



THE COST OF (NOT) ORGANIZING

Are Canada's unions willing to change the reality of work for a million young workers in the next decade? It's a good, tough question. There will need to be a dramatically new investment in organizing for the labour movement to achieve for the next generation what it did for those who are now retiring. And the hard truth is that means time, people and dues money.

Decent wages, benefits, working conditions and pensions are all part of the difference a union can make. Often those standards lift up others working in the same sector, but sometimes not. It depends on the union strength in any given sector. The portion of workers covered by collective agreements is called the unionization rate or *union density*. In Canada, union density reached 38% in 1981. Since then it has fallen to below 30%, and in greater Toronto only one out of every four workers has a union.

Why does that make a difference? If the majority of people in a sector have union wages and benefits, they will set the standards for that sector. On the other hand, if only a small portion have a union contract, they will always be under pressure to reduce their wages or conditions to match lower non-union costs. We have seen corporations force massive concessions and two-tier wages by threatening job loss or lengthy lock-outs, and politicians target public sector workers for earning more than the private sector.

The only way to resist these "market pressures" is to make sure the majority of workers in the sector have a union that fights to improve standards. How to achieve that? There is only one answer - putting time and money into organizing. Many good-paying occupations – from industrial workers to construction trades and even teachers – were once poverty jobs. That only changed after mass organizing drives provided the bargaining clout to improve standards. For a quarter century after WW2 unionization spread to workplaces across the economy and brought most workers into middle-income employment.

But in 1995 Ontario's Conservatives made massive changes to labour laws to make it harder for workers to unionize. They allowed employers to create a climate of fear and intimidation in the workplace before a mandatory vote. Union drives were defeated, companies were allowed to bust unions, and union density dropped. Public services were outsourced and ruthless competition drove down wages in healthcare, food services and even transit.

As a result, real wages across Ontario have stagnated for two decades. More people are stuck in precarious work, and some of the largest corporations have a business plan based on poverty wages. Many people only get a raise when the Minimum Wage is increased, and a whole generation risks being undervalued and underpaid for their entire working life.

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It's time to turn things around. Every union needs to devote more resources to organizing unrepresented workers in their sector. Bargaining goals need to include supporting union rights for workers along the supply chain or in related companies. And most importantly, every union activist needs to focus on fixing the laws so workers can join a union without fear.

There is a famous quote that tells us that "You can't remain an island of prosperity in a sea of despair". It is meant to be a moral caution about ignoring the plight of others, but it is also a hard truth about the future of our movement. Those of us with a union today have to thank someone from the past who did the hard work of building it from scratch. We should repay that debt and put our energy into giving millions of others a voice at work. Let's make this country a better place to live for everyone in the future.

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