

Clients and Consciousness: Drawing Militancy from Confusion on the Front Lines of the State

Greg McElligott

Volume 40, 1997

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/ilt40art05>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

McElligott, G. (1997). Clients and Consciousness: Drawing Militancy from Confusion on the Front Lines of the State. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 40, 171–198.

Article abstract

This article uses the experience of the Canada Employment and Immigration Union to argue that progressive political action is still possible on the front lines of the state. The CEIU has used client coalitions to defend and transform its membership, and these efforts have been aided by the contradictions of the neoconservative project itself. Union successes have occurred when clients and community groups are on side, real material gains are conceivable, and the issues at stake impinge on the discretionary decisions of front line workers. Union efforts are seen to constitute a prototypical strategy of "countermanagement," which can establish the foundations for a new, more democratically-accountable state.

Clients and Consciousness: Drawing Militancy from Confusion on the Front Lines of the State

Greg McElligott

Didn't they realize there are union people in here, too?
— besieged employment centre worker, 1994¹

Introduction

CONSIDERING THE PHENOMENAL growth and relative militancy of state unions over the past 30 years, it is remarkable how little their presence has intruded into discussions of the state itself. Whether the state is seen as the embodiment of some public good (as in mainstream public administration), or of class rule (as in neo-Marxist state theory), the bureaucracy's strength is portrayed as essentially undiminished by mass unionization. This same impression is often conveyed by public sector union leaders. When they speak of being scapegoated, or blame managers for waste and inefficiency, they effectively deny that state workers wield any politically relevant power. But from this perspective it is very difficult to understand the neo-conservative obsession with state unions, and with the productivity of state workers. It seems more fruitful to assume that the latter actually do possess significant powers and that neo-conservatives are right to view them as potential obstacles to their designs. But what are these powers, and how might they be used in "progressive" ways?

¹Cited in Anonymous, "Sydney CEC survives siege," *Paranoia* 12 (1994), 1, 1-10, 10. *Paranoia* is the semi-official newsletter of the Ontario section of PSAC's Employment and Immigration component, the CEIU. The Canada Employment Centre in Sydney, NS, had been invaded by about 200 "quite rowdy" members of a larger demonstration protesting high unemployment.

Greg McElligott, "Clients and Consciousness: Drawing Militancy from Confusion on the Front Lines of the State," *Labour/Le Travail*, 40 (Fall 1997), 171-98.

The answers to these questions can be found in the workplace dynamics of the state's human service agencies. Here frontline workers enter into relationships with a unique sort of clientele. These relationships, whether individually or collectively arranged, can undermine the integrity of the bureaucratic hierarchy, and foster progressive forms of resistance. More particularly, they can heighten class consciousness in a strategically placed group of workers, and spark coalitions that prefigure deeper forms of democracy.

The article proceeds from a theoretical consideration of the place of frontline workers, through discussions of relations with the unemployed, the legitimacy of resistance, locally based action strategies, and relations with refugees. The concluding section examines the strategic implications of frontline work in a neo-conservative age.

Service and the Capitalist State

Frontline workers spend their days inside organizations nominally devoted to "serving the public." But the state as a whole does not "serve" the majority of the population, as the neo-Marxists have made clear. Service always comes with an element of control, and for many (usually working-class) recipients control is preeminent. Nevertheless, the precise blend of service and control which clients experience is variable over time.

Neo-conservatism, broadly conceived, seeks to reshape the Keynesian welfare state — enhancing business services, and business opportunities, while introducing new, cheaper, strategies of social control. These latter tend to replace cash and services with promises and threats. What the state does, and what state workers do, is changed, but the impact is quite uneven. Many jobs and budgets are cut, but a few grow, at least in relative terms. Most workers face changing management expectations: zealous performance is encouraged among welfare inspectors, for example, while it is discouraged or made impossible among occupational health and safety inspectors.

State workplaces were permeated by contradictions even at the height of Keynesian welfarism, but during the neo-conservative ascendancy, these have become particularly acute. As governments attempt to dilute the service component of human services, they also take frontline work further and further from its nominal goals, and undermine the traditional means by which managers have controlled and motivated state workers — by linking altruism and obedience in the ethos of "public service."

The growing contradiction between their nominal and actual functions places frontline workers in a very awkward position: trained to serve and perhaps change society, they often find themselves simply policing the status quo, and are soon plunged into identity crises of one form or another.² Most analysts assume that the

²On the tension between these two roles, see James O'Connor, *The Fiscal Crisis of the State* (New York 1973), 241-2.

eventual outcome of such dilemmas will be "functional" behavior: individuals will conform, or burn out and leave. However there is a minority tradition which sees other possibilities.

Michael Lipsky suggests that, as gatekeepers controlling access to state services, "street-level bureaucrats" must try to meet limitless demands with chronically inadequate resources. One response to these conflicting pressures is to "ration" service delivery — reserving and selectively applying their time and energy so that at least some clients receive decent service. Widespread use of such coping strategies may mean that policy, as it is actually experienced by state clients, is only indirectly influenced by management regulations and directives. In Lipsky's work, street-level bureaucrats' own informal rationing criteria seem equally important — in which case their political consciousness can have a direct bearing on policy output.³

In his later work, Nicos Poulantzas reached similar conclusions. Although all state workers were tainted by their contribution to the "ideological inculcation and political repression of the dominated classes," they were bound to this role by an "internal cement" that was growing increasingly weak. This "cement" was an ideological construct: the image of a neutral, benevolent, state to which public servants could happily pledge their loyalty. That image was the first victim of Keynesianism's crisis, and would later be undermined in different ways by neo-conservative governments. The state's internal cement was dissolving, and ideological struggles inside the state were increasingly concerned with repairing that bond.⁴

James O'Connor suggested as far back as 1973 that state unions should seize the opportunities presented by this situation, and forge coalitions with state clients' movements to resist the construction of what he called a privatized "social-industrial complex." But there have been few attempts to analyse such strategies in practice, and O'Connor admitted that it would not be easy to bridge the gap between employed, economically secure frontline workers, and their dispossessed clientele.⁵

³Michael Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy* (New York 1980), 27-8; "Toward a Theory of Street-Level Bureaucracy," in M. Lipsky and W. Hawley, eds., *Theoretical Perspectives on Urban Politics* (Englewood Cliffs 1976), 196-213, 201; Jeffrey M. Protas, *People-Processing, The Street-Level Bureaucrat in Public Bureaucracies* (Lexington 1979), 9, 91-3, 166; Richard A. Weatherley, *Reforming Special Education: Policy Implementation from State Level to Street Level* (Cambridge 1979), 2, 6, 112, 145.

⁴Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes* (1968; London 1987), 333-5, 350; *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism* (1974; London 1979), 209-30, 317-9; *State, Power, Socialism* (1978; London 1980), 155-6.

⁵O'Connor, *The Fiscal Crisis of the State*, 236-56. One recent exception is Paul Johnston's *Success While Others Fail: Social Movement Unionism and the Public Workplace* (Ithaca 1994).

Other analysts have been more pessimistic about social unionism, and social movements in general. Bryan Palmer sees the former as little more than a promotional strategy for one group of union bureaucrats, and warns that coalitions with social movements cannot be allowed to detract from the centrality of production and class relations.⁶ But one can grant these two points, and still argue that coalitions are essential if workers' power is to be used wisely, and if fragmentation and sectionalism are to be avoided.

This article will show how one union was led to seek common ground with state clients, and how a leadership committed to self-organization, mobilization, and social change used the encounter for both defensive and transformative purposes. The object of study here is the Canada Employment and Immigration Union (CEIU), one of the largest components of the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC).⁷

Until 1993, the CEIU represented nearly all workers in the federal department of Employment and Immigration (EIC), many of whom were employment counselors, Unemployment Insurance agents (now *Employment Insurance* agents), and immigration officers.⁸ All of these are frontline workers — that is, non-management, public-sector employees in human service agencies, who exercise some autonomous discretionary power. And all have significant contact with a clientele drawn mostly from subordinate groups, whose attachment to the labour force is tenuous, marginal, or under negotiation. Political consciousness among the latter may be similarly transitional, and awareness of class, gender, and racial inequities particularly high.

Not all frontline workers have been equally receptive to the lessons clients can teach them. Some workers have indeed reinterpreted, and enriched, their nominal service function even as neo-conservative managers attempt to buttress a narrower "enforcement" culture. But others have adopted the enforcement line, and have blamed clients, rather than management, for escalating productivity pressures.

Since the early 1980s, CEIU leaders have been encouraging members to develop alternative notions of "service" which are more responsive to client needs than those offered by departmental management. The latter have used various sorts of service/quality campaigns quite cynically to inspire harder work from their frontline personnel, even as they deliver social programs which are stingier and

⁶Bryan Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800-1991* (Toronto 1992), 370-7, 405-16.

⁷PSAC's components reflect the government's departmental boundaries, but bargaining units are based on government-wide occupational categories. The CEIU represents over 20,000 members, about 19,000 of whom bargain in either the Clerical and Regulatory (CR) or Programme Administration (PM) categories. PSAC central is responsible for all bargaining, although negotiating committees tend to be fairly representative of the unit as a whole.

⁸In 1993 EIC joined the "super-department" of Human Resources Development. CEIU continues to represent most PSAC members there.

harder to access.⁹ Management's approach usually portrays good service in quantitative terms: speedy processing of UI claims rather than provision of adequate support, for example. Workers have also been told that cracking down on UI "abusers" serves taxpayers, "the public interest," or some other abstraction not physically present in their workplace. The needs of these invisible entities are determined by senior bureaucrats, who jealously guard their intermediary role in a chain of command which claims (falsely) to be democratically accountable.

As will be shown below, in some areas CEIU members were able to move toward a more progressive definition of service which focused on concrete benefits, not just processing speed, and on real human beings rather than abstractions. In doing so they also created new, more vibrant, mechanisms of public accountability, and a heightened understanding of the sources and dynamics of social power. Success in this regard was particularly common among employment counselors and UI agents. In other areas CEIU members proved harder to reach, even when comparable tactics were used. Initial advances among immigration officers seem to have been largely undone by a potent combination of racism and political opportunism.

Yet work on the front lines of the state remains a politically charged process of daily mediation between human needs and bureaucratic limitations. When individual frontline workers defy or evade management directives, their actions are loaded with political import — especially in the current conjuncture. This "mundane resistance" has, in fact, both motivated and complicated neo-conservative attempts to restructure the state. When collectivized, and linked through new democratic channels to the interests of client groups, it can lay the groundwork for an entirely different kind of state.

EIC Workers and the Unemployed

CEIU's efforts to reach the grassroots have clearly been developmental — aiming to tie members' concerns for their own jobs to a broader political consciousness. As the neo-conservative project began to take shape in the early 1980s, the union organized gatherings of employment counselors to discuss the changing demands of their jobs.

At one such meeting in 1983, counselors expressed concern about the growing emphasis on quantitative measurements of their productivity. Job placements were being given priority at the expense of counseling. But according to these counselors, the use of statistics was "inconsistent with the major focus of CEC in the

⁹Elsewhere I have described some of the contradictions that emerged when managers tried to retool and rehabilitate the notion of public service as a motivational tool. See "Mundane Resistance: State Workers and Neoconservatism in Canada," PhD Thesis, York University, 1995, Ch. 3.

Community," and such data was compiled only to serve capricious, politically motivated production targets.¹⁰

Later this group would note that these changes — part of EIC's "revitalization" of Employment Services — also tacitly encouraged discrimination, despite the department's commitment to affirmative action. Employment agencies often receive (illegal) requests from employers for applicants of a particular race and/or gender, and private agencies are notorious for granting such requests. EIC counselors were increasingly put "into a position where they must decide between what they know is right and what will gain them points. It is easy to fill a discriminatory order. After all who better than a Counselor knows how to manipulate the wording of an order and how to make a referral to placements ratio look good."¹¹

Initially, however, the major concern seemed to be with the changing role of EIC as a whole. The group wondered whether EIC would intervene in the community as a "social agency," or as a "placement agency to compete with other agencies."¹² But the counselors had already answered their own question: "[t]he shift of orientation is to stress the economic goals not the social goals of the job. There is more emphasis [on] placement and training of skills than concern for clients, diagnostic services, special needs. These latter activities cannot measure success in units."¹³

At the street level, counselors who had formerly worked with both employer and employee clients were now forced to specialize, serving only one sort of clientele. This shift enabled later Tory governments to target employer services more precisely and, over the years, to redirect resources to this area.¹⁴

On the client side, efficiency concerns were being used to justify the automation and depersonalization of service delivery. Whatever personal contact did occur between counselors and clients was supposed to be governed by new professional norms stressing control (of worker clients and of expenditures) over helping. The talk of instilling "problem ownership" in clients was instrumental here, and was seen by some counselors as a classic "blame the victim" strategy.¹⁵

Counselors did have access to various surreptitious means of frustrating revitalization's intent. But steadily increasing caseloads meant that time and energy used in the pursuit of quality service to individuals came at the expense of other clients, or of co-workers trying to meet their own quotas.¹⁶ *Paranoia*, CEIU's

¹⁰ Anonymous, "C.E.I.U. holds Employment Counselor meeting," *Paranoia*, 1 (1983), 3, 5-6, 5. CEC stand for Canada Employment Centre.

¹¹ Anonymous, "The employment counselor position: Whither and why?" *Paranoia*, 1 (1983), 7, 14.

¹² Anonymous, "C.E.I.U. holds Employment Counselor meeting," *Paranoia*, 1 (1983), 6.

¹³ Anonymous, "C.E.I.U. holds Employment Counselor meeting," *Paranoia*, 1 (1983), 5.

¹⁴ Interview with Harvey Linetsky, Toronto, 1990. Linetsky is an EIC employment counselor in Toronto.

¹⁵ Interview with Harvey Linetsky, Toronto, 1990.

¹⁶ Interview with Harvey Linetsky, Toronto, 1990.

semi-official newsletter (the official staff newsletter is *Panorama*), covered another meeting of employment centre personnel in Scarborough, where all present wanted to provide more services to clients

but were unable to because of time constraints from supervisors and co-workers. They all agreed it was unfair to expect co-workers to take on more interviews when someone spent extra time with a client who was unable to find a suitable job order. One ... felt guilty about making extra work for her friends and not meeting up to the expectations of her supervisor, also under pressure from management. Another said: 'Let's face it — it's a numbers game. Get them in and get them out. I don't like it but that's the way it is.'¹⁷

Here, as elsewhere, productivity pressures were being used to help control the extent and nature of frontline workers' interactions with their clients. But the conversion of their union to an explicitly client-oriented political stance has acted to some degree as an *antidote to this tendency*, undermining both management control and the "enforcement culture" that sustains it. During the 1981-2 recession, EIC hired scores of community organizers to initiate job creation projects through its Employment Development Branch. The experience and contacts of these activists seemed tailor-made for a government seeking a quick and dramatic response to the unemployment crisis. Many of the post-1980 generation of militant CEIU leaders came from this Branch, and their "extraordinary" organizing skills pushed the union toward more radical positions on a variety of fronts, particularly in Ontario and Québec. When Conservative restructuring dispersed these employees across EIC, the seeds of a militant, socially conscious posture were planted elsewhere. These seeds were nourished by the harsh impact neo-conservative policies had on both sides of the front line, as well as by CEIU activists.¹⁸

Early evidence of a leap to client advocacy can be found in the pages of *Paranoia*. In mid-1983, the magazine published a proposal to organize the unemployed, and demand jobs from employers using direct action tactics. An interesting variation on EIC's official function (matching job-seekers with job openings), this approach reflected union disillusionment with state-centred pressure tactics. Instead of inducing despair in the face of unresponsive governments

[a] general social understanding would be reached that society must directly confront the economic structure of our society to achieve full employment [Rather than being] massed and directed with little sense of contributing to any action other than their presence, ... the unemployed would be able to perceive the immediate reaction to their efforts and in the event of success could rightly claim that it came about by their own efforts.¹⁹

¹⁷ Anonymous, "Scarborough E&IOs bail out," *Paranoia*, 2 (1984), 7, 10.

¹⁸ Interview with Renaud Paquet, Ottawa, 1990; interview with Alan Lennon, Toronto, 25 July 1990 and 1 August 1990. Lennon is a former EDB employee.

¹⁹ Anonymous, "A Proposal to Take Effective Action on Unemployment," *Paranoia*, 1 (1983), 5, 5.

This proposal tried to respect the need for self-organization among the unemployed, while encouraging direct collective action, and exposing the membership to the dynamics of social power. The spirit behind it seems to have shaped CEIU's relationship with groups of unemployed workers after the recession of the early 1980s. In 1984, another article in *Paranoia* encouraged CEIU members to recognize their real allies in the struggle to defend the welfare state. According to *Paranoia*, these were neither managers nor politicians, but

the people staring at us from the opposite sides of our desks, ... the ones who will suffer along with us if services are slashed, ... the ones who can organize demonstrations, badger politicians and generally raise a stink when the time comes. Our natural allies then are the people we are paid to serve.²⁰

Yet it was clear that coalitions of this sort, which helped to organize the unemployed as well as assisting individuals, first had to transform the management-identified enforcement mentalities of some employees. This would require a "dramatic shift" for those members who saw EIC "as a sort of Fort Apache besieged by hostile hordes of the great unwashed," and themselves as "front line soldiers in the army of General Roberts." In the meantime, CEIU activists were urged to volunteer aid after hours "not just for reasons of economic self-interest but because it's the decent thing to do."²¹

By early 1984, informal contacts between CEIU and the Toronto Union of Unemployed Workers (TUUW) had solidified to the point that their coalition was able to block a threatened closure of 2 Toronto employment centres, and 450 potential layoffs. EIC was pursuing a classic strategy of "bureaucratic disentanglement," attempting to limit service costs by making access more awkward for those who needed it most. But CEIU and TUUW members hounded then-Minister John Roberts, and rallied the Metro community against the cuts. The breadth of local opposition — it included a unanimous resolution from Toronto City Council — soon forced the government to back down, canceling the closures and reducing the layoffs by more than half.²²

Paranoia editor John Andersen, while acknowledging that such victories were rare, and that this one had been facilitated by Roberts' leadership ambitions, nevertheless saw the CEIU-TUUW effort as a vindication of the coalition-building approach. To him it indicated as well that "at least some public sector workers are beginning to identify with the people they serve rather than with the government

²⁰ Anonymous, "Fort Apache and the CEIU," *Paranoia*, 2 (1984), 1, 16. The reference is to EIC Minister John Roberts.

²¹ Anonymous, "Fort Apache," *Paranoia*, 2 (1984), 16.

²² J. Andersen, "Victories out of Unity: Caseworkers and the Unemployed," *Our Times*, 3 (1984), 4, 24-5, 24.

employers."²³ Andersen attributed this shift in consciousness to the daily lessons given to employment counselors in the workplace:

CEIU members deal every day with large numbers of worried, unhappy people who have been caught in the gears of a malfunctioning system. An employment counsellor with a caseload of over 1,000 clients, which is the rule rather than the exception, knows something is wrong. So do UI workers facing enormous backlogs of UI claims. And so do the CEIU members being asked to work overtime in preparation for their own layoffs. There is no need to be told society has problems when the 'problems' are walking through the door at the rate of two or three per minute.²⁴

Yet social awareness was not always gained in ways very conducive to the building of coalitions. On the same page that *Paranoia* reported the CEIU-TUUV victory, another headline read: "CEIU member held captive by knife-wielding client."²⁵ Such incidents occur more frequently as the economy deteriorates, and potential physical danger from "irates" seems to pull CEIU members in more conservative directions.

Nevertheless, at least at the level of official policy, CEIU seems to have been moved toward client solidarity by its experience with the TUUV. When called upon to formulate a general critique of the UI program for an appearance before the Forget Commission, it relied heavily on contacts in the TUUV and local Unemployment Help Centres for specific recommendations.²⁶

The result was an explicitly client-centred brief that ran counter to the coercive line advocated by Forget and the government. Attacking the administration's hard-line approach, and "stereotyped" depictions of the unemployed as lazy and parasitic, the brief suggested that this image: "does not reflect reality. The truth is that the overwhelming majority are unemployed through no fault of their own There is a social responsibility involved here, not a political one. The unemployed require better service."²⁷

The brief covered a wide variety of contentious issues relating to UI, and in every case rejected further restrictions in favor of a more generous and compassionate approach to the unemployed. It also used the evocative question of UI abuse to criticize employers, noting that: "[t]oo much emphasis has been put upon client abuse of UI. Employer abuse seems to be generally disregarded The experience of our members has been that the rules [penalizing employer abuse] need to be more strictly enforced."²⁸

²³ Anderson, "Victories out of Unity," *Our Times*, 3 (1984), 25.

²⁴ Andersen, "Victories out of Unity," *Our Times*, 3 (1984), 24.

²⁵ See *Paranoia*, 2 (1984), 4, 3.

²⁶ Interview with Cres Pascucci, Ottawa, 1990.

²⁷ CEIU, "Brief for Commission of Inquiry on Unemployment Insurance," (January 1986), 2-3.

²⁸ CEIU, "Brief for Commission of Inquiry on Unemployment Insurance," 18.

EIC's "neutrality" was also jeopardized, said the brief, by its practice of allowing employment centres to refer scabs to strike-bound employers. *Paranoia* later published detailed advice on how to sabotage such job referrals using the discretionary power of frontline workers. Renaud Paquet, who was CEIU president from 1982-1989, says that this and similar union efforts succeeded in getting Toronto employment counselors to routinely ignore job orders involving scab labour.²⁹ Placement pressures notwithstanding, frontline workers had implemented their own policy of solidarity with striking workers.

But beyond the empathy for unemployed clients, and the antipathy to some employers, the dominant theme of the brief to the Forget Commission was that neo-conservative cutbacks hurt the unemployed as much as state workers, and reduced both service and efficiency. Constant UI rule changes, service centralization (to bypass frontline discretion), planned staff cuts, and heavy reliance on casual employees, all threatened both service quality and members' jobs, it said.³⁰

This line was vulnerable to charges that it merely appropriated clients' voices to save bureaucrats' jobs. The *Globe and Mail* said as much when CEIU protested the Charlottetown Accord's proposed devolution of Employment Services to the provinces.³¹ And Paquet admits that the focus on clients was partly tactical, aimed at opening minds among politicians and the public.³²

The degree of opportunism involved here can only be determined through a careful examination of the union's actions over a reasonable period of time. The *Globe* conducted no such evaluation. But the CEIU's references to client service in the Forget brief were neither gratuitous nor expedient. They focused entirely on service to the unemployed, and avoided misleading claims that this could involve better service for some vague, generic clientele that included the contradictory interests of employers. EIC, on the other hand, continued to mask business appeasement with precisely that sort of rhetoric.³³

Furthermore, in canvassing the jobless for advice, and in acting with them to advance full employment strategies, the union displayed a greater commitment to service than did EIC itself. The contrast was starkly exhibited in 1993, when the union responded to further UI restrictions by distributing a booklet telling claimants (and UI agents) how to avoid them, and reasserting its solidarity with the unemployed and the poor.³⁴

²⁹CEIU, "Brief for Commission of Inquiry on Unemployment Insurance," 18; Anonymous, "As you like it," *Paranoia* 4 (1986), 3, 6; interview with Renaud Paquet, Ottawa, 1990.

³⁰CEIU, "Brief for Commission of Inquiry on Unemployment Insurance," 12-3.

³¹See editorial, "Having an interest in UI hysteria," *The Globe and Mail*, 18 July 1992.

³²Interview with Renaud Paquet, Ottawa, 1990.

³³See McElligott, "Mundane Resistance," Ch. 4.

³⁴See "Booklet by union at UIC offices coaches jobless on new rules," *The Edmonton Journal*, 12 March 1993; R. Warskett, "Democratizing the State: Challenges from Public Sector Unions," *Studies in Political Economy*, 42 (1993), 129-40, 136-7.

The CEIU's concern for its members' job security was quite reasonable, considering the magnitude of the threat posed, and the widespread willingness to ignore this issue. Moreover, on a strategic level, if coalitions against neo-conservatism need state workers, then purely altruistic appeals that ignore their job security are unlikely to be the basis of long-term mobilization or stable coalitions. Particular care needs to be taken around invocations of "service to the public." These tend to echo discredited management strategies inside the state — one of which promised workers they would be "empowered to serve."³⁵

Yet the union's approach also reflects some of the daily contradictions faced by its frontline membership: personal service versus unreasonable caseloads, a formal commitment to service versus informal expectations of social control, etc. The cautious attitude toward rule changes reflects a similar kind of stress, but one which some theorists say actually increases workers' discretionary power. Jeffrey Prottas suggests that constant rule changes allow only a few *de facto* "core rules" to be enforced, allowing frontline workers to operate in "zones of relative indifference" to management.³⁶ In any case, pressure from state workers for a saner work pace are transparently more conducive to good service than efforts to crank up productivity and crack down on the "undeserving."

"Proper Channels": Legitimacy and Resistance

The CEIU had presented a similar message to the House Committee on Labour, Employment, and Immigration in 1985. This message found a receptive audience in the Committee, but Paquet's faith in the process was shattered when the Minister responsible ignored all its recommendations.³⁷ Future CEIU lobbies would seek to embarrass, rather than persuade, government officials.

Ultimately Paquet was drawn to the conclusion that lobbying was, by itself, an ineffective way to spend union resources. Seeking a strike mandate in a 1988 video, he said that without a mobilized membership, union negotiators had only "personal convincing power" to rely on: "[a]nd even if these people are all great, I'm telling you this doesn't work. That's not how you get Treasury Board to say yes to what you want."³⁸

CEIU leaders had reached similar conclusions about collective bargaining as early as 1986, when efforts to mobilize members against two PSAC-negotiated settlements had been overcome by support in other components. Acknowledging their minority status within PSAC and the imminent departure (to CUPW) of allies

³⁵On the use and abuse of altruism as a management tool in the public sector, see McElligott, "Mundane Resistance," 116-29.

³⁶See Prottas, *People-Processing*, 91-3.

³⁷Interview with Renaud Paquet, Ottawa, 1990.

³⁸CEIU, "November 1988 Strike Vote: Message from the CEIU National President," Video, November 1988.

in PSAC's postal component, the CEIU leadership resigned itself to remaining there and presenting its case in a "firm but no[t] confrontative" manner.³⁹

CEIU members had been active in the grassroots wildcats which sparked the 1980 PSAC clerks' strike, and they would contribute to that union's gradual radicalization, which culminated symbolically in PSAC's first "general" strike in 1991.⁴⁰ But the advent of "permanent exceptionalism" after 1975 was clearly limiting the gains which could be made through collective bargaining, as a restrictive industrial relations regime became even more confining.⁴¹ Ultimately the 1991 strike featured impressive feats of mobilization, adroit moves to deflect blame for service reduction, and unusually good public relations, but the key job security concession it won proved to be quite feeble when the time came to use it.⁴²

So in 1986, CEIU executive decided to de-emphasize bargaining-based strategies, and sponsor direct actions at selected locals, in support of locally generated demands, so long and so far as membership enthusiasm could be sustained. The target was to be EIC, or "a decision the [EIC] can make or influence." The intent was to exert such unremitting pressure on EIC that "it will be more trouble for them not to solve [employees'] problems than to resolve them."⁴³

This meant that cutbacks and layoffs would be tackled politically, in a way that engaged the membership, rather than through the more indirect, elite-driven mechanisms of collective bargaining. Paquet describes this approach as "getting people interested in what interests them," and he emphasizes that on a daily basis, most people are not concerned with collective bargaining issues. Instead, things related to everyday work problems — such as productivity standards, tools for work, changing regulations, and harassment — seem much more pressing. This is the same conclusion reached by EIC's own management studies. And both analyses recognize, in effect, that frontline workers tend to be most interested in things which affect their ability to exercise discretionary power over the pace and content of their jobs.⁴⁴

³⁹CEIU, "The Fight Continues," 11, 14; CEIU, "The Fight Continues, Our Direction," 20, 27.

⁴⁰See Bill Tieleman, "50,000 Strong: The federal clerks' strike of 1980," *Paranoia*, 3 (1985), 4 (special edition). About 50,000 clerks struck in 1980, whereas in 1991 about 110,000 "non-essential" workers went out, and 45,000 designated "essential" were forced to remain at work.

⁴¹See Leo Panitch and Donald Swartz, *The Assault on Trade Union Freedoms* (Toronto 1993), 94; Bill Fisher, "The right to strike: The labour movement's sacred cow?" *Paranoia*, 6 (1988), 3, 8-9, 9.

⁴²A. Pryde, "Tories Gambled and Lost in PSAC Strike," *Briarpatch*, 20 (1991-2), 10, 4-5. 4. The Liberals' 1995 budget unilaterally modified the Tories' 1991 job security agreement so that it applied only in departments not scheduled for major layoffs.

⁴³CEIU, "The Fight Continues," 18-20.

⁴⁴Interview with Renaud Paquet, 28 December 1990; L. Shelton, "How do we feel about quality of service?" *Panorama*, (May 1990), 6. *Panorama* was EIC's official staff newsletter, and one impetus for the creation and naming of the union alternative, *Paranoia*.

This shift was reinforced by Ottawa's ongoing promise to "let managers manage," which had produced at EIC a new management philosophy, various quality/service and participation initiatives, and the "revitalization" of Employment Services. Union strategists saw these as parts of "a concerted and systematic effort ... to counter our mobilization efforts ... [and] deal with [employees'] problems on an individual basis"⁴⁵ The turn to local action committed CEIU to greater decentralization, an EIC orientation, and more sensitivity to member's daily needs, but it retained the emphasis on mobilization over deal-making which had marked its earlier interventions in collective bargaining. It was, in effect, a strategy of "countermanagement," aimed at obstructing the neo-conservative transition set in motion at EIC.

Amendments to the union's constitution in 1984 had facilitated this transition. In that year a commitment to "foster good relations and mutual understanding" with management was replaced by one pledging to "unite all members by fostering an understanding of the fundamental differences between the interests of the members and those of the employer."⁴⁶

So the dominant tendency within the CEIU since at least 1984 encouraged a militant, action-oriented collective consciousness among the frontline workers who comprise the bulk of its membership. In many instances this has produced defensive local actions in response to threatened layoffs and EIC restructuring. And such actions have propelled the union with increasing regularity into the logic of community coalitions. This logic, according to Cres Pascucci, CEIU national president since 1989, is quite compelling: "[b]asically, the government is moving itself away from the social services field We can't fight that on our own. It's impossible."⁴⁷ Pascucci believes his union's widely dispersed membership can be used to increase contact with other PSAC components, and spread the CEIU's militant approach at a grassroots level.⁴⁸

The CEIU has used coalitions not only to gather community support for defensive struggles, but also to develop members' political knowledge and tactical skills. But arousing the will to defy management is a more complicated task. It requires, among other things, that the "proper channels" provided by management and the state be thoroughly discredited.

The CEIU's militant attitude to contract demands contributed to this end by revealing the limits of collective bargaining for minorities within PSAC. Repeated

⁴⁵ See McElligott, "Mundane Resistance," Chapters 3, 4; CEIU, "The Fight Continues," 13.

⁴⁶ CEIU, "By-Laws, Regulations, Policies," 1; Anonymous, "Delegates prepare for CEIU triennial convention," *Paranoia*, 2 (1984), 5, 10.

⁴⁷ Anonymous, "Election battle highlights CEIU convention," *Paranoia*, 8 (1990) 4, 3-12, 3.

⁴⁸ Anonymous, "CEIU locals can be the tie that binds," *Paranoia*, 6 (1988), 4, 3. As prospects for EIC devolution or privatization increase, there have also been more frequent attempts to merge with other components, but none of these has yet been consummated. See Anonymous, "CEIU shops around for a marriage partner," *Paranoia*, 10 (1992), 3, 1-12.

government attacks on the bargaining process have had comparable effects. Insofar as both strategies are products of the fiscal crisis, bargaining is unlikely to recover its legitimacy in the foreseeable future. Similarly, the union's flirtation with lobbying demonstrated fairly quickly the limited potential for gains through this channel. This lesson was probably reinforced by growing cynicism toward politicians and the old parties.⁴⁹ Yet while brief-writing and lobbying drain union resources, minimal efforts here seem useful in garnering local support for action against cuts.

Handling grievances through the individualized and legalistic means provided also stretches union resources. In the past the CEIU has tried unsuccessfully to delegate these onerous, and often divisive, duties to its locals. Grievances in general tend to atomize, legalize, and postpone eruptions of worker discontent, so CEIU has periodically tried to overwhelm management with mass grievances on similar issues. This tactic helps to collectivize and mobilize the grievance process, and in past it produced concrete results. But management adaptations have now led the union to mothball this tactic, and thousands of problems must again be formulated as individual grievances.⁵⁰

Aside from such obligations, the CEIU's leadership has tried wherever possible to disentangle itself from the maze of "proper channels." Worker and union rights have been asserted symbolically, as when Pascucci defied local managers to visit a Winnipeg employment centre. There he ignored "little memos" barring him, and showed that "despite barriers imposed by management, CEIU members can control their workplace"⁵¹

Challenging management rights, even on a largely symbolic level, is an essential task for a progressive union, not only because it helps to keep local managers in check, but also because it promotes the culture of opposition necessary for mobilization. Indeed, management's turn toward symbolic legitimization strategies (participation, empowerment, service/quality, etc.) has made symbolic opposition an important (and cheap!) weapon in the union arsenal. But a skirmish in Trail, BC, demonstrated the need to challenge basic management prerogatives in a more sustained fashion.

⁴⁹This cynicism is especially warranted in the case of federal public servants, who used their new political rights to help defeat the Tories in 1993, only to see the new Liberal government adopt and extend the Tories' bargaining stance.

⁵⁰Interview with Alan Lennon, Toronto, 19 October 1990; interview with Renaud Paquet, Ottawa, 1990. CEIU's exceptionally decentralized structure deals with appeals and grievances that other components leave to PSAC, and there are about 2000 of these a year in Toronto alone. See Anonymous, "Canada Employment and Immigration Union," 7; CEIU, "Canada Employment and Immigration Union," CEIU, "CEIU: A Short History," (no date).

⁵¹Anonymous, "Pascucci gets cold shoulder from management," *Paranoia*, 8 (1990), 2, 5.

Local Action and Local Control

As part of a continuing effort to "rationalize" service delivery, EIC announced in 1989 that most of Trail's UI services would be transferred to Nelson, BC, some 85 kilometers away. The move effectively shut down the UI office in Trail just as "rationalization" by the area's employers was boosting unemployment.⁵² The local union president, Joe Szajbely, speculates that the sixteen CEIU members affected were "collateral damage" in what was actually a purge of the local manager. But whatever its origin, the plan made a mockery of EIC's supposed commitment to consultation and community sensitivity. Local governments were not consulted before the move was announced, even though EIC later claimed they had agreed to it. They soon became part of a wide CEIU-led coalition against the cuts, which also included other unions, churches, and chambers of commerce.⁵³

In its coverage of these efforts *Paranoia* emphasized the profound disillusionment of those municipal leaders who had relied on "proper channels" to fight the cuts. It quoted one local mayor, in a letter written to EIC's minister:

Obviously, to deal with the problem in a discreet, rational and quiet manner is the wrong approach We [may] have to accept that the federal government's attitude toward rural Canada is indeed what many claim it to be. If that is indeed the reality of today, you might as well save the taxpayers the expense of going through empty and meaningless motions of consultation.⁵⁴

EIC had hoped to use consultation to legitimate neo-conservative restructuring. But the Trail incident discredited this project both outside and within the department. For Szajbely, consultation meant being informed by EIC managers of decisions that had already been made, or — if they were really important decisions — not being told at all. Consequently his local pressed for a boycott of all labour-management consultations, and this call was eventually heeded by most of the union.⁵⁵ An editorial in *Paranoia* explained this blatant disregard for proper channels:

management has the most to gain from formal talks After all, management needs formal talks to enable them to wave the minutes of some deadly meeting and claim they practice good industrial relations. In addition [consultations] serve a useful purpose in channeling

⁵²CEIU, "Trail Blazers," Video, 1990; CEIU, "Trail Sit-In," (Fact sheet distributed to 1990 Convention, Montréal); Anonymous, "CEIU Ontario joins LMCC boycott," *Paranoia*, 7 (1989), 4, 1. On the "service point rationalization" which was meant to follow the Campbell government's reorganization of federal departments, see Anonymous, "Federal ministers told to slash regional offices," *The Toronto Star*, 15 August 1993.

⁵³Interview with Joe Szajbely, Montréal, 1990; CEIU, "Trail Sit-In," 1; Anonymous, "Management wins friends and influences people," *Paranoia*, 8 (1990), 2, 11.

⁵⁴CEIU, "Trail Sit-In," 2; Anonymous, "Management wins friends," *Paranoia*, 8 (1990), 11.

⁵⁵Interview with Joe Szajbely, Montréal, 1990; CEIU, "Trail Sit-In," 1; Anonymous, "CEIU Ontario joins LMCC boycott," 1.

discontent to board rooms rather than having it spread around the work place and leading to assorted activities which management circles frown on [F]ormal talks ... are usually all form and no substance. The result is that we often find ourselves doing a minuet while management throws punches at us. And they have a mean right hook.⁵⁶

The national union also made much of the threat posed to other small communities by the Trail closing, since "about half the offices in the country" met the criteria used to shut down Trail.⁵⁷ This became the basis for the union's claim to victory when Trail did eventually close. Pascucci lauded the solidarity shown across the country for a small, isolated group of members. Trail, he said, "was and is the first example of how EIC intends to do more with less. Flin Flon, Manitoba and Orillia, Ontario have insurance units today because of Trail." This struggle also revolutionized the CEIU's BC section; Szajbely says it is now common to speak of the BC section "pre- and post-Trail."⁵⁸ So it is not surprising that the national CEIU has been careful to record and disseminate the tactical lessons learned at Trail. Among these the most crucial have to do with the relationship between local members and the union leadership.

The Trail members initially decided to fight the cuts through fairly traditional means. Petitions, lobbying, and grievances were pursued "to the point of exhaustion," and when it became clear that something more was required, the local called on the national office for suggestions. In response, the latter occupied an Ottawa employment centre for seven hours, to show Trail members "that their union was prepared to take a risk for a small, isolated membership." Then Pascucci and other national executives headed for Trail.⁵⁹

The national leadership joined a group of UI workers who were mostly political novices, although a few expressed regret at having missed out on the activism of the 1960s.⁶⁰ This is what happened next, according to a fact sheet distributed later:

- the leadership outlined a work stoppage strategy to the members, and thereafter did not participate in the debate other than to clarify matters of a procedural nature; *the members decided on a workstoppage and the form (sit-in) it would take*
- the leadership identified the logistical nature of a sit-in; *the group undertook the allotment of the various tasks to be performed*

⁵⁶ Anonymous, "Talks are cheap," *Paranoia*, 7 (1989), 4, 2.

⁵⁷ CEIU Ontario national Vice-President Erna Post, as quoted in Anonymous, "CEIU Ontario joins LMCC boycott," 1. Such claims were prescient — see Anonymous, "Employment centres being gutted, Bloc says," *The Globe and Mail*, 11 July 1995.

⁵⁸ CEIU, "Report of the National President to the Triennial Convention of the Canada Employment and Immigration Union, September, 1990," 6.; interview with Joe Szajbely, Montréal, 1990.

⁵⁹ CEIU, "Trail Sit-In," 1, 3; CEIU, "Trail Blazers."

⁶⁰ CEIU, "Trail Blazers."

— throughout the sit-in, the leadership attempted to anticipate events and proposed strategy options to the membership; *the group decided strategy and tactics without extensive leadership participation in the debates*⁶¹

The Trail sit-in lasted three and a half days (until police dispersed it) and sparked similar occupations in six other cities. Ultimately Trail did lose its UI office, and the workers who had occupied it were hit with fines and suspensions totaling over \$50,000. However, the union used these penalties to do further solidarity work, and CEIU members across the country contributed more than this amount to a Trail support fund.⁶²

The official union record portrays Trail as a victory, and not only because it invoked solidarity and perhaps slowed "rationalization" elsewhere. Trail is also seen as a prototype for future efforts to educate and empower members against neo-conservative restructuring. It seemed to show that union leaders could facilitate local militancy and defiance without compromising the principles of self-organization and democracy. They provided options and acted as a "buffer and conduit" between occupiers and managers. By day three, "the group had completely assumed responsibility for devising day-to-day tactics, sit-in administration, and began to fully participate in the anticipation of developments and devising counter-strategies."⁶³

Such statements, as well as those which seem to equate press releases by local elites with community support, should not be accepted uncritically. But CEIU leaders' concern with frontline empowerment seems to be quite real, even if it is accompanied by some pretty clear expectations regarding the path a properly-developing political consciousness should take. It is interesting to note that EIC management initiatives offering superficial empowerment, and the distorted altruism of "service," were followed in fairly short order by union attempts to deepen these thrusts, and invest them with more genuine meanings. Undertaken in the first instance as defensive responses to cutbacks, such efforts led quite naturally to new ways of dealing with state clients and their representatives, and at least a nominal advocacy of client interests. Faced with the evident bankruptcy of Keynesianism, and neo-conservatism's clear hostility, these state workers were moving toward new notions of "accountability" and "service" which transcended the options offered by either. Trail helped discredit EIC's new and improved set of "proper channels," so consultation helped to provoke, rather than neutralize, dissent. In its place, frontline coalitions were used to enforce accountability, maintain service, and establish the basis for more genuine participatory structures.

⁶¹CEIU, "Trail Sit-In," 3, emphasis in original.

⁶²CEIU, "Trail Sit-In," 2; CEIU, "Report of the National President to the Triennial Convention," 6; Anonymous, "CEIU Ontario nears \$15,000 goal for Trail fund," *Paranoia*, 8 (1990), 2, 1.

⁶³CEIU, "Trail Sit-In," 3.

EIC Workers and Refugees

Lobbying politicians and writing "constructive," well-documented briefs retain much legitimacy as political tactics. Some efforts of this kind seem to be essential, if only to crystallize union demands, and mollify the more conservative elements of the membership. In the CEIU's case, the contacts made through the initial UI-related brief soon led to more work in the field of immigration, when the refugee backlog became a hot political issue.⁶⁴ But here the union faced a dominant internal "enforcement culture," and found consciousness-raising to be a daunting task.

Immigration workers have a history of militant trade unionism, and a proven willingness to defy management, especially on workload issues. But the frustrations resulting from overwork have also been directed at their clientele. A brief CEIU presented on their behalf in 1987 said that: "most refugee claimants coming to Canada make manifestly unfounded claims," and described immigration work as "weed[ing] out the bogus claimants from the deserving ones." Another brief blamed "bogus" claimants for overwork and the refugee backlog, took a swipe at refugee advocates who "delay the process in clearly undeserving cases," and expressed alarm at the high number of refugee claims and appeals accepted.⁶⁵

While it may be true that even the most enlightened perspective would look askance at some refugee claims, the degree of hostility expressed here should make progressives uncomfortable. There are just too many echoes of neo-conservatism's punitive "law and order" stance, too much emphasis on claimants' moral failings, and too little consideration of the larger political and economic context. Furthermore it is hard to imagine how such attitudes could help build any kind of broader solidarity.

Ongoing attempts to streamline refugee processing have, in fact, divided CEIU members from one another, as well as from their clients. Immigration workers in EIC have taken a hard line on refugees at least partly to help secure their own jobs, and have criticized the Immigration and Refugee Board (where CEIU members also work) for ethnic favoritism. Other members have objected to the racist nature of these attacks.⁶⁶

Such fissures have caused public embarrassment to CEIU leaders. Cres Pascucci explained a 1992 incident to a *Globe and Mail* reporter by referring to the larger political context. National divisions over the refugee issue penetrate the union, he said, because "[o]ur membership is fairly reflective of society as a whole."⁶⁷ Pascucci had seen this dynamic at work during the union's 1990

⁶⁴CEIU, "Report of National President from April 1, 1987 to November 30, 1987," 79.

⁶⁵CEIU, "Brief on Bills C-55 and C-84, August 28, 1987," 4; CEIU, "Presentation to the House of Common's [sic] Committee, Labour, Employment and Immigration," (No date), 1, 2, 4.

⁶⁶E. Oziewicz, "Immigration workers split on changing refugee rules," *The Globe and Mail*, 22 April 1992.

⁶⁷Oziewicz, "Immigration workers split," A6.

convention in Montréal. Post-Meech Lake tensions emerged there when Québec delegates demanded a reiteration of their right to self-determination and more financial autonomy. The convention granted the first, but when negotiations failed to resolve the latter, Québec's new vice-presidents refused to take their oath of office.⁶⁸ This convention also witnessed a miniature Oka crisis when photos of soldiers surrounding Mohawk positions were ripped down. Tensions rose as friends of the photographer cried "vandalism," and a Native delegate defended the action. Eventually an uneasy peace was achieved with the creation of a "CEIU Native Humanity Fund."⁶⁹

Poulantzas spoke of a state increasingly rent and disabled by "the struggles of the popular masses."⁷⁰ But the above examples show how quickly such struggles — and others irreducible to class — can rip through state unions as well. For Poulantzas, divisions inside the state were (within limits) essential for class rule, since they reflected key social cleavages, and revealed the bases for hegemonic compromise. Similarly, divisions inside state unions may be essential to oppositional politics. But developments in this area affect coalition work, and are likely to be closely monitored by state officials.

The current union leadership seems to recognize the importance of its position. Pascucci argued in 1990 for political action on both sides of the state border, for "if we don't change society, we can't change our union." In part this has meant keeping members abreast of changes to the Immigration Act, and trying to increase sensitivity toward refugees' needs. Surprisingly, the 1987 brief's depiction of "most refugee claimants" as undeserving is considered a success in this regard. Pascucci says this wording represented a hard-won advance by union leaders, who convinced their Immigration members that an even harsher reference to "all refugee claimants" was inappropriate.⁷¹

CEIU leaders regard coalitions as extensions of these kind of developmental efforts, since they expose members to people normally encountered only as workplace adversaries. Many Toronto members reconsidered their "satanic" image of refugee advocate Mendel Green, for example, when he joined them on a coalition picket line. This act followed eight years of effort by the Toronto local to bring Immigration workers, lawyers, and management together. Charges of racism had originally been leveled by EIC's minister against his own staff, but management used delay and division to avoid the matter thereafter, so the union settled for a meeting between workers and some prominent lawyers in 1987.⁷²

⁶⁸CEIU, Fifth National Convention, Montréal, 19 September 1990 (author's notes). This in turn echoed similar events within PSAC prior to the 1980 Québec referendum.

⁶⁹CEIU, Fifth National Convention, Montréal, 19 September 1990.

⁷⁰Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism*, 155.

⁷¹C. Pascucci, election speech to the CEIU Fifth National Convention, Montréal, 20 September 1990; interview with Cres Pascucci, Ottawa, 1990.

⁷²Interview with Cres Pascucci, Ottawa, 1990; M. Prue, "Introduction" [to the first Immigration Training Weekend], (March, 1990), 1-2.

This conference led to the first major action undertaken by what had become an informal Immigration coalition. Union members, lawyers, church groups, and community activists sponsored demonstrations and lobbies to help end what they called "compulsory welfare" for refugee claimants. Prevented from earning their own living until granted refugee status, claimants were being forced onto welfare by backlog-related delays, and swelling local welfare budgets, particularly in Toronto.⁷³

The coalition's actions succeeded in forcing the government to change EIC policy at least temporarily, and grant work permits to refugee claimants — a result of undoubted benefit to these state clients.⁷⁴ But the coalition had also demanded that the money saved in this manner be used to eliminate the refugee backlog. The government made no moves in this direction.⁷⁵

By January 1989, Toronto Immigration officers were fed up. Members of "Local 613 ... weren't going to put up with the long line-ups every night anymore. They weren't going to put up with the lousy service they were giving or making people wait ... from midnight until eight in the morning on the coldest nights of the year standing outside."⁷⁶ The union decided to work to rule for more resources, and sought the support of the coalition for lunch-time demonstrations, and for a boycott of overtime and excessive caseloads. Union members would henceforth deal "only with those clients who can be reasonably seen during the working day."⁷⁷

In redefining a "fair day's work" to advance the interests of clients as well as workers, a traditional economic demand was given more potency and potential. Service was clearly reduced for some claimants, but the union had little trouble convincing the coalition that this short-term pain would be worth enduring; and when pickets went up the Canadian Bar Association, workers' groups, churches, and many others were there. National press coverage of this united front forced the government to respond, and Local 613 soon had 280 new members to deal with the backlog.⁷⁸

This tactic was so successful that the union tried it again in 1991 to support reclassification demands. Workers insisted on extra time to prepare their cases

⁷³Prue, "Introduction," 3; Anonymous, "Immigration workers join forces in coalition," *Paranoia*, 7 (1989), 1, 11.

⁷⁴This policy change was later codified and made explicit by the Chrétien government, but the coalition seems to have achieved it on an informal basis under the Tories.

⁷⁵Prue, "Introduction," 3; Anonymous, "Immigration workers join forces in coalition," *Paranoia*, 7 (1989), 11.

⁷⁶Prue, "Introduction," 3.

⁷⁷Michael Prue, cited in J. Lakey, "Immigration officers plan job slowdown over workload," *The Toronto Star*, 28 January 1989; "Immigration officers protest 'burn-out,'" *The Toronto Star*, 31 January 1989. Toronto workers often saw 25 clients a day — about three times the national rate.

⁷⁸Prue, "Introduction," 4.

"meticulously," adjourned hearings whenever possible, and argued against every single refugee claim.⁷⁹ There was little community support for this effort, perhaps because it distributed short-term pain quite generously while bestowing potential long-term gains only on those who were actually reclassified. It also ran headlong into the hard-line Tory bargaining stance which produced the 1991 PSAC strike.

The coalition was active in 1990, however, holding an "Immigration Training Weekend" in response to members' frequent complaints of insufficient training amid rapidly changing rules. Participants heard presentations on a variety of topics related to discretionary decisions in Immigration: administrative law, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, statutory interpretation, and the international context. They also received a training manual prepared by the coalition.⁸⁰

But while the union has encouraged these officers to use their discretionary power in an informed way, governments have tried to curtail it entirely, especially where clients are present. Claims processing is now done by mail from Vegreville, Alberta — a former Tory riding far removed from the sullying influence of the front line. The CEIU, with some support from the coalition, has fought such moves, not least because of their unsavory association with patronage. It celebrated a victory in 1993, when the incoming Liberals set up a second centre in Mississauga. This, according to Pascucci, was "a vindication" of union claims that one centre could not handle the national workload. The union received more vindication when the Liberals admitted that two-thirds of Vegreville's intended work had been diverted elsewhere. Immigration lawyers were soon directing clients to visa offices in the US for quicker service.⁸¹

Meanwhile the coalition continued to be active sporadically. In 1992 it denounced the Tories' conversion to Reform Party Immigration policies, some of which would actually increase the (punitive) discretionary power of Immigration

⁷⁹I. Hunter, "Immigration officers begin work slowdown," *The Ottawa Citizen*, 27 January 1991; Anonymous, "Immigration workers go for it," *Paranoia*, 9 (1991), 1, 1-10.

⁸⁰Interview with Alan Lennon, Toronto, 13 September 1990; background documents for Immigration Training Weekend, March, 1990. One attempt to deal with the refugee backlog was struck down by the courts largely because its guidelines "unduly fettered" the discretion of Immigration officers. See K. Makin, "Ruling kills refugee system, lawyers say," *The Globe and Mail*, 7 March 1990.

⁸¹See T. Appleby, "Immigration by mail started in Ontario," *The Globe and Mail*, 28 March 1991; Anonymous, "Immigration workers fighting move to Vegreville," *The Edmonton Journal*, 18 January 1993; CEIU, "Open Letter to Hon. Bernard Valcourt, Minister of Employment and Immigration," (advertisement) *The Globe and Mail*, 26 January 1993; Anonymous, "Immigration workers halt mail in protest," *The Edmonton Journal*, 26 February 1993; Anonymous, "Feds make big change to Vegreville decision," *Paranoia*, 11 (1993), 6, 1; A. Thompson, "Immigration paperwork overwhelms new centre," *The Toronto Star*, 15 September 1994; L. Sarick, "Delays plague immigration centre," *The Globe and Mail*, 13 January 1995.

officers.⁸² And while the coalition remains informal, there have been attempts to forge a community of interests among its participants. One draft pamphlet suggested that:

- CEIU members stand to gain a greater understanding of the system in which we are placed, and win allies in our fight for tolerable working conditions, a decent contract and social change
- Advocacy groups can achieve support for a faster, juster system both overseas and inland
- Immigrants and refugee claimants can look forward to a fairer, more efficient processing of their claims.⁸³

It is remarkable that even this consensus could be achieved so soon after Immigration workers had issued blanket denunciations of refugee claimants from a management-identified enforcement posture. By countering EIC efforts to separate frontline workers from their clients, the union was also able to decouple their interests from those of management. This strategy played on the contradiction between these workers' real and nominal functions, and provided them with a reasonable ideological context for discretionary decision making (which management could not provide).

Unfortunately, the solidarity forged by the coalition was severely tested in 1994, when Immigration investigators (who are CEIU members) were blamed for failing to deport the main suspect in a Toronto police killing. Media reaction to such crimes normally focuses on cries for harsher penalties, and in Toronto underlying racial tensions usually emerge in some form. But in this case the murder's "cause" was quickly traced to specific instances of bureaucratic bungling inside the EIC, and a flurry of divisive buck-passing and finger-pointing soon followed.

The CEIU, on behalf of 36 Toronto investigators, used the occasion to press their demands for more personnel, weapons, and police support. Until these "safety measures" were in place, the investigators refused to enforce deportation orders. These tactics bore fruit in the heat of a media-enhanced moral panic. The Liberal minister (Sergio Marchi) shifted right, talked about "snitch lines" and public deportee lists, and sent the RCMP after the undeported.⁸⁴

Despite a dramatic *mea culpa* from one official, the departmental investigation absolved everyone, including its author, who had been the assistant deputy minister responsible when the lapse occurred. However, it admitted that "the system failed,"

⁸²E. Oziewicz, "Coalition attacks proposed immigration policy," *The Globe and Mail*, 23 June 1993.

⁸³Background documents for Immigration Training Weekend, March, 1990.

⁸⁴See editorial, "A federal ministry out of control," *The Toronto Star*, 5 July 1994; Anonymous, "Task force pleases immigration officers," *The Globe and Mail*, 12 July 1994; A. Noorani and C. Wright, "They believed the hype," *This Magazine*, 28 (1994), 5, 29-32, 32.

and confirmed many traditional CEIU complaints about staffing and workload, as did some internal audits unearthed by the *Toronto Star*. During the period in question (1992-93), investigators were overworked, undertrained, and under pressure from their Tory minister (Bernard Valcourt) to boost deportations. Some regional managers had responded by directing enforcement towards "easy" cases (rejected refugee applicants) and away from more difficult and time-consuming ones ("foreigners" with criminal records). The department's service/quality goals could be met most "efficiently," it seems, by targeting the weakest segment of its clientele for better "service." Valcourt later denied this had been his intention.⁸⁵

Not surprisingly, refugee advocates reacted with alarm to the news that some of their clients had been placed ahead of criminals in the deportation queue. David Matas, president of the Canadian Council on Refugees, was appalled that this *de facto* policy "viewed refused refugee claimants as worse than the worst criminals."⁸⁶ Such revelations could hardly have enhanced relations between CEIU members and his constituency.

In cases such as these, the political significance of frontline work and service/quality campaigns become extraordinarily clear. But what also becomes clear is the degree to which union interventions in public policy debates are constrained by the interests and consciousness of those parts of their membership most directly involved.

Tactically, it might be argued that the CEIU performed admirably in the summer of 1994. By raising staffing and "safety" issues early on, blame was deflected to EIC management, and CEIU members' reputations were protected. Subsequent investigations of the department confirmed CEIU grievances and exposed further management failures. These issues, coupled with (orchestrated) public anger, gave the government and senior bureaucrats the motivation to "do something," and the availability of CEIU's concrete alternative allowed them to save some face by acceding to the union's demand.

But this tactical victory can hardly be termed progressive, in light of its strategic consequences. The coalition with advocacy groups was shaken by CEIU members' participation in the pursuit of "easy" deportation statistics, and by the strengthened enforcement culture that was the result of this affair. Moreover, it could be reasonably inferred from this case that an influential (if small) section of CEIU's membership preferred a coalition with the RCMP and the *Toronto Sun* to any sustained cooperation with client groups.

The union leadership is obliged to forcefully advance the interests of its members, but the nature of its membership is determined at least initially by

⁸⁵M. Welsh, "I released Gayle official admits," *The Toronto Star*, 30 June 1994; R. Howard and L. Sarick, "Numbers game led to deportation lapse," *The Globe and Mail*, 29 June 1994; Anonymous, "Immigration department a mess, reviews reveal," *The Toronto Star*, 4 July 1994; Anonymous, "A federal ministry out of control," *The Toronto Star*, 5 July 1994.

⁸⁶As cited in Howard and Sarick, "Numbers game."

departmental boundaries, and the ideological influence of the media, professional groups, etc. These limitations suggest that there will continue to be tensions between client advocacy and "normal" union business, whatever the intentions of CEIU leaders.

Conclusion: Militancy and the Front Line

In 1978, the CEIU's founding convention welcomed EIC's deputy minister as a featured speaker, and cooperation with management was a fundamental union goal. Only four conventions later, in 1990, delegates were applauding calls to "sabotage" EIC's flagship policy, the Labour Force Development Strategy.⁸⁷

CEIU members went through this transformation even as they faced a combination of unprecedented attacks and sophisticated new appeals from the management side. The fact that they are still willing, and demonstrably able, to defy management under these circumstances must be taken as a victory of sorts. But, as might be expected given the stakes involved, this defiance has had uneven effects, which have not always been "progressive."

Every policy decision made by EIC in the 1980s was made against the backdrop of its own steadily radicalizing workforce. From this reservoir the CEIU drew strength for many local triumphs and some clear victories. It averted UI closures in Toronto and perhaps elsewhere (after Trail); ended scab referrals by employment centres; alleviated "compulsory welfare" for refugee claimants; and gained new staff to process refugee claims. But, following the developmental dynamic that such struggles tend to have, it also prompted regressive responses from EIC. The clearest example here is the long-term thrust to automate, centralize, and privatize service delivery, which has been implemented strategically against internal "centres of opposition" at the expense of service quality.⁸⁸ More awkwardly, workers' increasing militancy has sometimes allowed their frustrations to erupt in indiscriminate or regressive ways. Union officials have their own explanations for such dilemmas.

According to CEIU Ontario staff member Allan Lennon, dealing with the public on a daily basis can make frontline EIC employees more sympathetic to client needs than their colleagues at headquarters. The problem in sections like Immigration, however, is that a strong organizational "enforcement culture" normally acts to suppress this potential.⁸⁹ Similarly, CEIU President Cres Pascucci explains careerism, deference, and weak strike support among Ottawa-Hull members by referring to their lack of contact with frontline work. But he also notes the importance of union leadership in drawing out the front line's potential.⁹⁰ Pascucci's predecessor,

⁸⁷ See McElligott, "Mundane Resistance," 428-38, 583-99.

⁸⁸ See McElligott, "Mundane Resistance," Ch. 6.

⁸⁹ Interview with Alan Lennon, Toronto, 25 July 1990. A former employee in EIC's old job creation section (the Employment Development Branch), Lennon's firing in 1986 prompted a union sit-in that saved his job. Lennon also has a PhD in philosophy.

⁹⁰ Interview with Cres Pascucci, Ottawa, 1990. Pascucci is a former UI agent.

Renaud Paquet, suggests that headquarters personnel tend to be overclassified and overpaid, and work at a slower pace, far from the general public. This leaves them "disconnected from their final work product" (and their union), and insecure about their own qualifications and capabilities. Alienation is compounded by the sheer size of EIC workplaces in the capital.⁹¹

These explanations all stress the liberating potential of frontline workers' proximity to service recipients, but make this potential conditional on political education. This is what union activists have attempted to provide through relatively direct means like *Paranoia*, through coalitions which expose members to definitions of client interests untainted by EIC mediation, and through lessons in the "school of struggle." This is an ambitious but quite sensible strategy. It recognizes the political content of daily workplace issues in EIC, and tries to provide alternative perspectives which challenge administrative neo-conservatism. And in many respects it has been quite successful: workers in the process of reconsidering their own roles are now more likely to appreciate the larger context, and often side openly with clients.

While exploring the possibilities of existing structures, this strategy has also run up against their limits. Obviously members' attitudes cannot simply be read off organization charts, but the CEIU's experience seems to suggest that jobs which are overwhelmingly coercive are likely to be least conducive to a solidaristic, client-oriented stance, even if they are on the front line. It is probably not coincidental that the latest incidents in Immigration involved members from the investigative branch, for example. These people are selected and trained for a specialized, pseudo-police role in enforcing deportation orders. A comparable section in UI tracks down "abuse" through increasingly sophisticated methods of data base analysis. Both are supported by entrenched enforcement cultures which are probably not typical of either Immigration or UI as a whole, although they nurture attitudes which neo-conservatives are trying to spread among all frontline workers.

One might raise all sorts of questions here about the composition of the union's membership, and about the tradeoff between strength in numbers and clearly shared interests. Ideally the CEIU might contain a more ideologically-compatible group of people — and similar questions might be raised about the presence in the union of some supervisory personnel. But for the foreseeable future the CEIU has little choice in this respect and it has chosen to try to transform, rather than purge, regressive attitudes.⁹² The priority should be stopping the spread of the enforcement culture, and neutralizing neo-conservative job restructuring, rather than putting out fires in local coercive branches. The union recognizes this, but, as we have seen, does not always control the political agenda.

⁹¹ Interview with Renaud Paquet, Ottawa, 1990. Paquet worked in Employment Services in Québec.

⁹² The union's role in PSAC, cross-cutting bargaining units, government cutbacks, and departmental reorganizations, all create obstacles here.

One area neglected in the discussion so far is the role of women and the women's movement in the politics of frontline work. CEIU actually has a higher proportion of women in its membership than is normal for PSAC (50 per cent versus an average of 45 per cent), and they achieved gains like guaranteed executive posts earlier than women elsewhere.⁹³ Coverage of the clerks' strike of 1980 suggested it had put to rest notions that women were passive, deferential, and conservative union members.⁹⁴ That strike seems to have ushered in a new generation of leaders, and the onset of a period of gradual radicalization throughout PSAC. But much work remains to be done on the role of women in events after 1980, in responding to what seem to be gender-based government appeals for service and self-sacrifice, and in initiating CEIU's whole strategy of coalition-building with clients. The latter strategy is certainly identified more closely with the women's than the union movement, and it raises larger questions related to democratic political praxis.

The CEIU's coalition work has been aimed at sensitizing members to client needs, and to the threat posed by neo-conservatism. Tactically the union favored forms of direct action which encouraged militancy while discouraging vanguardism and top-down control. This, plus the emphasis on coalitions, began to replace discredited "proper channels" with new mechanisms of public accountability. Neo-conservative politicians facilitated this approach by closing the safety valve of collective bargaining and forcing common sacrifices on state workers and clients. Senior bureaucrats found their faddish management theories were unable to rebuild employee loyalty and morale.

Management's service/quality pitch to clients, and the prospect of more frequent strikes, have prompted many public sector unions to reconsider traditional strike tactics.⁹⁵ But instead of merely refining these, such unions might embrace power more confidently through a strategy of "countermanagement." This would allow groups of state workers and relevant clients to develop and implement policies based on their mutual interests, where necessary (perhaps by definition) in defiance of senior bureaucrats. The message has to be that "good service" is a matter of content, not just speed, and it cannot be delivered through state structures built on hierarchy and subordination. Coalitions would define good service and use workers' discretionary powers to operationalize their definition, while opening up policy-making to both workers and clients.

⁹³ Anonymous, "Canada Employment and Immigration Union," *Argus-Journal*, 18 (1983), 1, 7; CEIU, "Canada Employment and Immigration Union," (February 1985); CEIU, "CEIU: A Short History," (no date).

⁹⁴ See Tieleman, "50,000 Strong: The federal clerks' strike of 1980."

⁹⁵ For alternatives in this regard, see "Strike at rich, unions told," *Toronto Star*, 14 May 1975 (interview with PSAC activist Bill Fisher); London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, *In and Against the State* (London 1980); C. Lipsig-Mummé, "The 'Positive Strike': Union Strategy and State Control," *Studies in Political Economy*, 31 (1990), 181-4.

The consequences of such resistance for state restructuring are potentially quite serious, and they have generally not been recognized by the left. Pessimism regarding unions in general and/or PSAC in particular has overlooked the successes of some unions and some parts of PSAC. Pessimism regarding frontline state workers themselves — expressed invariably in anecdotes about grumpy bureaucrats — overlooks existing centres of resistance, and the possibilities of change elsewhere. The CEIU, in contrast, has demonstrated that unions can mobilize frontline workers toward progressive ends, with substantial effect, using prototype "countermanagement" strategies.

Of course, union leaders cannot always choose their battlegrounds, and must in any case respond to their members' priorities if internal democracy is to be preserved. Nevertheless, union leaders can clearly help reshape those priorities over the medium to long term. Moreover, their prompt and astute interventions can transform the nature of battlegrounds chosen by others. Such opportunism is the essence of politics.

The CEIU's experience of activism seems to suggest that gains are most likely to be made when:

1. union demands are formulated in cooperation with organizations representing state clients, other community groups, and other unions;
2. such demands promise real material gains for all participants, preferably quickly;
3. the issues at stake relate directly to discretionary decisions that frontline workers make on the job, or to their scope for making those decisions.

These conditions are most likely to obtain where there has been regular interaction between state unions and organizations representing state clients, extending well beyond their respective leadership levels. The frequent absence, or limited nature, of client organizations pose obvious problems in this regard. It may be time to contemplate new organizational forms which institutionalize and deepen client-worker interaction, connect more unorganized clients to collective struggles, and share the "resources for resistance" on a wider basis.

For instance, it might not be outlandish to suggest that CEIU/PSAC create a new membership category open to unorganized state clients in the communities they serve. Bringing clients right in to union gatherings at various levels would certainly facilitate interaction, and it might help to counterbalance the influence of the enforcement mentality among current members.

However, union choices in this regard will always be made in the context of ongoing, highly-structured "service transactions" on the state's front line. Here the attitudes of both workers and clients are shaped by the dynamics of service delivery, rather than by the dynamics of cooperation and collective action. This is why it is essential that coalition work permeate daily experience on the front line.

Union efforts must ultimately be limited by the need to respect the autonomy and moral authority of individual frontline workers. If this respect is not granted,

frontline workers will find themselves subordinated to new, but equally undemocratic, hierarchies of power and privilege. Self-management, and its implications in a public sector context, need to be explored once again.

CEIU leaders now face (as they always do) a series of more pressing concerns that seem to make suggestions like these seem secondary, if not superfluous. On the other hand, CEIU's response to current organizational turmoil has been potentially conducive to the approaches outlined above. It has pushed for a more stable, region-based PSAC structure, and has arranged an informal common front of Ontario PSAC components.⁹⁶

The climate seems ripe for a more basic reconsideration of union structures, which might help to secure them against the reverberations of neo-conservative restructuring, and lay the foundations for a truly democratic state.

Research for this article was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, and by the openness and candor of CEIU members, staff, and officials. Its current form owes much to the valuable comments of four anonymous reviewers.

⁹⁶Anonymous, "Components get it together in Ontario," *Paranoia*, 12 (1994), 1, 9; Anonymous, "PSAC convention to test evolutionary theory," *Paranoia*, 12 (1994), 1, 9.