

The Path to Success for Organized Labour

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Labour unions are at a critical time in history. Unions are working to engage the current membership and exploring new innovative communication strategies that are needed to reach the younger generation in a meaningful way. Gone are the days of the bulletin board as the primary sources of union news and updates. People are busy and it's a challenge to draw the membership out to a meeting. It was not too long ago when local arenas were filled to capacity to hear the local union president address the membership. Email, text message, Twitter and Facebook are popular forms of communication in the fast-paced world of work, and the membership is demanding multiple communication platforms to access. Contrary to popular belief, union members are interested in their union; they simply don't have the time to participate in the traditional model that is in place, the membership meeting.

Like many organizations, unions are in a time of change and transformation. As stated by Littlemore (2013), union membership is “pretty close to what it was 10, 20, 30 or even 40 years ago.” (p. 1). Many factors affect the decline of union membership and according to Tattersall (2008), these factors include “international economic competition, anti-union legislation and a shift in local industries from unionized manufacturing to non-union services” (p. 416). Although union membership as a whole has remained constant, the numbers require further investigation. Littlemore (2013) confirms private sector union density has been on a constant decline. With a lens on the private sector unions, a more focused examination is required to understand the decline, what factors may be contributing to the drop in membership, as well as what unions can do to reverse this trend.

It is easy for the average person to read the data produced by the government on the status of unions in Canada. To the naked eye, private sector unions have been on a steady decline for the past three decades. Stone states, “statistics show that Canadian private sector union membership peaked at 33.4% of the workforce in the early 80's, but by 2009 had declined by more than half, to only 16%” (p. 1). It is no secret that the jobs are disappearing at an alarming rate in Canada. As accurately stated by Littlemore (2013), “the problem is deindustrialization, including both automation and the migration of jobs to cheaper labour markets, in the United States and overseas” (p.1).

Unions need to reevaluate their strengths and look to expand their ranks by building bridges with community partnerships. Tattersall (2008) states:

Union decline has prompted national union movements to debate strategies for union renewal, where unions revitalize their internal structures and strategies, grow and develop their membership and rebuild their external relationships to increase their power in the workplace and in the political arena (p. 416).

The labour movement must focus on partnering with groups and organizations that have mutual interests and goals. For example, over the past few years, unions have altered their focus from simply organizing non-union workers to working with community groups to advance the concept of providing a living wage for jobs. This brings positive public attention to the issue and draws activism and support from different groups. Tattersall states that “union action is strongest when it uses its ‘sword of justice’ rather than vested interests” (p. 424).

Finally, unions can build bridges within its own ranks with workers that may face barriers in the workplace. Cultural diversity is impacting all workplaces, and unions are well positioned to bridge the gap for workers that may feel left out or feel like outsiders. Leveson, Joiner, and Bakalis (2009) state employees identify “language differences as a major barrier to accessing both formal and informal communication networks within their organization” (p. 2). Unions can assist their membership with accessing both formal and informal communication networks by utilizing their resources as well as those networks with their community partners. This builds a stronger community of interest with the union member and the union as an organization. Simple changes such as staffing assignments that match the diversity of the workplace with the representative will allow workers and the union to identify with each other culturally while removing language barriers.

As Tattersall states, “while the term community is used to describe coalitions, it is also used elsewhere to describe other unions and workplace organizing strategies including worker centers, union campaigns in issues beyond wages and working conditions” (p. 416). Unions and the labour movement need to become a more inclusive organization and abandon the exclusive membership model. The labour movement in Canada must look to new methods of engaging its own membership as well as engaging groups that have a community of interest. Some great work has been done in this area with the expansion of permanent action centers set up to assist workers with employment related issues. However, many of these clinics are supported by multiple funding sources with labour being a contributor but not a champion of the project. Labour has focused their efforts on specific sectors plagued with precarious work, leaving room for independent centers to operate. According to Mojtehdzadeh (2016):

Some unions have already launched similar outreach efforts: private-sector union Unifor, for example, has an organization for Canadian freelancers in the media. While the Urban Workers Project is not affiliated with a union and does not intend to serve as one, Cash says he hopes the group can build bridges with like-minded movements (para 13).

The largest opportunity labour unions have are the millennials. Recent polls conclude that millennials are supportive of labour unions. DiSantis concludes, “The results of a recent Gallup survey of how Americans feel about labor unions suggests that a solid majority (58%) ‘approve’ of unions. And a growing share of the population (37%) wishes unions had more influence in the country” (Para 1). This information should be consumed, analyzed and action plans developed to capitalize on the momentum of this new surge in union support. Consultation is key to gaining millennials support and confidence. Greenblat stated, “...continued consultation were ultimately more helpful than not. Younger workers want to be consulted all the time, but just listening to them can make a big difference” (Para 14). By adjusting communication strategies and developing a more interactive and organic approach to membership, this will draw participation and a renewed interest in the labour movement and unions in general.

About the Author



Derik McArthur began his career with the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) after graduation from Confederation College with dual diplomas in Human Resources and Human Resources Management. In 2005, he was elected as president, RWDSU Canada, and as RWDSU International Vice-President/Canadian director. The following year, he was elected to international Vice-President of the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW) – a union that represents 1.4 million members in North America. In 2012, Derik lead RWDSU Canada, the Northern Joint Council and the 11 RWDSU locals in a merger with UFCW local 175 & 633 creating UFCW’s largest local union in North America, boasting a membership of over 74,000 members. Derik is now a director with UFCW local 175 & 633 based in Mississauga, Ontario. Derik holds a BA in Justice Studies and an MA in Interdisciplinary Studies from Royal Roads University. In his spare time Derik is an active member of the Canadian Forces Army reserve.

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