

## Solidarity Revisited: Organized Labour and the New Democratic Party

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### Abstract

*This article seeks to engage Jansen and Young's recent research on the impact of changing federal campaign finance laws on the relationship between organized labour and the New Democratic Party. Jansen and Young use models from mainstream comparative politics to argue that unions and the NDP retain links due to a "shared ideological commitment" to social democracy, rather than an expectation of mutual rewards and despite changes in the global economy. We critically assess the evidence, method of comparison, and theoretical assumptions informing their claims and find many aspects unconvincing. Instead, we propose that better explanations of this enduring yet strained relationship can be formulated by drawing insights from Canadian political economy, labour history and working class politics, and comparative social democracy.*

### Introduction

Changes to federal campaign finance laws in 2004 and 2006 represented a radical break with conventional Canadian politicking, ending the traditional political parties' reliance on corporations and unions for funding and placing the responsibility entirely on individuals and the state. The reforms introduced a great deal of uncertainty for politicians and academics alike, as both wondered what long term impact such changes might have on the relationships between political parties and their traditional financial supporters. In "Solidarity Forever? The NDP, Organized Labour, and the Changing Face of Party Finance in Canada" Harold Jansen and Lisa Young explore this question as it pertains to the NDP and Canada's union movement, the latter comprising a traditional source of financial support for the party.<sup>1</sup> Drawing from

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interviews with union and political party elites conducted since the reforms were introduced, they conclude that the “ban on union contributions weakens, but does not mute, the influence of labour within the NDP” (Jansen and Young, 2009: 658). Though strains in the relationship have surfaced since these changes, they argue that the two groups have worked to restructure rather than sever their ties in the new regulatory environment, in two major ways. For their part, the NDP has changed how organized labour is represented within the party, while retaining key leadership positions for union representatives (Jansen and Young, 2009: 669-70). Organized labour, meanwhile, has taken up a two-track strategy, retaining its traditional internal mobilization of members during election campaigns while also adopting what the authors describe as novel independent campaigns designed to focus public attention around issues it thinks the NDP should take up (2009: 671-3).

Despite these findings, the authors seem less certain about *why* the NDP-union relationship has survived the new campaign finance laws restricting union donations to the party. After testing theoretical insights from the comparative literature on parties and unions, they conclude that neither the rational exchange nor political economy models can fully explain the persistence of the relationship. They assert instead that the link between the NDP and organized labour in Canada results from a shared ideological commitment to social democracy, rather than an expectation of mutual rewards or a response to changes in the global economy. Still, why Canada has produced this allegedly exceptional outcome when compared to other similar countries, the authors admit, is not readily apparent to them (2009: 676).

Jansen and Young’s contribution here could very well become influential and widely cited for two reasons: its focus on campaign finance reform and the NDP, and its attention to organized labour as a political actor in Canadian politics. Their choice to focus on the effect of the new campaign finance laws on the federal NDP may strike some as curious, given that the two dominant federal parties, the Conservatives and Liberals, were much more reliant on corporate funds as a proportion of their total contributions than the NDP was on union money. As such, one might expect the new rules to hurt them more and political analysts to direct their attention there. Yet, as Jansen and Young rightly point out, “...no party is more affected by these changes than the NDP because of its unique organic ties to organized labour” (2009: 675). Their attention to organized labour as a political actor also makes their contribution stand out, as contemporary Canadian political science rarely notices unions (despite the fact that roughly 30% of the Canadian workforce belongs to one) and routinely ignores labour organizations as potentially important or influential elites worthy of study.

For these reasons, we would like to engage Jansen and Young about their findings and analysis. For instance, we agree with them that the NDP is a unique party but are not convinced that their analysis has captured what is so unique about it. And while we laud their focus on the politics of organized labour, we have concerns that they have not grappled effectively with the complexity of that politics. In challenging their work, we do not intend to dismiss what they have accomplished. Indeed, the authors provide much helpful new information on the restructuring of labour representation within the federal party and changes in party finances. Instead, we wish to critically examine some of their evidence and their stated rationale for the NDP and organized labour’s continued relationship, elements of which we find unconvincing. Specifically, we argue that the authors offer less than systematic evidence to support some of their claims, that they fail to highlight the important and sometimes contradictory relations between federal and provincial sections of both Canada’s labour movement and the NDP itself, and that their use

of theory drawn from rational choice or political economy appears either too reductionist or determinist. By contrast, we will argue that a non-determinist and historicized use of critical political economy, drawn from a considerable body of Canadian literature relevant to both the NDP and labour, could be utilized effectively to better explain the continuing solidarity between these two forces, while also revealing the complexities, variations and evolving tensions in that relationship.

## 1. Evidence

Jansen and Young hypothesize that removing union money from the relationship between labour and the NDP will lead to a change in their relations. Put simply, they suppose that if labour cannot contribute funds or staff time to the party's election efforts, the party will have an incentive to distance itself from a close association with unions to maximize its voter appeal. Of course, as the party moves in this direction, labour will also see little value in sustaining the relationship. Thus the changes to federal party finance laws limiting union contributions in 2004 and banning them altogether in 2006 offer a clear opportunity to test the hypothesis. They conclude from their research that relations between labour and the NDP were reorganized rather than severed as a result of the new legislation on the basis of three kinds of evidence: the restructuring of labour representation within the party, the party's rejection of Blairite 'third way' electoral strategies, and the development of new independent parallel election campaigns by labour. Upon scrutiny, however, only the first piece of evidence seems compelling, and even here the insight is neither new nor entirely unexpected.

As the authors note, the new campaign finance laws offered both the NDP and organized labour a chance to walk away from their historic relationship. And there were voices in both organizations making the case for separation. Instead, to adhere to the new legal requirements, labour and the federal NDP opted to renegotiate their relationship, stopping the flow of money but redesigning the party's internal representational bodies to retain a prominent role for labour. This is fairly clear evidence that simply changing who can fund the party will not necessarily affect who has influence within it. But we need not have waited for the 2004-2006 federal campaign finance changes to discover this. The BC government banned union donations to the provincial NDP in the 1960s but it did not fundamentally alter the influence of the powerful union movement within the party (the ban was later repealed in 1972 under the first BC NDP government) (Phillips, 1967: 156-7; Phillips, 2010: 112, 114). Similar bans on corporate and union donations were introduced in Quebec in 1977 and in Manitoba in 2000 (Linteau et al., 1991: 518; Wesley and Stewart, 2006). However, links between both provinces' union movements and the relevant local social democratic party have remained relatively stable.

The authors also infer that labour has retained influence in the NDP due to the party's relative reluctance to follow the global trend of social democratic parties to embrace a 'third way' approach to politics, distancing itself from organized labour and moving toward the political (and electorally viable) centre. They note that various pressures in the late 1990s led federal NDP leader Alexa McDonough (aided by organized groups within the party like NDP Progress) to advocate a 'third way' option to make the NDP more electorally competitive. Yet the party rejected the 'third way', which the authors credit to the strength of union influence. Presumably, the fact that the party continues to eschew the 'third way' federally confirms the unions' enduring influence.

However, this characterization of the influences affecting such decisions ignores the considerable influence of other forces associated with the party, not to mention the strategic location of the NDP in the national party system. The debate over the direction of the federal party involved countless individual members and many more organized groups than NDP Progress and the labour movement. For instance, Jansen and Young fail to mention the New Politics Initiative (NPI), which was inspired by the activity of anti-globalization social movements, had many more adherents than centrist forces in the party, and was arguably crucial in electing Jack Layton as federal leader in January 2003 on a platform that promoted stronger links between social movements and the party (Whitehorn, 2004: 108; Whitehorn, 2007: 151). As well, the electoral calculus behind the 'third way' argument is less persuasive in Canada since so many voters choose the federal NDP precisely because it represents an alternative to the Liberals and Conservatives (Zwelling, 2001). Finally, it was not clear to many NDP supporters and party activists, not just the unions, that the federal party was in a position to benefit from the 'third way' option as there was already a party peddling a Blairite blend of fiscal conservatism and social liberalism: the federal Liberals (Caplan, 2001: 98).

The final piece of evidence used to demonstrate the reorganizing rather than severing impact of the new federal laws was the unions' development of new independent issue-based campaigns launched during elections, with the CLC's "Better Choices" campaigns in the 2004 and 2006 federal elections cited as primary examples. However, these issue-based campaigns were neither new nor brought into being by the new regulations. Indeed, the CLC had been moving in this direction for some time under the leadership of its President, Ken Georgetti (who was elected in 1999).

Curiously, one piece of evidence missing from Jansen and Young's research is data on the federal NDP's financial state *after* the first round of new regulations was introduced in 2004. Between 2004 and 2006, unions could still contribute a limited amount to federal campaigns but Jansen and Young provide no data showing whether this was pursued or what impact it may have had. In fact, it appears that there was much debate within national labour organizations about how to respond to the 2004 laws, with numerous legal opinions sought about how labour might still contribute to the NDP financially under the new rules (Interview with Ron Stipp<sup>2</sup>, January 15, 2010). Jansen and Young also appear to be premature in assuming that the ban on union contributions necessarily ended the unions' economic or organizational usefulness to the NDP. For example, the CLC has turned its attention to supporting municipal candidates (where union contributions remain, for the most part, legal) who are closely identified with the NDP as part of a long-term strategy for grooming future NDP candidates at the federal and provincial levels (Savage, 2008: 180-181). Union polling data and membership lists also continue to make the rounds, which federal NDP riding associations use to identify potential party contributors, who are then contacted as individuals by party volunteers.

Of course, the lack of raw data on the post-2006 period may seem obvious given the nature of the changes: unions cannot give money and the party now has a federal subsidy to potentially make up for the loss of union income. Yet this assumes that the new laws affect just the relationship between unions and the federal party. But as will be outlined in more detail below, the new laws also crucially affect the relationship between different levels of the NDP (e.g. provincial and federal sections), a change with arguably more impact financially on the federal party than the union/party reorganization.

## 2. Method

Methodologically, Jansen and Young have pursued their research by focusing on national union bodies and the federal branch of the NDP. Given that the new laws were passed by the federal parliament and affect federal election campaigns, this does, at a glance, appear to be a logical approach. But neither the NDP nor Canada's labour movement can be understood by examining the federal level in isolation. Three problems emerge from their national focus: Canada's labour movement embodies profound regional and provincial variation in its approach to politics, the NDP itself encompasses considerable ideological differences amongst its provincial branches and federal level, and the organization, finances and structure of the provincial and federal wings of the party have historically been closely intertwined, making analysis of just one level deeply problematic. As will be demonstrated below, grappling with labour and the NDP federally necessarily means addressing provincial and regional variations as well.

Beginning with organized labour, it should be noted at the outset that any discussion of union-party relations in Canada must begin by recognizing that Canada is home to two distinct labour movements, one in English Canada and one in Quebec (McIntosh, 1999). Even within those labour movements, there exist a number of important internal divisions. How those divisions have influenced patterns of party-union cooperation has been the subject of much research (Horowitz, 1968; Archer, 1990; Panitch and Swartz, 2003; Carroll and Ratner, 2005; Savage, 2010). While Jansen and Young acknowledge that Canadian labour is "divided and heterogeneous" and that "it is probably a misnomer to speak of a single Canadian labour movement" (2009: 662), they appear to ignore these important caveats in developing their arguments and conclusions. Their decision to proceed without regard for the linguistic, regional, or ideological divisions, within both the labour movement and social democratic parties, paints a overly-uniform picture of party-union relations in Canada and limits our understanding of these complex relationships.

Jansen and Young's failure to distinguish between the labour movement in English Canada and the Quebec labour movement is a crucial oversight, given Quebec labour's historic antipathy towards the NDP and the absence of a provincial NDP section there. While all of Quebec's major union federations are officially committed to complete political independence in the realm of electoral politics, large sections of the Quebec labour movement (particularly the Autoworkers and the Steelworkers) keep close ties to both the Parti Quebecois (PQ) and the Bloc Quebecois (BQ), reflecting organized labour's strong support for Quebec sovereignty (Guntzel, 2000). The Quebec Federation of Labour (FTQ), Quebec's largest central labour organization, officially endorsed the PQ in the provincial elections of 1976, 1981, 1989, 1994 and 2007. The FTQ officially endorsed the BQ in the 1993, 2006, and 2008 federal elections. Compared to the FTQ, Quebec's other major central labour organizations, the Confédération des Syndicats Nationaux (CSN) and the Centrale des Syndicats du Québec (CSQ), have shown much less interest in officially endorsing political parties, preferring instead to pursue independent political action and campaigns designed to shape election issues for both union members and political parties. These campaigns have often times complimented PQ or BQ campaign themes.

Like its Quebecois counterpart, the English Canadian labour movement does not share one approach to electoral politics. While some unions in English Canada maintain close links to the NDP, others have no relationship whatsoever with the party. Furthermore, different unions support the NDP for different reasons. These are not new developments resulting from the

recent campaign finance changes, but rather reflect disparate union histories, cultures and ideological approaches. In short, there is a wide spectrum of NDP-union relationships in English Canada not captured by Jansen and Young's analysis.

For instance, in their focus on the CLC's two-pronged strategy of member mobilization and independent political campaigns, Jansen and Young neglect important regional variations. While regional CLC affiliates may lend support to the federal NDP from time to time based on specific political calculations, in no way can the party take their support for granted. It is also worth noting that the Quebec sections of most CLC affiliates (including the six affiliates with partisan ties to the NDP) have not demonstrated strong support for the federal NDP in Quebec, opting instead to remain neutral or more likely to support sovereigntist parties. While a focus on the CLC is significant given its central position in the union-party relationship, attention to its key affiliates is equally important given their relative political influence and their sometimes distinct approaches to electoral politics. Jansen and Young note the CAW's strategic voting initiative against the Conservatives in the 2006 federal election, but again overlook important regional elements of the story (2009: 665). The CAW's Quebec section eschewed strategic voting, endorsing the entire slate of BQ candidates instead. Nor was the CAW the only union pursuing this strategy: strategic voting in federal elections has also been promoted by the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), which has endorsed Liberal, NDP, and BQ candidates in and around the national capital region (Savage, 2010: 13).

Meanwhile, in the realm of provincial politics, we can see even more variation in the relations between the NDP and organized labour. Jansen and Young do acknowledge some of these differences in relation to the Ontario NDP government of the early 1990s, arguing that 'globalization' forced the party to distance itself from labour and vice versa (2009: 666). However, what actually occurred between unions and the party in Ontario during and after the Rae government is more complex and contradictory than this implies.

Although the NDP's Social Contract and its attack on free collective bargaining generated a major rift between the party and the Ontario labour movement (and particularly its public sector affiliates), with the OFL in 1993 formally calling on its member unions to disaffiliate from the party, thirteen unions dissented from this vote and advocated for continued union-party links. After the NDP government's defeat and the election of the rabidly anti-union Progressive Conservative government of Mike Harris in June 1995, the labour movement regrouped around a new political strategy. Between 1995 and 1998, and through alliances with progressive community organizations and social movements, organized labour led a broad-based movement against the Harris government's neoliberal *Common Sense Revolution* with a series of rotating general strikes across the province known as the Days of Action. These protests were designed to strengthen links with social movements, cause economic disruption, and highlight the damage being done by the Harris Conservatives (Reshef and Rastin, 2003: 133-152). However, the provincial NDP and key OFL affiliates were never entirely comfortable with this extra-parliamentary activity, and party and union officials worked to contain (and eventually jettison) this strategy.

Eventually, the Ontario Federation of Labour abandoned the Days of Action before the 1999 provincial election in favour of reconciliation with the NDP. This alienated several unions who were unwilling to forgive the NDP for its past sins. While most industrial unions and CUPE Ontario backed the NDP, another group of unions came together with community organizations

to form the Ontario Election Network, promoting strategic voting as a method of blocking the Conservatives' re-election (Reshef and Rastin, 2003: 167). The Teachers' unions, the CAW, OPSEU, the Ontario Nurses' Association, and building trades unions targeted two-dozen key ridings, endorsing a roughly equal number of Liberal and NDP candidates. The Network's electoral strategy ultimately failed. The Conservatives were returned to power with an even larger share of the popular vote and the NDP lost a significant share of its seats and political influence. Notwithstanding this result, the same group of unions redoubled their efforts to displace the Conservatives through strategic voting in the 2003 provincial election. Recast as the Working Families Coalition, the building trades unions, teachers' unions and the CAW launched major third party advertising blitzes in both the 2003 and 2007 provincial elections, ostensibly asking the public to vote for the Ontario Liberal Party in order to defeat the Conservatives (Savage, 2010: 15). Predictably, the Working Families Coalition's decision to act as a sort of front group for the Ontario Liberal Party raised the ire of partisan unions with close ties to the Ontario NDP, thus reinforcing the already deep divisions in Ontario labour politics. The point here is that relations between Ontario labour and the NDP cannot be read off of 'globalizing pressures'. Instead, they need to be mapped with careful attention to variations, the particular nuances of locale, and the actors' understandings of the strategic and historic context.

While Jansen and Young draw on provincial examples like Ontario to make their case, other provinces central in the NDP's history – like Saskatchewan and Manitoba – are overlooked entirely. This is a critical problem in their argument, given that the most important interactions between unions and parties actually occur in provincial politics. After all, the vast majority of labour's direct legislative priorities fall within provincial jurisdictions, provincial sections of the NDP have tended to be more electorally successful than the federal party, labour organizations (with the exception of Quebec's) have typically affiliated to the party through its provincial sections, and the day-to-day party-union relationship plays out primarily at the level of provincial Federations of Labour (Savage, 2010: 11).

In other words, it is difficult to draw universalizing conclusions about the union-party relationship in Canada because our labour movement appears to have no uniform electoral strategy. Various electoral strategies have been employed simultaneously, and sometimes at cross-purposes, even within a single province. These divisions are both regionally and ideologically based. Although Jansen and Young's extensive interviews offered an opportunity to examine or shed light on those ideological and regional divisions, the evidence gleaned from them appears to leave readers with the impression that no such divisions exist. Moreover, the choice to anonymise the union affiliations and locations of their interviewees prevents the reader from judging whether Jansen and Young sampled a broad, representative, cross-section of the labour movement. For example, evidence derived from a series of interviews with officials from the Steelworkers (USW), the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), and the Communications, Energy, and Paperworkers (CEP) would tell a very different story than would evidence gathered through interviews with officials from the CAW, the Teamsters, or the Laborers' International Union of North America (LIUNA). While the former group of unions have longstanding and durable relationships with the NDP – and would therefore more likely conform to the 'ideological exchange' explanation advanced by Jansen and Young – the latter group of unions do not, and are less likely to lend support for the ideological commitment model. In short, depending on the constellation of interviews conducted by Jansen and Young, any one explanation in their typology of union-party relations might have been affirmed. Of course, we

understand their rationale for anonymity but even granting this, they could have provided tables with a breakdown of interviews by province, region, sector etc. that would have shed some light on the range and character of their sample interviews.

Turning to their treatment of the NDP, conclusions drawn from the national level alone tend to mask the complexity and diversity of 'social democracy' as practiced by various branches of the party. Recall that Jansen and Young argue that labour influence prevented the federal party from turning to the Blairite 'third way', while globalizing pressures on the Ontario NDP government forced the provincial party to abandon its traditional labour allies. This characterization of the factors shaping the party's social democracy and relations with organized labour is challenged when we include all the other provinces with relevant experience of NDP governing. Just what comprises the "shared ideological commitment" Jansen and Young refer to becomes unclear amid a clear turn to the 'third way' at the provincial level.

These ambiguities are clearest in Saskatchewan and Manitoba. In Saskatchewan, the NDP (and its predecessor, the CCF) has dominated provincial politics in the postwar period, forming governments from 1944 to 1964, 1971 to 1982, and again from 1991 to 2007. In many accounts, the party's most recent stretch in office (from 1991 to 2007), characterized by aggressive deficit reduction, corporate tax cuts, and hospital closures, had more in common with neoliberal rather than social democratic ideology (Stanford, 2001: 95; Warnock, 2005: 89-91). In the area of workers' rights, the Saskatchewan NDP government raised the ire of the labour movement in 1999 by ending strikes by nurses and power utility workers with back-to-work legislation (Warnock, 2005: 95). In private, the union leadership was livid, but in public, most of the labour movement was careful not to criticize the party (Byers, 2002: 75). Despite its increasingly neoliberal orientation, the union leadership remains firmly committed to supporting the Saskatchewan NDP at election time. Labour support for the party endures because the union leadership is "trapped, choosing always to support the NDP as the lesser of the evils. With labour in its back pocket, the NDP leadership has concluded that it has to do very little to retain labour's support" (Warnock, 2005: 95).

A similar dynamic exists in the province of Manitoba, where the NDP has formed governments from 1969 to 1977, 1981 to 1988, and again from 1999 to the present. Known for its pragmatic left-wing policy innovation in the 1970s, the most recent NDP administration has strayed very far away from its democratic socialist roots. Wesley argues that the Manitoba NDP has "severed its ties to Keynesian social democracy, as applied under [former NDP premiers] Schreyer and Pawley. In their place, New Democrats now follow the 'Third Way' approach to politics, openly pursuing partnerships with the private and voluntary sectors, balancing budgets, and remaining at least somewhat open to the 'integration of the North American economies'" (Wesley, 2005: 11). As in Saskatchewan, Manitoba's unions have taken the position that the NDP, despite its flaws, must be supported to prevent the ascendance of an even more right-wing party.

While key provincial sections of the NDP have moved decisively to the political centre, the federal NDP has, more or less, remained committed to traditional social democratic policy prescriptions. However, Jansen and Young's conclusions appear to presuppose that the federal NDP and its provincial sections have parallel ideological approaches and public policy orientations. In practice, the federal NDP and its provincial sections do not see eye to eye on several important public policy matters. Historically, NDP provincial sections have been divided over questions of federalism and constitutional reform (Savage, 2007). More recent examples



of intra-party tension abound. For example, while the federal NDP supports the adoption of a federal anti-scab law modelled after similar laws passed by NDP governments in Ontario and British Columbia, NDP governments in Saskatchewan and Manitoba have refused to adopt anti-scab laws, despite intense lobbying by the labour movement (Warnock, 2005: 95; Panitch and Swartz, 2003: 203). The federal NDP's strong support for the Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change was not shared by the Saskatchewan NDP government, who opposed the Protocol in its early stages (Warnock, 2009). The federal NDP's opposition to Canada's military involvement in Afghanistan was rebuked by Manitoba NDP Premier Gary Doer, who endorsed the military effort. The federal NDP also butted heads with the Manitoba NDP Premier on the desirability of protectionist trade policies (*National Post*, 2009).

All of this is related to the last problem emerging from Jansen and Young's methodological focus on the national level, which is the treatment of the federal party as an entity wholly separate from its provincial branches. First, it is not clear that the federal and provincial parties can be separated so neatly. Historically, as an integrated federal and provincial party, the two branches overlapped considerably in terms of governing structures, personnel and, importantly, money. The NDP, and the CCF before it, were founded on very decentralized structures that privileged the provincial bodies. Provincial sections of the party would handle and control membership lists, membership dues, and even the running of federal campaigns within their jurisdiction (Morton, 1977: 204; Interview with Ron Stipp, 2010). Provincial party constitutions often give the provincial branch control over various aspects of federal affairs. For instance, even in 2010, BC NDP rules around the organization of nomination meetings also extend to federal nominations as well (Interview with Stephen Phillips<sup>3</sup>, January 15, 2010; see also *Constitution of the New Democratic Party*, amended 2006, specifically Article III: Membership, and Article XVI: Candidates). Second, given that Jansen and Young want to test the impact of the new federal campaign finance laws on the relations between the NDP and labour, they need to know whether any other intervening factors influence what is happening. When we turn to NDP provincial/federal relations, we discover a lot that may muddy Jansen and Young's conclusions. Most importantly, the new campaign finance laws may prove to have had much more effect on relations between the different sections of the party than on relations between the party and organized labour.

Unraveling the "Byzantine complexity of the party's internal financing" has tested the patience of more than a few social scientists (Carty, 1991: 240). Suffice it to say, the precise financial relationship between the different wings of the NDP has been in flux for much of its history. Like the CCF before it, the NDP has struggled to meet the financial demands of campaigning on par with the Liberals and Conservatives at the federal level. Grassroots support has generated considerable sums, but only in Saskatchewan and Ontario have these amounts been enough to consistently support the federal party as well (Paltiel et al, 1966: 390-6; Morton, 1977: 204). Historically, membership dues were collected provincially, a proportion of which would then be forwarded to the federal party. However, not all provincial parties could pay, or pay all the time, and the federal party has had to devise countless strategies to stabilize these financial relationships since its founding. The beginning of federal government financial support for political parties helped the federal party in the 1970s, though it did not keep pace with the escalating costs of campaigning (Morton, 1977: 204). By the 1990s, numerous campaigns to give the federal party an independent financial footing were started but eventually abandoned, usually due to the objections or intransigence of the key provincial sections (Interviews with Ron Stipp and Stephen Phillips, January 15, 2010). Most recently, the federal and provincial wings

signed 'service contracts' spelling out their respective responsibilities and financial obligations (Stipp, 2010).

The recent federal campaign finance reforms have accomplished what internal party negotiations in the NDP could not – a negotiated separation of the two wings of the party concerning financial matters. While Jansen and Young focus on how the recent rules banning union donations may have affected the federal party, they neglect how the rules also banned transfers of funds from provincial to federal levels of the same party.<sup>4</sup> Though the federal NDP often received only 15 cents of every dollar in membership dues given to the provincial party, the provincial sections also made lump sum contributions, particularly at election time. For instance, Whitehorn reports that provincial sections in Ontario, BC and Saskatchewan contributed 47% of the federal NDP's 1988 multi-million dollar campaign budget, compared to unions' contributions amounting to just 16% of the total (Whitehorn, 1992: 217). Thus unraveling the impact of the new finance rules on the behavior of the federal NDP is more complicated than simply subtracting union funds from the mix. Jansen and Young want to test the impact of the new rules by comparing NDP/labour relations before and after their introduction, surmising the removal of union funds may lead to an altered relationship and direction for the federal party. But much more has changed for the federal party as a result of the new rules than their relationship with labour, and as a result it is harder to say just what may be affecting its behavior. The end of provincial financing of the federal party removes a key point of leverage for the provincial sections over their federal counterpart, one that may ultimately have much more impact on the federal party and its ideological direction than the end of union contributions. At the very least, the union/party link cannot be studied in isolation from these other clearly significant relationships.

### 3. Theory

The problems with Jansen and Young's analysis extend to the theories that undergird their understanding of the interactions themselves. Though the authors ultimately reject the 'rational exchange' and 'political economy' models proposed at the outset of their paper as ineffective explanations for the continuing links between the NDP and organized labour, they nonetheless draw on them in characterizing what can be understood as 'rational' or how changes in the international economy ultimately impinge on politics. In both cases, the theories are too narrowly defined and deployed. Their characterization of what constitutes rational behaviour appears reductionist, ignoring historical context (i.e. what different actors may learn about their environment and each other over time), and seemingly recognizes only short-term instrumental gains as 'rational'. Their understanding of political economy is almost wholly deterministic, where changes in the global economy enter the political arena as an exogenous factor that 'forces' actors to do this or that, instead of appearing as a terrain that both affects and is affected by what people do.

Taking up rationality first, the authors argue that the rational exchange model suggests that unions seek policies and social democratic parties seek votes. However, according to Jansen and Young, unions have not proven very effective at mobilizing union members to vote NDP and the NDP has never captured federal power, gaining influence only in the rare minority government in which it can extract concessions from a larger party. Thus, for the authors, the relationship

between labour and the NDP is not premised on rational exchange considerations but instead on shared ideological commitments:

Labour unions support social democratic political parties not in the hope of improving the fate of unions or their workers but rather as a way of furthering the objectives of social democracy—objectives to which trade unionist leaders are generally personally committed (Jansen and Young, 2009: 661).

So too does the NDP favour ideology over votes:

Social democratic parties are less concerned with vote maximization than they are with furthering a particular set of ideas in the public sphere. This tendency can be even more pronounced in situations where the social democratic party is a minor or “third” party and faces less pressure to compromise positions in order to improve its chances of forming a government (Jansen and Young, 2009: 661).

These characterizations of ‘rationality’ contain a host of problems. First, Jansen and Young underestimate the historic influence of the CCF/NDP, reducing it to the few times the party could gain explicit agreements on policy from a minority government (for example, Trudeau in 1972). This ignores how the party influenced the policy mix of the federal Liberals at key historic moments when CCF/NDP fortunes appeared to be on the rise, as in 1945, the mid-1960s, and again just before the 1988 election. The establishment of the postwar welfare state in the 1940s, the nationalization of health insurance in the 1960s, and the Liberals’ critical positions on free trade in the 1980s were hardly likely without the perception of an electoral threat from the left (Whitaker, 1977: 136-56; McLeod, 1971: 89-90; Brodie and Jenson, 1988: 323). Nor is it historically accurate to suggest the CCF/NDP was satisfied to simply ‘further ideas’ in the public sphere. As many accounts of the party and biographical sketches of key players make clear, the party really believed it could overtake the Liberals and become a governing federal party. While these hopes may appear overly ambitious in retrospect, there is no denying that elites running the party believed them in 1945, 1965, 1988 and, arguably, most recently in 2008 (Morton, 1977: 14, 61; Beck, 1968: 386; Steed, 1999: 430; Erickson and Laycock, 2009: 105).

It is also hard to understand what the authors mean by ‘ideological’. It is as though ideas are ends in themselves, rather than frameworks for understanding and transforming the world. To suggest that union leaders support social democracy “not in the hope of improving the fate of unions or their workers” but for ideological reasons begs the question – what exactly is social democracy for? Historically, the rational benefits to workers were clear: an expanding social wage through public services and supportive state regulation of the labour-management relationship that would favour union organizing and participation in the workplace (Eley, 2002; Coldwell, 1945; Knowles, 1961). Jansen and Young themselves appear to grant this when they admit that unions may stick with a social democratic party “in the hopes of achieving more fundamental policy change in the longer term,” an observation confirmed by their union sources who argue that voting NDP will keep the federal Liberals on the left (2009: 661, 665). But somehow this only amounts to a ‘second order rationality’ to the authors, who perceive first order rationality as one where unions remain “free agents who can work with various parties to achieve incremental change” (2009: 661). Of course, this assumes that there would be other parties to make incremental deals with, an assumption not supported by the historic policy

preferences of the two major national parties (Brodie and Jenson, 1988; Heron, 1992; Roberts and Bullen, 1994; McCrorie, 1995; Finkel, 1995; Kealey, 1995). Trying to negotiate with forces uninterested in negotiations is not very rational.

Turning to political economy, the authors argue that changes in the global economy are forcing a new relationship on unions and social democratic parties the world over. The language used by Jansen and Young to describe these changes is entirely passive and tends to reify abstractions like 'globalization' and 'Keynesianism' as if they were actors in their own right. Thus Keynesianism "retreats" (2009: 660) or "collapses" (2009: 666) while international capital "erodes" union densities (2009: 665) or "forces" social democratic parties to sideline labour (2009: 666). Here the authors rely on Piazza's work on globalization and union-party relationships where he argues that there is clear link between the two. As Piazza puts it:

The mobility of capital under globalization weakens the bargaining power of unions and union density falls, diluting a previously important electoral base of centre-left political parties. To improve their electoral fortunes, these parties jettison their connections to organized labour (Piazza 2001, as cited in Jansen and Young 2009: 660).

While the authors admit that Piazza's characterization of globalization and the party-union link does not seem to explain the NDP/union relationship federally in Canada, they nonetheless seem to accept that globalization affects all economies in this way and limits what governments can do. This is a highly deterministic reading of the impact of changing global economic relationships, one that appears to discount the role of the state in not simply acquiescing to global pressures, but in authoring them. A considerable body of work empirically demonstrates that globalization is far from clear in its impacts on any particular state. From taxes, to social policy, to the behaviour of social democratic parties, researchers have found considerable variation in how advanced capitalist democracies have and can respond to globalizing pressures (Garrett and Mitchell, 2001; Swank and Steinmo, 2002; Dreher, 2006; van Kersbergen, 2003). Nor is Piazza's work the only source for insight on the changing relationship between labour and left parties. Needless to say, a considerable body of work on social democracy, not cited by Jansen and Young, challenges Piazza's rather deterministic linkage of globalization, social democracy and organized labour (e.g. Callaghan, 2002; Moschonas, 2002).

#### **4. Understanding the durability of NDP/labour solidarity**

Jansen and Young set out to "understand both the character and the underpinnings of the relationship between organized labour and the New Democrats" by locating "the history of this relationship in the context of theoretical accounts of trade union and political party motivations" drawn from the "comparative literature" (2009: 657-8). We wonder why they did not elect to draw from the extensive Canadian literature pertinent to these themes (for instance, in critical political economy and labour e.g. Panitch and Swartz 2003, or labour history e.g. Kealey 1976, or Palmer 1992). On the face of it, their choices may simply reflect methodological affinities. Both their comparative examples and some of their own work fit within the positivist, variable testing tradition while the Canadian alternatives utilize more historical and qualitative approaches. But the problem is that their comparative models do not adequately come to grips the specificities of the Canadian case. Without discounting the benefits of insights from comparativists, we agree with scholars like Smiley, Cairns, and Nesbitt-

Larking that Canadian political circumstances do not lend themselves to the unproblematic importing of theories and approaches developed elsewhere (Smiley 1974; Cairns 1975; Nesbit-Larking 2009). Instead we require approaches that engage with the specificities of Canadian circumstances, both historically and theoretically.

In the case of the links between the NDP and organized labour, this means we must explore the actual emergence and development of the relationship over time, carefully attending to relations amongst different players, their different interests, and how changing historical circumstances altered their view of things. This requires the use of a comparative historical method, which highlights how different outcomes are the product of long historical processes. This is also linked to a different understanding of political economy as an analytical framework. As Clement and Williams point out, “[s]ome have mistakenly attributed economic determinism to Canadian political economy, but it has focused primarily on human agency – choices and decisions made by political, economic, and social actors and their effects” (Clement and Williams, 1989: 11). In other words, political economy highlights the interaction of social forces / actors with the material circumstances they encounter, and the outcomes of the struggles they engage in to deal with those circumstances are understood to create new structuring conditions which enable or limit capacities and strategic options. As Mike Davis has put it in his discussion of the American working class, it is the “sedimented historical experiences of the working class”, the “results of these historical collisions” between capital and labour which create “new structural forms” that shape “the subjective capacities for class organization and consciousness” (Davis, 1986: 7). Goran Therborn adds that “how social forces will actually act in a given situation”, including the form of politics adopted, “depends centrally upon the forms of action which have been institutionalized in their founding moments” (Therborn, 1983: 40). For this kind of analysis of the linkage between unions and social democracy, we must turn to both Canadian and comparative labour history and the history of social democracy.

Union-party linkages in Canada evolved over a long period and represented a learning process by labour and political leaders. A long-running debate in Canadian labour circles in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century involved just how labour should pursue its political objectives. Nor was this debate unique to Canada. The question of whether workers needed to engage in political (and not just economic) action and of what kind preoccupied the labour movements in all western countries, though different economic / class configurations and political relations contributed to different outcomes (Lipset, 1983; Therborn, 1983).

Though initially hostile to labour, given their social base in various fractions of Canadian capital, both the Conservative and Liberal federal parties tried to woo working class voters with various promises in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Southern Ontario’s working class was a particular battleground, with the McDonald Tories offering up the Trade Unions Act in 1872, decriminalizing unions so as to undercut their Liberal political rival George Brown and opportunistically gain electoral advantage amongst Toronto’s craft workers for some years (Kealey, 1976: 53; Palmer, 1992: 110-11; Brodie and Jenson, 1988: 40). But neither party delivered much once in power, which intensified the debate over whether unions should support a separate labour party or throw its support behind an existing party. The Liberals under Laurier continually dangled pro-labour legislation before workers to keep them onside, with various ‘Lib-Lab’ candidates straddling the line between incorporation into the party and an independent labour politics. The intensification of class conflict during the First World War proved a catalyst for independent labour politics, though a serious federal party did not come

together until the founding of the CCF in 1932. Even so, while larger sections of working class activists were convinced of the need for an independent labour politics, the labour movement continued to be divided on the issue of partisan affiliation, largely defined by the split between the non-partisan and Gompers-influenced Trades and Labour Congress and the Canadian Congress of Labour, many (but not all) of whose affiliates were attached to the CCF (Abella, 1973). However, the Second World War provided much more convincing evidence that an independent political strategy could deliver major elements of the labour movement's reform agenda: twinned with workers' economic militancy, the CCF's mounting electoral pressure on the Liberals in the mid-1940s (both federally and provincially) provided the basis for a breakthrough in legislated labour rights and the creation of the post-war welfare state. More formal links between unions and a left party were created with the founding of the NDP in 1961. Both before and since, countless experiences have continued to add to the 'common sense' view that workers' interests and representatives would never have more than a subordinate role in the Conservative or Liberal parties, and that an ongoing competitive prod from a more left wing party was essential to maintain those programmes supportive to labour.

The mainstream parties' marginalization of labour within their coalitions is also addressed by the Canadian political economy tradition. First, as Brodie and Jenson have argued, despite their appeal to Canadian national identity and use of brokerage politics to mask class divisions, these parties *do* have a class base, rooted in the particular interests of various elements of the Canadian capitalist class. As such, while working class votes are often tactically useful to these parties, the distance the latter will go to win those votes is limited, particularly when workers' interests conflict with those at the helm of these parties (Brodie and Jenson, 1988: 2-3, 40-1). Historical experience has shown that pursuing alliances with these parties is of limited use to the union movement.

Thus, the historical and critical political economy literatures offer a deeper set of reasons why the relationship between organized labour and the NDP would continue, despite the recent change in campaign finance laws and other pressures emanating from the changing organization of the Canadian and global economies. An examination of the labour movement's political history sheds light on why labour tends to conclude that it still has no other political partners who would realistically take their concerns more seriously. Thus history and politics matter; the labour movement's political practices are the result of lessons learned in the attempts to cope, respond to and resist changes in political economic structures and processes. They are not determined by them in a simple way; nor will legislative change strip away the accumulation of political experience.

## Conclusion

We agree with Jansen and Young that considerable evidence exists that the recent changes in federal campaign finance laws have led to a renegotiation of the relationship between the New Democratic Party and organized labour in Canada rather than a break in their historic links. And their work has produced some new information about how this new relationship has been restructured. But we do not believe that they have provided an effective explanation about why or how this has come to pass. Their argument that the NDP and labour maintain their relationship due to a "shared ideological commitment" is, ultimately, too vague, lacking both evidence and theoretical support. We have highlighted above the key problems we find in their

analysis in terms of the evidence they draw upon and the methodological choices they have made. Yet, in our view, the root of the problem appears to be located in the narrow form of theory they employ to understand the phenomena they are trying to grapple with. As authors well versed in the literatures concerning comparative party finance, it is perhaps not surprising that they have drawn on rational choice or the new, more narrow forms of political economy (influenced by mainstream economics departments) in attempting to understand these recent changes in federal party finance rules as both approaches dominate that field. The authors appear less well versed in literatures concerning comparative and Canadian social democracy and labour studies, which we think is a major oversight for an article attempting to explain the relationship between a social democratic party and its national labour constituency.

By contrast, albeit in a fairly brief and schematic way for the purposes of this article, we have argued that the NDP and organized labour's continuing relationship, despite the recent campaign finance reforms, is not really that surprising if we examine the historical origins and development of that relationship and utilize a broader and more dynamic understanding of political economy. With this approach, we can see how Canadian labour leaders and the NDP have re-evaluated their relationship at many points in their history, but have chosen to remain connected due to their larger shared project of influencing the Canadian state's regulation of the economy to favour different groups, i.e. working people generally and organized labour specifically. It is precisely this critical view of "political economy", one that sees economies as crucially affected by political decisions rather than global forces or some invisible hand, that explains both their continuing links to each other and the lack of options for organized labour in seeking long-term benefits from either of the traditional governing parties at the federal level.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Harold Jansen and Lisa Young, "Solidarity Forever? The NDP, Organized Labour, and the Changing Face of Party Finance in Canada," *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 42:3 (September 2009), 657-78.
- <sup>2</sup> At the time of this interview, Ron Stipp was a Pacific Region representative of the Canadian Labour Congress and a member of the New Democratic Party federal executive.
- <sup>3</sup> At the time of this interview, Stephen Phillips was the federal NDP riding president of Vancouver Kingsway and lecturer in Political Science at Langara College, Vancouver BC.
- <sup>4</sup> As evident in other publications (Young, Sayers, and Jansen, 2007: 348), Jansen and Young are aware of these nuances in NDP organization and how the new rules have forced an end to provincial/federal financial transfers, but for some reason they have failed to factor these changes into their present analysis.

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