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*SPECIAL ISSUE ON ORGANIZING FOR AUSTERITY: THE NEOLIBERAL STATE, REGULATING
LABOUR AND WORKING CLASS RESISTANCE*

The 'Great Recession,' the Employers' Offensive and Canadian Public Sector Unions

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Abstract

The global economic crisis and its effects have changed the context for public sector unions in Canada. There is evidence that an intensified offensive against public sector unions is beginning. Few public sector unions are prepared to respond adequately to such an offensive, as the important 2009 strike by Toronto municipal workers illustrates. In this more difficult context, change within public sector unions is increasingly urgent. The most promising direction for union renewal lies in the praxis of social movement unionism. However, there are very few signs of moves to promote this approach within Canadian public sector unions.

Résumé

La crise économique globale et ses effets ont changé le contexte pour les syndicats du secteur public au Canada. Il y a des signes qu'une attaque violente contre les syndicats du secteur public a commencé. Peu de syndicats du secteur public sont prêts à répondre dans une manière satisfaisante à cette attaque, comme le montre la grève importante des travailleurs municipaux à Toronto en 2009. Dans ce contexte plus difficile, des changements au sein des syndicats du secteur public sont de plus en plus urgents. La direction la plus prometteuse pour une renaissance syndicale est la pratique d'un syndicalisme de mouvement social. Toutefois, il y a très peu d'indices que les syndicats du secteur public au Canada s'inscrivent dans une telle approche.

Keywords

Canada; public sector; unions; union renewal

Mots clés

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The global economic crisis, the ensuing responses from all levels of government and the development of a political climate more favorable to the neoliberal project of restructuring the public sector have changed the

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context for public sector unions in Canada. There is evidence that governments and other public sector employers are beginning to conduct an intensified offensive against public sector unions. This offensive will likely feature not only freezes for wage and benefit costs but also other concessionary demands and job cuts, along with new efforts to restructure the public sector. Few public sector unions are prepared to respond adequately to a more aggressive employers' offensive, as the important strike of Toronto municipal workers in the summer of 2009 illustrates. This highlights the increasingly urgent need for efforts to bring about change within public sector unions. But what kind of change is most appropriate in these circumstances? Union renewal always involves the cultivation of a particular mode of union praxis. Currently, most Canadian public sector unions continue to practice social unionism. Three alternative modes of union praxis present themselves as potentially more effective: corporate unionism, mobilization unionism and social movement unionism. I will argue that the most promising alternative is social movement unionism. However, there are at present very few signs of moves to promote this approach within Canadian public sector unions, for reasons that will be briefly considered.

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Neoliberalism, Public Sector Restructuring and the 'Great Recession'

The global economic crisis that began in 2008 – the worst crisis since the Great Depression of 1929-1939 – has been a crisis of capitalism in its neoliberal form. Neoliberalism is best understood as a project for reorganizing capitalism in response to the global economic crisis of the mid-1970s. That crisis exposed the limits of the Keynesian-compromise organization of capitalism that had taken shape after the Second World War and provided the framework for the uniquely sustained period of expansion that followed, one of whose features was a major expansion of the public sector (McNally 2011). As Alfredo Saad-Filho and Deborah Johnston (2005, 3) have argued:

Although every country is different, and historical analysis can reveal remarkably rich details, the overall picture is clear. The most basic feature of neoliberalism is the systematic use of state power to impose (financial) market imperatives, in a domestic process that is replicated internationally by 'globalisation.'

The neoliberal project has driven the restructuring of the public sector that has been taking place across the advanced capitalist countries

for the last three decades. This restructuring is associated with the ideas of New Public Management (NPM), but it is not persuasive to assess the changes within NPM's own terms, "as being primarily concerned with efficiency, effectiveness and economy" (Carter 2006, 148). The essence of public sector restructuring is an effort to reconstruct the broad welfare state form of public administration developed during the long post-war boom in order to reorient the public sector towards supporting economic competitiveness under neoliberal capitalism (Camfield 2007; Carter 2006). This process can be analysed as the construction of "lean states," states better-suited to remaking societies in the age of lean production (Sears 1999). The degree to which this has actually taken place has varied widely across the advanced capitalist countries (Carter 2006).

To the extent that it has taken place, the construction of lean states has been harmful to the users of public services, public sector workers and their unions. Unfortunately, research on public sector workers has suffered from the broad intellectual trend identified by Perry Anderson (2010, 6): "Studies of the working class anywhere in the world, once a staple of history and sociology, have declined along with labour movements as a political force." However, such recent research on public sector workers in Canada as has been published continues to confirm the negative impact on workers of neoliberal work reorganization. For example, Norene Pupo and Andy Noack (2009, 2010) have shown how the federal government's creation of Service Canada call centres has been experienced by most call centre workers as having created a more stressful, speeded-up work environment in which they are subjected to harsher management and less able to deliver quality public service.

This is not the place to examine contending accounts of the causes and dynamics of the economic crisis, important though they are.¹ But it is vital to note that one consequence of this crisis has been a rapid growth of state debt in the advanced capitalist countries. The cost of the neoliberal remedy for capitalism's crisis -- bailing-out failing financial firms and engaging in stimulus spending to prevent the crisis from becoming a catastrophic collapse -- has been estimated at approximately \$20 *trillion* (McNally 2011, 2-3). This unprecedented intervention to shore up global capitalism, along with falling tax revenues and higher welfare costs caused by the recession, have driven up debt to GDP ratios in the advanced capitalist countries. While economic predictions of this kind often turn out to be inaccurate, the International Monetary Fund's (IMF 2010, 7) estimate

¹ Of the explanations offered thus far, I find McNally 2011 the most persuasive.

in February 2010 was that across the G-7 countries “large fiscal deficits, reflecting cyclical factors, financial support measures, stimulus packages, and underlying structural spending pressures are expected to raise the general government gross debt-to-GDP ratio to about 120 percent in 2014, from around 80 percent in 2008.”

For partisans of neoliberalism, for whom deficits are anathema (at least in principle), the rapid growth of debt is a nightmarish scenario. Neoliberal opposition to budget deficits has several rationales. One is the straightforward desire to weaken social programs and the public sector in order to reinforce the subordination of the state and workers to “the power of money” (Clarke 1988, 356). Restraining deficits serves to limit any moves to enlarge the public sector or redefine it in ways that would be advantageous to workers. A second is that deficits are alleged to cause inflation.² Inflation is demonized by neoliberals for a variety of reasons. It squeezes the real value of revenue flows derived from interest payments, thereby reducing the profitability of financialized capital. Inflation could, hypothetically, lead to spiraling wage demands from workers, although the current conditions of wage-earners and unions in the advanced capitalist countries do not lend credibility to a scenario of rising wage militancy. Higher levels of inflation would also allow less-competitive firms to take advantage of fluctuating prices of inputs and outputs, thereby allowing them to survive without investing in the newest forms of work organization and technology. A third anti-deficit rationale is concern about the “crowding-out effect,” by which public sector borrowing forces up interest rates, to the detriment of private investors, although this argument has receded in recent years. While neoliberal ideology is important in explaining deficit-reduction policies, such policies are not simply the result of its influence. States are also subject to material disciplinary pressures to cut spending exerted by speculators through international markets for bonds, which states must sell in order to finance deficit spending, and also through currency markets (Camfield and Serge 2010).

For these reasons, then, deficit-slashing is high on the political agenda across the advanced capitalist countries, including Canada (Albo and Evans 2010). The IMF projects that Canada’s debt to GDP ratio for 2011 will be the second lowest of the G-7 states (IMF 2010, 20). However, the IMF calculation combines federal and provincial government debt; the Canadian federal debt to GDP ratio is, in fact, by far the lowest in the G-7 (McClern 2010). Nevertheless, deficit reduction became prominent in

² For a critique of this and related ideas, see Beitel 2010.

federal and provincial politics in 2010. Cost-cutting has also become a major political theme at the municipal level.

The implications of deficit-reducing fiscal policies for the public sector are clear. Neoliberal measures to reduce debt and deficits will draw on a well-established repertoire that includes freezing or reducing labour costs, cutting jobs, various forms of privatization (including contracting-out and Public-Private Partnerships) and the simple erosion or elimination of services. Neoliberal deficit-slashing packages are being implemented in a growing number of US and European jurisdictions, with California and Greece at the forefront (Albo and Evans 2010). In addition, the influence of the idea that deficits and debt must be reduced contributes to an ideological climate that is more hostile to the public sector. In such a climate it is easier for governments to redesign the public sector in neoliberal ways.

Canadian Public Sector Unions: Into a New Phase of the Employers' Offensive

What lies ahead for public sector workers in Canada in this economic and political context? Public sector workers have long endured an employers' offensive that began in the second half of the 1970s with the federal government's wage control program and its 1978 confrontation with the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW). The intensity of this offensive has ebbed and flowed through what Joseph Rose has periodized as years of "restraint" (1982-1990), "retrenchment" (1990-1997) and "postretrenchment" (1998 on) (Rose 2007). In my view, the Great Recession brought the postretrenchment phase to an end, opening a new period of austerity whose severity will be determined by the interplay of capital accumulation, state policy, capitalist initiatives directed at the public sector and worker resistance.

Here it is important to underscore that cost-reduction is not the only goal being pursued by governments and other public sector employers. Neoliberal public sector restructuring has never been solely or even primarily about containing or reducing state spending. It has also involved efforts to modify the form of state power, building lean states that can reshape society in the interests of competitiveness. In addition, opening up the still-sizeable public sector to profit-making firms has been an aspect of restructuring. For example, in Canada "the public health care system offers enormous untapped potential for profitability and is thus subject to ever-proliferating varieties of privatization" (Whiteside 2009, 95). All these dimensions of neoliberal restructuring will be at play in the period inaugurated by the Great Recession.

I believe it is futile to attempt to prepare any kind of forecast in detail about the new period. It is also essential to appreciate that governments, rightly fearful of reversing the beginnings of a recovery from the depths of the Great Recession, have not yet begun to implement major deficit-reduction or other restructuring measures. With this in mind, a number of recent experiences involving large groups of workers illustrate important challenges now facing public sector unions:

- In February 2010, faculty at Ontario's community colleges, represented by the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU), voted by 51 percent to accept the employer's offer which OPSEU officials had urged them to reject. The three-year contract ratified was similar to terms that had been imposed by the employer, and included concessions on workload, inflexible time limits on grievances and supervision of work during non-teaching periods (OPSEU 2010).
- In March 2010, a new two-year contract covering the 48,000 BC health support workers represented by the multi-union Facilities Bargaining Association (mostly members of the Hospital Employees Union (HEU)) and recommended by HEU leaders was ratified by a vote of 77 percent. It contains a loss of two days vacation time, and no pay increases for most workers (HEU 2010). This is one of the settlements reached as part of the BC government's Early Contract Discussions (ECD) approach, which involves offers that include a measure of job security for unions that agree to two-year deals that contain no compensation increases. The contract for the multi-union community health sector and the BC Government and Services Union's contract for provincial government employees have also been settled on this basis. The threat that workers whose unions reject the ECD framework will face contracting-out has been a factor in encouraging acceptance of the ECD approach.³
- Also in March 2010, the federal budget signaled that "starting with budget 2011, they [the Conservative government] will not only act on PS [public sector] pensions, they also intend to extend the PS wage freeze in addition to finding ways to reduce the size of the PS by eliminating whole programs (job cuts). Needless to say, those plans imply a serious deterioration in working conditions" (McDougall, Powell and Duranceau 2010, 2).

³ E-mail from HEU staffer, 30 March 2010.

- Officials of the Public Service Alliance of Canada negotiated a narrowly-ratified contract covering 95,000 federal government employees that gave up severance pay for workers voluntarily leaving their jobs in order to gain wage increases that were still below the rate of inflation.⁴
- The leaders of the Common Front of Quebec public sector unions (with the exception of the *Fédération interprofessionnelle de la santé du Québec* (FIQ)) and the Quebec government agreed to a five-year deal with wage increases of between seven and 10.5 percent over five years (barely above the rate of inflation) (Mandel 2010).
- The Ontario government is pursuing a policy of no compensation increases for two years for workers in the broader public sector (CUPE Ontario 2010).
- Despite having only struck briefly on two occasions in the last decade, members of the Amalgamated Transit Union at the Toronto Transit Commission had their right to strike removed by provincial legislation early in 2011.⁵
- Canada Post's "Modern Post" plan involves significant changes to labour processes that have negative effects on workers. In the negotiations for CUPW's main bargaining unit underway when this article was finalized (March 2011), Canada Post was demanding large concessions from current employees and even larger give-backs for future hires.⁶

Although no comprehensive studies of public sector collective bargaining or restructuring since the start of the Great Recession have yet appeared, these and other recent experiences suggest that many public sector unions are facing demands for contract concessions and restructuring measures which they are unable to repel. Public sector unions seem generally ill-equipped to contend with the attacks they are likely to face in the years ahead from employers who see them as obstacles to fiscal austerity and public sector "reform." This union weakness, not a new development (Camfield 2007), will become more pronounced to the degree to which employers become more aggressive in the new period of austerity. To help

⁴ "PSAC accepts deal – barely." *Ottawa Citizen*, 2 December 2010.

⁵ "Banning transit strikes is a bad idea." *The Globe and Mail*, 23 February 2011; "Labour cries foul as province moves on TTC strike ban." *The Globe and Mail*, 3 March 2011.

⁶ As documented on the union's official website and at theworkersstrugglewiththemodernpost.blogspot.com, a site created by CUPW militants.

illuminate the current condition of public sector unionism and challenges it faces, it is useful to examine the Toronto municipal workers' strike of 2009 in detail.

The Toronto Municipal Strike of 2009⁷

Over 24,000 Toronto municipal government employees, members of Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Locals 79 and 416, found themselves on the picket lines from 22 June to 29 July 2009. This was an important strike. It involved the largest union (CUPE), its largest local (Local 79), in the largest city in the land. Much as the CAW's high-profile 2009 deals with GM, Chrysler and Ford helped set the tone for how private sector unions would respond to demands for concessions during the economic crisis, this strike sent signals to workers and employers across the public sector and beyond. It was precipitated by the major concessions demanded by the employer, supposedly because of the City's dire fiscal circumstances (the City's budget surplus of \$350 million announced in March 2010⁸ is reason to doubt this justification).⁹ Most concessions were fended off, although the settlement granted the employer some of the changes to sick leave provisions that it wanted, by giving up the existing plan for all future hires. However, when the strike is examined with an eye to the future of public sector unionism, the conduct of the strike and its political consequences stand out as more important than the settlement.

In the only joint strike bulletin issued to members during the 38-day strike, the two local presidents wrote "When we entered collective bargaining early this year, we did not imagine that you would be walking picket lines by summer" (Dembinski and Ferguson 2009). This attitude persisted right up until the walkout began. Local leaders refused to mobilize for a possible strike.¹⁰ Nor did they clearly explain to members the issues on which they were refusing to give concessions.¹¹ There was an almost complete absence of communication between the locals' leaders and striking workers during the strike. Dedicated members worked hard to keep the strike running at the most basic level, but picketers usually had no leaflets explaining what the strike was about to distribute to passers-by. No

⁷ This section draws on Camfield 2011.

⁸ "David Miller's \$100 million defence." [TheStar.com](#), 10 March 2010

⁹ Only \$31 million of the surplus came from money not spent on the labour costs of the striking workers ("Surplus helps city balance budget." [TheStar.com](#), 17 February 2010).

¹⁰ E-mail from Julia Barnett to author, 28 June 2009.

¹¹ Julia Barnett to author, telephone communication, 23 August 2009.

membership meetings of any kind were held. Strikers were left feeling isolated and in the dark (Barnett and Fanelli 2009, 27).

The corporate media were filled with hostile coverage of the strike. The unions were portrayed as greedy and unrealistic for trying to defend paid sick day provisions in their contracts that were better than those of most workers. The fact that these provisions had been agreed to by their employer in exchange for monetary concessions by the unions in the past was almost never mentioned. This contributed to what Thomas Walkom described as the "unusual... visceral level of hostility against the strikers that emerges in casual conversation: The workers are uppity; they are already paid too much; they should all be fired."¹² In the face of this barrage, the top officers of CUPE 79 and 416 provided no leadership. They did very little to rally members' resolve and counter the wave of hostile accusations. They did even less to make a case for why defending municipal public sector jobs was in the interest of all working people in Toronto, particularly women and workers of colour (a clear majority of the strikers were women and/or people of colour). It fell to Linda McQuaig to make the public case that the unions were "holding the line against employers taking advantage of the recession to demand concessions (if unions simply give in, emboldened employers will go for more), and taking a stand against further erosion of public services."¹³ Strikers were never brought together in large marches, rallies or other mass actions that could have bolstered morale and, if they had disrupted business as usual on the streets of Toronto, applied pressure on the employer to settle the dispute on favorable terms.

For those familiar with CUPE 79 and 416, the conduct of the locals' leaderships did not come as a surprise. One former member who was fired as a result of his determined union activism described Local 79 as "very passive and very reluctant to engage in struggle."¹⁴ It is known for "really bureaucratic... management-style unionism," with a leadership that does not foster involvement and is happy "to be able to run the local without the interference of the membership."¹⁵ In 2002 the executive committee's resistance to mobilization and insistence on tightly controlling union affairs led to the resignation of almost the entire strike committee just months before a strike by Locals 79 and 416 that was ended by back to

¹² "Striking city workers a convenient target." [TheStar.com](http://www.thestar.com), 27 June 2009.

¹³ "Rich cause the crisis, workers get the blame." [TheStar.com](http://www.thestar.com), 16 July 2009.

¹⁴ Interview with Stan Dalton, 2003.

¹⁵ Interview with CUPE 79 activists A2 and A3, May 2004.

work legislation (White and Barnett 2002, 27). In 2009, the top officers of both locals appeared convinced that negotiations would end in a settlement without a strike because they had spent a considerable amount of money and mobilized many volunteers to support the 2003 election and 2006 reelection of Mayor David Miller and to back city councillors aligned with Miller.

Enthusiastic support in the labour movement for Miller was certainly not limited to the leaders of CUPE 79 and 416. In May -- when employer demands for a host of concessions from Locals 79 and 416 were on the bargaining table ("Recession" 2009) -- Miller had been welcomed at the Stewards' Assembly organized by the Toronto and York Region Labour Council (TYRLC). Those present at the assembly promised to "Work Hard to Renew Solidarity," endorsing a Solidarity Checklist that said, in part, "Helping each other in key struggles will be essential if we want to uphold the quality of life in greater Toronto" (*Stewards* 2009, 7).

The municipal workers' strike was nothing if not a key struggle. Yet most union leaders in Toronto did not treat it as such. There was a "lack of concerted mobilization efforts" (Barnett and Fanelli 2009, 27). TYRLC president John Cartwright's ties with the mayor and his supporters on city council were one reason why the TYRLC leadership did not do everything possible to help the strike win. Desperate for a "friend in city hall," too many in Toronto labour chose to remember only Miller's rhetoric about social justice and not, for example, his 2006 pledge to continue to cut municipal business taxes "every year for the next 15" (Miller 2006). Despite the leading role on Miller's 2003 and 2006 election teams of Conservative organizers including John Laschinger and Liberal insiders such as Peter Donolo,¹⁶ few in the city's unions recognized him for what he was: a wily politician who welcomed their support but had no intention of taking the side of the working class in Toronto due to his "alliance with -- and even greater fiscal and economic dependence upon -- major corporate and financial interests, including many of Canada and North America's most powerful corporations" (Albo and Rosenfeld 2009).

The strike revealed much about the state of public sector unions in Canada's largest city. Although the striking unions were not lacking in numbers, money or strike experience -- Local 79 had struck in 2000 and both locals had struck at the same time in 2002 -- both were notably ineffective. The top officers and staff of the locals, committed at best to a

¹⁶ "Mayor's team waiting in wings for election campaign to begin." *The Globe and Mail*, 17 October 2005: A10.

timid and conventional kind of social unionism, had not readied members for a fight. Nor had they done much to build unity between members of the two locals and their various bargaining units. Trained in the routines of grievance handling, arbitration, meetings with managers, union administration and campaigning for "friendly" politicians, they proved utterly unable to formulate a strategy for victory, devise creative tactics, motivate members and make a compelling case to other workers about why they should support the strike. Instead, they ran the strike as if the strikers themselves mattered little and the rest of Toronto's working class was irrelevant, squandering the most important potential sources of union power.

For their part, many rank and file strikers displayed much endurance and loyalty to the unions despite the poor quality leadership they received. There were also many indications of how workers were affected by belonging to unions that operate in routinized bureaucratic ways, discourage membership involvement, and do little to educate and mobilize members. Striking workers did not act as an articulate force to try to influence what other people thought about the struggle and the issues at stake. Picket lines were often token, passive and dispirited. At sites where both locals had picket lines there were sometimes tensions between members of Locals 79 and 416. There were very few independent initiatives by striking workers during the dispute.¹⁷

The morale of striking municipal workers was affected by their isolation from other workers in the city. The strike revealed just how many workers, feeling acutely insecure about their own jobs and fearful of how the economic crisis would affect them and their families, were quick to respond with hostility to public sector workers defending past gains. This kind of response is not natural or automatic, but the result of the forces of labour market competition outweighing class solidarity. The attitudes that led so many Torontonians to blame the city's workforce for the strike have been actively cultivated. For years most politicians, journalists, economists and other "experts" whose opinions are carried through the corporate news and entertainment media have repeated time and again that workers must give up past gains. The onset of the global economic crisis in 2008 only made such calls more emphatic. Years of increased insecurity in people's lives and saturation in neoliberal ideology – with little resistance

¹⁷These observations are informed by conversations during the strike with CUPE 79 activist Claudia White, another member of CUPE 79 who prefers anonymity and CUPE 1281 member Sheila Wilmot.

from most unions or other social movements or political forces – have had a real impact on the working class. Elementary social solidarity has been corroded. Many people react with anger at those who seek to defend rights, benefits or wages that are better than what they themselves enjoy, rather than wishing them well. Although the strike was not without support in the region, it was the hostile response that was strongest in Toronto during the summer of 2009.

Strikes can be important experiences that change those involved and generate energy for union renewal.¹⁸ However, this was not such a strike. It could only be demoralizing to spend weeks picketing with almost no information about what was happening in bargaining or on other picket lines, with no inkling of a strategy to try to bring the strike to a successful end and without ideas and inspiration to challenge hostile claims and encourage perseverance. Deprived of any opportunity to democratically shape how the strike would be run, Toronto municipal workers were given no reason to think of their unions as *their* organizations.

Nor did the strike bring municipal workers and other workers in the city closer together -- far from it. As two CUPE 79 members put it, “The strike was a political failure when it came to mobilizing sustained action and education, garnering public support as well as linking the defense of unionized jobs with fighting for workers in non-unionized jobs, the underemployed and the unemployed” (Barnett and Fanelli 2009, 28-29). This made it easier for right-wing populist candidate Rob Ford to channel “concerns about particular public services against city workers, and the idea of the public sector as a whole” (Saberi and Kipfer 2010) as part of his successful run to become the mayor of Toronto in 2010. Ford threatens to put the City of Toronto at the forefront of the offensive against public sector unions; his victory led to the city council motion requesting the removal of the right to strike from Toronto’s public transit workers, a request to which the provincial government readily acceded.

This strike illustrates two major dilemmas of public sector unionism today. First, a timid and conventional social unionism with a low level of membership participation, a lower level of democracy, an aversion to mobilizing members and no orientation towards a broader popular struggle against neoliberalism is very poorly suited to cope with the challenges of the new period inaugurated by the Great Recession. Such

¹⁸This has been neglected in academic work on union renewal but has recurred in my interviews and discussions with union activists (for example, former CUPW member John Friesen, 19 November 2008).

unionism characterizes many public sector unions today (Camfield 2007; Ross 2008). Second, in the context of an increasingly insecure neoliberal social environment public sector unionists defending past gains can expect to encounter significant hostility from many other workers. With this in mind, let us turn to the question of union renewal.

Renewal in Public Sector Unions¹⁹

There is broad agreement among researchers about the importance of union renewal (Kumar and Schenk 2006). But there is no unanimity about what union renewal means; it is a field of discussion in which there are a range of viewpoints about how unions should change and what their objectives should be. There are different perspectives on how unions should change and what their strategic objectives should be. All contributions to the union renewal discussion explicitly or implicitly advocate particular modes of union praxis. For this reason, explicitly putting the question of what kind of unionism can and should be practiced at the centre of discussions of union renewal helps to clarify proposals designed to address the challenges unions face today.

Unions are complex, many-sided organizations and every major union has its own specific features that have developed historically. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify distinct patterns of union activity and ideology, or modes of union praxis (Camfield 2007). In Canada today, five modes exist: business unionism, corporate unionism, social unionism, mobilization unionism and social movement unionism.²⁰ For the sake of clarity about the meaning of these concepts as used here, I will briefly summarize each.

Business unionism has a narrow focus on collective bargaining for members of the union and adopts a generally cooperative approach to dealing with employers. It accepts capitalist society as it exists today; at most its supporters advocate small changes in law and policy. If the union gets involved in political action, this will be limited to parliamentary politics. Involvement with 'the community' is limited to charity. For business unionists, unions should be run from the top down by officers and staff, with little membership involvement. This approach is practiced in many public sector unions, including those in which social unionism is dominant.

¹⁹Some material in this section draws on Camfield 2011.

²⁰This conceptualization differs from that offered in Camfield 2007, which failed to distinguish corporate unionism from mobilization unionism.

Corporate unionism is the term coined by Kim Moody in his important analysis of the approach developed by some US-based unions such as SEIU and UNITE HERE (Moody 2007). It is “a step beyond business unionism” that advocates highly centralized, staff-driven and even less democratic unions. It combines an energetic commitment to bring more workers under collective agreement coverage with an “almost religious attachment to partnerships with capital” and an “essentially administrative” vision (Moody 2007, 196). This mode of union praxis has only a slight presence in the public sector in Canada.

Social unionism is distinguished from business unionism by its greater concern for social and political issues not directly related to the workplace and its more critical attitude to neoliberal policies. Social unionists are often but not always non-confrontational in their dealings with employers and governments and wary of greater militancy and democratic membership control. Social unionism is commonly practiced in public sector unions (Ross 2008).

Least common in unions today are two alternative approaches, both of which are practiced by small numbers of activists in public sector unions today. *Mobilization unionism* involves taking a militant stance towards employers and commits unions to working for social change alongside community groups. It treats extra-parliamentary political action as important. Its supporters work to increase membership participation in their unions but do not advocate a much greater level of union democracy. This mode of praxis is called “social movement unionism” by some researchers (e.g. Fairbrother 2008). However, doing so errs in not distinguishing between this kind of unionism and another for which the term social movement unionism should be reserved (Camfield 2007).

Social movement unionism is committed to militancy and solidarity among unions and between unions and other social justice organizations in a struggle for progressive social change that involves extra-parliamentary action. It is distinguished from mobilization unionism by the centrality given to democracy. Supporters of social movement unionism believe that unions should be run by active memberships and see democracy as key to building workers’ power.²¹

Taking the contemporary political-economic context seriously suggests that the question that should be at the heart of discussions of public sector union renewal is this: what kind of unionism will be most

²¹Fletcher and Gapasin 2008 make a case for mobilization unionism; Moody 2007 argues for social movement unionism.

effective in defending workers' pay, benefits and rights, public sector jobs, union organization and public services against the neoliberal restructuring that is likely to intensify in the new period of austerity? In considering this question, it is important to bear in mind that for workers' concerns to be channeled into efforts for union renewal, rather than into competitive individualistic strategies for getting by, it is necessary for workers to see unions as organizations that have the potential to make positive change in the workplace and as *their* organizations, for whose activity they are responsible. This makes democratic membership control and intelligently-militant workplace activism vital to changing public sector unions in ways that increase their power to contest neoliberalism (Camfield 2007).

An energized business unionism has rightly had few proponents in discussions of union renewal, since this mode of union praxis has been a major contributor to the current difficulties of organized labour (Moody 2007; Fletcher and Gapasin 2008). Corporate unionism, practiced in much of SEIU and UNITE HERE, has had more advocates. However, the perception of the virtues of this kind of unionism has been affected by recent developments in the unions in which it is strongest. In 2009, SEIU's top leadership imposed trusteeship on the union's fast-growing 150,000-strong California health sector affiliate, United Healthcare Workers (UHW), which prompted most of UHW's elected officers to leave SEIU and begin to build the independent National Union of Healthcare Workers as a highly democratic organization (Winslow 2010). UNITE HERE has been riven by a split led by the former top officer of UNITE which has taken a portion of the membership into SEIU. These and other recent events in the two unions have underscored the top-down, undemocratic nature of corporate unionism and how little attention is devoted to promoting the self-organization of rank and file workers in this kind of unionism (Abbott-Klafter *et al.* 2009), adding weight to the analysis of earlier critics (Moody 2007; Early 2009; Camfield 2007). This makes it an inappropriate direction for unionists who wish to resist neoliberal restructuring.

Social unionism is the dominant form of unionism in the public sector in Canada. As Stephanie Ross (2008) has argued in detail, the practice of social unionism rarely alters how collective bargaining and contract administration are conducted. Nor does this usually change low levels of membership participation and heavy reliance on officials acting in place of workers. Supporters of social unionism do not seek to cultivate thoroughgoing democratic membership control within unions. This helps explain why social unionist praxis has generally not been effective at resisting the employers' offensive and neoliberal restructuring, as the

Toronto municipal workers' strike and many other recent experiences confirm.

This assessment implies the need for unions to explore alternative approaches. Mobilization unionism has not been practiced by many public sector unions in Canada. One exception is HEU in the early years of the first decade of the present century. Its militancy, encouragement of membership involvement and efforts at extra-parliamentary mobilization gave HEU members a greater capacity to resist the aggressive attacks they faced from the provincial Liberal government headed by Gordon Campbell. However, HEU's crucial 2004 strike -- in which members were not allowed to decide whether to accept a concessionary deal or, as many wished, to instead attempt to escalate solidarity action to try to achieve a better outcome -- provides an illustration of how mobilization unionism's democratic deficit is a significant weakness (Camfield 2006, 2007). This has also been confirmed by some experiences in US unions (Downs 2009).

What of social movement unionism? This mode of union praxis is the least common. It is dominant only in a limited number of locals in unions such as CUPE and CUPW,²² though there are activists scattered across public sector unions who take this approach. The decision of the June 2008 convention of the *Fédération interprofessionnelle de la santé du Québec* (FIQ), Quebec's union of nurses, nursing assistants and cardiorespiratory care workers (then numbering 57,000 members), to adopt social movement unionism, in explicit contradistinction from the social unionism previously practiced (FIQ 2008a; 2008b), remains unique. However, it appears that this decision has not been followed by a transformative process within the union and it is unclear if FIQ praxis has actually begun to move in the direction of social movement unionism.

Nevertheless, experience suggests that this kind of unionism is most effective at resisting neoliberalism. In the words of a FIQ (2008a, 31-32) document:

a struggle carried on by a larger number of people can only result in more success and consequently increase bargaining power. In short, the establishment of practices favouring inclusive and participatory democracy develops the active adherence of the greatest number of people... [Similarly] if a coalition or an alliance only involves the top of the union hierarchy, it will not

²²Many CUPW policies are consistent with this form of unionism, but the actual practice of much of the union is not, as a number of CUPW activists have made clear to me.

have the same bargaining power or the same penetration capacity as a coalition benefiting from the active support of all of its constituents.

Moreover, when unionists oppose employer and government demands as contrary to the interests of both union members and the users of public services, they are more likely to gain popular support than when they frame their opposition as a narrow defence of members alone. If a union under attack has a proven track record of support for other unions and community organizations the latter are more likely to support the union in its time of need. When a union has previously been attempting to build a broad social movement in conjunction with other unions and community organizations it is more likely that the latter's solidarity will take the form of effective action, rather than simply verbal or financial support.

Practicing social movement unionism is no panacea for the problems facing public sector workers, which are rooted in contemporary capitalism's drive to restructure the broad public sector. However, the history of international resistance to neoliberalism – including the victorious mass strikes in Guadeloupe and Martinique in early 2009 (McNally 2011, 161-3), the defeat of the French government's attempt to introduce a First Employment Contract in April 2006 (Bouneaud 2007), the BC teachers' strike of October 2005 (Camfield 2009) and the overturning of the privatization of water in the Bolivian city of Cochabamba in 2000 (Olivera and Lewis 2004) -- indicates that mass direct action and democratic self-organization have been key to softening the neoliberal blow and achieving such victories as have been won against neoliberal "reforms." This suggests that social movement unionism can strengthen the position of public sector unions in the increasingly difficult circumstances in which they find themselves.

There is no question that union renewal through processes to transform union praxis towards social movement unionism would not proceed smoothly and quickly in public sector unions. Bob Carter's (2006, 148) generalization that "centralised bargaining and bureaucratic unionism have long been features of state sector unionism" holds true for Canada, though the structure of bargaining is quite decentralized in some parts of the broader public sector, including social services and post-secondary education. With the exception of the FIQ, there is no evidence that the top officials of any union have even been interested in discussing a change in direction towards social movement unionism.

There are a number of reasons for this lack of interest. One is that neoliberal restructuring in Canada has not led to a massive loss of

representation rights or members for most public sector unions; public sector employers have not sought to eliminate unions altogether and density remains high. The apparent threat level has not been high enough to trigger widespread discussion and debate about major change among officials and rank and file activists. Another reason is the institutional conservatism that develops whenever union officialdom becomes consolidated. Social movement unionism can involve forms of action that pose risks for union institutions and for officials (especially full-time officers and staff) who depend on union institutions for their positions as officials. A third factor is that the level of democratic membership control involved in social movement unionism is contrary to the established bureaucratic ways in which so much union activity in Canada is organized. In addition, in most unions there are few independent-thinking left-wing activists who might organize to press for their organizations to change by moving in the direction of social movement unionism.²³ Finally, social movement unionism has such a weak presence in the contemporary Canadian labour movement that it is simply not a recognized alternative in the eyes of most union activists. For these reasons, despite its merits for public sector unions faced with neoliberal restructuring, it is unlikely that this mode of union praxis will spread within these unions in the foreseeable future.

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²³The reasons for this are explored in Camfield 2011.

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