between labour and management?

In most jurisdictions you still have to fight to get a union even with legislative changes. In many communities today there are still people who are afraid to join a union because they may get discharged by their employer. When you look at how employers fight labour legislation, which would be normally acceptable in any democratic society that recognizes the role of the trade union movement, it's no wonder you start from some suspicion and distrust. But most working people that I've talked with have a certain respect for their employer and what they want to do is make their conditions better. They want their employer to be able to, if it's in the private sector, make money, make some profit. They want to see their sector keep modernizing and be able to have the new technology that produces quality goods and improves productivity. But they also have a right to be suspicious of management when they see transnational corporations who, when the economy goes into the dumps, will immediately change their labour relations attitudes and come to the bargaining table and try to take things away that people have fought for over the years. However, there's a lot of dialogue and a lot of trust built through the labour relations climate and there's a lot of mutual respect that comes from that. For example, work has been done on health and safety matters that started from confrontation, within an adversarial system, but has led to a broader education and broader acceptance of the importance of health, of safety. But, I want to be very candid. On some basic fundamental issues in our society, about improving legislation on health and safety or workers compensation, most employers are becoming pretty hard-nosed against what we think are the basic rights of working people.

In this context, do you think that the current system is conducive to an effective restructuring of the economy?

Well, I don't know of any other system that does any better. If you look at some of the sectors that have been restructured, the system has been working reasonably well. There's a lot of dialogue between labour and management on restructuring. There's cooperation on some of the

issues. But the problem with restructuring and the broader social problem is that you're really talking about less jobs. I don't know any system that can meet the test of saying to people, 'You are going to be out of work and somehow this system is going to make it painless for you.' You can make it less painful by putting together severance programs that provide early retirement, retraining and job searches. I don't know of any other labour relations system that does any better. Unless there is a social commitment, starting at the national level, that declares that full employment should be our goal, that restructuring must be contained to meet the goal of maintaining full employment, and that we have to find jobs for people who are going to lose jobs on account of restructuring, restructuring is going to create stress. I think the problem that we're seeing in our country today is that governments who should be setting examples in this kind of restructuring are setting bad examples, saying we intend to cut the public sector, we intend to change the collective agreement, we intend to rip up the collective agreement. That doesn't set a very good example of a framework that says there should be a national dialogue around these important social issues of restructuring. And then, in some parts of the world where there is no labour movement or a weak labour movement, employers attempt to restructure just by discharging people, closing facilities, and moving locations. This happens in our society as well. The fact is that a lot of restructuring has been done unilaterally by management and there is very little consensus on an effective restructuring process except in certain industries. I think it's really important for the trade union movement to represent the viewpoint that we want to protect as many jobs as we can and we want to make any restructuring as painless as we can for the people affected.

Is there a danger though that union leaders, when faced with these problems, draw a line saying 'no' and, therefore, almost getting excluded from the decision-making process; they are not going to be part of the solution.

There are some unions, some union leaders, who would rather have someone else make a decision for them, rather than make the decision themselves. You see some of that in some bargaining situations where you could arrive at a settlement versus going to compulsory arbitration. There are some who say, 'politically for us it's better if someone else makes that decision.' I come from the viewpoint that we should accept our responsibilities and we should fight like hell to recognize reality, but fight like hell to represent workers through that reality. We went through enormous restructuring in the auto sector. What we said there was that, while you couldn't bargain job security, you could bargain some form of income security for a period of time. In many ways you must have a two-track strategy. It's like dealing with the government. On the one hand you have to oppose the general thrust or the direction the government is taking, but on the other hand you have to be at the table to bargain the best possible arrangement for restructuring. Bell Telephone is another example. Here we had a union, the CEP [Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union], who I think worked very hard to establish a whole different kind of collective bargaining relationship, including a framework for conducting

the actual bargaining itself. Then, in the midst of negotiations, without any warning to the union, the president of Bell announced that the company was going to cut 10,000 jobs. When the union was critical of the action, the company said, 'Well, how come the union is not more cooperative these days?' Examples like this show that you can't preach cooperation and consultation and responsibility to trade union leaders and members and then conduct yourself in a unilateral fashion when the going gets tough. It's easy to talk about cooperation when the going's easy, it's more difficult to talk about when the going gets tough. Most union leaders, certainly in the private sector, are realistic and prepared to negotiate a process of restructuring. The problem with the public sector is, I think, that governments have continually taken the responsibility and accountability away from trade union leadership. The latest situation in Ottawa is a good example. Here we had a collective agreement that contained a certain clause that would apply in the event of a restructuring. The government tried to bargain some changes in that and weren't successful. The government had an obligation to stay at the bargaining table, but decided that the simple way was to pass a piece of legislation that leaves the government the option of saying to the union that we don't have to bargain anymore to find a solution. All that does, I think, is relieve a lot of people of the responsibility. When governments set this kind of an example they make it much more difficult to achieve effective restructuring. In the private sector there are examples like Algoma or some paper mills indicating that labour and management are trying new ideas and new forms of restructuring, and it's being done with government assistance in some cases, with the labour movement accepting the responsibilities and trying to find the most painless way to come through the restructuring.

I understand that these sorts of things generally do not happen in European countries like Germany, France or Sweden where there is a legal obligation on employers to inform and consult with the union. Do you think similar kinds of legislative provisions are needed here to make the system, which you say is a very good system, even better?

There has to be a political will to set those kinds of social dimensions. When you have governments who believe the way to prosperity is to have more cuts in employment, the mindset becomes 'that's the only way to prosperity.' The problem with our society today is that we think that the way to get out of the mess we're in is to rush to the bottom, to get lean and mean, to throw as many people out of work as we can, and somehow it will all work out. Yes, you need some more accountability and responsibility, but you can't do that in isolation from what's going on in the political dimension. I think in some of the countries, certainly in Western Europe, Scandinavia, and Germany, there was much more recognition that if you're going to have a restructuring you have to do that in full consultation with government officials and the broader society. Japan, for many years, went through this saying, 'Well, if you're going to restructure the auto sector you have to find other jobs for people.' You are right, there has to be a broader political-social framework so that these decisions won't just be left to the parties to make. But

regardless of what you work out, there will be social costs borne by people, some people will end up on unemployment insurance, social assistance, or in retraining.

You say that our labour relations system is better than any other country's. How could it be a good labour relations system when unions are only tolerated, where collective bargaining is considered a menace by a government that has a 70-80 percent unionization rate, and by a company like Bell that had a very good labour relationship with its union?

I'm talking about the practice of labour relations. If you're asking me, 'Can we have a better climate? Can we develop a climate in which unions are accepted as an important contributor to the democratic process, where public sector workers' rights are recognized, as they should be, by democratic governments, where employers who have union organizing in one location are readily acceptable of the workers in another location?' Yes, you can have a much better climate for the conduct of labour relations than we have in Canada. What I was talking about before is how the system is working. I think it's working as well as we can expect. But we could develop a much broader legislative framework in which collective bargaining rights would be much more acceptable. And then you would find, I think, unions accepting much more responsibility for change. Some would say that people are afraid of change. I don't accept that. I think for most people change is a challenge. What they don't like is the insecurity that can happen through change. When change means that you or your son or your daughter or your partner is going to lose a job it's no wonder you don't want change. If change means that the job content is going to change, that the work environment is going to change, but your employment situation, your benefits will improve as a result of this, that your job security will improve, most people will be glad to accept that and glad to go through training and other adjustments.

What's Bob White's vision of labour relations? What kind of changes would you like to see made? Would you like unions to be involved in all sorts of decisions at the enterprise level?

I don't quarrel with those who want to have workers on the board of directors or whatever. I think in some situations that will work. I remember when Doug Fraser [the UAW President in the early 1980s] got on the Board of Directors of Chrysler in the United States. My comment was that that would be an interesting experiment. He had some input into some decisions that Chrysler made, but not many. I think these are part and parcel of experiments for labour relations. I don't think, however, that any one model applied broadly across the system would be a panacea.

Do you think that there should be some sort of an obligation for employers to at least provide information and have consultation with the union on the changes that are being made?

Of course. There should be obligation on the part of employers to give long periods of notice for restructuring, to give the financial and other planning information to the unions explaining what the choices are and why they are going to make those changes, and giving the unions a chance to make some alternative proposals.

What about the works council idea?

Collective bargaining only represents 40 percent of the workforce? A majority of the workforce is deprived of the rights of representation. Again, you have to keep in mind that the political and social context in Europe comes from a much different base. In those countries there is a full acceptance of the trade union movement's role and trade unions have representation on works councils. I don't think works councils are necessarily the answer in Canada. I think a better answer is labour legislation that is much more accepting of the role of the trade union movement in a democratic society, where workers can form unions much more easily than they are doing currently. In many jurisdictions where they have tried to level the playing field more, you're seeing more organization but you're also seeing political leaders saying, 'As soon as we get elected we are going to take that away from people.' When somebody tells me the answer to these problems is works councils, I tend to think that works councils are a way to avoid real unionization at the workplace in many cases.

There might be people who do not want to become members of the union, but they want to participate and want to be involved and be informed of the decision making at their workplace.

I think works councils will encourage employers who want to keep unions out. If you look at organizations like Dofasco or others that have been successful in that and have some mechanism at the workplace for people to feel that they are really participating, in most cases, workers in these situations are not really participating. They may be giving some opinions on what's going on in their department, what's going on in terms of scrap, what's going on in terms of product lines, what's going on in terms of service, etc. but when the board of directors meets they're not going to have a major impact on what decisions will be made. The formalized works council, in many ways, is some form of unionization by a different name. We used to call them company unions. In British Columbia they call them 'rat unions.' They are also called associations.' The question is whether you structure that by legislation. I'm not opposed to it, I just don't know what value that brings to the system. I think Volkswagen had a kind of works council system in their plant in Barrie, Ontario. The CAW was able to use the works council system as a way of bringing people together and saying, 'If this is what you really want to participate in, then the best way to participate is through a union'; the workers ultimately joined the CAW. Works councils are among the ideas that have been floated by people like Robert Reich, the U.S. Secretary of Labor, in the U.S. It's interesting to me that while they talk about works councils, they can't make any progressive legislative change which would really allow the growth of

organized labour in the United States. It indicates to me that works councils can never ever play the role that the labour movement can play.

If joint health and safety committees can work, as they do in Canada, why can't works councils?

I think that health and safety committees have worked because we have a legislative framework making them mandatory for certain purposes. Their experience may not be applicable to the discussion on works councils. The history of health and safety committees was initially one of adversarial confrontation by unions to drag management, in many cases, into dealing with health, not just safety, in the workplace. Then larger employers came to accept that the union has a great deal of knowledge about health and safety which could be developed to provide a safe and healthy work environment. We then set in motion demands for a legislative framework for health and safety with internal responsibility mechanisms. We've always said we don't want to have this just for our own membership; it's like our argument on minimum wage, we think this should apply to everybody. We believed that there should be health and safety committees for unorganized workers. Now in most jurisdictions we have a legislative framework for health and safety conditions and standards that workers can look at and say to their employer, 'This is what you are violating and this is what you should be doing.' Works councils would only have a loose legislative framework with rights of information and consultation for workers, but would not oblige employers to have councils like health and safety committees. I'm not opposed to works councils. I don't think they are a panacea and I don't think they are a replacement for the role of the trade union movement in our society.

What about bilateral institutions like the Canadian Labour Market and Productivity Centre (CLMPC), and sectoral bodies like the Canadian Steel Industry Trade and Employment Congress? What do you think has been the experience with these and what is the promise of these for labour relations purposes?

Any time you get into these forums, even though you may bring different perspectives to the table, these forums provide an opportunity to develop dialogue around certain issues. I'm a great believer in the need for dialogue regardless of who it is with, but especially with major employers in the country, and the need to keep that dialogue going. I think these forums break down some barriers about the role of the union. When I was with the CAW we would have a meeting with the president and major officials of a particular company once a year, not to go over grievances or collective bargaining, but to spend time on product lines, on quality, on productivity numbers, on technology, on the future of the industry. Some of our committee members used to oppose that, but I would say to them, 'Look, if we're going to deal with these matters then we should know what we're talking about.' As far as the CLMPC is concerned, I don't think that that is a place where you set new trends in labour relations, but again it's a place

where the top employers and some of the top union leaders come together around issues that are of importance to them, issues around new technology and jobs, issues around the framework of discussing unemployment insurance etc. I think these kinds of forums are important and we should participate. I don't want them to become debating societies. I've got no time for just meeting for meeting's sake. I think the Canadian Labour Force Development Board has played a positive role in terms of setting some parameters for training and encouraging dialogue at the provincial and local levels so that the local people are involved in training. It was done mainly by business and labour and then they brought in some of the social action equity groups. I think some of these things are uniquely Canadian in some ways. It's something that doesn't happen in the United States and something that, I think, makes us stronger. I think in most cases they are a good avenue for building bridges, a good avenue for having dialogue; I've found you don't just stay with the issue on the table, you talk about other, broader issues. We did this in Ontario with the Ontario Quality of Working Life Centre; often in those meetings we were discussing social and economic issues, broader issues than actual workplace situations. These kinds of forums are important.

One of the shortcomings that I see is not of the system but really of the people. Perhaps if there were more Bob Whites in the system then the adversarial system would be working much more effectively. What do you see as the role model you can play for the labour movement?

A lot of the collective bargaining that takes place depends on people. I came out of a union, where, in the major sectors we dealt with, there is very centralized collective bargaining. Therefore, the top officials of the union have a major role to play and if they didn't play that role they wouldn't be elected to the leadership of the union. I think there are a lot of good union leaders in the country, some of them get a chance to do their job at the bargaining table. Look at how CEP has gone through a lot of changes. The IWA [International Woodworkers Association, now known as IWACanada], the UFCW [United Food and Commercial Workers] and the Steelworkers have had similar experiences. To me the model union leader is one who has credibility with the membership; I have never thought you get that credibility by speaking in the voice of the employer. You get that credibility by recognizing and expressing the concerns of the people you represent and those concerns are very real. Whether you can achieve the objective of solving those concerns is another matter. Workers expect you to at least make the best effort you can to do that and then go back to them and have them make that judgment. You have to have integrity. That doesn't mean that you don't represent your point of view very clearly. It doesn't mean that you don't many times go to the wire in confrontation. You have to build relationships with the people you are dealing with and you have to know the issues. You have to be well informed, not only about details at the workplace, but also about the broad people issues you are dealing with. I remember my first strike as the young president of a local union that had the workers on strike for 13 weeks. The Assistant Director of the union said to me, 'You've done very well. You've got them on strike, now how the hell are you going to get them back to work?'

Ultimately, you have to be able to find the settlement. We believed in my union that there is a heavy obligation on the leader to reach a settlement.

How did you learn that?

We believed in our union that you had to find a settlement. There were people coming to the bargaining table who didn't have the experience and were working under enormous pressure and we would have to help them find a settlement to the dispute. I've always taken a position that whenever an interruption of work takes place, whenever a strike takes place, the last thing that you want to do is walk away and leave it sit. Sometimes you recognize, sometimes both parties recognize, the water's too wide to build a bridge, but the bridge ultimately needs to be built. The only question is when. You have to find the compromise. Labour relations and collective bargaining are two-way streets. You have employers who have good people at the table, not ones who are weak but ones who articulate their position clearly and bring integrity to the table so when they say something to you, you know that's as good as writing it down—they'll write it down later. If they bring people who also, within the parameters that they are given, want to find a solution and want to build the relationship, then there is progress. If a union goes to the bargaining table with the purpose of avoiding decision making and blaming somebody else for everything that's happening, it won't work. If an employer comes to the bargaining table determined not to like this union and to do everything he or she can to make the union look bad with the hope that the employees will work gradually to decertify the union, then that can't work either. There is a lot of opportunity for dialogue in the private sector. However, in the public sector today, it's really difficult to be a union leader because on the one hand, you have an enormous amount of insecurity, while on the other hand, you have governments as employers taking away the very thing that unions are about, which is dealing in bargaining and dealing in restructuring and dealing with the problems of the workforce they're confronting. They make it more difficult for a union leader to build credibility with the membership. It is very difficult to be a good union leader when you don't get a chance to do the things you're there to do. However, there's a lot of talent in the labour movement.

Can these leadership values be diffused more widely within the unions? Is any union trying to do that?

Yes. We, in the labour movement, do a lot of education in terms of how to conduct yourself in bargaining and how to deal with grievances. It's quite remarkable to me that you can organize a new unit of 1,000 or 500 people, they elect a committee, and those people through time become knowledgeable enough to put their issues on the table, find some solutions, work to build a relationship with the employer; and solve a lot of problems at the workplace. Again, not to make too big a point of it, good relationships have to be built right at the grass-roots level. You have to be able to work out a lot of the problems. We used to go to the bargaining table in the auto sector

with 20,000 grievances on the table. It was impossible to build a climate of trust. They really shouldn't be part of the collective bargaining process—they cloud a lot of what you are trying to solve. The labour movement was warts and weaknesses, but it's what the democratic system produces. I don't want to keep coming back to it but the public sector workers know they're going through change. What's different is that their unions have not been allowed to work their way through this. Because they're not getting an opportunity and a responsibility to deal with the problems on a day to day basis in most cases, they're put on the defensive, then they have to go into the trenches, and the rhetoric has to be increased. In many cases, bargaining is very difficult because your space is so limited that all you're talking about is how to cut the workforce. People never anticipated collective bargaining to just talk about how to cut jobs. That framework is really difficult for leadership to deal with as well.

Do you think union leaders have to lead rather than simply follow the membership?

Yes, they have to lead. If you are elected to a leadership position you should have an opportunity to view things in the broader spectrum. You should have an opportunity to gather people around you who have ideas in terms of directions to take. You will always have workers who want this problem solved, or that problem solved, or think we should get more money and bargain job security. But the role of union leadership is to develop the programs and the strategy on how to get there and to know when to consult with the broad local leadership to do that. But the leadership should come from the top. That doesn't mean that you don't consult, have conferences and all that before you get there. But the leadership should come from the top. I think that's what leadership is about. Ultimately, the people you have bargained for, the people you're leading, have to make the decision whether or not they agree with your leadership. Leadership requires you to lead, it doesn't require you to say, 'I wonder which way the wind is blowing today.'

You are considered a very competent negotiator? What makes you such a good negotiator?

First of all, I'm not prepared to accept that. All I'm saying is that I've grown up with the system and I just learn by doing it. If somebody said to me, 'Put ten points out as to how you do this,' it would be difficult for me to outline them. But you know what you're doing. You have a sense of what's going to develop in negotiations. Sometimes you do, but sometimes you don't. There are a lot of surprises in negotiations and sometimes there is the luck of timing. The important thing is to analyse what you're putting on the table, listen very carefully, not to just what's being said, but what's not being said, and what's really being said. It is also important to figure out what are the really key points that you want to get across in what you've put on the table and how do you best achieve that. Then as you get closer, recognize that there has to be some compromise and how best to find that compromise. You also have to recognize that the person on the other side of the table also has to justify the decisions that are being made to a different, much smaller group than you do, and recognize that in many cases they go back to people that aren't subject to the same

pressures as those individuals around the table. I think it's a question of making sure that you argue and talk things through with the people on your side, both the committee people and any specialists you may have, to understand the costs, the concepts, the comparisons, the ways to go at it, the ways to frame it, and always experiment with other ways of getting to the same point. Sometimes you have to send a message across the table in very clear language that nobody misunderstands. On some issues you have to make the other parties understand that nothing will get by you. On other issues you may have to say that we will have great difficulty reaching any decision. Other people have to get to know your language. Ultimately, I think, there are three things you must recognize: the talent on both sides of the table; the fact that the objective of the negotiations is to maximize the benefits for the people you represent and at the same time minimize the damage to those you are bargaining with; and that, at the end of the day, your peers are going to judge you. And a final, important point is never deal with personal politics.

Did you ever have a case where a committee turned against you and defeated you?

I've had memberships defeat me on ratification.

But never a committee?

A committee has rejected proposals that I've brought back, but, the CAW operated on the principle that we wouldn't reach the settlement without the full committee with us. So we waited. That was one way of making sure that the committee was on-side. That was one way of not allowing people to absolve themselves of responsibilities. So when we went before the membership we usually went with the unanimous committee, because I wasn't going to go before the membership and have somebody say, 'I was there and I don't like this and I'm recommending no.' We might as well go back to square one because then you divide the membership on an issue.

Have you signed agreements where you haven't had all your committee sign?

No, not to my knowledge. In the master agreement negotiations with, for example, General Motors we would have local people who wouldn't sign a local agreement in someplace like Oshawa because of major political factions. But no, I can honestly say that I have never put my name to an agreement that the committee wouldn't sign. It just wouldn't happen. I grew up in the system where, once you built trust, there were times when you would have 'off the record discussions' with management, maybe one on one or two on two. If we were in a real jam, we would put our notepads and stuff away and get a flipchart, look at our problems, and say 'what if,' recognizing that all those 'what ifs' may not mean anything, but would give ideas. We were always trying to find a solution. Some union leaders won't do that. I know. Some say, 'Well,

employers can't be trusted.' I would say to a local union leader, 'Look, at the workplace you're a committee person or a steward. I presume you have many one-on-one meetings with your foreman.

What makes you trust the management at that level but not trust a one-on-one with the top people of the corporation?'

I always did come back and tell people the contents of the discussion and try to give them the flavour of where things are going. In most cases, I tried to take one of the local leaders with me and give them some recognition.

What are your views on mutual gains bargaining?

I have never participated in it. You can call it whatever you like, you can add all these fancy names, but in the end you have to arrive at a settlement that is satisfactory to the membership. I think some of these experiments are fine if people want to participate in them. I'm not interested in them. I think that the best system is a system in which you work at solving problems and building mutual respect throughout the life of the collective agreement and you deal with the issues across the bargaining table to reach decisions. If mutual gains or sitting around in a circle does that for people, fine. I think proponents of mutual gains bargaining would argue that the behaviour you have articulated should be part of the process. They would like to load all that up to the front end of the process. You know in traditional negotiations it comes in at the back end. I may be wrong, but I really think in most collective bargaining situations most work is done towards the end when both parties are looking at some kind of timetable. This really is a very good example of how a long legislative process and government interference just drags it out and people get very comfortable sitting around in meetings and not doing a damned thing. Employers do it and unions do it and there's no bumping up to a wall. Once you start to bump up to some kind of a deadline that's when the system starts to work and people have to make certain decisions. I don't care what you call that, but I think that's the best way to do it.

What about experiments like Saturn and NUMMI? What are your views on them?

I think they are just experiments. You can go back ten years when all of these new experiments were taking place. They were going to change labour relations. If you look today you find more strikes in the U.S. auto industry during the life of a collective agreement than we've had in the last ten years in Canada at bargaining time. The NUMMI experiment was an example of the Japanese model. We did something the same at CAMI in Ingersoll. I don't think, in a new enterprise like that, you should try to apply an old style collective agreement. In the case of CAMI we didn't do that. We took a fresh approach and negotiated a very different collective agreement. There were younger people in the workforce, new management, and new ideas,

which we tried to blend a bit, but you have to recognize that, ultimately, even in those kinds of enterprises, workers are going to have problems that they want solved and management is not going to want to solve them because they've got other priorities. As a consequence, recently there was a strike at CAMI. I think the Saturn experiment was a way of having workers involved in setting up the location. But you can go to Ste. Therese, Quebec today and you will find it's probably the best laid out, ergonomically sound plant that they've ever seen and a lot of that was done by consultation with the workers in an environment where the union was recognized. There's a plant that has changed the history of constant confrontation to one of recognition of the union and of trying to deal with some of the problems.

What's your opinion of Algoma and employee buyouts?

I haven't been critical of Algoma. In that situation, in a one industry town, people had to make some decision. I think they got the luck of the draw in terms of this happening when the industry was on the rise. If it works out well for them, I think that's fine. I don't think it detracts from the labour movement at all to have those kinds of experiments to look at. But I think you have to put that situation in context. Most employers want less interference in their affairs, less regulations; they don't want employees on the board of directors, they don't even want legislation on some of these matters.

If you were the national director of the Steelworkers would you have done the same thing at Algoma?

I can't answer that. All I can say is that in the CAW we didn't do it when we faced similar situations. But I think the Steelworkers were more inclined to do it because they have participated in such experiments in the U.S. They had gone through a major restructuring of the steel sector in the United States and they thought what they had done had been successful. Therefore, I think there was a great deal of pressure on the Steelworkers in Canada to have an example of one and here was the example they could use within a town where this industry was so important. I can't judge whether I would have done it or not. This is another model of labour relations and restructuring that needs to be looked at and needs to be talked about as people look at other situations. I don't think it's a model for every workplace and I think we have to just see how it works out in the long term. I would argue that in the long term it could work out. It certainly will work out better than the plant closing.

One of the things that's happening now, it started about ten years ago, is that employers are behaving quite differently, or they're making noises that they're going to behave differently in a number of ways. One is that they want a strategic alliance with their unions, they want a partnership with their unions. What's your reaction?

It depends on the issues. Again, some employers talk about a strategic alliance until you try to organize one of their unorganized plants. I remember going through that in the United States when GM had the southern strategy. Because a lot of the population was moving south GM was going to put the plants in the south, but everywhere they went they were fighting the organization of the UAW. I remember saying at the UAW executive board, 'I think this southern strategy is nuts, we should tell General Motors that if that's how they are going to conduct themselves then they can't have a relationship with us in Michigan. They can't have a two-tiered relationship with us. You recognize us when we are certified and have the power, but you don't recognize us when we're not.' One thing is we never go to the bargaining table saying we want to put an employer out of business. We don't want General Motors to fail, but they were saying they wanted the UAW to fail in the south. Therefore, the strategic initiatives, to be successful, should carry over to broader political questions. A lot of times they don't. In aerospace and some of the major sectors, we've always argued that government should look at the sector involved when developing strategies. We can't argue that on the one hand and not say that employers and unions in those sectors shouldn't be around the table with governments to talk about strategic initiatives. I think partnership assumes a measure of equality. I have yet to see the model in Canada that shows a measure of equality. I have yet to see a model in Canada that gives the union the right to veto a workplace closure, that gives the union the right to determine what product line is going to be built, that gives the union the right to say there's going to be absolutely no layoffs. When you say partnership I think you had better explain to the membership what that really means. It means a very limited partnership in terms of the real decisions.

Some union leaders will say to the employer, 'I don't want to be your partner.'

I've always said, 'Look, I'm not interested in your partnership because it's not an equal partnership. We want to establish a good intelligent climate here that resolves the problems, but it is no good calling ourselves partners because we aren't really partners.' I've also said to employers, and in my speeches, that around certain issues in the aerospace sector or the telecommunications sector, because of employment implications and technology changes, we have a commonality of purpose with employers in terms of how we get at some of those issues, in terms of government policies, in terms of setting the framework for retraining, in terms of setting a joint sectoral body like the Canadian Steel Industry Trade and Employment Congress. But on the broader societal issues we're not even close to a partnership. Look at how multinationals conduct themselves—the exploitation that happens in a developing world by multinational corporations, their fight against any measure of social dimension to international trade, the campaign they conduct against progressive labour relations legislation, against better worker compensation, or better health and safety legislation. You can't call that partnership. I'm not going to say we're partners with you here and we're not partners with you over there. It's better, in my opinion, that we don't have these phoney terminologies and recognize that there are many areas in which we have common goals and other areas where we have different objectives.

For example, at the workplace level unions and management have put together programs to prevent alcohol and drug abuse which suggests that some employers are very good in working with the unions to make sure people are taken care of. In many new start-up situations employers and unions have taken joint initiatives in the area of training. The problem with some of the terminologies like partnership is they infer something to rank and file members and they start believing that they really now have some control over things, but in most cases they don't; then, when things change, such as what happened in the Bell Telephone situation, they wonder, 'What the hell was this partnership all about? How come you told me that we were partners with the employer?' I think it's better to be clear about it and good employers understand that. Quite frankly, they would argue that if you want to be our partners you should be with us on some of these government policies and taxation issues, things like that, and we're not there.

Do you think that employer attitudes have changed over the past fifteen years? Not just in auto, but in other industries?

I don't know what's going on today with the small employer, but when I look at what is going on in the retail sector, the UFCW is having to put up with major employer demands in terms of wage cuts and other kinds of things; I don't see much change in employer attitudes there. I think in some of the other situations there is much more sharing of information, there's more receptiveness to doing some innovative bargaining around things. I think a lot depends on the economic situation facing a particular employer. If we have learned anything from the major recession, it is that you can have a wonderful relationship with the employer, but you had better make sure that you have a strong organization because when times change the relationship can change pretty dramatically. I think some labour organizations that had good relationships with employers found out very quickly what happens when the economic situation changes—the employers went on the attack and made decisions from the top to do things much differently and they had the economic clout to do so.

Employers appear to be decentralizing a lot, forcing everything down to the plant level, putting more power in the hands of the line managers than in the past at least they say they're doing that. Some are doing away with their labour relations central departments, and so on. That can be a deliberate labour relations strategy. What that does is put much more pressure on the locals and then the locals also have to make key decisions too because employers are saying, 'We're going to shut the plant down unless you make concessions.' Is much of this going on in your opinion?

I honestly can't tell, but this is sort of a trend in society. People say you don't have to have government anymore, you can do all this by community development. Well, I think community development is important, but it can't replace the strategy for a country, or an international strategy, or a trade strategy. I think the whole question of dismantling labour relations

departments is an indication of the low priority employers put on having good labour relations. All of this is interesting. But decentralizing and pushing labour relations decisions down to the bottom does not make much sense.

They [employers] want to get closer to the customer, closer to the employee, be leaner.

One of the problems with that is it puts pressure on middle management.

They're eliminating a lot of them.

They're eliminating a lot of them and then the ones who are left are required to do things that really should be done by someone else. Workplaces are a mosaic of the community, of the country and there are all kinds of stresses going on in these places. The more problems you can solve at the lower level the better, but there has to be some central theme on how you solve these issues.

It seems to me that decentralization by corporations can profoundly affect our industrial relations.

Yes it can. It's happening. I think many smaller companies and local unions work things out on a regular basis. Local bargaining is going on in small workplaces, small service centres, which never comes to the limelight. It is in these small places that relationships are built, that trust is built. You organize a small employer of 50-60 people and right away they don't trust you; they go out and hire a high-priced lawyer and that lawyer is determined to drag the negotiations out. That is where some of this tough stuff goes on.

Ours is a very fragmented union movement. It may be good in terms of being democratic, and maybe it's good in being responsive, but the fact is that a lot of power lies with the locals. If corporations start dealing with locals, and if you don't have coordinated bargaining, could this trend be harmful for the labour movement?

Master bargaining, coordinated bargaining, takes place only in large enterprises. There are very few master agreements covering individual employers, like the auto parts companies. In municipalities they all have local bargaining. I think the big thing was the attempt by some employers to break up big master agreements. We resisted that very strongly in Northern Telecom and in auto because we knew what they were trying to do— play one plant off against the other. I think we were more successful in retaining the commonality and allowing locals flexibility in bargaining their local agreements.

Do you see any problems for unions with these kinds of employer strategies, if indeed they are strategies?

I think it depends on the sector and the employer. The public sector today is facing some of the most difficult situations to deal with in terms of strategies because, first of all, you're dealing with services to the public, you're dealing with a climate in which it's very easy to attack people who are delivering that service. How the union leadership responds to that and tries to build public support for limited campaigns is the big issue. It's very difficult for them. It has nothing to do with local-by-local bargaining, but with the political climate we are in, it has to do with political expediency. In the private sector, look for example at the service sector, it is still going through enormous restructuring and change and a lot of jobs are being lost. Ultimately unless we have a greater commitment to the idea of full employment and social programs, we're going to run into more and more problems. I think what will happen if we continue to go down the road of cuts to social programs etc., some of these will come to the bargaining table. If you take away certain things that people have, then you will see them become demands at the bargaining table. Once again, the powerful organizations will be able to make the gains and the weaker organizations won't and the people with no representation won't either. That's one of the dangers in what's going on. I look, for example, at the growth of Blue Cross in Ontario. A number of benefits are now carried by them that used to be covered under the medicare system. Well, demands will come to the bargaining tables to get whatever Blue Cross is covering and we will want them to be paid by employers. There are a lot of stresses and strains in the current environment. We're in a period of strong productivity growth, enormous increases in corporate profits, enormous increases in corporate executive salaries, and yet unemployment is stuck now at over 9 percent.

And no real wage growth?

Yes, and no real wage growth. I thought it was interesting that in a recent speech President Clinton mentioned the problem of affirmative action. He said the problem is that workers, particularly the blue-collar workers, are now, in terms of wages, back to where they were ten years ago. There's a fight to increase the minimum wage in the United States, but there's a lack of unionization to fight effectively. These things are real problems and the labour movement is, of course, working in this environment.

As president of the CLC, what do you think are some of the major issues for labour in the 1990s?

I really think the issues start with the question of jobs. If we can't in the developed world come to grips with the question of more employment and more secure employment, then there's not much hope for the rest of the world. And if we can't do it we're going into a declining standard of

living, declining social network, and an increase in all the things we don't want to happen in our society. We're seeing some of that in Canada today and we're seeing a lot more of it in other countries. This whole issue of transferring social security and health to the provinces, I would argue, was probably much more than was ever contemplated under Meech Lake. It is a major change. The question is what does it mean for healthcare? What does it mean for social assistance recipients? What does it mean for the mobility of people? The role of the labour movement is to try to build a voice and a concern. We're working with social partners in a thoughtful way. We're trying to do education at the workplace and at weekend schools about what this means, what the healthcare system might look like in the future. We have to start to build some political opposition because the tragedy today is that there really aren't political voices raising the key questions. Look at what happened in Mexico. This country did everything the so-called economic gurus said you should do. They privatized, they deregulated, they restructured, they held wages down, they had high interest rates to attack inflation, they deregulated their financial markets, and then they entered into NAFTA. Everyone, including the OECD, said 'this is the way of the future. This is the example we should follow.' Today, there is an enormous growth of unemployment in Mexico because of bankruptcies, because of the devaluation of the peso. All of a sudden Mexico is no longer an example to follow! Their example, in fact, defines the debate on deregulation and international speculation. We have to come to grips with the devastation that goes with no commitment to long-term investment in the economy and have some reregulation, especially in terms of international speculation. We need investment for long-term job growth, productivity growth, economic and social growth.

What do you think about the Tobin tax idea?

I think Professor Tobin's idea that there should be some tax on international transactions makes a great deal of sense. There's not much new about unstable international financial bargains. There's not much new about high unemployment in the world. There's not much new about the rise of racism and nationalism. There's not much new about saying we can't afford healthcare and social programs. This is all pretty old stuff. I think we can afford the social programs, but we're all preoccupied with how financial markets are judging us. And you have people who comment on this who are making money on their comments. And you have people speculating on dollars. I'm not saying you shouldn't be allowed to make money and invest, but I'm saying that you can't have these total unregulated international markets. What gets me about the so-called economic gurus is that there are always models they want you to look at. Ten years ago it was Japan. That was going to be the wave of the future. Cooperation, codetermination, guaranteed workforce, all this kind of stuff. Nobody's pointing to Japan as a model today. The real estate boom has dropped. The yen is much different. The Japanese who made major investments in North America and undercut prices are pulling their investments back. I just think you have to have some discussion about a social dimension to economic development, about people, about jobs, and about incomes and about some kind of social safety net. But the trend is still running the

other way and the OECD is still saying the problem with the world is that there are too many restrictions on labour markets.

The issues you talk about may not be new issues, but they are certainly more important today. They are far more widespread. On top of that, the countervailing force, the labour movements, in almost all countries are in a period of decline. Is that the future of the world?

There are some labour movements in a state of decline. But, for example, in Eastern Europe the labour movement is going through a rebuilding in a different fashion. It's going to take quite a while, you're talking almost a generation there. At the international level more labour movements are coming into the international labour body, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions. The labour movement is not declining in South Africa, it's growing. So there are countries where it's not in decline. I think the biggest problem in the western world is the decline of the American labour movement and I don't know how that's going to turn around.

What about Japan and the United Kingdom where unions appear to be on the decline?

Well, yes, the labour movement in the United Kingdom has gone through a major decline, but if the United Kingdom labour movement can survive the devastation of Thatcher in any respect, then they have a potential to grow. It's always been difficult for the labour movement to grow in difficult economic times, unless it gets to be an absolute disaster and then you go back to the streets and you start to build again. I don't see areas of large growth happening in labour movements around the globe, but I think in many countries including here in Canada, the labour movement still has an important voice.

What, in your view, are the reasons why the Canadian labour movement is strong? Why is it that it has not followed the American course?

I can't put my finger on all the reasons. However, I think one is that we are much more active in the broader social-political arena. There are sections of the American labour movement that have always had this social dimension, social unionism, but we've worked much more with the broad social networks in Canada. Our activity in the social democratic party, where we've had to raise our voices and be part of the broader political spectrum, has been important to us. The grass roots level of the federations and labour councils and the national level of the union have been important. The commitment by many unions in Canada towards organizing the unorganized has been an important factor. The enormous amount of money that's spent by unions on social education is an important reason for their strength.

What about the weaknesses of the labour movement in Canada?

There are lots of weaknesses in the labour movement in Canada. There are weaknesses at the national level in terms of what we can do nationally. There's duplication in the labour movement, duplication in educational services, in publications, and in other things. We could be better if we were prepared to do more at the central level, but it's the system we grew up with. There are divisions developing in the labour movement. There are things we're not doing. And, then, there is the whole question of finances, the inability to do more than we are doing now because of a reduction in membership. We are a political organization— politics is part of the labour movement and we're facing some difficulties now with how people feel about political parties. There are lots of problems we face in the political climate today, without any real left wing opposition in the parliament of the country. Another problem is the geography of the country. You can go out to BC today and see the BC labour federation playing a very important role in BC. You'll see in Atlantic Canada a major campaign by all the federations on labour law reform. You'll see in Quebec the FTQ [Federation des travailleurs du Quebec], CSN [Confederation des syndicats nationaux], and all the unions playing a part in what's going on in Quebec. Although there are these warts and problems, as I travel the world I see there's an enormous amount of respect for the Canadian labour movement.

There are a lot of divisions within the movement.

Of course. There are differences in terms of how we approach things.

These differences are becoming a bit more serious, for example, between the Steelworkers and the Auto Workers.

I've never thought of those kinds of disputes, disputes on how you approach issues, as being unhealthy in the labour movement. Does this mean that everybody is going to take a different direction, or does it mean that we ultimately come together around broad social policy and political issues? So far, we have been able to bring those divergent views together around common issues. There's always potential for divisions. There are divisions everywhere in all labour movements around the world. Different centrals have different political relationships and there is that potential here in Canada. But there are many positive developments too. The building trades, who separated from the Canadian Labour Congress in 1982, are coming back into the central labour body. There is a good chance before the end of 1995 that we'll have the vast majority of them back. If there are differences of opinion on some fundamental issues I think that's appropriate. If those differences involve personalities where you're not pre-pared to work with somebody and you're prepared to divide the movement, then obviously that would be very troublesome.

What about divisions and tensions based on the fact that the overall membership is declining and there is in-fighting and competition between unions for membership? There appears to be

a lot of tension on mergers and who should affiliate with whom. Earlier you had jurisdiction, but there are no jurisdictions anymore.

Yes, and I don't think there should be. It's better, in my opinion, to work with those tensions and get people to merge and organize. Leaving people unorganized because of arguments over territory is absolute nonsense. I say you have to work these tensions out and get workers organized. If you are in a city in which the Steelworkers are predominant and there are bank workers or hotel workers that need to be organized, and they can organize, then I say 'Go ahead and organize them.' Then, they'll get the service, the benefit of belonging to a more cohesive group. You'll have some territorial fights about that, but it is quite amazing that, while we do have these fights, we work most of them out. If you look at Ontario and BC there has been a lot of organizing over the past few years.

But is it substantive?

Yes, it is substantive. Look at the organizing performance of the CAW, UFCW and Steelworkers. The CAW has been organizing in the auto parts industry. The Steelworkers have organized security guards, workers at Tim Horton's and many other places. While the numbers are small, they indicate a commitment to a broader organization. There still is a large banking sector, a large financial sector, that needs to be organized. I'm not saying that we're doing well on organizing. If you try to carve up territory for organizing, nothing will be done. I would much rather have discussions about who's going to organize, who can organize, than somebody saying 'Nobody's organizing.' I often said that my former union, which has a big strike fund of 700 or 800 million dollars, could take a couple of hundred million dollars and use it for concentrated organizing of small places.

Do you favour coordinated organizing, similar to the initiatives taken by the FTQ in Quebec?

I am not sure. If I, a member of the CAW, go door to door to talk to a worker on behalf of the FTQ saying, 'Do you want to join the FTQ?', the worker responds with, 'What's FTQ? What union am I going into?' and I say 'Well, we don't know yet,' then his response is likely to be, 'Well I'm sorry. When you find out you come back and talk to me.' Therefore, direct organizing by a central labour body will only have marginal impact. However, if the FTQ was going to assign jurisdiction for a location to a union and everybody helps this union to organize that location, then that makes sense. I think most organizing has to be done at the local level. If, in a community labour councils were to have part-time community organizers and assign jurisdiction of an unorganized location to a specific union, then all the unions can come together and help that one union in coordinated organizing. I think that makes eminent sense. I don't want to start trying to carve up jurisdictions when some unions are not going to do any organizing anyway.

Do you think that there is some promise in the idea of community level unionism that the CAW is proposing?

I think the CAW is trying to develop an identity with the community in terms of services in the hope that that will transform into a greater role for the labour movement. In many cases it's really the role of the labour council to provide services in the community. Anything that unions can do at the community level to build respect for the labour movement will help to build a context for the labour movement. That's the network where you also develop a liaison with ethnic groups and equity groups. This kind of activity can only be positive because through it unions build support in the community.



Industrial Relations Centre (IRC)
Queen's University
Kingston, ON K7L 3N6
irc.queensu.ca



SCHOOL OF
Policy Studies
QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY