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Building trades  
Developing cities,  
protecting rights



September 2011

# UNIONIZED LABOUR



# 3

FACTS

WHAT YOU SHOULD  
KNOW BEFORE YOU  
VOTE



# SEEKING STABILITY FOR ALL

**Bridging the interests** of employers, workers and  
youth in a recovering economy

PHOTOS: CUPE

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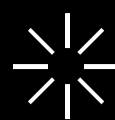
## CHALLENGES



FACT

1

CANADA HAS RATIFIED SIX OF EIGHT INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION CONVENTIONS



WE RECOMMEND



**Saving the middle class**  
How can stability be achieved?

PAGE 7

"The middle class that grew in Canada over the course of the last two generations is now not necessarily going to be there for the next generation of young workers..."

**Your questions, answered** p. 6  
Experts from the public and private sector discuss upcoming election issues.

**Youth and the economy** p. 7  
Safeguarding against economic disaster.

In a recuperating economy, all working-class Canadians share a unified goal: **financial stability and clear, enforced rights in the workplace.** Unions are proof of Canadian democracy, supporting a healthy economy and a viable future for all.

## Why do unions matter?

**A**nti-union sentiment has accelerated since the global crisis of 2008 brought economies to their knees and left public finances in a mess. Widespread frustration with fragile growth and soaring debt has been channelled towards unions, which are increasingly portrayed as representing labour's elite, irrelevant, or a drag on the economy. Yet no country has ever achieved widespread prosperity and created a large middle class without strong unions.

### Trail blazers

**1** Generations of hard-fought union struggles brought Canadians the eight-hour day and the weekend; workplace health and safety legislation and employment standards; income supports for new parents and training for unemployed workers; public pensions and minimum wages; protections for injured workers and equal pay for equal work. Unions helped organize the extension of these negotiated workplace-based achievements to the whole workforce through legislation.

### Bridging the gap

**2** International evidence shows that where unions are strong

they reduce the pay gap between workers and management, men and women, racial minorities and other workers. The ILO reports that, across 20 OECD nations, a one percent increase in union density is associated with a 1.5 percent reduction in the incidence of low-wage employment. All over the world unions are a major force in reducing inequality and poverty, and broadening access to basic support for everyone.

### Challenges for the middle class

**3** But decades of watering down rules for capital investment and chipping away at workers' rights has accompanied rapid globalization and technological change, shifting the balance of power. Median wages and incomes of those working full-time full-year are today no further ahead than they were in the late 1970s. The economy is growing, but many workers without a collective voice are losing ground.

Since 1975 to mid 2011, union density in the workforce has dropped from 36.8 percent to just below 30 percent. A rising share of the gains from economic growth went to elite pay-packages. The richest one percent of Canadians took one-third of all income gains between 1997 and 2007. That compares to eight percent in the



**Bruce Campbell**  
Executive Director, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

### DID YOU KNOW?

- **36.8%:** Canadian unionization rate in 1975.
- **31.5%:** Canadian unionization rate in 2010.
- **74.9%:** Public sector unionization rate in 2010
- **17.5%:** Private sector unionization rate in 2010.
- **16%:** Unionization rate for youth (18 to 24) in 2010.
- **8%:** National income growth that went to Canada's richest 1% (1960s).
- **32%:** National income growth that went to Canada's richest 1% (1997 to 2007).
- **\$1,500:** Increase in median earnings of full-time full-year workers (inflation-adjusted), 1976 to 2009.

1960s.

The future of the middle class is anything but assured, particularly for younger workers and newcomers working in parts of the economy where unions have made little headway in organizing. The stakes are huge, the path ahead uncertain.

Who else speaks out on behalf of the interests of the little guy, the people who need reliable public pensions and public goods like electricity, well-maintained roads and bridges, clean water, affordable health care and education, and good public transit?

Unions ensure gains from productivity improvements result in widespread prosperity. In fact, ironically, businesses need unions too: they ultimately rely on the rising purchasing power of the many, not the few, to deliver growth and profits.

### The need for representation

**4** Healthy labour relations contribute to workplace innovation, economic development, and a large and vibrant middle class essential to a healthy democracy.

That's exactly what's in jeopardy for the next generation of Canadian workers. And that's why Canada needs unions, now more than ever.

BRUCE CAMPBELL

editorial@mediaplanet.com

## Trade unions: Developing cities, protecting rights

**Infrastructure is the key component of our economic capacity, but as cities rapidly develop and urban populations rise, the protection of labour rights for union workers has become crucial.**

Unions act as the link between the workers and labour market and also play a significant role which ensures that infrastructure workers have acceptable working and safety conditions. "Labour rights are human rights. Unions are the only ones who look out for us," says Robert Blakely, Canadian operating officer and the director of Canadian Affairs of the Building and Construction Trades Department, AFL-CIO. Despite the common notion that individuals who pursue a career in trades are incompetent, union workers are, in fact, the best trained in the country, and are highly skilled. They are the appendage of a cascade of development planners and the primary reason why



"Labour rights are human rights. Unions are the only ones who look out for us."

**Robert Blakely**  
Canadian Operating Officer, Director, Canadian Affairs of the Building and Construction Trades Department, AFL-CIO

Canadians benefit from fundamental facilities and systems.

### Recognizing the problem

Unfortunately, like most industries, there are downsides which need to be addressed, for example government funding and replacement of the baby boom generation. Without funding to provide workers with a healthy environment and to support workplace training, the future doesn't look bright. "Over the last 25 years, deficit fights have allowed us to construct buildings, but spend as little as we can

on their maintenance," says Blakely. This has resulted in pot holes, as well as swimming pools, buildings and schools that need repair. "Canada is ill prepared for a double dip, if there's another recession.

Involvement has to start with the government to invest in infrastructure and create and maintain jobs," says Sylvain Schetagne, senior economist of the Canadian Labour Congress. Labour workers deserve a fair return for their skills, but without proper leadership, access to funds, education

and resources have been denied.

### Formulating an action plan

The deeper question, and by far one of the greatest challenges is, who will replace the baby boom generation? The boomers have been building Canada for the last 40 years and within another five years, 25 percent of the workforce will retire. This is an enormous issue because the rate of untrained youth is increasing, which leaves skill shortages that need to be resolved quickly. "On most major jobs in Canada, 30 percent are apprentices, but more help is needed," claims Blakely, who believes that a turnaround is possible. He continues, "The people who build infrastructure need to be refreshed, while others need to examine the importance of skilled trades and what infrastructure means to society."

PAULEANNA REID

editorial@mediaplanet.com

What are three areas of investment Ontario cities need most?

**Transport Infrastructure is a critical part of sustaining our vast transportation system. Airports, canals, bridges, roads, tunnels and other kinds of transportation infrastructure depend on periodic maintenance and renewal.**

The Building Trades play a vital role in supplying skilled labour needed to keep these systems functioning. By investing in these areas, Ontario cities are investing in employment, training and direct jobs for hundreds of thousands of people. Infrastructure is often taken for granted, but it's not an abstract concept at all. It is built and sustained by men and women in the building trades and disciplines like engineering, architecture, and finance. It provides spin-off effects for communities in every part of the province, and by providing jobs it is an engine of economic development for Ontario.

PATRICK J. DILLON

Business Manager and Secretary Treasurer  
Provincial Building and Construction Trades

Council of Ontario  
editorial@mediaplanet.com

# BETTER PENSIONS – A MORE **SECURE** FUTURE

ALL CANADIANS SHOULD HAVE THE RIGHT  
TO A SECURE INCOME IN THEIR RETIREMENT  
THROUGH ACCESS TO WORKPLACE AND  
GOVERNMENT-SPONSORED PENSION PLANS.

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# INSPIRATION



**Question:** How does CUPE plan to preserve pension plans for Canadians?

**Answer:** Through campaign activity in support of Canada Pension Plan.

## Seeking stability: Everyone's right

### HOW WE MADE IT

**Decades ago it was common for people to work until their death and although the labour market has evolved remarkably since the 19th century, there is still room for much needed improvement.**

The Canadian Union of Public

Employees, otherwise known as CUPE, is determined to unveil a suitable pension plan agreement between both employers and employees. With approximately six hundred thousand members across Canada, CUPE represents workers in various fields such as: health care, education, municipalities, libraries, universities, social services, public utilities, transportation, emergency services and airlines. As a strong and collective voice in the workplace and in society, CUPE is dedicated to enhancing life of all workers in Canada.

#### Preserving Canada's pension plans

With the arrival of a more compassionate sense of post-career perspective, pension plans have become a critical topic of discussion between the level of government and work places. However, the question still remains—how can we survive economically at the end of our work lives

in a time where everyone is focused on making as much money as they can to make ends meet now?

“People should be able to look forward to a period of time when they can stop and enjoy a stage of their life where their economic security is not in jeopardy or in doubt and they can benefit from the fruits of their lifetime of labour,” says Kevin Skerit, senior research officer with CUPE.

The concept and framework behind a beneficial pension plan matters today, more than ever, because of significant economic challenges that currently exist. Following the 2008 economic crisis, financial markets which provide retirement arrangements have yet to rebuild a loyal relationship with citizens who have lost confidence in the rate of return that financial assets once delivered.

#### Overcoming economic obstacles

The biggest challenges in recent years have been the amount of tax on pension plans and the continued gaps of coverage and poverty that many seniors currently face. As an organized labour movement, CUPE has developed an action plan by opening up dialogue about social policy and how their employer counterparts can meet the widely desired goal of achieving the most cost efficient, comprehensive and effective way to accomplish economic security for retirement. “Old age security can't be met through individual savings plans like RRSPs,” Skerit says. “Our view is that this only leaves one option: the public pension system.” Public pensions in Canada make up the foundations for most workers, yet the entitlement that they provide are minimal and most workers who depend on those plans are in poverty or fall far below it once they reach the age of 65. “In the last 10 to 15 years, the level of pension coverage has gone from around 43 to 45 percent down to 33 to 35 percent, followed by a gradual long term decline. Part of that is a result of pressure from employers and even some governments to reduce the cost of these arrangements,” affirms Skerit.

#### Working together to build our future

CUPE has been involved in campaign activity in support of Canada Pension Plan to improve the guaranteed

income supplement and promote a socially responsible approach to retirement. In order to hold together the wages and compensation that were fought for decades ago, developing proposals to resolve these issues is vital.

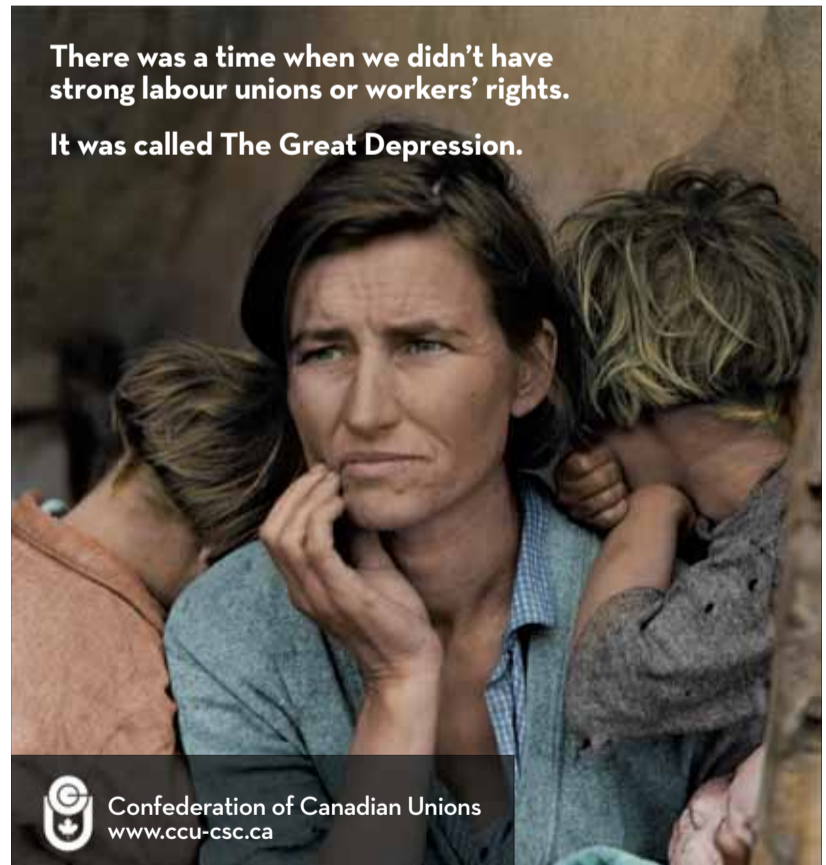
What this means for the next generation is a fair and balanced solution based on the notion of solidarity associated with equitable principles. CUPE's goal is to demonstrate the commitment and respect that they have, in return, earned from its members. They believe that operating with these fundamental standards will receive recognition and build a future based on willpower.

PAULEANNA REID  
editorial@mediaplanet.com

### PROFILE

#### CUPE

- **Size matters:** CUPE is Canada's largest union.
- **Member profile:** More than half of CUPE members are women and approximately one-third are part-time workers.
- **Main focus:** To negotiate wages and working conditions with expertise to deal with the growing complexities of our global economy.



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**FACT**  
**2**  
PUBLIC-PRIVATE UNIONIZATION RATES IN CANADA ARE 74.9%, 17.5%

**TAKING ACTION**  
1-2: A union rally on pensions held in 2009 on Parliament Hill.  
PHOTOS: CUPE



NEWS IN BRIEF



**Emile Therien**  
Public Health and Safety Advocate,  
Retired — President of Canada Safety Council

Protecting health and safety amongst a growing economy

**The expansion of our cities has ignited a health and safety issue that should not be ignored because lives and injuries are at stake.**

“Solutions are already in motion. The whole issue is to make sure that those laws and regulations are applied across the country,” says Emile Therien, Public Health and Safety Advocate and Retired President of Canada Safety Council. The urban transit business depends on unions to fight for priorities and the unique needs of not only the workers who provide these services, but for the public; the people who benefit from them.

**Targeting the main goal**

“The objective here is to strike a happy balance,” says Therien. “Four hundred workers are predicted to

be let go from the TTC and with budget cuts continuing to decline, unions are the major players in the developing legislation leading to our objectives,” he continues. The maintenance and enhancement of public services should be in the forefront of everyone’s mind to help propel the government into enforcing action and ensuring that it is a main priority. Revolutionizing laws will be a work in progress, and although we all understand that it will never be perfect, the objective still remains that together, we will strive towards a better future.

PAULEANNA REID  
editorial@mediaplanet.com

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## QUESTION AND ANSWER

FACT

3

16% OF  
CANADIAN  
YOUTH IN THE  
WORKFORCE  
ARE UNIONIZED

Q&amp;A

**Private Sector Unions:  
What's in it for business owners?****Joanie Cameron Pritchett**  
President,  
Confederation of Canadian Unions

"Unionized workers respond positively in environments with high wages, strong benefits and pensions and respect and fairness on the job. This also plays an important macroeconomic role, because a healthy middle class depends on a strong labour movement. The Confederation of Canadian Unions is proud to be on the front lines of this struggle. When unionized workers bargain for higher pay or better working conditions, it puts upward pressure on other businesses to do the same. This leads to greater demand for goods and services that businesses sell, as well as greater economic growth and stability."

**What are the priority issues concerning Ontarians which need to be addressed in the upcoming provincial election?**

"The priority issues currently concerning Ontarians in the upcoming election is the protection and enhancement of public services, healthcare and education. It's important to maintain these public services for not only those who deliver them but for those who receive them. Another rising concern is the state of our healthcare system and whether we're receiving the best healthcare for a healthy workforce. Lastly, education is a key. With increasing tuition, it has become not a right but a privilege and needs to be accessible and affordable."

**Sharon DeSousa**  
Regional Executive Vice President for Ontario,  
Public Service Alliance of Canada**Do young people find labour unions to be protective of their rights?****Morley Gunderson**  
Labour Economist,  
Professor, University of Toronto

"The stereotype with young people tends to be the perception that they are individualistic, the "me" generation, but the evidence from recent surveys suggests that young people do have a desire for unions or collective action. The unionization rate is very low, so their unmet demand is higher than it is for adults, in part because the jobs they are getting now tend to be non union jobs. In a sense their frustrations are greater but most people believe that this isn't the case."

**How is Canadian government responding to current pension disputes across the country especially with our increasingly aging population?**

The Treasury Board Secretariat consults and collaborates with unions in an ongoing manner on employee and pension benefit issues. The Public Service Labour Relations Act establishes that the provisions of the public service pension plan are not negotiated. The Government recognizes that the public service pension plan is critical to attracting employees and fostering efficient, collaborative and innovative workplaces. Pensions are integrated into the overall compensation approach: competitiveness, value, reward performance and affordability.

ISABELLE ROBILLARD, MANAGER, PUBLIC AFFAIRS, TREASURY BOARD OF CANADA

PAULEANNA REID  
editorial@mediaplanet.com

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RESPECT  
& EQUITY**

**LET'S  
WORK  
TOGETHER  
FOR A  
BETTER  
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**Stop Marine Rescue Sub-Centre Closures**

As part of the \$56.8 million deficit reductions announced by the Harper government on June 7, 2011, two Marine Rescue Sub Centres (MRSCs) – one in St. John's, NL and the other in Quebec City, Quebec will close. The Harper government proposes to have Search and Rescue services for the North Atlantic provided from Trenton, Ontario or Halifax, Nova Scotia. Where every second counts to save a life, response times are now at risk.

The Union of Canadian Transportation Employees (UCTE) challenges the notion that it would be feasible to provide search and rescue (SAR) services from either Halifax or Trenton due to the uniqueness of the waterways and the communities both in Quebec and Newfoundland & Labrador.

The Canadian Coast Guard (CCG) proposes using technology to do some of the work currently done by the sub-centres slated for closure. Prior to this announcement, the CCG was considering making the St. John's Marine Rescue Sub-Centre into a full centre. When the Union asked what technology, the response was "most boats have GPS."

Since the announcement, UCTE has been hard at work advocating for the safety of fishers, commercial and recreational boaters by having the Marine Rescue Sub-Centres stay open. UCTE has been lobbying government, speaking at rallies, conducting interviews with different media, and working with various stakeholders in order to ensure this happens.

**How you can help?**

Sign the UCTE petition at [www.ucte.com](http://www.ucte.com) for presentation in parliament. We need to let government know that there is no price tag on the safety of Canadians.

**We need to let government know that there is no price tag on the safety of Canadians.**

NEWS



# A platform for industry insight

**Question:** Where are labour standards discussed, debated and examined?  
**Answer:** The ILO provides a platform for various types of industry insight and opinion to combine and create results.

**The International Labour Organization (ILO) is structured around a tripartite approach which consists of government, employer, and worker representatives.**

This unique forum creates a platform for its 183 member states to freely debate labour standards and policies with government and social partners of the economy. In 1919, the ILO was formed and Canada was one of its 29 founding members. The goal of economic security and social justice combined with a system of international labour standards such as: an eight-hour work day, a ban on child labour and equal pay for work of equal value, have become part of the essential tools needed towards advocating growth opportunities for men and women in the workplace.

**Crafting a reputation worth saving**

“The importance of Canada’s role within the ILO has been very signifi-



“To date, Canada has only ratified six of the eight ILO fundamental Conventions.”

**Eric Gravel**  
Senior Legal Officer, ILO

cant over the years, both in terms of representation from workers, employers and government. What we bring to the table is our work, both at the Union level and community level with workers who don’t have unions to represent them,” says Barbara Byers, executive vice president of the Canadian Labour Congress and a worker repre-

sentative on the governing body of the ILO. Our country is also known for its strong institutional commitment for good governance and organization regarding standards policy. This has played in Canada’s favour and is one of the elements that contribute to a strong and healthy democracy.

**Making progress under turmoil**

“Canada’s reputation has seen a better past. We are not making very good strides in terms of labour laws here in Canada and there haven’t been any advances over the years. In fact there have been more attacks on labour laws,” exclaims Byers. “We are one of the top five countries where complaints are registered and internationally, our character has slipped considerably in terms of labour rights. In particular the right to collective bargaining and the right to freedom of association,” she explains. “To date, Canada has only ratified six of the eight ILO fundamental Conventions,” says Eric Gravel, Senior Legal Officer in the ILO. Two of these that have not been endorsed are the forced labour convention and a fundamental convention concerning child labour. But despite our lack of motivation to continue these efforts, Canada remains optimistic that a turnaround is within our midsts and we will champion a new level of respect that has diminished in the last decade.

**FACTS**

- **The ILO accomplishes** its work through three main bodies (The International labour Conference, the Governing body and the Office) which comprise governments’, employers’ and workers’ representatives.
- **The driving forces** behind ILO’s creation arose from security, humanitarian, political and economic considerations.
- **The organization’s focus** is to promote opportunities for women

- and men to obtain decent and productive work, in conditions of freedom, equity, security and dignity.
- **All 183 member States** of the ILO meet at the International Labour Conference, held every year in Geneva, Switzerland, in the month of June.

**Read more on the web:**  
[www.ilo.org](http://www.ilo.org)

**PAULEANNA REID**  
 editorial@mediaplanet.com

## The expert take: A middle-class conundrum

Rifling through old boxes the other day I stumbled upon a Simpsons bag. Along with Eaton’s, Simpsons typified what was once a high quality and affordable retail sector.

Today, middle class consumption has been replaced by either uptown opulence or bleak box-stores along urban thoroughfares. Of the many department stores that once catered to middle class families, only the Bay survives.

**Eliminating the middle man**

What happened to the traditional department store and what might this phenomenon have to do with declining private sector unionisation?

Marketers shape retail offerings according to consumer demand; today, that is at the highest and lowest extremes of income distribution. The missing middle and its retail is no coincidence. The two are related: as union influence wanes so does income inequality grow.

So why aren’t workers trying to improve their earnings potential by unionising in numbers they once did?

Employers—owing to competitive pressures—are more strongly resistant to unions. Industries where private sector union membership has remained high—e.g., airline, energy and telecommunication sectors—have until recently been spared exposure to international competition that the rest of Canadian industry has faced for decades.

Employees also play a significant role. Large numbers of workers are not opting for unions at their workplace partly because declining unionism is subject to ‘social networking effects’;

fewer members reduces social incentives to join. This lowers the likelihood of joining amongst the next cohort of workers and so on.

Unless unions step up efforts to increase their presence in society, just as corporations sponsor things we value in order to be ‘seen’ as good institutions, they will miss their mark with a new generation of workers in non-traditional occupations. It is here where better employment conditions are most needed. Until such time, we should all hold on to our Simpsons bags.

“Employers—owing to competitive pressures—are more strongly resistant to unions.”



**Rafael Gomez**  
Associate Professor in Employment Relations, Centre for Industrial Relations and Human Resources & Woodsworth College, University of Toronto



**John Gordon**  
National President, PSAC

If we follow Jack Layton’s call to be hopeful and optimistic, we can create jobs, build public services and improve working conditions for all Canadians.

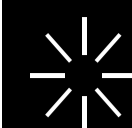
The situation for young people right now is particularly dire. They are entering the workforce by taking on a series of casual, part-time and term contracts. This forces them to delay purchasing a house, having children and making investments that keep our economy out of a recession. The trend of two-tier wages, pensions and benefits spreading across the country is leading to less job security for young people.

The truth is that public services and the people who deliver them contribute to the prosperity of all Canadians. Small businesses could not survive without the public sector, which maintains and operates the infrastructure and implements the regulations necessary for small businesses to thrive in our economy.

**Safeguarding against economic disaster**

Communities with higher rates of public sector employment are more sheltered from the devastating effects of a recession. When people are employed, they spend money in their communities. The same is true for retirees with secure pension plans. Future generations, their families and communities deserve the benefits that public services bring, and not the race to the bottom being sold by the Conservatives.

We should be focusing on how to improve wages and working conditions for everyone. Our children, the next generation of Canadians, depend on us to make the right decisions for their future. This means improving labour standards, promoting workplace health and safety and fighting for job security and good pensions—for public and private sector workers alike.



DON'T MISS!



**Armine Yalnizyan**  
Senior Economist, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

## Saving the middle class?

**In 30 years, the middle class has neither grown nor found success in achieving economic security. Although job wages, education and healthcare systems remain stagnant, the community still thirsts for change.**

“The middle class that grew in Canada over the course of the last two generations is now not necessarily going to be there for the next generation of young workers,” says Armine Yalnizyan, senior economist at the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. The two basic things that people do to assure their economic security is to buy a home or get a post secondary education and both of these costs have escalated rapidly, yet wages have fell flat. This proposes a financial challenge which means a bigger bite out of one’s pay check to stay afloat.

“The middle class that grew in Canada over the course of the last two generations is now not necessarily going to be there for the next generation of young workers.”

**Changing the state of the economy**

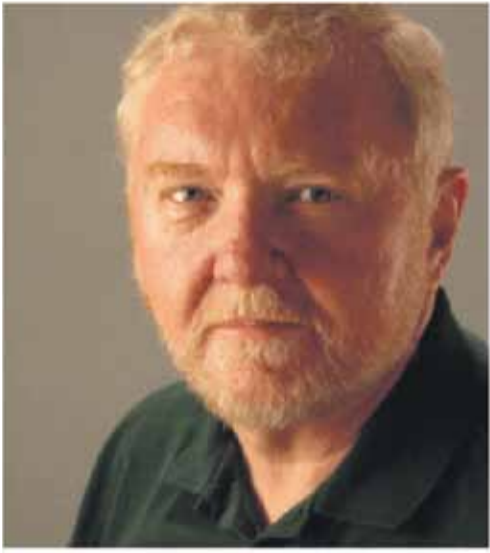
The middle class is important for economic, social and political reasons. A robust middle class provides the economy with immense purchasing power for mass production, mass consumption and is in part responsible for the success of thriving businesses. This social class is a much needed bridge between the poor and the rich—a meeting place for everybody’s intersection of concerns. “If you only focus on the vulnerable, the middle class or the well off, you actually won’t be successful because you need resources and engagement from all of those parties if you’re going to create change,” says Al Hatton, president and CEO of United Way Centraide Canada. Concurrently, the government also plays an integral role in this matter. To strengthen our economy, it is imperative to grow job opportunities that have good wages, working conditions, benefits and pensions. As a result, this will encourage individuals to upgrade their skills and create career ladders that influence a wave of productivity needed to balance the wage advantages favoured to management and top executives.

**Creating strong communities**

The working class is also in need of strong community support to create change. Civil organizations such as the United Way focus on fulfilling potential in the individuals they interact with and creating better lives for all. “It’s not just enough to make sure that certain people with problems are happy, but to have healthy and safe communities which create positive, long term lasting social change,” says Hatton. Leadership and volunteering contribute a wealth of opportunities, which make the transition to learning language skills, finding job opportunities and a place to live a lot easier and develops the potential of every citizen, which will, in return, develop a healthy environment.

**PAULEANNA REID**  
 editorial@mediaplanet.com

# Some Would Have You Believe Organized Labour Is To Blame For Today's Global Economic Ills



**By Don MacKinnon**  
*President*  
*Power Workers' Union*

Another Labour Day has come and gone, with most Ontarians having enjoyed summer's last extended weekend with family and friends. Many are unaware that this statutory holiday started with the struggle of Ontario workers for better working conditions.

In 1869, workers in Hamilton began demanding a shorter standard workday – from 12 to 9 hours. By 1872, this “Nine Hour” movement had spread to Toronto, where printers went on strike and paraded for this cause. This action ultimately led to the official Labour Day designation by Prime Minister John Thompson in 1894.

Workers have struggled for fair treatment and a better life for their children and grandchildren since the dawn of civilization. This will continue to be the case a thousand years from now – it is part of the human condition and it drives progress in any society. Governments of all sorts have been toppled throughout history when workers' needs are ignored.

In our society - make no mistake - unions are the principal advocates for all Canadian workers in their ongoing struggle for decent working conditions, fair treatment and a fair share of the economic pie. The basic rights we all have today would look much different if not for the tireless efforts of unions. These include: employment standards; workplace health and safety; compensation for injury on the job; protection against arbitrary or subjective managerial actions; pensions that provide dignified retirement; and many more. All contribute to the standard of living Canadians enjoy.

In most western democracies, reasonably sophisticated mechanisms have been developed under law that is typically designed to foster dialogue between workers and their employers. Working conditions, wages, retirement programs, benefits etc. are negotiated between the parties and the affected workers are entitled to vote as to whether or not they accept the resulting changes to their working relationship.

Occasionally, workers and their employer cannot or will not come to agreement. In those cases employees typically have the democratic right to vote to collectively withdraw their services and the employer has the right to lock the employees out. Either of these last resort steps will put significant economic pressure on employees and employers to come to agreement.

More and more, union-management relationships have become reliant on the fundamental reality that neither can optimize their success without the cooperation and support of the other. High productivity can only come from a trained, motivated and engaged workforce. Employee motivation and engagement can only be established and sustained if the workforce is valued, treated fairly and paid appropriately. Well paying jobs with good benefits can only be sustained if the business is successful.

Over the last twenty-five years, labour relations between workers (unions) and employers have become much more positive and sophisticated. Most union-management relationships have made great strides toward problem solving and mutual gains approaches to workplace issues and collective bargaining.

Increased labour relations sophistication has resulted in sound solutions on difficult issues that are supported by both management and workers. Further, the number of strikes and lockouts has steadily declined as a result.

However, today there are still some workplaces where either the employer, the union, or both have failed to come to the realization that they need to work with each other to solve problems effectively.

In today's increasingly tumultuous times, organized labour is a target for some politicians and big corporations seeking quick and oversimplified ways to cut costs and solve complex economic and environmental issues. Some would like to rewind the clock to a more confrontational time. They demand that unions reduce hard won benefits and accept further reductions for new workers as their contribution to dealing with the economic effects of globalization, off-shoring jobs, the international debt crisis, climate change, and growing competition from emerging economies like China and India. Ironically, workers in those countries are agitating for the same rights and benefits Canadian and European labour groups secured decades ago.

Recent media coverage indicates that many multi-national corporations are sitting on huge cash reserves while lobbying governments for more tax cuts that put downward pressure on fundamental social programs and compensation levels for the workers that provide them. Some press governments for legislative changes to restrict the rights of unions to represent workers and for other changes to labour law that would tilt the balance in favour of higher corporate profits and lower standards of living for workers.

There are those who say unions are no longer relevant. These kinds of comments usually come from those who have something to gain from a lower standard of living for Canadian workers. Unions will be relevant as long as there are employers and employees.

There is no doubt that unions need to continuously evolve and develop better approaches and better representation models for workers in a changing economy – but if not for unions, who will speak and act in support of fair treatment for Canadian workers, now and in the future?



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