Labour
Journal of Canadian Labour Studies
Le Travail
Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes

Debating the Labour Movement's Past, Present, and Future

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Volume 85, Spring 2020

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1070910ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/llt.2020.0009

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Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)
1911-4842 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Pollack, M. & Selby, J. (2020). Debating the Labour Movement's Past, Present, and Future. *Labour / Le Travail*, *85*, 261–268. https://doi.org/10.1353/llt.2020.0009

Labour / Le Travail
ISSUE 85 (2020)
ISSN: 1911-4842

CONTROVERSY / POLÉMIQUE

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The following is an exchange sparked by Jim Selby's presentation piece in *Labour/Le Travail* vol. 83. Since debates about the labour movement's strategies – past, present and future – raise important questions, we have printed Marion Pollack's response to Selby's article and, in keeping with journal protocol, his final response. —Eds.

Commentary on Jim Selby's "Labour in Need of Revolutionary Vision"

Marion Pollack

I WAS PLEASED TO RECEIVE the spring 2019 issue of *Labour/Le Travail* in the mail. I eagerly skimmed some of the contents and was very impressed with what I read. Then I read Jim Selby's presentation, "Labour in Need of Revolutionary Vision," and I was saddened.

Mr. Selby's statements are often too general and too sweeping to be historically accurate. He writes, "Labour has been unable to protect good jobs or to make bad jobs better." This is simply untrue. While the labour movement has not been able to stop the growth of precarious work, and has certainly suffered significant losses as a result of capital's onslaught, it has both protected good jobs and made bad jobs better. For instance, the BC Teachers' Federation fought a long series of battles on picket lines, in the media, and in the courts that culminated in a 10 November 2016 decision from the Supreme Court of Canada ordering the government to restore contractual class-size limits

Marion Pollack and Jim Selby, "Debating the Labour Movement's Past, Present and Future," *Labour/Le Travail* 85 (Spring 2020): 261–268, https://doi.org/10.1353/llt.2020.0009.

that it had stripped from teachers in 2002.[1] In January 2004, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) organized 6,000 rural and suburban mail carriers. Until that date, they had been contract workers who had to bid every couple of years to keep their jobs. They had very few rights and virtually no benefits. Unionization improved their situation. The CUPW fight for pay equity for these workers produced more gains. In June 2018, CUPW won pay equity arbitration against Canada Post that resulted in retroactive wage increases of over four dollars per hour and improved leaves and rights for these workers.[2]

Moreover, Selby's comments in this and in other sections of his presentation do not recognize the differential impact that unions have had on diverse groups of workers. A gendered intersectional lens is crucial not only to provide a thorough analysis but also to develop meaningful solutions. Unionization and collective bargaining is a vitally important way to reduce the pay gap between men and women and, in this way, to address in a small but very consequential way the ongoing legacy and realities of sexism and patriarchy. Unionization also has historically reduced some of the economic effects of racism and colonialism.

This brings me to my foremost concern about Selby's article. He states that "a third barrier to business union action against neoliberalism is structural" and then goes on to explain that union officers and staff have vested interests in the ongoing organizational integrity of their unions. Nowhere in his analysis about union structure is there any discussion about who is included and excluded as part of that structure.

Workers and their unions are affected by multiple forces and structures that work together to reinforce conditions of equality, inequality, and social inclusion/exclusion. Workers have diverse experiences that mean they are positioned differently, even in the same workplace. Union leaders and staff are also differently affected by their own unique circumstances of power, privilege, and identity. Unions are likewise influenced by their own histories, demographic makeup, and experiences dealing with employers and governments. A great deal of dissimilarity exists between and among unions in Canada.

Different power relationships have profoundly shaped the labour movement. Unions are embedded in these relationships of power and privilege, and any attempt to describe barriers that unions face must apply this intersectional framework. This analysis must be multi-pronged and multidimensional.[3] Selby's presentation does not take into account the variety of union structures

1. Rod Mickleburgh, *On the Line: A History of the British Columbia Labour Movement* (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 2018), 269–270.

2. "Summary of Arbitrator Flynn's Decision on RSMC Pay Equity," Canadian Union of Postal Workers, 4 June 2018, https://www.cupw.ca/en/summary-arbitrator-flynn%E2%80%99s-decision-rsmc-pay-equity.

3. Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAW), *Intersectional Feminist Frameworks: An Emerging Vision* (Ottawa: CRIAW, 2006), 4.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/llt.2020.0009

and leaderships in Canada. It reduces them to a certain mushy generic sameness. This reduces the strength of his presentation.

A gendered intersectional framework is also needed to examine the complex barriers facing unions and to determine how to create change. Such an approach would have placed Selby's call for a revolutionary trade union movement into a more dynamic context. I strongly believe that Mr. Selby's modest proposal of a revolutionary union movement will not work if equality and a challenge to racism, colonialism, homophobia, transphobia, and so on are not fundamental parts of any change. A revolutionary trade union movement must be truly inclusive and embody principles of reconciliation. If equality issues are not addressed in a thoughtful, open, and comprehensive way, any plan to radically transform the trade union movement will inevitably lack the elements needed for health, vibrancy, and ultimately success. It is frustrating to see an action plan to revolutionize the trade union movement that not only views both the working class and the labour movement as homogeneous but also fails to use the words "gender," "colonialism," and "race."

Many trade union movement structures and practices were developed in periods where racism, sexism, and anti-Indigenous attitudes were rampant. The labour movement is not immune from having structures and practices that reflect that legacy. In most parts of the trade union movement people benefitted – sometimes consciously and many times unconsciously – from racism, sexism, et cetera. It is not that trade union leaders purposely chose to benefit from white privilege, or male privilege, or other privileges; it is that racism, sexism, and the legacy of colonization are so deeply entrenched in both the structure of society and our psyches that this is inevitable. In his article, Selby fails to acknowledge this and seems to oversimplify the motives of trade union leaders.

In order to revitalize the trade union movement, it is necessary to look at the very structure of that movement, as well as who is participating in it and who is excluded and marginalized. Selby's call for a national conference, *Rediscovering Labour Radicalism: Can Unions Change the World?*, does not address the fact that many marginalized workers and union activists simply will not be able to attend this conference for a variety of reasons. It also does not address the fact that at many conferences and meetings certain voices are heard and given more authority and acknowledgement than other voices. In order to have the type of discussion Selby envisions, the voices of historically marginalized people need to be front and centre.

Selby's article provides important food for thought. More discussion and debate about transforming, strengthening, and democratizing the trade union movement is needed.

Response to Marion Pollack's commentary

Jim Selby

I WOULD LIKE TO THANK Marion Pollack for taking time to respond to my piece and the editors of *Labour/Le Travail* for giving me the opportunity to expand on the possibilities I see for a revolutionary union movement. Sister Pollack's response reminds us how important it is to foster open, vigorous debate within the union movement if we are to find a collective way forward out of our current quagmire.

A tension has always existed in the labour movement between those members who see unions as a legitimate part of the capitalist system, or who at least believe that the system can be gradually reformed, and those who see unions as institutions of a working class that must transcend capitalism in order to be free of subjugation and exploitation. The members of the former group have been in firm control of the labour movement since the purge of the left from the late 1940s through the early 1970s.

One of the points I made in my presentation was that the decline of the labour movement in Europe and North America in terms of membership, bargaining gains, and political influence has discredited the idea that unions are respected, legitimate actors within capitalism. The inability of labour to resist the neoliberal agenda of global capital and the capitalist state is not debatable. As leading European industrial relations researcher Richard Hyman has noted, "Trade union membership, as a proportion of the labour force, is almost universally in decline." He notes that although coverage by collective agreements has not changed, "its content has been hollowed out through diverse forms of decentralization and concession bargaining."[1] In the United States, inequality and falling wages highlight runaway employer power in the labour market. Bank of Canada senior deputy governor Carolyn Wilkins notes that "workers' wages have not kept up with gains in productivity over the last decades, [and] their income share has fallen," while unionization rates in the private sector have also fallen.[2]

Another clear sign of union decline is the increasing number of concessionary agreements being negotiated. The Canadian Auto Workers (now Unifor),

1. Richard Hyman, "What Future for Industrial Relations in Europe?," *Employee Relations* 40, 4 (2018): 571. Union decline, growing inequality, and wage stagnation have been growing in Canada and across the OECD, see Jeff Rubin, "Has Global Trade Liberalization Left Canadian Workers Behind?," CIGI Paper No. 163, Centre for International Governance Innovation, 26 February 2018; Ian Thomas MacDonald, "Towards Neoliberal Trade Unionism: Decline, Renewal and Transformation in the North American Labour Movements," *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 52, 4 (2014): 725–752.

2. Carolyn A. Wilkins, "A Look under the Hood of Canada's Job Market," speech to Toronto Region Board of Trade, 31 January 2019, https://www.bankofcanada.ca/2019/01/look-under-hood-canadas-job-market/.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/llt.2020.0009

which left the United Automobile Workers over the international union's willingness to accept concessions, has since negotiated concession agreements with the automakers in an ultimately futile effort to save jobs. The most odious form of concessionary agreement, the two-tier contract, where new hires have lesser wages or benefits than other workers, violates basic union principles and undermines solidarity. Any concessions, moreover, lead to labour leaders not only tacitly accepting the dominance of market power and employers under neoliberalism but also legitimizing that order of things to their members.[3]

Pointing to a few successes does not change the fact of overall union decline, particularly among precarious workers. The problem is that those occasional struggles, while indicative of workers' willingness to fight, have not altered the overall trajectory of labour. Ms. Pollack writes, "Nowhere in his analysis about union structure is there any discussion about who is included and excluded as part of that structure." In fact, I said, "The worst of business unions are authoritarian and non-inclusive, but even the best, the so-called social union variety, have democratic deficits in terms of gender, race, and ethnicity and are still enmeshed within the capitalist system." The integration of existing unions in the capitalist system of labour relations makes it likely that union leadership will mirror the dominant ideology and social relations that exist in our society. When unions have periodically challenged sexism or racism within their ranks and in broader society, these challenges were the product of radical left (socialist, anarchist, communist) influences within the movement.

Sister Pollack argues that a "gendered intersectional framework is also needed to examine the complex barriers facing unions and to determine how to create change" and that the absence of that analysis weakens the pursuit of revolutionary unionism. I respectfully disagree. Since race and gender are both social constructs, it follows that existing definitions of race and gender are grounded within the capitalist system.[4] An intersectional analysis focuses on differences, which, although valuable in exposing hidden layers of oppression and exploitation, do not lead to effective anti-capitalist movement building. Class analysis, on the other hand, does. Class is not a subjective identity but rather, as Shahrzad Mojab and Sara Carpenter so succinctly put it, "a process and relation of appropriation and exploitation … formed through relations

3. Ken Jacobs, "A Tale of Two Tiers: Dividing Workers in the Age of Neoliberalism," *New Labor Forum* 18, 1 (2009): 67; Tim Fowler, "Does Fighting Back Still Matter? The Canadian Autoworkers, Capitalist Crisis and Confrontation," *Capital and Class* 36, 3 (2012): 493–513.

4. See, for example, Erika Palmer & Benedicte Wilson, "Models with Men and Women: Representing Gender in Dynamic Modeling of Social Systems," *Science and Engineering Ethics* 24, 2 (2018): 419–439; Judith Lorber & Susan A. Farrell, eds., *The Social Construction of Gender* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1991); Lorber, *Paradoxes of Gender* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Audrey Smedley & Brian D. Smedley, "Race as Biology Is Fiction, Racism as a Social Problem Is Real: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives on the Social Construction of Race," *American Psychologist* 60, 1 (2005): 16–26; Ann Morning, "Does Genomics Challenge the Social Construction of Race?," *Sociological Theory* 32, 3 (2014): 189–207.

of oppression based in social constructions of race, gender, sexuality, ability, culture and origin"[5]

An intersectional analysis is most useful in considering differing levels of oppression in existing social and economic realities. Identifying issues of race, ability, gender, sexuality, and many more modes of oppression and inequality, and how they are "interlocking," is a valuable contribution. But identifying oppression does not end it. Radical, structural change is required for that. Creating an alternative social order – namely, the unseating of the capitalist order to create the possibility of a new society free of oppression and exploitation – is a project for collective action by revolutionary unions and other working-class bodies.

The possibilities inherent in radical socialist transformation can be glimpsed in the giant steps taken in women's lives in the very early years following the Russian revolution. Reforms transformed the gendered exploitation of women's unpaid social-reproduction labour into waged, socially valued work through communal kitchens, laundries, and crèches. Women were given access to "birth control and abortion, equal pay, and land and property rights." The fact that these radical feminist reforms, some of them not yet equalled elsewhere, were later truncated or lost in the Soviet Union is indicative of the failure of the revolutionary project in that state, not of the possibilities of a new society.[6]

An important point of my presentation was that radical transformation is necessary in the way unions are structured and in their objectives, strategies, and tactics. In that vein, I suggest there are far better ways to address non-representative, conservative, and entrenched union leadership than the limited responses suggested by intersectional thinking, including affirmative-action programs. The barrier to full membership participation lies in the way union officers are elected, the way union staff are hired, and the inherent power vested in the leadership positions. The current structures of union leadership and the powers of "leaders" are fraught with toxic masculinities that encourage narcissistic behaviours and ethical decay.

5. Shahrzad Mojab & Sara Carpenter, "Marxism, Feminism, and 'Intersectionality,'" *Journal of Labor and Society* 22, 2 (2019): 275–282. See also Victor Wallis, "Intersectionality's Binding Agent: The Political Primacy of Class," *New Political Science* 37, 4 (2015): 604–619; Teresa L. Ebert, "Rematerializing Feminism," *Science and Society* 69, 1 (2005): 33–55; Hester Eisenstein, "A Dangerous Liaison? Feminism and Corporate Globalization," *Science and Society* 69, 3 (2005): 487–518; Eisenstein, "'Scouting Parties and Bold Detachments': Toward a Postcapitalist Feminism," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 34, 1/2 (2006): 40–62; Valerie Scatamburlo-D'Annibale & Peter McLaren, "The Strategic Centrality of Class in the Politics of 'Race' and 'Difference,'" *Cultural Studies – Critical Methodologies* 3, 2 (2003): 148–175; Martha E. Gimenez, "Marxism, and Class, Gender, and Race: Rethinking the Trilogy," *Race, Gender and Class* 18, 2 (2001): 23–33.

6. Bryan D. Palmer & Joan Sangster, "Legacies of 1917: Revolution's Longue Durée," *American Communist History* 16, 1/2 (2017): 9.

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One solution to the union leadership problem would be to adopt a more radical form of democratic governance. Rather than rely on the prevalent model of representative democracy in capitalist society, with its open invitation to undue influence, corruption, electioneering, and divisive cliques, unions could elect officers by sortition. Sortition is a system of selection of leaders by random lot, as practised in ancient Athens. Random-lot election would, through the rules of probability, provide leadership truly representative of the membership. Sortition also minimizes divisive electioneering and the likelihood of entrenched cliques and power-seeking personalities. Further, restricting union officers to administrative powers only, with all policy established by majority vote of the membership, would go a long way to truly democratizing unions.[7] Given the communications technologies available to unions today, there is no reason not to give every member a direct vote on policy.

What I am trying to say here is that there are many radical policies and practices that a truly revolutionary union movement could consider and adopt. It was not the intent of my article to second-guess where radical unionists might want to go, but rather, to encourage them to act.

On the matter of state power and state animosity to unions, I do not believe there is any evidence that the power of the state to "attack or curtail" unions is somehow greater today than in 1919 or the 1930s. While the consolidation of neoliberalism has definitely emboldened the anti-labour measures of capital and the state, workers in the past confronted similar attacks with more concerted resistance. For example, in 1979, CUPW president Jean-Claude Parrot went to jail rather than ordering striking postal workers back, and in 1972, Confédération des syndicats nationaux president Marcel Pepin, Québec Federation of Labour president Louis Laberge, and Centrale de l'enseignement du Québec president Yvon Charbonneau were sentenced to a year in jail for telling common-front strikers to ignore back-to-work orders. Their incarceration triggered a week-long general strike involving 300,000 workers at its peak. Note that severe fines were levied against individual workers in the common-front strike as well.[8] Suggesting that workers can have their right to strike neutralized by the threat or application of financial penalties essentially leads to the conclusion that workers do not have the inalienable right to strike. That

7. Sortition has come under increasing attention recently; see Simon Pek, "Rekindling Union Democracy through the Use of Sortition," *Journal of Business Ethics* 155, 4 (2019): 1033–1051; Tom Malleson, "Should Democracy Work through Elections or Sortition?," *Politics and Society* 46, 3 (2018): 401–417; Yves Sintome, "From Deliberative to Radical Democracy? Sortition and Politics in the Twenty-First Century," *Politics and Society* 46, 3 (2018): 337–357; David Van Reybrouck, *Against Elections: The Case for Democracy* (London: Bodley Head, 2017); Erik Olin Wright, "Postscript to Gastil and Wright: The Anticapitalist Argument for Sortition," *Politics and Society* 46, 3 (2018): 331–335.

8. Ann Charney, "The View from Quebec," *Maclean's*, 1 July 1972, 4; Michael Mandel & Harry J. Glasbeek, "The Crime and Punishment of Jean-Claude Parrot," *Canadian Forum* 59, 691 (1979): 10–14.

indicates a failure of leadership in current union culture rather than an inescapable reality. In fact, workers always have the capacity to strike, regardless of any legislation to the contrary.

Finally, I would like to be very clear that the national conference I proposed in no way suggested that anyone be excluded. I pictured a no-fee conference with subsidies for travel and a plan for billeting participants wherever possible. As my piece made very clear, a new radical union movement must be inclusive of the entire working class, including precarious and non-waged workers, students, and the unemployed. Although it is doubtful that many business union leaders would be interested in either attending or supporting such a conference, there are left trade unionists who would support such an effort.

What is urgently needed is to start a discussion around revolutionary unionism and to begin organizing at national, provincial, and regional levels without precluding any possibilities for action. In this time of increasingly globalized corporate governance, imminent environmental catastrophe, decaying liberal democracy, and the associated rise of the extreme right, it is vital that labour starts imagining a freer, more just, and egalitarian future and exerts its collective strength in that direction.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/llt.2020.0009