
DEBATES

A NEW UNION FOR CHALLENGING TIMES: A REPLY TO ANDREW JACKSON

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Editor's Note: This article was written by Mr. Lewenza prior to his retirement as President of the CAW and before the formation of Unifor.

Union members in Canada understand well that their living standards and security depend fully on the union card they carry in their pocket. In fact, without unions there is no such thing as a “middle class.” It's only when we can approach employers collectively, to negotiate the terms of our employment and compensation from a more equal footing that workers have any chance of winning a fairer share of the wealth we produce. There's no society that has ever attained true mass prosperity, allowing most people to live a decent life, without strong unions and widespread collective bargaining.

For the first decades after World War II, governments largely accepted this logic, and implemented new policies that supported and stabilized collective bargaining. This included the implementation in Canada of the Rand formula. The Rand formula and the whole dues check-off system was pioneered thanks to the courage of United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 200 members at Ford in Windsor, and it underpinned the expansion of the whole system after the war.

For a while, most of our employers went along with it. Companies never welcomed the union with open arms of course, but they tolerated unionization and they dealt with us. They came to recognize that unionization offered benefits to employers (i.e., stabilizing workplace relations, boosting productivity, and more), as well as costs (i.e., higher wages and benefits). It was better for them to work with us than be engaged in a non-stop battle to the death.

But as Andrew Jackson's useful overview proves, those times have clearly changed. With globalization and deregulation and privatization in their pocket, corporations are on the warpath. Stock market financiers and private equity high-flyers came to dictate corporate strategy. With workers increasingly

desperate (here and around the world) to hang onto their livelihoods, companies felt less obliged to tolerate unionism. Governments, meanwhile, increasingly took up the corporate agenda. It's as if they pressed "rewind" on labour law – making it harder to certify new units, harder to go on strike, harder to make progress.

The latest and most dangerous example of this backward trend is the coming attack on the Rand formula. We know that so-called "right to work" laws have been spreading in America, now reaching right to our border after Michigan's adoption last year. ("Right-to-work" is a terrible misnomer. These laws don't give workers any right to a job at all; actually they take away our rights to bargain for *better* work.) And now, for the first time, mainstream political leaders in Canada have joined the attack on the Rand formula.

Saskatchewan's right-wing Premier Brad Wall campaigned on a platform that included abolishing the Rand formula; for now, he has backed away from that plan (in favour of other, more incremental attacks on unions). Conservative MPs in Ottawa have been toying with attacking the Rand formula through a private members bill (similar to their attack last year, through Bill C-377, on union financing). Ontario's Conservative leader Tim Hudak is proposing to abolish dues check-off systems, and even to do away with certified bargaining units altogether.

Make no mistake, this is an arrow aimed right at the heart of the labour movement. Our ability to negotiate good wages, benefits, and working conditions depends on having every member who benefits from the union pay their fair share of the freight (through their dues). By trying to abolish dues check-off, employers (and their right-wing political flunkies) are trying to abolish collective bargaining altogether.

Our enemies are fostering negative views about unions among the broader non-unionized public, in an effort to divide and conquer Canadian workers. Imagine someone without a union: low wages, no benefits, and no security. Logically, they should try to form a union themselves to fight for better treatment. Instead, business and conservative leaders try to turn exploited non-union workers *against* unions, portraying us as a "special interest group" rather than a force fighting for all workers.

Andrew Jackson argues that the latest wave of attacks on unions is a response to our weakness, not our strength. I am convinced that if the labour movement does not respond energetically and effectively to this attack on the Rand formula, corporations and governments will decide this is a good time to get rid of unions altogether. We need to demonstrate our power by mobilizing members and activists to defend the Rand formula and the other pillars of our collective bargaining system. And we must change public opinion by reminding Canadians about the crucial role unions play in building a fairer society for all workers – union and non-union.

Just ask yourself, what would Canada look like without unions at all? Even non-union workers understand well that this would give their boss free reign to exploit, dictate, hire and fire at will. People know in their guts that unions are a countervailing power that strengthens the economic position of working people generally. Take that away, by making it financially impossible to form unions, and you hurt all workers.

One part of our response to the coming attacks, of course, must be to improve our own practices as a union. We must ensure our bargaining and organizing strategies, our messages, and our profile are as effective as they can be, given the challenging times. In this context, I am encouraged by our project with the Communications Energy and Paperworkers (CEP) union to found a new Canadian union. We both see building this new union as part and parcel of our bigger, shared challenge: buttressing and energizing the labour movement as a whole. Indeed, an emphasis on union renewal and innovation has been central to the project from the beginning; both sides have been clear that we are not just merging two great organizations, we are building a new union.

The concept of forming a new, larger union jointly with the CEP was endorsed unanimously by delegates to the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) convention last summer—and overwhelmingly supported by CEP delegates to their convention in October. Since then several specialized working groups have been laying the groundwork for the launch of the new union, at its founding convention in Toronto on Labour Day weekend. They are working through the details of our new constitution, integrating offices and staff, and developing a new name and logo. The National Executive Boards of both unions will review these details, and adopt a final plan in May. Then it's on to the founding convention, which will open on August 30.

The new union will be bigger: over 300,000 members, making us the largest (mostly) private-sector union in Canada. It will have a critical mass of membership in every province, and in several strategic sectors of the economy: manufacturing, energy, transportation, communications, resources, and services. The new union will clearly have power—enough power to make a big difference for workers. We'll make the most of modern communication technologies to get the word out. We'll use new strategies to organize new members. We will have the ear of governments and the media.

One feature of our project that has captured a lot of attention has been our proposal to include workers outside of recognized or certified bargaining units in the new union. This would allow activists to organize union power in a range of settings where existing labour laws make it difficult to do so—including in workplaces which have not yet been formally certified by labour boards, in precarious work settings where it is difficult or impossible to organize traditional unions, or among unemployed people and students. Our specific proposals for how to do this will be presented and debated at our founding convention. It will

take time and experimentation to learn how to make the most of these flexible new structures. The core of our power will certainly remain our members in certified bargaining units. But these new approaches to organizing and activism will be important in extending the opportunity for union membership to more workers, and helping us portray the union as a force genuinely fighting on behalf of all working people. There's a dedicated website with updates on the whole process: www.newunionproject.ca.

Forming the new union will be a historic step for both the CAW and the CEP. We each take great pride in our history and name. But we learned long ago that unions must continually improve and innovate. After all, when the CAW took the brave step of breaking away from the UAW in 1985, it was with the goal of creating a new organization, one more conducive to Canadian conditions, and more effective at representing Canadian workers. The same was true when the CEP founded themselves in 1992. In the decades since, the activism and leadership of both unions has made the whole labour movement stronger.

Now it's time to take another big step forward. A bigger, stronger union, with a commitment to modern communication and organizing strategies, and a commitment to renewal and innovation, that will help us resist the coming attacks on collective bargaining. And it will help us build a labour movement that can lift the standards for all working people, despite the aggressive attacks we are facing.