

The Historical and Contemporary Life-Value of the Canadian Labour Movement

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Article abstract

Neo-liberal ideology has attempted to set different groups of workers—employed and unemployed, public and private sector, unionized and non-unionized—in opposition to each other. A successful response will require more than clear philosophical principles. It will require detailed, difficult, and long-term political efforts to construct solidarity. At the same time, that practical political work requires principles. The most effective principles on the basis of which solidarity can be built are those that disclose shared interests. The life-value principles underlying the most significant achievements of the union movement are the best means by which the shared interests of all workers can be disclosed.

ARTICLE

The Historical and Contemporary Life-Value of the Canadian Labour Movement

Jeff Noonan

THE CANADIAN LABOUR MOVEMENT faces a three-dimensional crisis. Falling rates of union density, combined with intensifying legal impediments to strike action in the context of growing competition between workers as a result of weak labour markets, threaten the social and political power of organized labour. The percentage of unionized workers has fallen from 33.7 per cent in 1999 to 29.7 per cent in 2011, with only 16 per cent of workers in the private sector now members of unions.¹ Those that remain are facing more legal impediments to effective job action, as employers and governments conspire to strip away the right to strike and to facilitate the use of replacement workers where striking is not short-circuited by legislation. Where militant job action is successfully initiated, many private sector employers have the option of closing shop and reopening it in a non-union jurisdiction, as Electro-Motive workers in London discovered in the winter of 2012.² Unions are also facing new hurdles in organizing historically unorganized workers. Witness the Supreme Court of Canada's April 2011 decision against the United Food and Commercial Workers' attempt to unionize farm workers.³

1. Sharanjit Uppal, "Unionization, 2011," *Statistics Canada*, 26 October 2011, 1, 8 <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/75-001-x/2011004/article/11579-eng.htm> (18 December 2012).

2. Greg Keenan, "Caterpillar Pulls Plug on London Plant," *The Globe and Mail on the Web*, 3 February 2012 <http://www.globeandmail.com/globe-investor/caterpillar-pulls-plug-on-london-plant/article2325356> (19 May 2012).

3. United Food and Commercial Workers, "The Struggle Continues," *United Food and Commercial Workers' Website*, 2011 http://ufcw.ca/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2340&Itemid=316&lang=en (14 May 2011).

These crises should be understood in the context of a set of more pervasive life-crises caused by the neo-liberal assault on wage and job security, tax reductions for corporations and the wealthy, defunding of public institutions, and relaxation of regulations on capital, commodity, financial, and labour markets.⁴ The union movement has not always mounted a coherent response to these challenges. As Greg Albo argues, “the period of neo-liberalism has depended upon – and meant – the organizational, economic, and political impasse of the union movement. It exposed the limits of the union movement in the core capitalist countries: the ideological failure to grasp the nature of neo-liberal globalization, and union strategic and organizational capacities in regard to it.”⁵ One might go further and worry whether this “impasse” has not exposed the limits of the broader labour movement and progressive forces generally. The broader labour movement includes groups such as unemployed workers’ groups, workers’ centres, and workers’ assemblies, elements of social democratic parties which remain committed to workers’ struggles, community groups active in immigrant workers’ communities, unorganized workers who are nevertheless politically active around workplace and social issues, feminist and environmental groups concerned with the condition of women in the workplace and the potential for workers to become leaders for sustainable development, and small left groups struggling to build a basis of support amongst workers. This crisis of organized labour, of the broader labour movement, and of progressive forces generally has meant a steady erosion in the commitment of contemporary Canadian society to recognize and provide the fundamental natural and social goods that its citizens as human beings require.

Neo-liberalism has systematically targeted the gains made by working people and oppressed and excluded minorities in the struggle for social justice. From the life-value perspective in which this argument is grounded, “social justice” means that major social institutions, including especially the institutions of economic life are freed as far as possible from the capitalist money-value system, in which ability to pay market price is all that counts. In contrast, social justice is served by principles that “guarantee access to those goods ... needed by human beings to survive, develop, and live good lives,” either through unpriced public provision or through ensuring that everyone can afford core natural and social necessities.⁶ Hence, social justice from a life-value perspective means that everyone in society gets what they deserve as

4. For an excellent overview of the social implications of neo-liberal policy, see David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York 2005), 64–119.

5. Greg Albo, “The Crisis of Neo-liberalism and the Impasse of the Union Movement,” *Relay*, 26 (April–June 2009), 4.

6. Giorgio Baruchello and Rachel Lorna Johnstone, “Construing the International Covenant on Social, Economic, and Cultural Rights as Civil Commons,” *Studies in Social Justice*, 5 (Summer 2011), 66.

human beings, and what they deserve is the satisfaction of their life-requirements so that they can lead good lives, both as individuals and as interacting members of communities.

The idea that underlies this concept of social justice, “life-value” derives from the work of John McMurtry.⁷ It has two internally related meanings. Resources, relationships, practices, and institutions, which are universally necessary as means for the survival of human life and the development of its capacities for experience, thought, mutualistic interaction, and practical creativity, have instrumental life-value. The free development, expression, and enjoyment of these life-capacities is the end or goal which gives purpose to the satisfaction of their correlative life-requirements. Thus, the free development, expression, and enjoyment of life-capacities have intrinsic life-value. This paper will argue that a necessary (but not sufficient) condition of the union movement overcoming its historic “impasse” is for it to consciously articulate its contemporary goals as universal life-values.

Neo-liberal ideology has attempted to set different groups of workers – employed and unemployed, public and private sector, unionized and non-unionized – in opposition to each other. A successful response will require more than clear philosophical principles. It will require detailed, difficult, and long-term political efforts to construct solidarity. At the same time, that practical political work requires principles. The most effective principles on the basis of which solidarity can be built are those which disclose shared interests. The life-value principles underlying the most significant achievements of the union movement are the best means by which the shared interests of all workers can be disclosed. Higher wages, secure pensions, health and safety regulations, and workers having a democratic voice rest on principles which – when institutionalized in law and policy – have made social life under capitalism more just, more democratic, more meaningful, and more enjoyable for all, and not for a supposed elite of organized workers.

The argument will be developed in three steps. The first will examine the crisis of the Canadian union movement and the response different groups of organized workers have mounted. The aim of the first section is to uncover the hidden role life-value has played in the key achievements of the labour movement and in plans for union renewal. The second section will elaborate at greater philosophical depth on the meaning of life-value, its structural conflict with the capitalist money-value system, and the difficulties the union movement faces in finding effective solutions to this structural conflict of values. The concluding section sketches the life-valuable political principles that can aid the union movement in its struggle to restore its leadership position in the broader movement for social justice.

7. John McMurtry, *Value Wars* (London 2002), 155–6.

Crisis and Renewal in the Canadian Labour Movement

IN THE WEAK LABOUR MARKETS generated by the 2008 economic crisis, employers, and allied political groups have successfully compromised the ability of workers to engage in successful strike action. The years 2008–2012 saw significant defeats for autoworkers and locomotive builders in Windsor, Oshawa, Oakville, and London, for public employees in Toronto and Windsor, mine, mill, and smelter, workers in Sudbury, airline workers at Air Canada, and postal workers across the country.⁸

The labour movement has responded in three distinct ways. The first strategy has been to mobilize solidarity in the face of immediate threats. In response to the draconian demands and bad-faith bargaining strategies of Caterpillar, the CAW was able to organize an impressive solidarity rally in London and build support amongst local politicians to generate political pressure against Caterpillar. Faced with open collusion between management and the federal government, Air Canada ground workers (also organized by CAW) staged an angry and militant, if short-lived, wildcat strike in the spring of 2012. While these examples reveal that a fighting spirit can still move labour, these actions have been forced upon unions. They are as much signs of employers' strength as they are signs of militancy.

The second response has also been determined by the employers' agenda. It takes the form of accommodating employer pressure to increase productivity by agreeing to intensified work regimes in the hope of ensuring existing employment levels and attracting new investment. While it is true that increasing labour productivity can be life-valuable insofar as it makes more efficient use of resources, creating more wealth with which to satisfy shared life-interests, in the context of capitalist society this potential is never fully realized. Instead, fewer workers are forced to work harder while the productivity gains tend to be captured by the owners in the form of higher profits. Having achieved higher profits, they do not guarantee job security beyond the existing contract, for to issue iron-clad, long-term guarantees would be to give up the ability to keep workers in different countries and in different locals in competition with each other. Giving up this power to keep workers in competition would alleviate the market pressure that drives the productivity gains from which higher profits are derived. A recent example of this tactic occurred in January 2011, when Sergio Marchionne, CEO of FIAT and Chrysler, threatened militant Italian auto workers with the loss of their jobs if they did not agree to concessions. In making this threat he pointed to the example of Canadian auto workers in Brampton, whose CAW local had – entirely understandably – tried to bargain new investment at the Chrysler plant. “Last Friday

8. An overview of these various defeats as well as the legislative attacks on unions orchestrated by the Harper government can be found in, “Towards a New Union: CAW-CEP Proposal Committee Final Report,” *New Union Project*, 2012, 8 <http://www.newunionproject.ca> (23 December 2012).

I was in Brampton, Canada,” Marchionne said, and they [the CAW] wanted us to make investments. They appreciated our investments and now await the third shift.”⁹

While it is entirely legitimate for Canadian locals to work to serve their members’ interests in maintaining employment levels, intra-industry competition between workers serves to weaken, not strengthen, job security, because work will flow only to the most productive plant, and only so long as it remains most productive. While all unions must to some extent work within the immediate structures of capitalist competition, and thus, to some extent, operate as business unions “work[ing] to improve the material lot of a particular sector of the working class ... by engaging in workplace level bargaining and legalistic industrial relations,” all must also understand that the competitive dynamics of capitalism make all employment potentially precarious.¹⁰ Lasting job security ultimately requires new forms of national and international solidarity between workers and a new set of values governing economic life in general. As will become apparent, this insight is not foreign to the union movement itself in its most far-sighted moments of self-reflection and strategizing.

At the same time, there are more troubling, short-sighted tendencies within the second response. Labour lawyer Glenn Wheeler, for example, loses sight of the larger political, economic, and moral problems when he argues that “unions have an interest in helping their employers do well, so being a union worker is not about slacking off. If the boss is bringing in lots of work, we can get a better deal at the bargaining table. We should tell our employers and our members that the union label indicates dependable, hard-working employees committed to the success of the enterprise.”¹¹ While it would obviously be self-undermining (not to mention ecologically wasteful) for employees to do a deliberately bad job, there is no indication whatsoever in Wheeler’s argument that there can be a fundamental difference of interest between employees and employers, or that the union movement first arose to at least attenuate, if not fully overcome, that opposition of interest. If unions try to rebuild their political, economic, and moral power solely on the basis of the contribution they make to ensuring employees work hard and well, they will exacerbate rather than alleviate the degree to which capitalist market forces dominate the lives of workers.

Unions thus seem caught in a double bind. If they compete for scarce work on the employer’s terms, they serve the interests of the employer. If they refuse the most outrageous concessions, they win a moral victory, but lose work. The solution requires breaking out of the defensive posture of the first two responses and defining a new, progressive agenda that takes the fight

9. Angelo Persichilli, “CAW’s Lewenza Leads Auto Turnaround,” *Toronto Star*, 16 January 2011.

10. Stephanie Ross, “Varieties of Social Unionism: Towards a Framework of Comparison,” *Just Labour: A Canadian Journal of Work and Society*, 11 (Autumn 2007), 16–17.

11. *Toronto Star*, 10 April, 2011; Glenn Wheeler, “Labour Needs a New Image.”

to employers and governments. This third response goes under the general heading of “union renewal.”

“Union renewal” is a term with multiple and contested meanings.¹² The aim of this discussion is not to work through every nuance, but to argue that the process of union renewal can benefit from explicit grounding in life-value principles. For present purposes “union renewal” will be understood generally as “a process of change to rebuild the organizational and institutional strength of the labour movement” whose goal is not simply to increase union power at the bargaining table but to “defend and advance the interests and rights of workers,” in society as a whole.¹³ Kumar here links, as does this argument, the possibility of successful *union* renewal with successful rebuilding of the strength of the broader labour movement.

Union renewal depends upon the degree to which members can be democratically engaged in the internal life of the union, in formulating bargaining goals and participating in collective bargaining, and in thinking about wider social, political, and economic issues and how the union movement can contribute to their solution. Camfield argues that union renewal through internal democratization and external alliance-building is the best articulation of “social movement unionism.” Camfield argues that “social movement unionism ... is distinguished by its placement of democratic membership control at the centre of efforts to build union power.”¹⁴ But the rebuilding of union power cannot succeed in a political vacuum. As the name indicates, social movement unionism is an attempt to renew union power by drawing unions out of their defensive shells. Like mobilization unionism, social movement unionism aims to rebuild union power by unorganized workers and engaging the already organized in active, workplace-centred struggle. It goes beyond mobilization unionism insofar as it links the success of local struggles to participation in movements that address more general social problems. “Social movement unionism,” he continues, “shares the solidaristic orientation, concern with workers’ lives on and off the job, militancy, and long-term perspective of mobilization unionism. Unions in which social movement unionist praxis is dominant may support a political party, but their strategic goal is to build a broad social movement of unions and community-based organizations to change society.”¹⁵ Union renewal through democratization, mobilization, and

12. Robert Kickey, Sarosh Kuruvilla, and Tashlin Lakhani, “No Panacea for Success: Member Activism, Organizing, and Union Renewal,” *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 48 (March 2010), 53–83.

13. Pradeep Kumar, “Whither Unionism: Current State and Future Prospects of Union Renewal in Canada,” June 2008, <http://www.irc.queensu.ca/articles/whither-unionism> (4 May 2012).

14. David Camfield, “Renewal in Canadian Public Sector Unions: Neo-Liberalism and Union Practice,” *Industrial Relations/Relations Industrielles*, 62 (2007), 287.

15. David Camfield, *Canadian Labour in Crisis: Reinventing the Workers’ Movement*

movement-building rejects the link implicit in Wheeler's strategy between union survival and cooperation with employers. At the same time, it is not naive in relation to the threats that unions face in the existing political climate.

The main threat to union renewal is found in the wider political-economic context in which unions find themselves. Camfield again puts this point clearly: "social movement unionism was given a boost by union involvement in extra-parliamentary struggles in the years before and after the turn of the century [but] the end of these struggles and the more right-wing political climate in society since 9/11 drained away much of the support for alternative kinds of unionism."¹⁶ The retreat of organized labour is thus not simply a failure of leadership but the result of comprehensive political defeat of the broader labour movement and allied progressive forces.¹⁷ Movements such as the Arab Spring, Occupy, the various struggles against austerity in Europe, and the Québec student movement perhaps indicate that a long period of political quiescence is ending.¹⁸ However, for this period of increased struggle to become a period of political success will require a shared understanding of principles that link these movements together across differences of identity and specific demands. Life-value principles, this paper suggests, provide the needed basis of integration and unity.

Life-value principles spell out for activists the real identity of interests between workers' rights and the life-interests of the broader community. They foreground the universal life-value of living wages, safe working conditions, publicly funded infrastructure and institutions, and open, tolerant, and democratic societies that have been central to the demands of unionized labour for more than a century. Workers and community activists alike must relearn why it is true that, as the old Industrial Workers' of the World slogan asserted, "an injury to one is an injury to all." If the labour movement is ideologically isolated from community movements because of successful neo-liberal divide-and-conquer tactics, it will fail to realize its full political potential, and if it fails to reach its full political potential, individual unions will continue to bargain from a position of weakness.

(Halifax 2011), 52.

16. Camfield, *Canadian Labour in Crisis: Reinventing the Workers' Movement*, 52.

17. Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, "Capitalist Crisis and the Crisis this Time," in Leo Panitch, Greg Albo, and Vivek Chibber, eds., *Socialist Register 2011* (London 2010), 15–16.

18. For concise but insightful discussions of these movements see, "CLASSE Manifesto," *Occupy Wall Street*, <http://occupywallstreet.org/article/share-our-future-classe-manifesto/> (17 December 2012); "Occupy Wall Street, Principles of Solidarity," *New York City General Assembly*, <http://www.nycga.net/resources/principles-of-solidarity/> (17 December 2012); Jerome Roos, "Manifesto – Spain's Real Democracy Now!" *Roar Magazine Online*, 21 May, 2011, <http://roarmag.org/2011/05/m-15-manifesto-real-democracy-now-spanish-revolution-protests/> (17 December 2011); "The Economic Program of SYRIZA-EKIM," *The Bullet 653*, <http://www.socialistproject.ca/bullet/653.php> (17 December 2012).

The labour movement thus needs a convincing way of explaining why injuries to unionized workers are injuries to the universal life-interests underlying the particular political demands of community-based groups. Life-interests are objective foundations for subjective demands for the natural resources and the social relationships and institutions that everyone needs to survive and flourish. They are objective because if they are not satisfied, people can neither survive as biological organisms nor develop as socially self-conscious, creative agents. Humanity lies not in our body abstractly conceived as a biological system, but as the basis from which develop those sets of self-determined projects through which different people define themselves and create meaning in their lives. All movements for social justice implicitly operate according to one or more of these natural and social life-interests, for all have as their goal a society in which life-requirements are satisfied so that life-capacities may freely and fully develop. New lines of solidarity can be built and existing lines strengthened through a clear, explicit, and rigorous unpacking of the scope and meaning of objective life-interests. The next section will spell out as fully as space permits the meaning of life-value and the scope of objective life-interests.

Life-Value, Money-Value, and the Direction of Union Struggles

THE FIRST STEP IS TO ISOLATE the unifying principle that explains the universal social value of the past achievements of the labour movement. For purposes of analysis these achievements can be divided into collectively bargained improvements in the organization and remuneration of work, and improvements in access to public goods and institutions to which the labour movement has contributed as a member of more general social movements. Within the workplace the most significant achievements of organized labour include winning the right to organize, collectively bargain, and strike; raising wages above mere subsistence levels such that wider participation in the cultural life of the community and savings become possible; pension schemes that enable one to eventually leave the paid labour force; health and safety legislation; equity legislation that enshrines the principle of equal pay for work of equal value and enables wider participation of historically excluded and oppressed groups in meaningful social labour; on-site or subsidized daycare that ensures high-quality care for children and facilitates women's ongoing participation in paid work outside the home; and reductions in the legal length of the working day. The universal significance of these victories lies in the way each challenged the absolute right of capitalist money-value to rule working life. The rule of capitalist money-value over working life means not only that concerns of profitable production determine the demand for labour, but also that working life is treated as having no value other than the wages it brings. "Money-value" in this comprehensive sense is not simply the primary measure of economic value in capitalism, but the ruling system-value in terms of which

both good social policy and individual decisions are judged. As McMurtry argues, “the reigning system is governed by private money-sequence growth as determining good” in all spheres of social and individual existence.¹⁹

The union movement has recognized the problems that the rule of money-value over the life-value of labour generates. As a recent Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) convention document argues, “the current economic system is not working for working people ... It has failed to deliver good jobs and rising living standards, decent workplaces and equal and inclusive societies.”²⁰ Implicit in these claims is the principle that workplace struggles concern more than remuneration but also the quality of work activity (“good” jobs, not just jobs) and the justice of work and social relationships (equality, decency, and inclusiveness) as essential union goals.

At its best, organized labour has not focussed exclusively on life inside the factory or office but has also mobilized to transform society outside of the workplace. Organized labour has thus fought for the maintenance and extension of public health care, education, and pensions, income security schemes like unemployment insurance, workers’ compensation, and welfare, and public funding for artistic and cultural institutions of all sorts. Another CLC paper explicates the general social significance of these victories. “Whether we live in an urban or rural, small or large municipality, we require ... infrastructure for clean water, waste water facilities, roads, as well as bridges. Our communities need public transportation systems. We depend upon community centres, libraries, immigrant settlement houses, recreational facilities, social housing and co-ops, parks, cultural centres, and child care facilities.”²¹ Viewed in terms of their general social significance, these achievements have helped to build the “civil commons” institutions that attenuate people’s direct dependence upon capital.

Civil commons institutions like universal health care and public education grow out of the shared life-interest of all people in accessing the resources and institutions that they require in order to live and develop as human beings.²² Because they are funded by public resources, they decommodify essential life-goods. By making these essential life-goods available to everyone on the basis of their need for them rather than the ability to pay market price, civil commons institutions are a direct attack on the rule of capitalist money-value

19. John McMurtry, “What is Good, What is Bad: The Value of All Values Across Times, Places, and Theories,” *Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems*, <http://www.eolss.net> (18 May 2012).

20. Canadian Labour Congress, “Good Jobs for All,” *Canadian Labour Congress*, 2011, <http://www.canadianlabour.ca/convention/2011-convention/policy-papers> (17 May 2011).

21. Canadian Labour Congress, “Creating Jobs by Building the Communities We Need for the Future,” *Canadian Labour Congress*, 2011, <http://www.canadianlabour.ca/action-centre/municipality-matters/public-infrastructure> (17 May 2011).

22. John McMurtry, *The Cancer Stage of Capitalism* (London 1999), 204–5.

over life-interests. The labour movement's historic contribution to the building up of the civil commons is a second dimension of its universal life-value. All groups benefit from the fundamental challenge the union movement has historically posed to the rule of money-value over people's ability to satisfy their life-requirements, because everyone shares the life-requirements that civil commons institutions satisfy. Whereas the capitalist principle is invest if and only if there is profit to be made, regardless of whether any particular investment meets a real life-requirement, the principle underlying the civil commons institutions listed in the CLC document is invest so as to ensure the satisfaction of everyone's life-requirements. The universal social importance of the labour movement lies in the alternative life-value system from which the goodness of its demands grows.

By definition, anything which is of value is an object of care and concern for people who value it.²³ If one values a memento, one seeks to preserve it. If one values a friend, one seeks his or her well-being. The fundamental condition of valuing anything at all is that the valuing subject is alive and able to form judgements about those things and relationships he or she will care and concern him or herself with. Thus, beneath all possible subjective value judgements is an objective structure of value built into those goods, resources, and relationships that human beings require to live and form more specific value judgments. This objective layer of value is what was defined in the introduction as instrumental life-value. When human beings are deprived of instrumental life-values, they are harmed to the extent of the deprivation.²⁴ Total deprivation of instrumental life-values leads to death; partial deprivation due to poverty, oppression, or alienation leads to impairments of capacity development. When society is organized such that all are able to access instrumental life-values, then each is enabled to freely develop and enjoy those sentient, cognitive, and practical capacities that are intrinsically life-valuable. While different people will pursue different projects over the course of life, the *form* of a good life is the same for all – free development and enjoyment of the capacities that distinguish human life in specific constellations that follow from the decisions and interests of the person in question. Instrumental life-values ground a shared life-interest, therefore, because everyone requires access to them as the material conditions of a good life.

Since human beings are *both and at once* biological organisms and self-determining, self-developing, and self-transforming social self-conscious agents, the range of life-requirements extends from more or less fixed natural life-requirements to more complex and historically mutable social, cultural,

23. All the philosophical complexities of this definition of value cannot be examined here, as it would constitute a digression from the main purpose of the paper. For a fuller discussion see Jeff Noonan, *Materialist Ethics and Life-Value* (Montreal 2012), 8, 23.

24. John McMurtry, *Unequal Freedoms* (Toronto 1998), 164.

political, and temporal life-requirements.²⁵ The most basic form of life-value is found in the natural resources and social relationships that sustain biological functioning. In a capitalist society workers are dependent upon their wages as the source of the money the system demands for access to basic life-requirement satisfiers. Hence, of the achievements listed above, the most fundamental, *within the limits of capitalist society*, is the elevation of wages to a level that ensures access to higher quality physical-organic life-requirement satisfiers (nutritious food, shelter, appropriate clothing, etc.). As Lebowitz argues in *Beyond Capital*, the political economy of labour aims to recapture money destined to accumulate as capital under the control of the ruling class and channel it to purposes of satisfying workers' needs.²⁶ At the same time as raising wages has enabled access to better quality life-requirement satisfiers, wider participation in the life of the community, and savings, it has also run the risk of more tightly binding workers to capitalist labour, commodity, and credit markets, and thus unwittingly serving the growth of capitalist money-value, if this goal is treated as an end in itself, rather than as a means to the more transformational end of ensuring that workers are able to control the conditions of their lives, both inside and outside the workplace. Understood in this instrumentally life-valuable way, raising wages is one moment of a broader set of demands that has included health and safety legislation, child care, public health care, and income security schemes of all sorts as instituted modes of ensuring the all-round satisfaction of the physical-organic requirements of life.

The life-value of these achievements is universal insofar as it rests on the principle that the purpose of collective labour is to ensure the satisfaction of the universally shared physical-organic requirements of *life*. In contrast, the principle of capitalist society is that labour is to be profitably exploited or not made available at all, regardless of the consequences for the lives and well-being of workers. The deepest material foundation of a good society is thus that it ensures the comprehensive satisfaction of the physical-organic requirements of *each and all*, a foundation which, as the history of unregulated market outcomes proves, the capitalist money-value system will not establish on its own. Engels captures the universal value of trade union struggle for security of the material conditions of *human* life: "Workers cannot feel happy in this condition: that theirs is not a state in which a man or a whole class of men can think and feel and live as human beings. The worker must strive to exchange their brutalizing condition, to secure for themselves a better, more human position."²⁷

25. Space prevents a systematic consideration of critical rejoinders to this categorization of human natural, social, and temporal life-requirements. These are examined in Noonan, *Materialist Ethics and Life-Value*, 46–88.

26. Michael Lebowitz, *Beyond Capital* (New York 1992), 21.

27. Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Classes of England* (St. Alban's 1969), 239.

In contrast to the dominant concept of human nature underlying capitalist society, the life-value perspective does not regard human beings as self-interested atoms naturally driven to accumulate as much as possible for one's self exclusively. From Hobbes to James Mill to John Rawls, philosophical supporters of capitalism have assumed that human beings are egocentric self-maximizers who identify their good with private possession and accumulation.²⁸ While not denying that people are trained to behave this way by capitalist institutions, life-value philosophy argues that beneath these competitive drives lies a deeper capacity for interdependent cooperation. Through interdependent cooperation human beings not only survive but also become co-creators of different and changing social-symbolic worlds. It is within this humanly created social field of life-development that the affective-emotional, relational, aesthetic creative capacities of human life develop. Just as the basic biological functions which support life depend upon regular inputs of physical-organic life-requirement satisfiers, so too social self-conscious agency, whether expressed in relation to the aesthetic experience of the world, non-instrumental loving and caring relations with others, or the practical creation of ideas and things, depends upon access to socio-cultural life-requirement satisfiers beyond the level of organic life-requirements. In terms of the historic achievements listed above, the legitimate right of workers to provide collective input into the nature and pace of work through their unions, public education, public investment in the arts, day care (from the standpoint of the socialization of the child and from the standpoint of the social conditions for women to live as productive and creative workers outside the home if they so choose), and equity legislation of all forms as an expressed commitment to human solidarity across differences have universal life-value as contributions to socio-cultural life-requirement satisfaction.

At this level, too, there is opposition between the capitalist money-value system and the life-value of the institutions and relationships that enable the free development of socially self-conscious human agency. From the money-value perspective, each person is a self-maximizing atom that treats others as means to her or his own desires for self-maximizing accumulation. While there may be occasions in capitalist society when treating others as means is unavoidable, it remains the case that beneath this instrumentalization of others' lives is a capacity for interdependent, mutualistic, and solidaristic social relationships. This deeper capacity is embodied in the public, civil commons institutions that the union movement has been central to building. One can only develop one's individual life-capacities if one first learns from others, employs means created by others labour, and discovers meaning in the responses and evaluations others make of one's work. The ongoing privatization of public institutions is not only an attack on public sector workers,

28. See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Indianapolis 1994), 58; James Mill, *An Essay on Government* (Indianapolis 1955), 57; John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge 1999), 9.

but on the universally life-valuable principle that those institutions through which social self-conscious agency is developed ought to be open and accessible to all, because necessary to a fully human life. Thus, once again, union support for public institutions reveals a dimension of universal social value when interpreted from the life-value perspective.

While the social-self-conscious moment of human life elevates it above mere biological functioning, it cannot free life from biology entirely. As biological systems, human beings must die. Consciousness of mortality constitutes the basis for a third class of universal life-requirements for the *temporal means of free human experience, expression, and activity*. This temporal life-requirement is expressed as the requirement for an experience of time as free. The union movement's struggle to reduce the working day is strong evidence for the reality of this life-requirement. If there were no real harm caused to people by not being able to experience time as free, then there would have been no reason to struggle for shorter working days and more control over work. While Marx was the first to explore the universal value of free time, and also the first to systematically examine the value of the labour movement from the standpoint of temporal life-requirements, he tended to think of free time exclusively in terms of time away from paid labour.²⁹ From the life-value perspective the temporal requirement of free human experience, expression, and activity is not limited to time outside of paid labour. Instead, whether at work or not, human beings require an experience of time itself as free, as an open matrix of possibilities for life-valuable action.³⁰ Since under capitalism work-time is dominated by an end external to the activities which fill it – the production of money-value – it is rare that work-time can be experienced as free. Hence the importance of union struggles to shorten the working day. The intensified competitive pressures generated within the working class have compromised the ability of even the most militant unions to further pursue this essential demand. In the context of neo-liberal assaults, even the most militant unions have been forced to accept longer and more stressful hours of work for fewer workers.³¹

This situation is a paradigm example of the morally inverted world of capitalism: some are worked to the point of mental and physical exhaustion while others languish without work. However, it is not impossible in principle to successfully attenuate the alienating nature of work under capitalism. The primary means of achieving this goal is through struggles for greater control over the organization and pace of work activity. While demands for control

29. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol.1 (Moscow 1986), 252–54; Karl Marx, "Outline of a Critique of Political Economy (Grundrisse)," in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol.28 (New York 1986), 490–540.

30. Jeff Noonan, "Free Time as a Condition of a Free Human Life," *Contemporary Political Theory*, 8 (November 2009), 377–393.

31. David Schweickart, *After Capitalism*, 2nd ed., (Lanham 2011), 106–11.

over the workplace and work activity have become less and less common, they were an important part of Canadian labour struggles in the early period of industrialization.³² They could become so again if the current conjuncture of pressures on the working class generates novel ideas about how to solve unemployment through a redivision of total social labour time. To the extent that unions have struggled to secure regular and effective input into the organization of work activity, they have also contributed to an experience of time at work as more free, i.e., as a more open matrix of possibilities in which workers themselves decide how to accomplish the work and less a closed structure of imposed routines in the service of money-value accumulation.

Once again there is principled opposition between understanding the life-value of a shorter work day and democratic control over the labour process and the capitalist money-value system. Underlying the demand for shorter working days and worker control over the content and pace of work activity is an understanding of life as valuable because of the experiences and activities one is able to enjoy within its finite frame. In order to experience and act freely, not only must physical and socio-cultural life-requirements be met, people must be conscious of their present and future as an open matrix of possibilities within which they are substantively free to choose between different projects and experiences. It is possible that people can be well-nourished and housed, well-cared for when ill, well-educated, and yet trapped in work routines over which they have no control and which dominate almost all their waking life-time. While in such cases many important life-requirements are met and some life-capacities developed, they are developed as compulsory behaviours within coercive work routines. From the money-value perspective life is valuable only to the extent that it is productive of money-value. The potentially multivalent richness of life, within or outside of work, is levelled into service to money-value expansion with only one's wages as compensation.

The preceding discussion suggests that union renewal need not involve a total reinvention of the movement's goals. Instead, it is as much a matter of reinterpreting its most successful historical struggles in terms of their universal life-value. When *workers* are successful in rechannelling wealth the capitalist wants to appropriate as private profit to life-valuable purposes of life-requirement satisfaction, *society as a whole* becomes more just and free, because more instrumentally and intrinsically life-valuable. The *particular* victories discussed above are *universally* life-valuable, because they have channelled resources towards the comprehensive satisfaction of the life-requirements of each and all, and thus enabled the wider and deeper expression and enjoyment of the life-capacities that make human life meaningful.

While it is true that in the current period of crisis the union movement has perhaps retrenched around narrower sets of monetary demands (as Wheeler's

32. Bryan D. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800–1991* (Toronto 1992), 93.

comments quoted in the introduction illustrate), a longer historical view suggests that unions have not ignored the intrinsic life-value of labouring activity. Marx's critique of alienation, with its warning about the limitations of wage-based struggles, still makes clear that the real value of labour is not its wages, but in its being the process by which the social world is created out of nature, and thus the means by which individual humans become objectively important for one another.³³ The very existence of unions as institutions through which workers can collectively deliberate about their conditions of work and act together to transform the process, the pace, and the culture of work is itself the clearest evidence that unions do not subordinate concern for the intrinsic life-value of labour to its instrumental value as a provider of wages. The intrinsic life-value of labour is the enjoyment of the process of creative self-realization, the joy of experiencing one's capacities come to life through their objectification in social space for appropriation and use by others. If the union movement follows the advice of supporters like Wheeler, it risks becoming alienated from workers' concerns with the quality of their work activity, with the nature of the contribution their activity makes to the natural field of life-support and the social field of life-development, from other social movements, and from problems of the good in social life generally. To the extent that organized labour becomes alienated from these sources of its power and the universal concerns that make it relevant, it becomes vulnerable to divide-and-conquer neo-liberal attacks. The paper concludes with a sketch the basic principles for the reconstruction of a life-valuable labour movement.

Re-Building a Life-Valuable Labour Movement

CAPITALISM IS ABLE to reproduce itself by constructing an artificial form of dependence binding people to labour and commodity markets. From within this structure of dependence it appears impossible to alter the social system because human life seems to depend upon access to paid work and human happiness appears to depend upon exchanging money for commodified objects and experiences. However, human life is not actually dependent upon capitalism or any of the other particular social systems in which it has historically organized itself for survival and development. Viewed from the standpoint of what it really requires to survive and develop, human life is dependent on a life-sustaining natural world and life-capacity developing social institutions created by collective labour, broadly construed. The first step towards rebuilding a life-valuable labour movement in Canada is to expose this difference between that conditions that capitalism requires to reproduce itself and the conditions which human life requires to survive, develop, and flourish.

33. Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844," *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels Collected Works, Volume 3* (New York 1975), 280.

The capitalist structure of dependence is life-negating to the extent that it is allowed to reduce human life to a tool of the growth of non-living money-value. Consciousness of the real structure of human dependence on nature and interdependence in society is life-affirming because out of it develops the manifold forms of relationship and practice that protect and improve natural and social life-support and life-development systems. This proper understanding yields a principle by which the labour movement can guide itself towards forms of political demands which are in everyone's life-interest because they are universally life-valuable. This principle is formulated by McMurtry as the *life-coherence principle*. It maintains that only those practices are good which "consistently enable ecological and human life together."³⁴ Labour itself embodies this life-coherence principle. The labour movement can rebuild itself by consciously developing social demands on its basis.

As Marx argued, labour is the collective process of human self-creation developing out of necessary metabolic interchange between humanity and the environment.³⁵ Understood in terms of the life-coherence principle, labour as the collective means whereby human society is created presupposes, depends upon, and grows out of the essential connection it establishes to nature as the shared basis of life-support. Hence the two sides of the life-coherence principle are embodied in the two sides of labour. Life-coherent political demands follow directly from recognition of this fact.

As soon as the social value of labour is understood by reference to the life-coherence principle, the universal life-value of the labour movement becomes clear. If the labour movement is to protect the particular interests of working people in finding and maintaining meaningful employment, it must orient itself to supporting the universal life-interest of all people in forms of labour that *sustainably* create and improve human life over an open-ended future. The intrinsic life-value of labour – its being a central form of meaningful life-activity, for self and others – presupposes its instrumental life-value, its contribution to the production and distribution of life-requirement satisfiers. When the union movement grasps the dependence of the social life-value of labour on its natural life-value, it can become a leader of a widespread movement in favour of a life-coherent, ecologically sound, and humanly meaningful economy. This principle is already recognized in the most far-sighted programs for union renewal, such as the Action Agenda formulated by the Toronto and York District Labour Council (but not adopted as official policy when it was debated by the Canadian Labour Congress in 2008).³⁶ The Action Agenda, along with other important policy papers such as the final report of

34. John McMurtry, "Human Rights versus Corporate Rights: Understanding Life-Value, the Civil Commons, and Social Justice," *Studies in Social Justice*, 5 (Summer 2011), 14.

35. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 173–4.

36. "Action Agenda to Build Labour Power in the 21st Century," *Labour Action*, <http://www.labouraction.ca/action.htm> (12 May 2012).

the committee that recommended the upcoming merger between the CAW and the Communication, Energy, and Paper Workers Union, recognize that the most basic set of life-valuable union demands must be for forms of meaningful work ("good jobs") which preserve and improve the natural world.³⁷ The immediate interests of workers and the longer-term interests of all human beings thus organically coincide. Instead of being seen as an enemy of the multifaceted environmental movement, a life-coherent labour movement could lead it.

The same organic connection that links the short-term, particular interests of labour to the long-term universal life-interests of humanity reappears at the level of social organization. Here the union movement can return to a position of leadership by remembering that access to life-values can be raised not only by increasing the money-value paid to individuals as atomic selves, but also by rechannelling collectively produced wealth from profits to investment in civil commons institutions. Civil commons institutions expand access to life-values by making them available on the basis of human need for them, not ability to pay.³⁸ Public education and public health care are the most important existing examples. The neo-liberal reorganization of capital has weakened both civil commons institutions and the normative principle of provision on the basis of life-requirement that has justified them. Yet the life-requirements that civil commons institutions satisfy are universally life-enabling. Thus, political movements that either defend existing civil commons institutions or fight for the creation of new ones are grounded in everyone's life-interest. As life-capacity enabling, civil commons institutions free people's energies from the soul-destroying search for meaning in shopping malls and canned entertainment and redirect it to forms of activity that are actually meaningful: development of our capacities to experience, think, and imagine, to relate to one another as ends-in-ourselves, and to collectively create a social world in which everyone has an important and valued role to play. When life-sustaining and life-improving resources, relations, institutions, and practices are decommodified, the artificial dependence on labour and commodity markets that capitalism depends upon is weakened.³⁹

The importance of the life-coherence principle for rebuilding the labour movement not only lies in the universal life-value of the particular political goals

37. "Towards a New Union."

38. Much empirical work has been done on the contribution that public provisions of life-goods has on the level of a "living wage – the amount families must expend in order to meet basic life-necessities." See for example Iglia Ivanova and Seth Klein, *Working For a Living Wage 2012*, (Ottawa 2012), <http://www.policyalternatives.ca/livingwage2012> (23 December 2012).

39. Without using the term, others have spelled out concrete programs for civil commons development, which need not be repeated here. See for example Greg Albo, Sam Gindin, and Leo Panitch, *In and Out of Crisis: The Global Financial Meltdown and Left Alternatives* (Oakland 2010), 106–21; Camfield, *Canadian Labour in Crisis*, 111–38.

it illuminates, but also in the organic basis in existing institutions and principles for more deeply transformative demands it reveals. Progressively realized over an open-ended timeframe, expansion of civil commons institutions could ultimately transform capitalism into a democratic economy. "Organic politics" understands social transformation as an open-ended process of internal institutional change. It contrasts with "theoretical politics," which views transformational politics as dependent upon all-or-nothing changes supported by arguments more logical than concretely historical and political that certain goals are or are not achievable within capitalism.⁴⁰ Rather than internally consistent demonstrations about what is or is not possible, demonstrations which, whatever their theoretical rigour, fail to inspire, organic politics seeks to organize people where they are now – increasingly threatened by intensified commodification of both natural resources and civil commons institutions – to demand concrete social changes that are both realizable in the short term and based on principles with more far-reaching and radical long-term implications. While it might seem as though organic politics is conservative, it is rooted in the actual political practice of Marx himself. In a most important study of Marx's political practice, August H. Nimtz Jr., concludes that while Marx was unwaveringly committed to the revolutionary transformation of capitalist society, his political practice was always structured by demands that were both immediately realizable and destabilizing.⁴¹ Marx never understood revolution as an all-or-nothing struggle, but rather as an open-ended, long-term series of struggles that progressively transformed the institutions of capitalist society into democratic socialist institutions. Like this original practice, organic politics rejects an abstract opposition between reform and revolution and sees social transformation as an internally unified progressive development in which fundamental social changes emerge from successful struggles around concrete issues of life-requirement deprivation. Understood historically, each life-valuable achievement in which union struggles played a significant part – the right to vote, the right to collectively bargain, public health care, public education – is a plateau from which the assault on the new, higher peak can be attempted. By revisioning radical change as a series of concrete achievements internally unified by the principle of recovering collective, democratic control over life-resources now exclusively controlled by the appropriating class, the left moves out from the shadows of logical proofs that another world is possible to the sun of established reality in which that other world is already actual, albeit in undeveloped and contradictory forms.

Organic politics also provides the basis of an answer to the final question that could be posed to this argument: why look to the union movement

40. See also Jeff Noonan, "Socialism as a Life-Coherent Society," *Alternate Routes*, 35 (November 2011), 195–216.

41. See August H. Nimtz Jr., *Marx and Engels: Their Contribution to the Democratic Breakthrough* (Albany 2000), 285–306.

for leadership rather than a new movement or movements? The principle of organic politics is: new developments emerge from established plateaus of achievement. Applied to social movements, the union movement is an established plateau of achievement. No other existing social movement or political party remotely approaches the numbers of Canadian workers organized in unions – 4.2 million.⁴² Sheer numbers are not the whole story. The union movement also retains an organizational capacity *sans pareil*. As Hilary Wainwright argues, “unions are in many countries the largest, best resourced, most stable, most institutional, and, in some respects, most rooted ... movements in civil society. These attributes give them the potential to be, as Carmen Sosa, a water workers leader in Uruguay suggests, ‘the vertebral column of the popular movement’”⁴³ Given the unmatched scale and organizational capacity of the unions, any rebirth of a broader socialist movement will depend, as Meszaros argues, on the active realization of the transformational political potential of the unions.⁴⁴ The activation of this potential in turn depends upon union members learning to believe in the values of solidarity and mutuality once again. Where there is belief in values there is confidence; where there is confidence, strength; and where there is strength, new heights of collective achievement can be attained.

42. “Unionization Rates in the First Half of 2008 and 2009,” *Statistics Canada*, www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/75-001-x/topics-sujets/unionization-syndicalisation/unionization-syndicalisation-2009-eng-htm (12 February 2011).

43. Hilary Wainwright, “A New Trade Unionism in the Making?” *The Bullet* 488, April 2011, 3, www.socialistproject.ca/bullet/488.php (15 April 2011).

44. Istvan Meszaros, *The Challenge and Burden of Historical Time* (New York 2008), 138.