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## Organized Labour and the NDP Looking Back on Sixty Years of Party-Union Relations

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## PRESENTATION / PRÉSENTATION

# Organized Labour and the NDP: Looking Back on Sixty Years of Party-Union Relations

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IN 1961, THE CANADIAN LABOUR CONGRESS (CLC) and Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) came together to officially launch the New Democratic Party (NDP) as the political arm of organized labour in Canada. Sixty years later, the left-right electoral realignment the party's architects had anticipated has not materialized and the NDP's relationship to the labour movement is much weaker. The crisis of social-democratic electoralism, the changing composition of union membership, the impact of campaign finance reform, and ongoing concerns about the party's electoral viability and an associated reversion to Gomperist electoral strategies have all contributed to a weakening of the union-party link.

Although important segments of the union movement continue to hold special status as key party stakeholders, and although unions continue to be an important source of NDP candidates and volunteers, organized labour's formal ties to and influence over the party have diminished considerably in recent decades. Why has this taken place? And what are the implications of this new, less formal, and less partisan relationship? The reorientation of NDP-union relations has shifted the landscape of labour politics in Canada, but in unanticipated ways. Loosening ties to the NDP was promoted by some unions as key to developing a more independent and left-wing brand of working-class

politics. However, it appears the opposite has occurred, as evidenced by the emergence of Gomperist strategies as the main alternative to traditional partisan NDP links in the realm of electoral politics. In many ways, Gomperism has filled the void for an increasingly disorganized labour and working-class movement. The lack of a militant and politicized union rank-and-file is reflected in the relative quietism of the labour leadership. As a result, the impulse toward sectionalism and the defence of narrow political interests have grown increasingly strong in union circles, while traditional electoral alliances, based on a set of common ideological principles, have waned.

This article begins with a broad overview of the scholarly literature on labour politics in Canada before focusing more specifically on the relationship between organized labour and the NDP. The article is organized thematically, focusing on three key features of the party-union relationship: (1) institutional ties between labour and the NDP; (2) the ideological impact of labour on the politics of the NDP; and (3) labour's (in)ability to deliver votes to the party. Each dimension of the party-union relationship reveals factors that have contributed to a loosening of ties over time and sets the stage for a final concluding section exploring the implications of a weakened NDP-union link for the future of labour and working-class politics in Canada.

## History and Context

DEBATES CONCERNING IF OR HOW unions should even engage in political action date back to at least the 1870s. Since that time, union leaders have advanced and promoted a wide variety of political strategies, including partyism, labourism, syndicalism, socialism, communism, and social democracy.<sup>1</sup> Martin Robin's historical analysis of competing forms of labour politics in Canada revealed a pattern wherein Canada's union movement alternated between conventional electoral strategies and syndicalist direct action between 1880 and 1930.<sup>2</sup> While there was a strong tradition of independent labour political action in

1. For a range of perspectives on the varied history of Canadian labour politics, see Bryan D. Palmer, *Working Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800–1991* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1992); Jacques Rouillard, *Le syndicalisme québécois: deux siècles d'histoire* (Montréal: Boréal, 2004); Gregory S. Kealey, *Toronto Workers Respond to Industrial Capitalism, 1867–1892* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980); Craig Heron, "Labourism and the Canadian Working Class," *Labour/Le Travail* 13 (1984): 45–76; Charles Lipton, *The Trade Union Movement of Canada, 1827–1959*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: NC Press, 1973); Ivan Avakumovic, *The Communist Party of Canada: A History* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1975); Desmond Morton, *Social Democracy in Canada*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Samuel Stevens Hakkert, 1977); Joan Sangster, *Dreams of Equality: Women on the Canadian Left, 1920–1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989); Mark Leier, *Where the Fraser River Flows: The Industrial Workers of the World in British Columbia* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1990).

2. Martin Robin, *Radical Politics and Canadian Labour, 1880–1930* (Kingston: Queen's University Industrial Relations Centre, 1968).

Canada, for much of the early 20th century Gompersism very much steered craft union approaches to electoral politics.<sup>3</sup> Narrowly concerned with securing the best possible economic deal for workers, Gompersism, often referred to as business unionism, is named for Samuel Gompers, the founding president of the American Federation of Labor. While Gompers conceded that capitalists and workers did have some conflicting interests, he was well known for his political pragmatism, rejecting outright suggestions that the capitalist system needed to be replaced or that workers needed an independent labour party to promote their interests more effectively.<sup>4</sup> In the realm of electoral politics, Gompers argued that labour could strengthen its economic clout in the workplace by employing a strategy of rewarding friends and punishing enemies.<sup>5</sup> In the words of Stephanie Ross, “business unionists will mobilize their members to support politicians with a labour-friendly record but will work to shift that support if those politicians do not deliver for labour.”<sup>6</sup> Generally, Gompersist political strategy is geared toward the narrow interests of a specific group of union members rather than issues of wealth redistribution or justice with broader implications for the working class as a whole.<sup>7</sup>

The most widely embraced alternative to business unionist approaches to labour politics in the early to mid-20th century was socialism. While socialist thought and action took various competing and complementary forms, its most prominent electoral expression was undoubtedly the CCF. Created in the midst of the Great Depression by socialists, farmers, labour groups, and social reformers to challenge the capitalist economic orthodoxy of the Liberals and Conservatives, the CCF competed with the Communist Party to carry the mantle of working-class politics and managed to secure significant support from industrial unions.<sup>8</sup> In its first decade, the CCF managed to make inroads in British Columbia, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, both federally and provincially, and would eventually emerge as the dominant electoral force on the left.

From its earliest days, CCF activists debated the pros and cons of formal labour affiliation to the party. Some worried that mass affiliation would water

3. Robert H. Babcock, *Gompers in Canada: A Study in American Continentalism before the First World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 55–71.

4. Robert Hoxie, “Trade Unionism in the United States,” *Journal of Political Economy* 22, 3 (1914): 201–217; Louis Reed, *The Labor Philosophy of Samuel Gompers* (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat, 1966).

5. Stephanie Ross, Larry Savage, Errol Black & Jim Silver, *Building a Better World: An Introduction to the Labour Movement in Canada*, 3rd ed. (Winnipeg: Fernwood, 2015), 93.

6. Stephanie Ross, “Business Unionism and Social Unionism in Theory and Practice,” in Stephanie Ross and Larry Savage, eds., *Rethinking the Politics of Labour in Canada* (Halifax: Fernwood, 2012), 37.

7. Ross, “Business Unionism,” 35–38.

8. James Naylor, *The Fate of Labour Socialism: The Co-operative Commonwealth Federation and the Dream of a Working-Class Future* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016).

down the party's socialist orientation, while others saw strong links to organized labour as a way to anchor the party in the working class and ward off the reformist tendencies of the CCF's more middle-class elements.<sup>9</sup> The first formal union affiliation came in 1938 but did not precipitate an immediate avalanche of new affiliates.<sup>10</sup>

In 1943, the CCF achieved an impressive electoral breakthrough by forming the Official Opposition in Ontario, winning in many working-class constituencies where it had not previously been competitive. After having not won a single seat and mustering just 5.6 per cent of the popular vote in the previous election in 1937, the party secured 31.7 per cent of the popular vote and netted 34 seats (just 4 short of becoming the largest party in the legislature). The Ontario CCF's spectacular rise during the wartime election happened against the backdrop of a huge increase in work stoppages across Canada and was driven by a highly politicized working-class mobilization based on the desire for a new labour relations regime.<sup>11</sup> Unsurprisingly, the CCF's new Ontario members of provincial parliament (MPPs) counted among them a significant number of union activists who had played an important role in mobilizing workers on picket lines and in their communities.<sup>12</sup>

While the backbone of the CCF was arguably the working-class communities in industrial cities such as Toronto, Winnipeg, and Vancouver, the party scored its first major electoral victory in 1944 when it formed a majority government in the heavily agricultural province of Saskatchewan, where the farmer component of the party proved formidable. Successive provincial CCF governments in the province went on to implement groundbreaking public policy including universal healthcare, the right to collectively bargain and to strike for public-sector workers, widespread public ownership of key services and utilities, and the introduction of joint occupational health and safety committees.<sup>13</sup>

Union affiliation to the CCF peaked in 1944 with roughly 100 unions and 50,000 union members formally linked to the party.<sup>14</sup> These numbers were disappointing, however, given the explosive growth in union membership and

9. For a thorough discussion of the role of labour in the CCF see Naylor.

10. Keith Archer, *Political Choices and Electoral Consequences: A Study of Organized Labour and the New Democratic Party* (Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), 35.

11. Wendy Cuthbertson, *Labour Goes to War: The CIO and the Construction of a New Social Order, 1939–1945* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2012); Gerald Caplan, *The Dilemma of Canadian Socialism: The CCF in Ontario* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1973), 88–107.

12. Naylor, *Fate of Labour Socialism*, 299.

13. Elaine Bernard, "The New Democratic Party and Labor Political Action in Canada," *Labor Research Review* 1, 22 (1994): 99–109; John F. Conway, *The Rise of the New West: The History of a Region in Confederation*, 4th ed. (Toronto: Lorimer, 2014), 131–153.

14. Archer, *Political Choices*, 35.

the effort put into recruitment strategies during the war. Decades of debate and division between unions about labour's political strategy impeded the CCF's ability to win over the broader labour movement as a formal partner and were undermined by internal political divisions within the labour movement with communist, socialist, and Gomperist elements pulling unions in different directions. Thus, while the CCF was labour socialist in character, and even endorsed by the Canadian Congress of Labour (CCL) as the "political arm of labour" in 1943, it was never a labour party per se.<sup>15</sup> The party was largely shunned by the much larger Trades and Labour Congress (TLC), which preferred a non-partisan Gomperist approach to electoral politics in line with the American Federation of Labor. By 1952, union affiliation to the CCF had shrunk to just 15,000 union members.<sup>16</sup> Richard Ulric Miller argues that "whether because of American influence and control, communist opposition, and alleged predilection of TLC leadership for the Liberals or further disillusionment with political action engendered by consistent electoral failures, the CCF did not become labour's parliamentary arm."<sup>17</sup>

The debate over whether labour needed its "own" party would not be resolved until the rival labour federations merged to form the CLC in 1956. One of the CLC's first priorities was to throw a lifeline to the faltering CCF, which, after decades of disappointing results in federal elections, had been handed a near death blow in the 1958 federal election after capturing just 9.5 per cent of the popular vote and holding on to just eight seats in the House of Commons.<sup>18</sup> Changes in the ideological composition of the labour leadership, strained relations between the Liberals and key labour leaders, and the ascendancy of social-democratic union leadership more broadly helped create the conditions that allowed most unions to overcome their aversion to partisan politics and support the establishment of a new party out of the ashes of the CCF.<sup>19</sup> The

15. Naylor, *Fate of Labour Socialism*, 298; Richard Ulric Miller, "Organized Labour and Politics in Canada," in Richard Ulric Miller & Fraser Isbester, eds., *Canadian Labour in Transition* (Toronto: Prentice-Hall, 1971), 207–210.

16. Nelson Wiseman, *Social Democracy in Manitoba: A History of the CCF/NDP* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1983), 80.

17. Miller, "Organized Labour," 210. While the CCL adopted a resolution to endorse the CCF as "the political arm of labour in Canada" in 1943, Archer explains that the "drive for affiliation was confined mainly to Ontario" and "there never were significant numbers of unions affiliated with the party." Archer, *Political Choices*, 18.

18. While the CCF formed a government in Saskatchewan, the party was on life support in most provinces and at the federal level. On the rise and fall of the CCF, see Leo Zakuta, *A Protest Movement Becalmed: A Study of Change in the CCF* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964); Walter D. Young, *The Anatomy of a Party: The National CCF, 1932–61* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969).

19. Gad Horowitz, *Canadian Labour in Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968), 162–197. New Party was the placeholder name for what would officially become the New Democratic Party after delegates officially adopted a name for the new political formation at

CLC's successful resolution called for the establishment of "a broadly based people's political movement, which embraces the CCF, the Labour movement, farm organizations, professional people, and other liberally minded persons interested in basic social reform."<sup>20</sup>

The most significant formal partisan attachment between organized labour and a political party in Canada was thus achieved in 1961 with the creation of the NDP. Canada's NDP was launched much later than similar parties in the United Kingdom, in Australia, and across Europe. Unlike those socialist-inspired labour parties, the emergence of the NDP did not fundamentally realign Canada's federal party system. In fact, the NDP has never formed a federal government and only briefly rose to the status of Official Opposition in 2011 before reverting to its traditional position as third or fourth party in 2015. The party has proven more successful at the provincial level, having formed governments in six provinces. This provincial success is relevant insofar as most labour and employment law in Canada falls under provincial jurisdiction.

Much has been written about the labour movement's relationship to the NDP in both federal and provincial politics. Contemporary academic debates have largely centred on the extent to which NDP provincial governments actually represent workers' interests.<sup>21</sup> Union experiments with strategic voting and the tactic's perceived negative impact on the NDP have also attracted scholarly attention.<sup>22</sup> Whether responsibility for the federal NDP's underwhelming

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the founding convention.

20. Resolution adopted at the CLC Convention held at Winnipeg, 21–25 April 1958, as reprinted in Stanley Knowles, *The New Party* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1961), 127–128.

21. Bryan Evans, "The New Democratic Party in the Era of Neoliberalism," in Ross & Savage, eds., *Rethinking*, 48–61; Evans, "From Protest Movement to Neoliberal Management: Canada's New Democratic Party in the Era of Permanent Austerity," in Bryan Evans & Ingo Schmidt, eds., *Social Democracy after the Cold War* (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2012), 45–98; Leo Panitch & Donald Swartz, *From Consent to Coercion: The Assault on Trade Union Freedoms* (Toronto: Garamond, 2003); Larry Savage, "Contemporary Party-Union Relations in Canada," *Labor Studies Journal* 35, 1 (2010): 8–26; Larry Savage & Charles Smith, "Public Sector Unions and Electoral Politics in Canada," in Stephanie Ross & Larry Savage, eds., *Public Sector Unions in the Age of Austerity* (Halifax: Fernwood, 2013), 46–56.

22. Yonatan Reshef & Sandra Rastin, *Unions in the Time of Revolution: Government Restructuring in Alberta and Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003); Henry Jacek & Brian Tanguay, "Can Strategic Voting Beat Mike Harris?," *Inroads: A Journal of Opinion* 10 (2001): 55; Tim Fowler, "Coordinated Strategic Voting in the 2008 Federal Election," *American Review of Canadian Studies* 42, 1 (2012): 20–33; Larry Savage, "Organized Labour and the Politics of Strategic Voting," in Ross & Savage, eds., *Rethinking*, 75–87; Brian Tanguay, "Parties, Organized Interests, and Electoral Democracy: The 1999 Ontario Provincial Election," in William Cross, ed., *Political Parties, Representation, and Electoral Democracy in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2001), 145–160; Larry Savage & Nick Ruhloff-Queiruga, "Organized Labour, Campaign Finance, and the Politics of Strategic Voting in Ontario," *Labour/Le Travail* 80 (Fall 2017): 247–271.



electoral record rests primarily with organized labour, with the party, or with a lack of class consciousness among voters is a topic that has been hotly contested.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, party and union activists, as well as researchers, have long debated whether the union link helps or hinders the NDP's electoral fortunes.<sup>24</sup> Some of these debates have been framed in normative terms. However, the ideological implications of strengthening or loosening labour ties to the NDP are complicated and uneven, in part because labour has had both left-wing and right-wing influences on the party, depending on the era, the issue, and the individual unions involved.<sup>25</sup>

The initial response from affiliates to the CLC's call for the creation of the New Party was promising. Every provincial federation of labour, except for that of Prince Edward Island, was officially on board. Nearly every industrial union signalled support. While railway and most construction unions showed no interest in the New Party project, the Carpenters and Plumbers responded positively.<sup>26</sup>

Enthusiasm for the launch of the New Party reached a fever pitch when high school teacher Walter Pitman won a by-election in Peterborough on 31 October 1960 as a New Party candidate – a seat in which the CCF had never been competitive. It would not take long, however, for cracks to emerge. Québec Federation of Labour (FTQ) delegates voted overwhelmingly to back the New Party in 1961;<sup>27</sup> however, the rival Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN), under the leadership of Liberal partisan Jean Marchand, ultimately rejected overtures by the NDP, “thereby depriving the NDP of the financial and political support of almost half of the Quebec labour movement.”<sup>28</sup> The Québec labour movement's growing militancy and gradual shift on the constitutional

23. Keith Archer & Alan Whitehorn, *Political Activists: The NDP in Convention* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997); Janine Brodie & Jane Jenson, *Crisis, Challenge and Change: Party and Class in Canada Revisited* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1988); Neil Bradford, “Ideas, Intellectuals and Social Democracy in Canada,” in Alain Gagnon & Brian Tanguay, eds., *Canadian Parties in Transition: Discourse, Organization, Representation* (Toronto: Nelson, 1989): 83–110; Miller, “Organized Labour,” 204–239.

24. Archer, *Political Choices*; Horowitz, *Canadian Labour in Politics*; David McGrane, *The New NDP: Moderation, Modernization, and Political Marketing* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2019); David Laycock & Linda Erickson, eds., *Reviving Social Democracy: The Near Death and Surprising Rise of the Federal NDP* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2015); Miller, “Organized Labour,” 204–239.

25. Archer & Whitehorn, *Political Activists*; James Laxer, *In Search of a New Left: Canadian Politics after the Neoconservative Assault* (Toronto: Viking, 1996); Evans, “New Democratic Party,” 48–61.

26. Miller, “Organized Labour,” 211.

27. Morton, *Social Democracy in Canada*, 22.

28. Richard Simeon & Ian Robinson, *State, Society, and the Development of Canadian Federalism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 163.



front – including its eventual embrace of Québec sovereignty as a political objective – further alienated it from the NDP in the decades to follow.<sup>29</sup>

The labour movement's much hoped for realignment of the party system did not materialize after the NDP finished a distant third place, receiving 13.6 per cent of the votes in the 1962 federal election. Pitman lost his seat in Peterborough and the party only managed to win a single seat east of Ontario. The party's 4.4 per cent vote share in Québec was particularly disappointing given the unprecedented endorsement it had received from the FTQ. A poll conducted after the election found that more union households had voted Liberal than NDP.<sup>30</sup> Less than two years later, the party unexpectedly lost power in Saskatchewan's 1964 provincial election. As a result, its only provincial government beachhead was gone. Commenting on these early years, Desmond Morton recognized that "the birth of the new party was shaky indeed."<sup>31</sup>

While most union leaders remained committed to the NDP through formal institutional ties, concerns about the party's electoral viability convinced some unions affiliated to the party to maintain informal ties to the Liberals.<sup>32</sup> Thus, while the creation of the NDP gave the appearance of a near universal embrace of social-democratic electoralism on the part of the union movement, many unions affiliated to the party were hedging their bets, retreating to Gompertist impulses when it suited them.<sup>33</sup> Charlotte Yates argues that the NDP played a peripheral role in labour strategy in its early years because of its failure to muster enough electoral support to act as a significant broker of "Keynesian postwar society." This task, she argues, was largely left to individual unions via the bargaining table and through strike action.<sup>34</sup>

In *Canadian Labour in Politics*, Gad Horowitz predicted that if the NDP failed to achieve a significant electoral breakthrough after its first few national campaigns, union leaders might rethink their strategy and pull the plug on the party.<sup>35</sup> However, while the federal NDP failed to achieve much traction at the federal level, its leverage in minority Parliaments between 1962 and 1968 amplified its importance. More importantly, given that 90 per cent of

29. Savage, "Contemporary Party-Union Relations," 21–23.

30. Brodie & Jensen, *Crisis, Challenge and Change*, 250.

31. Morton, *Social Democracy in Canada*, 52.

32. Charlotte Yates, *From Plant to Politics: The Autoworkers Union in Postwar Canada* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 138.

33. Miller, "Organized Labour," 205.

34. Yates, *From Plant to Politics*, 137; Brodie and Jensen argue that despite being partially modeled after the British Labour Party, the NDP's credibility as an electoral vehicle for the working class was hampered by the fact that, unlike the Labour Party, it had not played a central role in achieving the postwar welfare state. See Brodie & Jensen, *Crisis, Challenge and Change*, 244.

35. Horowitz, *Canadian Labour in Politics*, 263.

Canadian workers are employed in provincially regulated industries, the NDP's relative success in provincial politics gave the union movement a reason to preserve its stake in the NDP. The election of NDP majority governments in Manitoba in 1969 and British Columbia in 1972, and the return of the NDP to power in Saskatchewan in 1971, gave labour leaders the hope they needed.

The federal Liberal government's imposition of wage and price controls in 1975, after having campaigned against them in 1974, colossally damaged any goodwill that remained between the Liberals and the labour movement.<sup>36</sup> This policy reversal drew unions closer to the federal NDP – a staunch opponent of wage controls – and helped to increase the NDP's seat count and share of the vote in the 1979 and 1980 elections. While the NDP remained a minor party, in practical terms the labour movement could justify its continued support for the party by pointing to its positive electoral trajectory, its important role as a successful broker in minority Parliaments, and its reliability as an ally on the public policy front.

The labour movement's broad political calculus is best understood by exploring specific dimensions of the party-union relationship over time. The labour movement's weakening institutional and organizational ties to the NDP, its ideological impact on the party's policies and priorities, and its inability to deliver a majority of union votes to the NDP have all helped to shape the evolution of party-union relations and ultimately contributed to a loosening of ties in more recent decades.

## Institutional Links

THERE IS NO QUESTION the NDP survived its first two decades as a result of its close partnership with the labour movement. The structural and financial ties between labour and the party, while not as strong or reliable as they could have been, kept the party afloat.<sup>37</sup> The relative strength of labour's institutional ties, however, has varied over time.

At the New Party's founding convention in 1961, 35 per cent of delegates represented affiliated unions.<sup>38</sup> For the first few decades thereafter, union delegates typically made up a quarter of NDP convention attendees.<sup>39</sup> While their numbers have dwindled in more recent years as a result, in part, of the impact of campaign finance reforms on the party's organizational structure, union activists continue to represent a key constituency within the party. In 1971, Miller noted that "the number of trade unionists holding vice-presidencies, NDP

36. Morton, *Social Democracy in Canada*, 193; Christo Aivalis, *The Constant Liberal: Pierre Trudeau, Organized Labour, and the Canadian Social Democratic Left* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2018): 125.

37. Archer, *Political Choices*; Morton, *Social Democracy in Canada*, 190–191.

38. Morton, *Social Democracy in Canada*, 23.

39. Archer & Whitehorn, *Political Activists*, 50.

staff positions and other such positions is evidence of the interlocking nature of the administration of the NDP and the Canadian labour movement.<sup>40</sup> This is still true today, with prominent union activists holding elected positions within the highest levels of the party both federally and provincially, and with a good number of party staffers recruited from the ranks of organized labour and vice versa.

While several studies have concluded that labour was willing to provide strong financial backing to launch the NDP without demanding much institutional power in return, after the party's first few electoral outings labour affiliates did begin to demand greater influence.<sup>41</sup> By the late 1960s unions were calling for increased representation in party structures, and in 1969 the NDP federal convention voted to expand the size of the party's federal council to include one representative from each of the twelve largest affiliated unions.<sup>42</sup> Beginning in the 1970s, a representative from the CLC also began to sit in on federal NDP caucus meetings (a practice that ended during Thomas Mulcair's tenure as leader).<sup>43</sup>

Between 1975 and 2002, unions contributed an average of \$1.9 million annually to the NDP, representing 18.4 per cent of the party's revenues. Much of this revenue came through the per capita donations of union affiliates who remitted to the NDP monthly payments based on the number of union members in the affiliated organization.<sup>44</sup> In election years, that average increased to \$3.7 million, or 28.1 per cent of overall party revenue.<sup>45</sup> Not only were unions an important source of funding for the NDP for most of its history, but labour also played a critical role in providing research, campaign staff, and organizers to the party at election time.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, unions traditionally co-signed loans

40. Miller, "Organized Labour," 221.

41. Francis Eastham, "An Analysis of the Relationship between the New Democratic Party and Organized Labour with Particular Reference to Hamilton," MA thesis, McMaster University, 1972, 69–72; Horowitz, *Canadian Labour*, 227–228.

42. Yates, *From Plant to Politics*, 167. This number was later expanded to extend representation to up to 30 reps from national labour organizations, with no union having more than two reps. See *Constitution of the New Democratic Party of Canada*, April 2013, Art. VIII:1(e), [http://xfer.ndp.ca/2013/constitution/2013\\_CONSTITUTION\\_E.pdf](http://xfer.ndp.ca/2013/constitution/2013_CONSTITUTION_E.pdf).

43. Ian McLeod, *Under Siege: The Federal NDP in the Nineties* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1994), 117; Andrew Jackson, *The Fire and the Ashes: Rekindling Democratic Socialism in Canada* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2021), 70.

44. Per capita also determined delegate entitlement for union affiliates at party conventions and councils.

45. Harold Jansen & Lisa Young, "Solidarity Forever? The NDP, Organized Labour, and the Changing Face of Party Finance in Canada," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 42, 3 (2009): 664.

46. Archer, *Political Choices*, 34; Jackson, *Fire and the Ashes*, 70; Andrew Jackson & Bob Baldwin, "Policy Analysis by the Labour Movement in a Hostile Environment," Working Paper 41, Queen's University School of Policy Studies, March 2005, 20–21; Miller, "Organized

for the party to run its election campaigns.<sup>47</sup> When the federal government announced a curtailment of corporate and union donations in 2003, unions moved swiftly to help the party purchase a building in downtown Ottawa to be used as a permanent headquarters and as collateral with which to secure future campaign loans.<sup>48</sup>

Even after union donations were banned completely at the federal level in 2006, labour representatives preserved their reserved positions on the NDP's Federal Council and Executive and several unions have continued to support the party directly through third-party advertising or where provincial campaign finance laws permitted. For example, between 2005 and 2017, unions accounted for six of the top ten donors to political parties in British Columbia and their contributions flowed almost exclusively to the BC NDP.<sup>49</sup> In the 2019 federal election, the Steelworkers spent \$736,000 on targeted TV and radio ads attacking the Trudeau Liberals and endorsing NDP leader Jagmeet Singh.<sup>50</sup> And in 2020, three years after British Columbia banned union and corporate donations, Unifor released TV and social media ads attacking BC Liberal leader Andrew Wilkinson as part of a campaign to support the re-election of John Horgan's NDP government.<sup>51</sup>

Despite these enduring party-union links, it is clear that the ties between organized labour and the NDP have weakened considerably over time amid a crisis in social-democratic electoralism. Admittedly, there has never really been a "golden age" of NDP-union relations. Despite widespread support from industrial union leaders and provincial federations of labour to launch the New Party in 1961, the relationship has always been organizationally weak, in relative terms, never having come close to matching the strength of labour/social-democratic party ties in Britain, in Australia, and across Europe. In fact, at its peak, union member affiliation to the NDP reached just 14.6 per cent in 1963, only a couple of years after the party's launch.<sup>52</sup>

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Labour," 226; McGrane, *New NDP*, 43–46; Alan Whitehorn, "The 2000 NDP Campaign: Social Democracy at the Crossroads," in Jon Pammett & Christopher Dornan, eds., *The Canadian General Election of 2000* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2001), 116.

47. Whitehorn, "2000 NDP Campaign," 117; Jansen & Young, "Solidarity Forever?," 669.

48. Jansen & Young, "Solidarity Forever?," 669.

49. See Brice Hall, "Follow the Money – Database," *National Post*, 15 December 2020, <https://nationalpost.com/news/politics/follow-the-money-database/>.

50. James Keller, "Third-Party Groups Poured Millions into Federal Election Campaign, with Most of the Money Coming from Unions: Elections Canada Reports," *Globe and Mail*, 19 September 2019, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/politics/article-third-party-groups-poured-millions-into-federal-election-campaign/>.

51. Unifor, "Unifor Debuts tv Election Ad Exposing 'Out of Touch' B.C. Liberals," news release, 19 October 2020, <https://www.unifor.org/en/whats-new/press-room/unifor-debuts-tv-election-ad-exposing-out-touch-bc-liberals>.

52. See Table 3 in Archer, *Political Choices*, 37.

The party's initial affiliation structure, which required unions to affiliate at the local rather than the national or international levels, severely undermined the party's ability to grow its affiliate base since it required thousands of locals, rather than dozens of parent unions, to sign on. This cumbersome structure, however, was consciously chosen by the party's founders who were trying to avoid both internal and external charges of labour domination through bloc voting at party meetings and conventions.<sup>53</sup> The architects of the New Party determined that at party conventions, each delegate would have one vote, but the formula for allocating delegates to union affiliates was weighted differently.<sup>54</sup> For example, a riding association would be entitled to one convention delegate for its first 50 members, one for each of the next 50 members up to 200, and then one delegate for each 100 members thereafter. In contrast, union local affiliates would only be allocated one delegate for every 1,000 members or major fraction thereof.<sup>55</sup>

If avoiding labour domination was the goal, it worked almost too well. According to Desmond Morton and Terry Copp, "the 'hands off' strategy did not save the party from charges of labour domination – fatal for potential farm and middle-class backers – while it did deny it effective organizational and financial backing."<sup>56</sup> Requiring unions to affiliate local-by-local no doubt made it more difficult for the party to expand its base with union members, but the affiliation structure was not the only undermining factor in growing the NDP's affiliate base. Some international unions had provisions in their constitutions prohibiting partisan political activity, and some union leaders rejected affiliation with the NDP on the very "liberal, individualist, anti-group, anti-class" basis that it would "constitute an offense against the individual liberty of the membership."<sup>57</sup>

Moreover, as Janine Brodie and Jane Jensen remind us, many so-called non-partisan union leaders were not actually "politically neutral. Indeed, many had strong ties with bourgeois parties, specifically the Liberals. Bourgeois party partisans permeated almost every layer of the trade union movement."<sup>58</sup> For example, Herb Barker, president of the Hamilton Municipal Employees' Association, took the position that "on city council we have to deal with people in all parties. We have found good friends among Liberals and Conservatives.

53. Miller, "Organized Labour," 221.

54. Bernard, "New Democratic Party," 101.

55. Miller, "Organized Labour," 220.

56. Desmond Morton with Terry Copp, *Working People: An Illustrated History of the Canadian Labour Movement* (Ottawa: Deneau, 1984), 243–244.

57. Horowitz, *Canadian Labour*, 234, 239–240.

58. Brodie & Jensen, *Crisis, Challenge and Change*, 242.

They have never let politics interfere with their dealings with us and we feel we should do the same.”<sup>59</sup>

Other union leaders, while sympathetic to the New Party, feared backlash from powerful Liberal or Conservative politicians. This was particularly true in Newfoundland, where Premier Joey Smallwood blacklisted the provincial federation of labour over its support for the NDP, leading to an internal power struggle over the provincial labour movement’s approach to electoral politics. Many unionists feared that labour would lose more than it would gain by aligning itself with the NDP.<sup>60</sup> Morton argues that inter- and intra-union conflicts also impeded NDP affiliation with various union powerbrokers using allegiance to the party as a weapon to undermine political opponents within the house of labour.<sup>61</sup>

These dynamics helped to produce an affiliated membership that was drawn almost exclusively from industrial unions and consistently regionally skewed.<sup>62</sup> In 1985, for example, locals based in BC and Ontario accounted for over 87 per cent of all union members affiliated to the NDP; in contrast, just over 1 per cent were based in Québec, despite that province’s large population and relatively high rate of union density.<sup>63</sup> In short, the union membership affiliated to the NDP never came close to accurately reflecting the actual composition of the broader Canadian labour movement.

While union affiliation numbers in the party’s first few years were disappointing, the situation only went from bad to worse. The share of NDP-affiliated union members dropped to 10.4 per cent in 1974 and to 7.3 per cent in 1984.<sup>64</sup> Admittedly, the total number of union members affiliated to the NDP in its first twenty years remained quite constant, hovering between 216,000 and 295,000. However, the fact that overall union membership in Canada more than doubled between 1963 and 1984, thanks in part to the explosive growth of public-sector unionism, meant that the share of union members affiliated to the party shrank considerably over time.<sup>65</sup> Throughout this period, Brodie and Jensen note, “overall, the union links with the NDP remained more formal

59. As quoted in Horowitz, *Canadian Labour*, 244.

60. Horowitz, 245–247.

61. Morton, *Social Democracy in Canada*, 30.

62. Miller, “Organized Labour,” 219.

63. Archer, *Political Choices*, 38. The rise of Québec nationalism in the 1970s severely complicated attempts by the party to make inroads with the province’s unions, which were becoming increasingly sovereignist in political orientation and more closely aligned with the initially social-democratic Parti Québécois. Ralph P. Güntzel, “‘Rapprocher ‘les lieux du pouvoir’: The Québec Labour Movement and Québec Sovereigntism, 1960–2000,” *Labour/Le Travail* 46 (Fall 2000): 369–395; Larry Savage, “Quebec Labour and the Referendums,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 41, 4 (2008): 861–887.

64. Archer, *Political Choices*, 37.

65. Archer, 44.

and financial rather than being designed for mobilization of the union membership in support of the NDP.”<sup>66</sup> In other words, the NDP-labour link appeared much stronger than it actually was.

Because the party had been birthed and shaped by a blue-collar industrial union movement just as a white-collar union movement was about to take off, its connection to public-sector unionism was even more tenuous, especially given the dominant non-partisan orientation of many public-sector unions in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, only one of the 573 officially registered labour delegates at the NDP’s founding convention represented a public-sector union.<sup>68</sup> While Morton argues that leaders who emerged out of the public-sector union movement “tended to have NDP sympathies and even an impromptu yearning to mobilize their members for the cause,” formal institutional ties between public-sector unions and the party have been few and far between.<sup>69</sup> Those that did exist were largely set ablaze in the 1990s, primarily in response to unhappiness with the actions of NDP provincial governments.

Campaign finance regulation changes between 2004 and 2006 prompted the federal NDP to modify its constitution to do away with per capita payments by union affiliates and instead required them to simply demonstrate that union members were also party members for the purpose of calculating convention delegate entitlement.<sup>70</sup> Despite the fact that union affiliation did not require any per capita payments under this system, affiliation numbers continued to dwindle. In an effort to reverse this trend, delegates at the party’s 2021 convention passed a constitutional amendment granting union affiliates delegate positions (through national and/or local affiliation) based on the size of the union, rather than the number of card-carrying New Democrats who were also members of the affiliated union.<sup>71</sup> Whether or not this change

66. Brodie & Jensen, *Crisis, Challenge and Change*, 243.

67. Savage & Smith, “Public Sector Unions,” 48–50.

68. The delegate was representing the National Union of Public Sector Employees, which later merged with the National Union of Public Employees to create the Canadian Union of Public Employees in 1963. See Table in Horowitz, *Canadian Labour*, 233.

69. Desmond Morton, *Working People: An Illustrated History of the Canadian Labour Movement*, 4th ed. (Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1998), 265. In 1965, the national CUPE convention adopted a somewhat cautious resolution “to take positive action in support of the New Democratic Party, compatible with the autonomy of individual local unions”; it followed up in 1967 with a resolution calling for the union to “institute a more extensive program to educate the membership on the platform of the New Democratic Party, and how it affects them personally, to promote greater interest in politics and local union affiliation to the NDP.” See 1985 CUPE Policy Compendium as quoted in Savage & Smith, “Public Sector Unions,” 49. While CUPE is considered an NDP ally, very few CUPE locals have ever followed through with affiliation.

70. *Constitution*, Art. III:3(b).

71. See Christo Aivalis, “2021 NDP Convention Day Three: Party Offers Roadmap for a Better Canada,” *Canadian Dimension*, 11 April 2021, <https://canadiandimension.com/articles/>



will lead to an increase in affiliation rates and reverse the union movement's declining clout in the party remains to be seen.<sup>72</sup> The impact of affiliation on key party decision-making processes, like leadership contests, however, has declined in recent decades given the move toward a one-member-one-vote system. Traditionally, delegated conventions chose the party's leader, but in 2001 the federal NDP adopted a modified one-member-one-vote system. In recognition of labour's special status as a founding partner, the party opted to allocate 25 per cent of the weight of the leadership vote to affiliates.<sup>73</sup> However, the weighted votes for union-affiliated delegates were done away with altogether in advance of the 2012 leadership vote that elected Mulcair.<sup>74</sup>

Overall, while NDP-union affiliation numbers never came close to meeting their potential, there is no question that union fundraising dollars and organizational ties that guaranteed labour representation in party structures ensured close co-operation between union leaders and the party in its first few decades. As the composition of the union membership changed and campaign finance laws became more restrictive, however, NDP-union relations were further weakened in the context of the party's ideological shift away from its social-democratic roots that began, in earnest, in the 1990s.

## Ideological Impact

DESPITE RELATIVELY WEAK affiliation numbers historically, media pundits and the NDP's opponents have continuously used labour's ties as a cudgel with which to criticize the party. Less than a year after its founding convention, defeated NDP leadership contestant and Saskatchewan MP Hazen Argue defected to the Liberals, arguing that "it would be most dangerous to the democratic process to have a party gain power, the effective control of which resided in a handful of labour leaders outside the House of Commons."<sup>75</sup> For its entire history, the NDP's opponents have raised the spectre of labour domination to undermine the party's electoral fortunes in provincial and federal elections.<sup>76</sup> Even as distance has grown between labour and the NDP and the

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view/2021-ndp-convention-day-three-new-democrats-offer-roadmap-for-a-better-canada.

72. The change was promoted by supporters as an opportunity to reinvigorate the participation of unionists in the party through the expansion of affiliated delegate spots but was criticized by opponents as a disincentive for unions to encourage their members to sign up directly as party members.

73. McGrane, *New NDP*, 31; Lynda Erickson & David Laycock, "Building for a Breakthrough: The Layton Years, 2003–2011," in Laycock & Erickson, eds., *Reviving Social Democracy*, 39.

74. Joanna Smith, "Unions to Play Smaller Role in NDP Leadership Vote," *Toronto Star*, 8 September 2011, [https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2011/09/08/unions\\_to\\_play\\_smaller\\_role\\_in\\_ndp\\_leadership\\_vote.html](https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2011/09/08/unions_to_play_smaller_role_in_ndp_leadership_vote.html).

75. As quoted in Morton, *Social Democracy in Canada*, 32.

76. Laxer, *New Left*, 137; Linda Erickson & Maria Zakharova, "Members, Activists, and Party

financial link has been severely undermined in recent decades, the party's competitors continue to lambaste the NDP as the puppet of "union bosses."<sup>77</sup>

Fear of labour domination also lingers within the party itself. A 2009 NDP member survey revealed that while a slim majority (54 per cent) thought labour's decision-making influence on the party should "stay the same," 30 per cent thought it should be decreased or greatly decreased, while only 16 per cent thought it should be increased or greatly increased.<sup>78</sup> But what are the ideological implications of significant union influence on or within the NDP? The answer is not as straightforward as it may seem, in part because labour's ideological influence on the party has never been uniform and has evolved over time.

While unions have never been a monolithic group in terms of ideological perspective, Miller argues that, during the party's first decade, unions served as a "restraining force on party platforms and policies" and were perceived by many long-time CCF activists as a moderating influence within the New Party.<sup>79</sup> This preference for moderation was evident even in the process of creating the New Party, with party architects avoiding the use of the term "socialist" in the CLC's 1958 convention resolution calling for a "broadly based people's movement that would bring together the CCF, trade unions, farm organizations and liberally-minded people."<sup>80</sup> Christo Aivalis' search of CCF-NDP archival materials revealed that the party's founders went out of their way to project an image that was "violently anti-Communist" and "in favour of free enterprise."<sup>81</sup> Indeed, the push to moderate the New Party was driven by both external and internal pressures. While conservative elements of the union leadership were uneasy about the prospect of affiliating their organizations to an explicitly socialist political party, they felt comfortable with a moderate pro-union party that would pose no threat to the capitalist system.<sup>82</sup>

Recall that the party's founders had hoped the emergence of a broadly social-democratic labour-backed party would challenge the long-standing electoral dominance of the Liberal and Conservative Parties by realigning Canadian

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Opinion," in Laycock & Erickson, eds., *Reviving Social Democracy*, 177.

77. For example, in Ontario's 2018 provincial election, the Liberals – who themselves benefitted tremendously from union support and donations from 2003 to 2014 – led a sustained attack on the NDP in the last week of the campaign on the basis of the party's relationship to the union movement, warning of "endless strikes" under an NDP government. John Michael McGrath, "How Kathleen Wynne Became One of Ontario's Most Cynical Politicians," *TVO*, 1 June 2018, <https://www.tvo.org/article/how-kathleen-wynne-became-one-of-ontarios-most-cynical-politicians>.

78. Erickson & Zakharova, "Members, Activists," 178.

79. Miller, "Organized Labour," 228.

80. Aivalis, *Constant Liberal*, 46–47.

81. Aivalis, 47.

82. Leo Zakuta, "The New Party," *Canadian Forum* 39 (February 1960): 252.

politics on a left-right basis, as had occurred in Britain after the creation of the British Labour Party.<sup>83</sup> It became clear rather quickly, however, that the federal Liberal Party would not easily be displaced. Despite the NDP's deliberately moderate approach – or perhaps because of it – the party struggled to compete for both votes and seats in its first decade. Moreover, with the arrival of erstwhile fellow traveller Pierre Trudeau on the federal scene, the party's ideological positioning vis-à-vis the Liberals was compromised in the minds of many voters.<sup>84</sup>

Despite these challenges, the union leadership's preference for a moderate approach spilled over into the 1970s, as evidenced by the role that key union affiliates played in the demise of the Waffle, an organized internal party movement campaigning for the NDP to adopt its radical "Manifesto for an Independent Socialist Canada."<sup>85</sup> While a number of rank-and-file unionists were Waffle supporters, the overwhelming majority of union leaders and delegates to NDP meetings and conventions were allied with the party's establishment in opposition to the Waffle's candidates and policy positions.<sup>86</sup> The heads of international unions worried that a logical extension of the Waffle manifesto would be the establishment of rival independent Canadian unions that would threaten the existence of their organizations.<sup>87</sup>

It was not just the Waffle's left nationalism that concerned the party's establishment. The radicalism and activism of Waffle members was considered an equal, if not greater, threat to the NDP establishment's control of the party. Ontario NDP leader Stephen Lewis accused the Waffle of acting like "a party within a party" that displayed a "sneering, contemptuous attitude towards official trade unionism and the labour leadership."<sup>88</sup> Eventually, union leaders would team up with the leadership of the Ontario NDP to expel the Waffle. On 25 June 1972, the Ontario NDP provincial council voted 218 to 88 in favour of expelling the group, with over 90 per cent of labour delegates voting

83. Dennis Smith, "Prairie Revolt, Federalism and the Party System," in H. G. Thorburn, ed., *Party Politics in Canada*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Prentice Hall, 1967), 190.

84. Aivalis, *Constant Liberal*, 68–69.

85. For detailed accounts of the Waffle's role in the party, see John Bullen, "The Ontario Waffle and the Struggle for an Independent Socialist Canada: Conflict within the NDP," *Canadian Historical Review* 64, 2 (1983): 189–215; David Blocker, "Labour and the Waffle: Unions Confront Canadian Left Nationalism in the New Democratic Party," *Labour/Le Travail* 87 (Spring 2021): 49–92.

86. Yates, *From Plant to Politics*, 169; Laxer, *New Left*, 159; Blocker, "Labour and the Waffle."

87. Laxer, *New Left*, 159; Morton, *Social Democracy in Canada*, 131; Blocker, "Labour and the Waffle."

88. Morton, *Social Democracy in Canada*, 132.

with the majority.<sup>89</sup> The move reinforced labour's internal party influence and prompted an exodus of left-nationalist activists from party ranks.<sup>90</sup>

While organized labour was working to consolidate its power base within the NDP, key union leaders were still maintaining relations with the governing Liberals. According to Morton, influential Liberals, and specifically Minister of Labour John Munro, "knew something of the frustration and disillusionment some union leaders felt about the NDP. As a veteran Hamilton politician, vulnerable to NDP strength, he had good reason to promote a divorce." Munro understood that labour leaders were not interested in supporting the NDP for the sake of supporting the NDP. Eventually, they would become "fed up with losers. They wanted to be insiders, rubbing shoulders with the Ottawa power brokers."<sup>91</sup>

The Liberals' tripartite overtures and quiet offers of Senate appointments were frustrated, however, with the Liberal government's introduction of wage controls in 1975. The Liberal policy reversal on wage controls drove union leaders firmly back into the arms of the federal NDP.<sup>92</sup> However, the acceptance of the federal government's anti-inflation framework by NDP provincial governments in British Columbia, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba caused deep divisions with union leaders and the federal party, on one side, and NDP premiers, on the other.<sup>93</sup> Adding to the tension caused by wage controls, NDP provincial governments in BC and Saskatchewan irked labour movement allies by passing back-to-work legislation to end strikes in a range of industries.<sup>94</sup> While union leaders certainly butted heads with NDP premiers over these labour relations issues, the long-term impacts of these disagreements on the ideological character of the party-union relationship played themselves out in different ways.

In their survey of 1987 NDP convention delegates, Keith Archer and Alan Whitehorn reveal that non-union delegates were more likely than union delegates to identify as "socialist" and placed themselves further to the left than union delegates on a left-right scale. They also conclude that union delegates were less likely to embrace radical policy positions and were demonstrably less

89. Eastham, "Analysis," 76.

90. Yates, *From Plant to Politics*, 170; Robert Laxer, *Canada's Unions* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1976), 264.

91. Morton, *Social Democracy in Canada*, 192.

92. Morton, 193.

93. In 1977, Ed Schreyer's NDP government eventually pulled Manitoba out of the controls program at labour's behest but could not hold on to power in the subsequent election. See Simeon & Robinson, *State, Society*, 221.

94. Morton, *Social Democracy in Canada*, 177, 186. The Saskatchewan NDP used back-to-work legislation to end a Power Commission strike while the BC NDP used back-to-work legislation to end strikes by supermarket workers, propane-truck drivers, forestry workers, and employees at BC Rail two months before the 1975 provincial election, which the party lost.

committed to equity politics and demilitarization.<sup>95</sup> At the same time, perhaps unsurprisingly, union delegates were more likely to support pro-labour policies that would advance union interests. For example, they were much more likely to oppose hypothetical NDP government intervention in the process of free collective bargaining or any kind of interference with the right to strike. Union delegates were also more likely to agree (60.8 per cent vs. 52.5 per cent for non-union delegates) that “the central question of Canadian politics is the class struggle between labour and capital.”<sup>96</sup> In other words, while the labour link seemingly reinforced a more explicit class-based approach to politics, it did not necessarily reinforce a more left-wing politics overall.

In some ways, the 1988 federal election represented a significant turning point in labour’s influence vis-à-vis the party. In the wake of that election, in which the issue of free trade dominated, Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) president Bob White penned a stinging critique of the party’s strategic decision to downplay opposition to free trade and focus instead on attacking the Liberals instead of the pro-free trade Progressive Conservatives.<sup>97</sup> White’s CAW and other CLC-affiliated unions had spent large amounts of money fighting the Mulroney government’s proposed free trade deal, even launching the Pro-Canada Network in conjunction with the Council of Canadians to organize public opposition.<sup>98</sup>

In her biography of Ed Broadbent, Judy Steed argues that the NDP leader was personally popular in the late 1980s but that the NDP’s ties to labour were widely perceived as his “Achilles’ heel.”<sup>99</sup> “Ed has to convince the country he’s not in the clutches of labour,” she argued. But Brodie and Jensen claim that the party had “arrived at this point not by constructing a class-based coalition but, instead, by presenting itself as the only ‘honest broker’ in a brokerage party system which in the past decade was shaken by deceit, ambiguity and dissent.”<sup>100</sup> In this context, the NDP’s strategy to downplay opposition to free trade – organized labour’s number one issue – backfired when the Liberals prioritized the issue and positioned themselves as the party best able to stop the deal. On the verge of the election, in which a long-awaited NDP breakthrough had been anticipated, Brodie and Jensen presciently warned that “playing the brokerage game exacts its costs. ... [T]he electoral support of ‘ordinary Canadians’ is volatile, easily swayed by the appeals of leadership at one moment and divided by regional or national loyalties the next. At the same

95. Archer & Whitehorn, *Political Activists*, 54, 57.

96. Archer & Whitehorn, 59.

97. Laxer, *New Left*, 132.

98. McLeod, *Under Siege*, 91.

99. Judy Steed, *Ed Broadbent: The Pursuit of Power* (Toronto: Penguin, 1989), 327.

100. Brodie & Jensen, *Crisis, Challenge and Change*, 323.

time, brokerage politics strains and weakens the party's ties with labour and other progressive forces."<sup>101</sup>

In the end, the opposition parties split the vote and the Mulroney Conservatives were comfortably re-elected. After the election, USW president Leo Gerard and White, who served as federal NDP vice-president throughout the 1980s, complained that union resources and support for the party had been taken for granted. In an open letter, White argued, "it is ironic that at a time when the unions' relations with all kinds of groups outside the mainstream labour movement have overcome tensions and moved – unevenly – towards common goals, there remain sections of the NDP that still discuss the party's relationship with the working-class in whispered anxieties."<sup>102</sup> Months later, Broadbent stepped down as NDP leader. Even though the party had secured just over 20 per cent of the vote for the first time in its history, the outcome did not match expectations given the party's position in the polls in the run-up to the campaign. Moreover, the party's failure to win a single seat in Québec, after all the time and effort it had spent in the hopes of a breakthrough, was a bitter pill to swallow.

The very public criticisms from labour leaders resulted in the establishment of a task force to examine the relationship between the party and the union movement. According to Elaine Bernard, however, with a change in leadership and the urgent need to begin advance planning for a series of provincial elections, "these badly needed discussions were cut short and resulted in a simple reaffirmation of support for the party by labor and a pledge to increase labor participation in leadership bodies in the party."<sup>103</sup>

New Democrats chose Yukon MP Audrey McLaughlin to replace Broadbent as leader in December 1989 and the party rose to first place in national public opinion polls within a year.<sup>104</sup> Between September 1990 and October 1991, the NDP would form provincial governments in Ontario, BC, and Saskatchewan. For the first time in history a majority of Canadians were governed by New Democrats at the provincial level. Union leaders were ecstatic and a federal breakthrough seemed inevitable. The honeymoon, however, was short-lived as the legislative records of NDP provincial governments failed to meet the expectations of union members and the public more generally.

In Ontario, party-union relations unravelled in response to the NDP government's handling of public-sector labour relations. The Rae government's decision to address the province's growing debt and deficit by passing the Social Contract Act – a fiscal austerity program that rolled back wages and

101. Brodie & Jensen, 323–324.

102. Bob White, "From Defeat to Renewal: The NDP Tomorrow," *This Magazine*, May–June 1989, 23–26.

103. Bernard, "New Democratic Party," 105.

104. Canadian Gallup Poll, "Present Preferred Political Party," October 1990.

suspended collective bargaining rights in the public sector – was met with fierce opposition by public-sector unions and their allies.<sup>105</sup> Stephen McBride describes the passage of the Social Contract as a “paradigmatic event,” and Leo Panitch and Donald Swartz argue that the law “shattered the confidence of the trade unions in their central political strategy: electing NDP governments.”<sup>106</sup> In response to the Social Contract, the Ontario Federation of Labour’s 1993 convention voted to condemn “the Ontario NDP government for violating the principles of free collective bargaining” and called on “the OFL and its affiliated unions to disaffiliate from the Ontario NDP.”<sup>107</sup> Unlike the use of back-to-work legislation by NDP provincial governments in the 1970s, which did not compromise labour movement support for those governments overall, the Social Contract was viewed by the OFL as a fundamental and unforgivable betrayal of union principles. The law’s passage had clearly alienated a majority of the province’s labour movement and led to a re-evaluation of the traditional link between organized labour and the NDP across the country.

Broken promises, austerity, the marginalization of labour’s interests, and the perception that the party had become an old-line status quo political option on constitutional issues severely undermined the NDP’s union and working-class credibility.<sup>108</sup> “If Ontario’s Rae government represented the pinnacle of electoral success, it also became the symbol of the New Democrats’ inability to carry out provincial programs in the 1990s,” argued James Laxer.<sup>109</sup>

This crisis in social-democratic electoralism dealt a near death blow to the NDP in the 1993 federal election. The party did not win a single seat east of Manitoba and for the first time in its history lost official status in the House of Commons, after capturing just 6.9 per cent of the vote and nine seats. It was a

105. Panitch & Swartz, *From Consent to Coercion*, 172–181; Buzz Hargrove, *Laying It on the Line: Driving a Hard Bargain in Challenging Times* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2009), 120.

106. Stephen McBride, “‘If You Don’t Know Where You’re Going You’ll End Up Somewhere Else’: Ideological and Policy Failure in the Ontario NDP,” in William Carroll & R.S. Ratner, eds., *Challenges and Perils: Social Democracy in Neoliberal Times* (Halifax: Fernwood, 2005), 35; Panitch & Swartz, *From Consent to Coercion*, 178.

107. Before the convention voted on the resolution put forward by a coalition of public-sector unions and the CAW, a dozen private-sector unions loyal to the NDP walked out in protest. Stephanie Ross, “The Challenges of Union Political Action in the Era of Neoliberalism,” in Greg Albo & Bryan Evans, eds., *Divided Province: Ontario Politics in the Age of Neoliberalism* (Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2019), 526–527.

108. Bernard, “New Democratic Party,” 105–106; Larry Savage, “Organized Labour and Constitutional Reform under Mulroney,” *Labour/Le Travail* 60 (Fall 2007): 137–70; John Warnock, “The CCF-NDP in Saskatchewan,” in Carroll & Ratner, eds., *Challenges and Perils*, 82–104; Panitch & Swartz, *From Consent to Coercion*, 103–222; Savage, “Contemporary Party-Union Relations,” 8–26; Evans, “New Democratic Party,” 48–61; Thomas Walkom, *Rae Days: The Rise and Follies of the NDP* (Toronto: Key Porter, 1994); Evans, “Protest Movement,” 45–98.

109. Laxer, *New Left*, 4–5.



smaller share of seats and votes than the CCF had secured in the 1958 election that resulted in that party's demise and reformulation as the NDP.

The party and the labour movement were undoubtedly estranged, but the federal NDP's historic defeat did not precipitate an immediate divorce. The CLC waited until after the much anticipated defeat of the Rae government in 1995 to undertake a process of reviewing its relationship with the party. Although the CLC's May 1996 report, co-authored by Congress officers and NDP stalwarts Dick Martin and Nancy Riche, reaffirmed labour support for the NDP, it also insisted that the party must recognize labour's special status as a founding partner and recommended more regular meetings between the NDP leadership and the CLC's Executive Council.<sup>110</sup> Most of the CLC's affiliates, however, were not nearly as willing to forgive the NDP for its ideological drift.

Party-union divisions precipitated by the passage of the Social Contract Act led to a significant fragmentation in the electoral approach of unions in Ontario. While some unions, after pointing to the lack of alternatives, remained steadfast allies of the NDP, others embraced anti-Conservative strategic voting as a preferred electoral strategy.<sup>111</sup> In most cases, that meant forging closer ties to the Liberals as the party best positioned to defeat Conservatives in the vast majority of Ontario ridings.<sup>112</sup> While union-backed strategic voting campaigns failed to defeat Ontario's rabidly anti-union PC government in 1999, they did unintentionally contribute to the NDP's loss of official party status at Queen's Park after the party netted just nine seats and 12.6 per cent of the popular vote in that year's provincial election.

A string of bruising NDP defeats in Ontario, in BC, and federally between 1999 and 2001 combined with a surge in extraparliamentary anti-globalization youth activism sparked the formation of the New Politics Initiative (NPI), an informal grouping committed to exploring the possibility of launching a new grassroots left-wing party to replace the NDP.<sup>113</sup> While the NPI was not "union-driven," its national coordinating committee included influential union staffers like Morna Ballantyne of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and Jim Stanford of the CAW.<sup>114</sup> While the initiative was widely perceived by party loyalists as an attempt to take over the NDP, its architects viewed it more as a grassroots attempt to radically democratize the party and

110. Richard Martin & Nancy Riche, *Report of the CLC-NDP Review Committee* (Ottawa: Canadian Labour Congress, 1996).

111. Savage, "Contemporary Party-Union Relations," 15.

112. Brad Walchuk, "Changing Union-Party Relations in Canada: The Rise of the Working Families Coalition," *Labor Studies Journal* 35, 1 (2010): 27–50; Savage & Ruhloff-Queiruga, "Organized Labour," 247–271.

113. Jim Stanford & Svend Robinson, "The New Politics Initiative: Open, Sustainable, Democratic," in Z. David Berlin & Howard Aster, eds., *What's Left? The New Democratic Party in Renewal* (Oakville, ON: Mosaic, 2001): 80; McGrane, *New NDP*, 28.

114. Stanford & Robinson, "New Politics Initiative," 93.

strengthen its ties both to social movements and to unions. In the end, the NPI proposal was defeated at the federal NDP's 2001 convention, with 37 per cent of delegates in favour and 63 per cent opposed. Union delegates were split over the resolution, with the CAW, CUPE, Canadian Union of Postal Workers, and Public Service Alliance of Canada delegates in support and the Steelworkers, United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), and Communications, Energy, and Paperworkers opposed.<sup>115</sup> Notably, the same groupings of unions found themselves on opposite sides over the OFL's 1993 resolution over withdrawing support from the Ontario NDP, with the former group in favour and the latter group opposed.

As support for the left-wing NPI withered, however, union support for strategic voting grew. In 2003, the Ontario Liberals received more in union campaign contributions than the NDP.<sup>116</sup> This historic first not only demonstrated the extent to which organized labour was willing to break partisan allegiances but also served to undermine the Ontario NDP's electoral prospects. While the federal and Ontario sections of the party had always been forced to contend with the problem of strategic voting, the fact that some of the party's traditional union allies were now backing organized strategic voting efforts caused enormous animosity between party officials and certain union leaders. In fact, CAW president Buzz Hargrove's endorsement of strategic voting in the 2006 federal election led the Ontario NDP to revoke his party membership, thus precipitating an official break between the CAW and the NDP. This was a particularly significant fracture given the key role the union had played in both launching and bankrolling the NDP.<sup>117</sup>

The CAW was not the only union experiencing strained relations with the NDP during this period. The CLC and a host of labour leaders were critical of NDP leader Jack Layton's decision to pull the plug on Paul Martin's minority Liberal government in 2005 and trigger a federal election.<sup>118</sup> Concerned about the prospect of a Conservative win, several unions participated in strategic voting campaigns at the federal level.<sup>119</sup>

In order to mitigate against the negative effects of strategic voting on the NDP, Whitehorn argues, the party attempted to make "the Liberal Party seem so unappealing to social democrats that the gulf between the Liberals and the NDP would widen." To accomplish this, he explains, "NDP ads targeted the Liberals and were more negative." Conversely, the NDP worked to "lessen the

115. McGrane, *New NDP*, 28, 29.

116. Savage & Ruhloff-Queiruga, "Organized Labour," 267.

117. Savage, "Organized Labour and the Politics," 75.

118. Alan Whitehorn, "The NDP and the Enigma of Strategic Voting," in Jon Pammett & Christopher Dornan, eds., *The Canadian General Election of 2006* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2006), 94.

119. Savage, "Organized Labour and the Politics," 80–85.

fear of the Conservative Party and its Alberta-based leader” by resisting “the inevitable temptation to portray the Conservatives as extremely right-wing and their leader as a scary man with a hidden agenda.”<sup>120</sup> This strategic pivot, viewed by many union leaders as having helped Stephen Harper become prime minister, only increased tensions between labour and the NDP.

While the effectiveness of union-backed strategic voting campaigns are suspect at best, the electoral tactic has become normalized and widespread in labour movement circles, especially in Ontario and at the federal level, where competitive multi-party systems have endured.<sup>121</sup> Union-led anti-Conservative multi-party strategic voting has been framed by unions as a form of “electoral harm reduction” that prioritizes stopping Conservatives over a partisan focus on advancing the electoral standing of the NDP.<sup>122</sup> While strategic voting campaigns have undoubtedly undermined the NDP in key jurisdictions in recent decades, it is important to remember that union leaders’ concerns about the party’s ability to win elections have undermined NDP electoral prospects for its entire history.

From the very start, what David Lewis referred to as “success psychology” hampered the party’s ability to secure union endorsements.<sup>123</sup> Horowitz described the dilemma as follows: “Union support is necessary for the take-off; but the take-off is a prerequisite for support from these unions. Their leaders want to back a winner; they want some assurance of large profits before they make their investment.”<sup>124</sup> Languishing in third or fourth place in public opinion polls for most of its history has undermined confidence in the federal NDP’s ability to win. This “success psychology” continues to plague the NDP, both federally and in most provinces, to this day, albeit in a slightly different form with many unions unwilling to go all in for the party for fear of splitting the non-conservative vote in the vast majority of campaigns.

## Delivering Union Votes

THE LABOUR LEADERSHIP’S hesitancy to fully embrace the NDP is both a product and a symptom of the relatively weak level of support the NDP receives from union voters. Over the years, several studies have addressed this question

120. Whitehorn, “NDP,” 97.

121. In addition to the CAW/Unifor, teachers’ unions, building and construction trades unions, the Service Employees International Union, the United Food and Commercial Workers, the Public Service Alliance of Canada, the Ontario Public Service Employees Union, the Québec Federation of Labour, firefighters’ unions, and nurses’ unions have all experimented with strategic voting. Savage, “Organized Labour and the Politics”; Savage & Ruhloff-Queiruga, “Organized Labour.”

122. Savage & Ruhloff-Queiruga, “Organized Labour,” 247.

123. As quoted in Horowitz, *Canadian Labour in Politics*, 251.

124. Horowitz, 262.

and have consistently highlighted the disconnect between union leaders and union members on the question of support for the NDP.

In 1976, Robert Laxer wrote that while provincial federations of labour, the CLC, and most large industrial unions officially backed the NDP, most union locals in Canada remained non-partisan or offered only “perfunctory” support to the NDP.<sup>125</sup> Writing about the same period, Morton observed that “the few unions that found the courage and the cash to survey their own members’ attitudes soon discovered that few of them had any allegiance to the labour movement’s political or social goals nor even to their own elected leaders. Unions were strictly for benefits.”<sup>126</sup> Decades later, CUPE president and future BC NDP MLA Judy Darcy, when asked about the party-union relationship, lamented that “the focus has been far too much on the organizational relationship at the top, and not enough on the common education that needs to be done with union members and people in Canada around the programs that the NDP and labour movement have in common.” She added, “we’re not reaching our members with those issues between elections. It’s no wonder we’re not persuading them at election time.”<sup>127</sup> Even unions like the Autoworkers that played a key role in launching the party and had a relatively healthy rate of affiliation had a hard time convincing members that a vote for the NDP offered tangible political benefits. Both White and Hargrove have noted that the union consistently struggled to rally its members behind the NDP at election time – a challenge made more difficult after the experience of the Rae government in Ontario.<sup>128</sup>

While research consistently shows that union membership makes voters somewhat more likely to vote for the NDP, it is worth remembering that party support among union voters never exceeded 25 per cent in any federal election study between 1968 and 1984.<sup>129</sup> In other words, the vast majority of union members generally voted for other parties. The 2011 federal election, in which the NDP formed the Official Opposition for the first time in history, stands out as the only exception to the rule.<sup>130</sup> However, it is worth noting that in that election, the party garnered an unprecedented share of union votes despite dwindling formal union support.

125. Laxer, *Canada’s Unions*, 263.

126. Morton, *Working People*, 315.

127. Quoted in McLeod, *Under Siege*, 129.

128. Bob White, *Hard Bargains: My Life on the Line* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1987), 90; Buzz Hargrove, *Labour of Love: The Fight to Create a More Humane Canada* (Toronto: McFarlane & Ross, 1998), 97. Both White and Hargrove state that some members complained the NDP was too far left, others too far right.

129. The literature is summarized in Archer, *Political Choices*, 56–58; Erickson & Laycock, “Building for a Breakthrough,” 49–51.

130. McGrane, *New NDP*, 221.

This leads to the question of whether union endorsements carry much weight at all. The federal NDP's most stunning historical breakthrough was winning 59 of 75 seats in Québec in the 2011 federal election. The irony of Jack Layton's Québec breakthrough is that it occurred in spite of the provincial labour leadership's overwhelming preference for the Bloc Québécois (BQ) in that election.<sup>131</sup> While the NDP's slate of Québec candidates included some union activists, most union leaders and the FTQ were counselling a vote for the BQ.<sup>132</sup> In Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, north of Montréal, Bloc MP Luc Desnoyers, the CAW's former Québec director, had strong union backing but lost handily to the NDP's Laurin Liu, a twenty-year-old McGill University student who had not even campaigned in the riding. Given her 10,000-plus-vote margin of victory, it would seem that union voters were not influenced by labour's BQ endorsement. In contrast, Layton's general openness to accommodating Québec's constitutional demands, including support for expanding French-language rights, appeared to resonate with nationalist voters. Moreover, his jovial appearance on a very popular Québec talk show drew positive attention and interest in Layton personally.<sup>133</sup> He had clearly struck a chord with Québec voters and the polls began to shift dramatically as a result. However, even after the NDP had overtaken the other parties in public opinion polls in the province and were the odds on favourite to secure the largest number of Québec seats, the province's labour movement stubbornly stuck with the BQ and even attacked the NDP in the dying days of the campaign. The Québec director of the Steelworkers, for example, argued that the NDP would defend Ottawa's interests at the expense of Québec's and warned that a vote for the NDP would split the vote and facilitate the election of Conservative MPs.<sup>134</sup> A week later, the BQ lost official party status and the NDP made history. In the subsequent 2015 election, the province's unions largely abandoned the BQ as an electoral vehicle and rallied around the NDP, now led by Québec MP and former Québec cabinet minister Thomas Mulcair, as the party best positioned

131. Savage, "Organized Labour and the Politics," 84.

132. Union activists included former PSAC president Nycole Turmel (PSAC); Tyrone Benskin, a vice-president of the Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television and Radio Artists (ACTRA); former CUPE Local vice-president Alexandre Boulgerice; and Guy Caron, who served as an economist for the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada (CEP).

133. Murray Cooke & Dennis Pilon, *Left Turn in Canada: The NDP Breakthrough and the Future of Canadian Politics* (New York: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 2012), 12; Karl Bélanger, "The NDP in Quebec before and after the Orange Wave," in Roberta Lexier, Stephanie Bangrath & Jon Weier, eds., *Party of Conscience: The CCF, the NDP, and Social Democracy in Canada* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2018), 157–158.

134. Daniel Roy, "Le Bloc québécois: un parti progressiste qui défend les intérêts des travailleurs du Québec," *Syndicat des Métallos*, 28 April 2011, <https://www.metallos.org/actualites-et-medias/actualites/le-bloc-quebecois-un-parti-progressiste-qui-defend-les-interets-des-travailleurs-du-quebec/>.

to defeat the Harper Conservatives.<sup>135</sup> After a lacklustre campaign, however, the NDP managed to hold on to just sixteen of its Québec-based seats.

David McGrane argues that in 2015 the federal NDP was unable to effectively retain its union voter base because these voters tended to abandon the party in greater proportion than their non-union counterparts.<sup>136</sup> This finding suggests that union members' votes were more likely driven by anti-Conservative fears than by strongly held pro-NDP views. Of course, these dynamics can always play out differently depending on the campaign and specific candidates involved. In his case study of the 2018 Ontario provincial election in Sudbury, Adam King argues that while the NDP-labour link continues to benefit the party in Northern Ontario, the right-wing populism and cultural political messaging of the Progressive Conservative campaign clearly resonated with members of the region's largest union, USW Local 6500, representing 3,000 mineworkers employed by Vale (formerly Inco).<sup>137</sup> The national leadership of the United Steelworkers has exclusively endorsed the NDP in federal and provincial elections since the party was launched in 1961. In Sault Ste. Marie, however, USW Local 2251, which represents 2,100 workers at the Algoma steel mill, broke ranks with the leadership and endorsed the re-election of a local PC MPP in the 2018 Ontario provincial election. "If the executive of local unions could deliver the vote of their members, the NDP party would have been in power for the last 60 years. The reality is they can't," explained local president Mike Da Prat.<sup>138</sup> Local 2251 had only recently put its endorsement to a direct vote of the membership after years of automatically endorsing the NDP based on the recommendation of the parent union.

In summary, while union households are consistently more likely to vote NDP than non-union households, the union leadership has failed to produce a reliable NDP voting bloc of rank-and-file union members. This failure, however, has not convinced unions to retreat from the electoral arena. On the contrary, labour organizations are more active than ever in electoral politics but have largely migrated to Gomperist strategies, anti-Conservative strategic voting campaigns, third-party advertising, or parallel issue campaigns as ways of educating and mobilizing members. The efficacy of some of these tactics

135. CBC Radio-Canada, "La FTQ appuie les candidats néo-démocrates du Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean," 20 September 2015, <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/739943/ftq-ndp-election>; Jean-Luc Lavallée, "La FTQ a ciblé 8 circonscriptions pour barrer la route aux conservateurs," *Le Journal de Montréal*, 13 January 2015, <https://www.journaldemontreal.com/2015/01/13/ftq---npd>.

136. McGrane, *New NDP*, 304–305.

137. Adam D. K. King, "Right-Wing Populism, Organized Labor, and White Workers in Sudbury, Ontario: A Cautionary Tale from the 2018 Ontario Election," *Journal of Labor and Society* 23, 4 (2020): 485–501.

138. Quoted in Erik White, "Sault Ste. Marie Steelworkers Take Flack for Backing PC Candidate: 'This Is Democracy,'" *CBC News*, 31 May 2018, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/sudbury/provincial-election-unions-organized-labour-1.4684174>.

requires further examination, but what is clear is that unions continue to struggle with meaningful member engagement as it relates to political parties and elections.

## The Future of Labour and Working-Class Politics in Canada

IN *THE NEW NDP*, McGRANE argues that since 2000, the federal NDP's political marketing and locus of power have shifted away from direct party stakeholders, like organized labour, toward party competitors and swing voters. This shift, he argues, has had a moderating effect on the party as it abandons class-based approaches to political organizing in favour of issues-based political micro-targeting driven by party insiders and staffers. According to McGrane, because the federal NDP managed to increase its vote share and seat count in each election between 2000 and 2011, "in a virtuous circle, electoral success and moderation and modernization reinforced each other."<sup>139</sup> The irony of McGrane's analysis, however, is that for most of the NDP's history, organized labour had a demonstrably conservative or moderating effect on the party's policies and ideological brand. The idea that loosening ties with labour helped contribute to even further moderation speaks, then, to the extent to which the party's commitment to any semblance of social-democratic politics has been compromised. Moreover, the virtuous circle McGrane refers to was clearly broken in 2015, when the party lost more than half its seats and fell back to third place in the House of Commons. In 2019, the party continued on this downward trajectory, placing fourth in terms of seat count. What lessons, if any, can we draw from this turn of events?

An overreliance on the use of polling and focus groups has seemingly transformed the NDP into an ideologically incoherent weathervane in search of the coveted moderate swing voter. To a large extent, this strategic gamble has come at the expense of a focus on politically organizing and mobilizing working-class voters for the purpose of building sustained support for positions and policies that will redistribute power and wealth in meaningful ways.<sup>140</sup> Brodie and Jensen contend that "the first condition for class voting is the existence of a political party which can contribute to the creation of a constituency of class-conscious voters." A party of the left, they argue, must "attempt to forge its own definition of politics in a way that class will be seen as the relevant political criteria for electoral choice and party loyalty. In the absence of a clear definition, workers and their potential allies will likely be organized by the bourgeois parties along cleavages other than class."<sup>141</sup> Since

139. McGrane, *New NDP*, 41.

140. Dennis Pilon & Larry Savage, "Working-Class Politics Matters: Identity, Class, Parties," in Greg Albo, Stephen Maher & Alan Zuege, eds., *State Transformations: Classes, Strategy, Socialism* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 76–98; Evans, "Protest Movement," 45–97.

141. Brodie & Jensen, *Crisis, Challenge and Change*, 324.



its inception, the NDP has had an uncomfortable relationship with the politics of class, oftentimes deliberately downplaying this approach in favour of a brokerage orientation. The crisis in social-democratic electoralism in the 1990s, precipitated by the ascendance of neoliberal public policy imperatives, and the associated failure of social-democratic governments to adequately confront, let alone challenge, them, has further aggravated the party's ability to credibly advance a class-based politics.

In more recent decades, in response to focus groups and public opinion surveys, the party has gone out of its way to disassociate itself with class-based politics, opting instead to embrace a political marketing strategy that slices and dices the electorate into issue-based consumer-voters.<sup>142</sup> Given the NDP's sustained strategic reorientation away from organized labour, influenced by chronically low levels of union affiliation and recent legislative bans on union donations, the party can no longer credibly be described as the political arm of the labour movement. That said, it is important to note that the impetus for weakening ties between the NDP and organized labour has come from both the party and union leadership.<sup>143</sup>

Disillusioned with the NDP and the legacy of the Social Contract, the CAW launched its internal Task Force on Working-Class Politics in the 21st Century in late 1999 to reconsider its engagement with electoral politics. Despite the best intentions of some of its framers, who saw the project as a way of laying the foundation for a more radical, independent, working-class politics, the task force unveiled a number of recommendations in May 2002, which in effect legitimized the CAW leadership's call for strategic voting and set the stage for a closer relationship to the Liberal Party in subsequent election campaigns.<sup>144</sup> Thus, while the union's break with the NDP was justified, in part, in order to pursue a more explicitly radical brand of working-class politics, this has not materialized. Instead, this "independent" approach has more or less been adopted by the CAW's successor, Unifor, as outlined in the union's "policy on political relationships and elections" adopted in 2014, and continues to inform the union's interventions in election campaigns across the country.<sup>145</sup>

142. Laycock and Erickson, for example, assert that survey data demonstrates that the "NDP's union connections may have little or no appeal" for swing voters. David Laycock & Linda Erickson, "Future Scenarios: NDP Evolution and Party System Change," in Laycock & Erickson, eds., *Reviving Social Democracy*, 301.

143. McGrane, *New NDP*, 51–68.

144. CAW National Executive Board, *CAW Task Force on Working Class Politics in the 21st Century*, May 2002, 16–17; Larry Savage, "The Politics of Labour and Labour Relations in Ontario," in Cheryl N. Collier & Jonathan Malloy, eds., *The Politics of Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 302; James Watson, "Contesting the Crisis: CUPE, the CAW, and Third Way Neoliberalism in Ontario from 2003–2013," PhD thesis, McMaster University, 2020, 123.

145. Unifor, "Policy on Political Relationships and Elections," in *Politics for Workers: Unifor's Political Project* (Toronto: Unifor, September 2014), 21–22, <https://www.unifor.org/sites/>

It is important to note that even though the CAW Task Force on Working-Class Politics and Unifor's policy on political relationships and elections stress the importance of not telling members how to vote, the union has not stopped endorsing candidates.<sup>146</sup> Rather, it just started endorsing candidates from multiple parties, depending on the campaign, and has shifted a greater proportion of its resources to back the election of Liberals, sometimes in opposition to electorally viable NDP candidates. While the union continues to back the NDP in some provinces where it is electorally well positioned to win, like British Columbia and Alberta, Unifor has developed closer links with Liberals as part of anti-Conservative strategic voting initiatives in Ontario and at the federal level. In more recent years, the premise of closer relations with Liberal governments has not even been strategic voting but rather a desire to have more direct influence over decision makers.<sup>147</sup> Thus, while the loosening of partisan ties to the NDP initially carried a left-wing justification, that reasoning dissolved rather quickly and was replaced with a Gomperist approach to wielding influence in the electoral arena.

Paradoxically, since the CAW's very public break with the NDP during the 2006 federal election campaign, all of the union's local leaders, staff, and activists who have gone on to win seats in federal or provincial elections have done so as New Democrats.<sup>148</sup> In federal elections and in most provincial contests, the slate of NDP candidates always includes a good number of union leaders, staffers, and activists.<sup>149</sup> This suggests that many politically engaged union activists continue to consider the NDP to be "their" party in spite of loosening organizational ties. While ideological affinity may be an important factor here, we should not underestimate the legacy of deep historical and personal ties to explain why so many union activists continue to offer themselves up as NDP candidates.<sup>150</sup> Moreover, sustained union activist support for the NDP

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146. CAW, *Collective Bargaining and Political Action, CAW Task Force on Working Class Politics in the 21st Century* (2002), 16; Unifor, "Policy," 22.

147. Larry Savage, "Anybody-But-Conservative: Canadian Unions and Strategic Voting," in Stephanie Ross & Larry Savage, eds., *Rethinking the Politics of Labour*, 2nd ed. (Halifax: Fernwood, 2021).

148. For example, Malcolm Allen in Welland, Wayne Gates in Niagara Falls, Peggy Nash in Parkdale-High Park, and Tracey Ramsay in Essex.

149. For example, in Ontario's 2018 election, over half of the new NDP MPPs elected as part of the Official Opposition had labour-movement ties. And in the 2015 federal election, 20 of the 21 union staffers running for election did so under the NDP banner. See John Dehaas, "Election Analysis: Most Common Occupations for Candidates in Each Party," *CTV News*, 9 October 2015, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/election/election-analysis-most-common-occupations-for-candidates-in-each-party-1.2602533>.

150. See debate between Jansen & Young, "Solidarity Forever?," 657–678, and Dennis Pilon, Stephanie Ross & Larry Savage, "Solidarity Revisited: Organized Labour and the New Democratic Party," *Canadian Political Science Review* 5, 1 (2011): 20–37.

is partially explained by the lack of a credible left-wing electoral alternative waiting in the wings.<sup>151</sup>

## The Future of the NDP-Labour Relationship

MCGRANE CORRECTLY NOTES that both labour and the NDP are generally satisfied with the loosening of formal ties. The NDP is no longer expected to go out of its way to orient itself to unions, especially when doing so would cost it support in the polls. Unions, on the other hand, are no longer expected to stick with the party through thick and thin and are freer to criticize the NDP when the party adopts positions that are contrary to the aims and objectives of the union movement. While it is clear that the bonds between organized labour and the NDP are not what they used to be, it is worth noting that they have not completely disappeared either, even among non-affiliated unions. For example, union-backed parallel issue campaigns and member-to-member canvassing continue to benefit NDP campaigns and candidates in many regions.<sup>152</sup>

Part of what made the NDP possible in the first place was that the labour movement launched the New Party at a time when historically divided unions were coming together under the new umbrella of the CLC.<sup>153</sup> Today's landscape is much different, with unions increasingly deeply divided along several political and sectoral axes.<sup>154</sup> The idea that organized labour could build a new, pro-union, party of the left without first sorting out its own deep internal divisions is unrealistic. In fact, some key segments of the labour movement have gone in the opposite direction, calling on the NDP to merge or co-operate electorally with the Liberals – a direction that would likely further dilute the party's pro-labour ideological orientation.<sup>155</sup> All of this suggests that while loosening ties with the NDP theoretically held the promise of creating space

151. Québec solidaire may be an exception in this regard, but it is worth noting that the party competes exclusively in Québec provincial elections where the NDP is a nonentity.

152. McGrane, *New NDP*, 325.

153. Bernard, "New Democratic Party," 107.

154. Larry Savage, "The Past, Present, and Future of the Canadian Labour Movement: Interrogating Insider Accounts," *Labour/Le Travail* 85 (Spring 2020): 285–293.

155. For example, after the 2008 Alberta election, Alberta Federation of Labour president Gil McGowan proposed that the provincial NDP and Liberals join electoral forces in a co-operative pact designed to more effectively compete with the governing Progressive Conservatives. Graham Thomson, "Unity Pact Breathes Life into Politics," *Edmonton Journal*, 6 May 2008, [https://www.afl.org/unity\\_pact\\_breathes\\_life\\_into\\_politics\\_liberals\\_and\\_ndp\\_talk\\_about\\_not\\_competing\\_for\\_ridings\\_but\\_will\\_it\\_be\\_enough\\_to\\_win](https://www.afl.org/unity_pact_breathes_life_into_politics_liberals_and_ndp_talk_about_not_competing_for_ridings_but_will_it_be_enough_to_win). In 2011, just months after the NDP formed the Official Opposition in the House of Commons, CAW president Ken Lewenza publicly called for the party to merge with the federal Liberals in order to create a united electoral alternative to the Harper Conservatives. Laura Payton, "NDP-Liberal Merger the Way to Win, CAW Says," *CBC News*, 2 September 2011, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/ndp-liberal-merger-the-way-to-win-caw-says-1.1057208>.

for a more radical working-class electoral vehicle, unions have not moved in this direction. Instead, loosening ties to the NDP has only strengthened the Gomerist electoral impulses of a growing number of unions. This new approach does not foreclose the possibility of helping elect the NDP in particular places or particular campaigns. Indeed, unions almost universally threw their support behind NDP efforts in BC and Saskatchewan in 2020 provincial elections. Concretely, this reversion back to Gomerism means that endorsements and resources cannot be taken for granted by any party and will need to be earned on a case-by-case basis. To paraphrase Gompers himself, labour now seeks to punish enemies and reward friends as part of a seemingly endless *quid pro quo*.

While a Gomerist approach may extend benefits to individual unions with a direct stake in a particular public policy outcome, it is doubtful that this orientation can successfully deliver sustained political victories for working people.<sup>156</sup> The success of such a strategy is further complicated by the fact that unions have increasingly come to adopt political tactics that respond to, rather than challenge, neoliberal imperatives.<sup>157</sup> Specifically, strategic voting or ad hoc alliances with Liberals are less about realizing labour's political and economic policy objectives and more about blocking the possibility of worse outcomes.<sup>158</sup> Bernard warns that such Gomerist approaches further reduce unions to special interest group status and "[condemn] labor to being forever on the outside."<sup>159</sup> That is because Gomerist electoral approaches require sacrificing the political arm of labour that is so instrumental to forming governments and ultimately passing laws that advance the interests of all working people.

Admittedly, many union activists view the NDP as an unreliable electoral vehicle for achieving a social-democratic government, even on its own terms. The ghosts of Bob Rae and other provincial NDP premiers loom large here. The NDP's drift to the political centre, however, does not absolve the labour leadership from its shared responsibility for the sorry state of working-class politics in Canada.

The labour movement has also drifted politically, lowering its expectations in the face of a crisis in social democracy and showing little interest in pursuing political alternatives that might challenge or even topple the fundamental pillars of Canada's labour relations regime, let alone the broader capitalist economic system.<sup>160</sup> Some unions continue to steer clear of parties and elections

156. Savage, "Politics of Labour," 304.

157. Larry Savage, "Organized Labour and the Shifting Landscape of Local Politics in Ontario," *Studies in Political Economy* 93, 1 (2014): 123.

158. Savage & Ruhloff-Queiruga, "Organized Labour."

159. Bernard, "New Democratic Party," 107.

160. Larry Savage & Charles Smith, *Unions in Court: Organized Labour and the Charter of*

altogether, insisting that talk of politics has no place in the union, thus reinforcing the status quo. Even among those unions that embrace political action, socialist-inspired political education is largely absent from labour education courses, which focus primarily on the technical and legal aspects of labour relations rather than the labour movement's emancipatory potential.<sup>161</sup> More broadly, Canada has experienced a marked decline in union militancy, as evidenced by the fact that the incidence of strikes has been trending downward for decades. Political strikes have also become exceedingly rare, with a growing number of unions shying away from using work stoppages to apply political pressure on governments or employers. Union density, particularly in the private sector, has witnessed steep declines in recent decades, and the labour movement's capacity to mount effective and sustained fight-back campaigns has taken a similar hit. Where unions have become more politically active, electoral engagement has tended to be sectionalist or transactional in nature, as labour organizations have grown increasingly defensive in the context of neoliberal restructuring.<sup>162</sup> The drift back to Gomerism by important segments of the labour movement, then, should be understood as a sign of organized labour's weakness rather than its strength.

If the crisis in social-democratic electoralism is breathing new life into old Gomerist approaches to electoral politics, what does this mean for the future of organized labour and the NDP? Given that a formal institutional rapprochement between unions and the NDP appears increasingly unlikely, co-operation moving forward may take on more informal dimensions. Over time, however, as historical attachments wither, union density declines, and personalities in key decision-making positions change, we can expect the NDP will become increasingly less oriented toward the labour movement and vice versa.

Perhaps of greater concern to the NDP, rival parties in search of new pools of support are now making unprecedented overtures to win over union voters. While Liberals have always made an effort to cut into the NDP's labour and working-class base, Conservatives have more recently begun to pursue frames and strategies designed to win over union voters traditionally hostile to that party's anti-labour policy positions. In the 2019 federal election, the Conservative Party secured its best-ever result among "manual labourers."<sup>163</sup> And shortly after winning the leadership of the federal Conservative Party,

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*Rights and Freedoms* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017).

161. For a critical take on the CAW's paid education leave program, see Reuben Roth, "Kitchen Economics for the Family: Paid Education Leave and the Canadian Autoworkers Union," MA thesis, Ontario Institute for Studies of Education of the University of Toronto, 1997.

162. Savage & Ruhloff-Queiruga, "Organized Labour."

163. Christopher Reynolds, "Singh Strives to Carve Out Space for NDP as Tories, Liberals Target His Turf," *Toronto Star*, 19 December 2020, <https://www.thestar.com/politics/2020/12/19/singh-strives-to-carve-out-space-for-ndp-as-tories-liberals-target-his-turf.html>.

Erin O'Toole raised eyebrows with a 2020 Labour Day message that blamed "big business" and "bad trade deals" for Canada's ailing manufacturing, energy, and forestry sectors and offered up "solidarity" and a "Canada First" economic strategy as the path toward higher wages and prosperity.<sup>164</sup> He followed up with a speech to the Canadian Club in October 2020 in which he made a case for unions, arguing that a high level of private-sector union density "was an essential part of the balance between what was good for business and what was good for employees. Today, that balance is dangerously disappearing. Too much power is in the hands of a few corporate and financial élites who have been only too happy to outsource jobs abroad."<sup>165</sup> *Globe and Mail* columnist Robyn Urback joked that O'Toole sounded as though he was running in the 1989 NDP leadership race.<sup>166</sup> But the Conservative strategy is no joke. Rather, it is designed to appeal to workers experiencing real economic insecurity, often as a result of economic restructuring, who do not see their material concerns being taken up concretely by other parties.

The Conservative case for private-sector unions, steeped in populist and economic-nationalist rhetoric, is designed to exploit fissures between private- and public-sector workers by positioning the party as a catalyst for private-sector growth and opportunity, on the one hand, and public-sector restraint, on the other.<sup>167</sup> Conservatives decry economic inequality, but in a way that lays blame not on capitalism as an economic system but rather on foreign actors and greedy élites. In short, the Conservatives are using populist and conservative cultural appeals to address the very real material concerns of union members in a way that clearly differentiates them from other parties more closely associated with the promotion of working-class interests historically. For example, the Conservatives frame the federal NDP's legitimate concerns over climate change and Indigenous sovereignty as both anti-development and anti-labour on the basis that the NDP's concern for these issues inhibits the growth and job creation that union members rely on to secure their livelihoods.<sup>168</sup> This is precisely the dynamic Ontario PC Labour Minister

164. Erin O'Toole, "Do you think it's time for economic policy that puts Canadian workers first?," Twitter, 7 September 2020, <https://twitter.com/erinotoole/status/1302991683072798721>.

165. Quoted in John Michael McGrath, "Why the Next Group of Voters Canada's Conservatives Will Chase Is ... Unions?" *TVO*, 3 November 2020, <https://www.tvto.org/article/why-the-next-group-of-voters-canadas-conservatives-will-chase-is-unions>.

166. Robyn Urback, "The Main Philosophy of Erin O'Toole's 'Principled Conservatism' Is Winning Elections," *Globe and Mail*, 11 November 2020.

167. Steve Tufts, "O'Toole Is Smart to Align Himself with Union," *Toronto Star*, 9 November 2020, <https://www.thestar.com/opinion/contributors/2020/11/09/otoole-is-smart-to-align-himself-with-unions.html>.

168. Brian Platt, "Why Erin O'Toole Is Gambling on Building a New, Union-Friendly Conservative Voting Coalition," *National Post*, 12 November 2020, <https://nationalpost.com/news/politics/why-erin-otoole-is-gambling-on-building-a-new-union-friendly-conservative-voting-coalition>.

Monte McNaughton was referring to when he argued that “the left, truthfully, has chosen social justice and identity politics instead of things that matter to families.”<sup>169</sup> Despite the fact that building and construction trade unions emerged as a key opponent of the Ontario PCs from 1999 to 2014, in some ways, these union voters are the lowest hanging fruit for Conservatives given the demographic makeup of the sector and the pro-development mentality of construction unions and workers generally.

It is too early to tell whether Conservative appeals to private-sector union voters will pay off or lead to any substantial electoral realignment. However, it is clear that the NDP’s drift to the political centre on economic issues and the party’s weakening ties to the labour movement have invited such strategic interventions from the right. Of course, this dynamic is not unique to Canada. Right-wing populist frames have helped to construct an alternative narrative about the sources of economic insecurity and the solutions needed to bring back the Golden Age of Capitalism, thus undermining the historical link between social-democratic parties and working-class constituencies in a variety of advanced capitalist democracies.<sup>170</sup>

The challenge for both the NDP and the labour movement is to contest the legitimacy of such frames – not by dismissing the intended audience as stupid or ignorant, but rather by putting forward an alternative vision and understanding of the economy that directly addresses their material interests in ways that unite workers through shared class interests. This undoubtedly requires a great deal of proactive education, but it also requires clear messaging and education about the shortcomings of capitalism as a system that produces and reproduces the very economic and social inequalities that stratify and divide working-class communities.

Rising to the challenge of the populist right is made all the more difficult in the Canadian context by the deep divisions within the labour movement. Regional, linguistic, ideological, and sector-specific divisions all impede efforts to unite union voters around a common political vision. For its part, the NDP’s ideological unevenness, typified by policy differences between NDP provincial governments and the federal party, leads to confusion and lack of faith in the party’s ability to present a true alternative political agenda and vision. In this way, the NDP may variably be considered both a help and a hindrance to meaningful economic and social transformation. While perfect policy uniformity is likely unachievable, the weakening of the party-union link renders co-operation more difficult, especially in the absence of labour’s “own” political vehicle.

169. McGrath, “Why the Next Group.”

170. Steven High, “Right-Wing Populism and the Realignment of Working-Class Politics in Canada,” *Canadian Dimension*, 19 November 2020, <https://canadiandimension.com/articles/view/right-wing-populism-and-the-realignment-of-working-class-politics-in-canada>; Jackson, *Fire and the Ashes*, 132–133.



How the future of NDP-union relations will continue to evolve is an open question. However, the significant re-emergence of Gomperist electoral strategies does not bode well for the party in the short term and may prove counterproductive to labour in the long term. This is not to suggest that unions ought to uncritically flock back to the NDP en masse and redouble their efforts to mould it once again into the political arm of labour. Even if the labour movement was interested in a rapprochement, the party has made it clear that it has little interest in renewing its vows to organized labour.

In the end, the labour movement is one of the only political forces in society that has the organizational power and resource capacity to organize working people and the plethora of social movement organizations committed to resisting neoliberalism and ultimately building an alternative society. Pursuing a transformative political strategy requires flexible and participatory long-term planning that will not conform to traditional electoral cycles. It requires alliance building that is open, democratic, and sustained. And yes, it requires taking elections seriously, but not in a way that reduces the role of unions to that of a special interest group.

These prescriptions will require a significant change in the current trajectory of the politics of the Canadian labour movement. If individual unions are willing to jettison or stay silent on key social and economic demands as part of a *quid pro quo* Gomperist strategy designed to preserve or secure a specific investment or policy goal, how does labour's broader vision for an alternative society based on principles of social justice and economic equality ever gain a toehold in the minds of union members, let alone workers more broadly? Organized labour incrementally loses the capacity and the imagination to act as a truly transformative movement every time unions embrace the uneasy cross-class alliances that underpin Gomperist labour politics. More importantly, because such strategic shifts have an educative effect on the union rank-and-file, and thus help validate ideological realignment over time, Gomperist tactics – whether motivated by fear, instrumentalism, opportunism, or a combination of all three – threaten to compromise the labour movement's ability to press its own political agenda, in its own name, in future years.

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