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### The Future of Work Implications for Unions L'avenir du travail Implication pour les syndicats El futuro del trabajo La implicación de los sindicatos

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# *The Future of Work*

## *Implications for Unions*<sup>1</sup>

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*What are the trends shaping the future of work? How can unions respond in ways that will invigorate the labour movement for the twenty-first century? This article addresses these questions by first presenting a critique of the future-of-work literature, followed by a detailed analysis of the best available Canadian evidence of the major forces already exerting pressures for change on workplaces. The shape of tomorrow's workplace is visible today. Unions will continue to play a vital role in Canadian society by adapting their organizing and collective bargaining strategies to the often contradictory economic, labour market, organizational, human resource management, and demographic trends evident today.*

Today's debates about the changing nature of work have a familiar ring, revolving around threats to union survival and the urgency of devising new organizing and collective bargaining strategies to encompass the growing number of service sector workers. Over the past quarter-century, the Canadian labour movement has adapted remarkably well to an increasingly white-collar, service-based, feminized workforce. Skeptics might argue, however, that the membership gains that saved Canadian unions from American-style decline came from the public sector, where union density has peaked and jobs are being cut to reduce deficits. Yet this hardly signals the imminent demise of unions. Canadian unions have been "reinventing" themselves for decades; they must continue to do so in a more innovative and aggressive manner. Indeed, history is repeating itself: the future depends on organizing service sector workers, as the

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1. This article is a revised version of The Fourteenth Sefton Memorial Lecture, presented at Woodsworth College, University of Toronto, 27 March 1996.

Canadian Labour Congress first acknowledged in its white-collar organizing drive of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Equally essential, unions must address the intense pressures for change now found in workplaces. While nowhere near as cataclysmic as futurists would suggest, these forces pose major dilemmas for unions — as well as opportunities. This article examines the implications current debates about the future of work have for unions. Specifically, two key questions are addressed: What are the trends shaping the future of work? And how can unions respond in ways that will invigorate the labour movement for the twenty-first century? Detailed analysis of Canadian data and research identifies the major forces already exerting pressures for change on workplaces. If unions seize the challenges presented by these trends, they will continue to defy their critics by demonstrating their evolving role in a democratic society. Put simply, the shape of tomorrow's workplace is visible today. What ultimately emerges will depend on the decisions and actions of workers, employers, governments — and unions.

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#### *DIVERGENT IMAGES OF THE FUTURE OF WORK*

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The economic environment of the 1980s and 1990s has created human dislocation and organizational turmoil. Persistently high unemployment, downsizing, economic globalization, relentless technological change, the polarization of working conditions and incomes, the weight of public deficits and debt, and a crisis in management have redefined work. A huge literature on the future of work has sprung up, presenting a barrage of speculations and contradictory images of the future. Workers feel intensely insecure about their economic futures; unemployment is the top concern in national public opinion polls (Betcherman and Lowe 1997). Managers also are unsure about the best way forward. In the language of management, “constant white-water” is generating the need for a “paradigm shift.”

Future-of-work writers cluster into two large camps: the optimists who champion change, and the pessimists who are critics of change. In between is a third cluster who advocate policy responses to shape change in specific directions.

Typical of the optimists are William Bridges and Nuala Beck. In their high-tech future, the metamorphosis of old work structures will enable many to become mini-entrepreneurs and knowledge workers. In *JobShift*, Bridges proclaims that “the modern world is on the verge of a huge leap in creativity and productivity.... Although there will always be enormous amounts of work to do, [it] will not be contained in the familiar enve-

lopes we call jobs. In fact, many organizations are today well along the path toward being ‘dejobbed’ (1994: viii, ix). Nuala Beck claims to present a “clear road map to the future” by identifying industries with technology-based, knowledge-intensive employment growth (1992: 2). In her view, cheap silicon chips and educated workers fuel the “new economy.” There are equally optimistic predictions about future work organizations. Joseph Boyett, in *Beyond Workplace 2000*, foresees a “meltdown of the barrier between the leader and follower, the manager and worker. Bosses, in the traditional sense, will all but disappear” (Boyett and Boyett 1995: xiv).

In stark contrast, the pessimistic camp focuses on the negative impact of the information technology revolution. “The information age has arrived,” asserts Jeremy Rifkin in *The End of Work*, “new, more sophisticated software technologies are going to bring civilization ever closer to a new workerless world” (1995: xv). Richard Barnet pronounces that “The global job crisis is so profound and its interrelated causes are so little understood that the best of the currently fashionable strategies for creating jobs just nibble at the problem; others are likely to make it worse” (1993: 49). David Noble argues that information technology has been used “to deskill, discipline, and displace human labour in a global speed-up of unprecedented proportions” (1995: xi).

The optimists see the future in very individualistic terms; if you prepare yourself for the new, dejobbed economy you will succeed. The pessimists tend to share a deterministic view of the inexorable, dehumanizing face of technology, manipulated by management to boost productivity regardless of the human costs. Few futurists see unions as central to the process of economic transformation; typically unions are portrayed as vestiges of an obsolete industrial system.

While some of the pessimists advocate policy alternatives — Rifkin (1995) proposes to shift income and work to the voluntary sector — there is a more pragmatic literature that enunciates specific policies to deal with the unemployment problem. Redistribution of work time is being advanced as a means of reducing unemployment, but this discussion is taking place in a public policy arena devoid of fresh approaches to job creation.

Bruce O’Hara (1993), for example, presents a blue-print for achieving a 4-day work week as a way of economic renewal and improved quality of life. The federal Advisory Group on Working Time and the Distribution of Work also recommended a voluntary redistribution of work hours as a way of lowering unemployment (Human Resources Development Canada 1994; also see Yalnizyan et al. 1994). The labour movement has begun

to consider the idea, especially since the precedent set in the 1993 IG Metall strike at Volkswagen in Germany, establishing a 29-hour work week with only modest pay reductions in order to create 30,000 new jobs. Yet the redistribution of work time requires greater flexibility in work arrangements, which runs counter to many employers' view of flexibility as a pool of low-wage, temporary and part-time workers (Zeidenberg 1993).

### *HOW TO MANAGE IN THE FUTURE*

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Turning to the new management literature, we find two prominent themes: human resource development, and worker participation in decision-making. There seems to be a growing focus on the new human resources management and high-performance work systems (Appelbaum and Batt 1994; Pfeffer 1994; Osterman 1994; Betcherman et al. 1994). Collaboration with management on lean production, work teams and other forms of work reorganization can set potentially dangerous traps for unions (Wells 1993; Rinehart et al. 1994). Still, unions must seriously consider why workers want high performance work systems.

Learning and empowerment are the management mantras of the 1990s, central to the discourse on productivity, innovation and competitiveness. Economic policy now assumes that improved human resource utilization will make organizations more innovative, adaptable and flexible, as echoed in numerous federal and provincial government reports (e.g., Porter and Monitor Company 1991; Ontario Premier's Council 1990). The Business Council on National Issues (1993) and the Conference Board of Canada (e.g., Johnston and Farquhar 1992) are leading this chorus. Robert Reich's (1991: 3) description of the global economy neatly frames the issue: "We are living through a transformation that will rearrange the politics and economics of the coming century... Each nation's primary assets will be its citizens' skills and insights."

### *AN ASSESSMENT*

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Much future-of-work literature is thin on analysis and overly speculative. And the recent management literature advocates reforms that are seldom easily or completely applied in work organizations, which is consistent with the history of management practice (Nelson 1980). The latest research on high-performance work systems, for example, suggests that few Canadian employers (likely no more than 10%) have implemented these changes comprehensively (O'Grady 1993; Godard 1995; Betcherman 1995: 116). A large majority of firms still have Taylorist job

design, provide little training, don't involve employees in decision making, and are not family-friendly (Betcherman et al. 1994: 58).

If the futuristic literature on work and management tells us anything, it is that we are at an historic juncture where the way is open for new ideas and approaches. So far, high-performance work systems exist more in theory than in practice, although it is important to recognize that in some industries, mainly automotives, lean production is entrenched (Green and Yanarella 1996). For unions, this means that because the very future of work is being debated, there is opportunity to influence its direction by proposing clear alternatives. Richard Freeman (1995: 519) attributes declining union density in the U.S. and the U.K. to "the behaviour of employers, employees, unions and government, and not [to] any mechanistic shift in economic structure." Similarly, how work will be organized and managed in future will be determined by negotiations and power struggles in which unions can play a vital role.

Standing back and assessing these disparate perspectives on the future of work, we can find elements of a worker-centred response from organized labour. The Canadian Auto Workers' statement on work reorganization, union research on technological change, and the Ontario Federation of Labour's policy on training are good examples (CAW/TCA Canada 1990; Shenck and Anderson 1995; Jackson 1992). Labour must go further, however, in order to address the profound contradictions affecting the lives of workers today. Consider these examples: Many workers are putting in longer hours at a time in their lives when they want to work less, but have no economic choice, while over 1.5 million are jobless. Despite the growing emphasis on people-centred organizations, downsizing remains the dominant management strategy even in times of profitability, and survivor syndrome is the malaise of the 1990s. Contrary to predictions that computerization will destroy jobs, the majority of Canadian workers think their jobs have improved because of computers and few attribute job loss to automation. While workers may find the notion of a "learning organization" appealing, so far Canadian employers have a poor record of training and underemploy a sizable proportion of the workforce. Indeed, the majority of jobs being created are in the bottom tiers of the service sector, not in the high-tech knowledge sectors. And while it is true that there is heightened public concern about unemployment and job security, we also should not lose sight of the fact that many workers also want employment that is both flexible and challenging.

These contradictory trends suggest a rather different image than those presented by futurists. By examining the evidence for these and related trends, I want to raise concrete issues for unions to reflect upon as

they devise organizing and collective bargaining strategies for the twenty-first century.

### *EMERGING WORK ARRANGEMENTS*

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Looking first at emerging work arrangements in Canada, the de-jobbed economy of Bridges and others does not stand up to scrutiny. Non-standard work (NSW) — the category that includes part-time work, temporary work, multiple job-holding, and own-account self-employment — comprised 33% of all workers 15 to 64 years of age in 1994 (Krahn 1995). This is an increase from 28% in 1989, surely cause for concern. But the largest component of NSW, part-time work, has been creeping up since the 1970s and has been stable for the past five years. Using Statistics Canada's new definition (main job is less than 30 hours per week, rather than all jobs totaling less than 30 hours), 12.5% of all workers were part-time in 1976, increasing to 18.8% in 1994 (Statistics Canada 1995: section C, Table 1).

Much of this increase can be explained by rising youth employment. Indeed, in 1992 over a quarter of all part-timers were teenagers (Lindsay et al. 1994: 27). The part-time rate for workers 25 years and older increased more slowly (about 4 percentage points), from 9.5% to 13.9% between 1976 and 1994. For 15-24 year olds, the rate jumped from 21% to 45% in the same period. This youth cohort also is over-represented in the ranks of temporary workers, with 1 in 6 in temporary positions in 1994 (Krahn 1995: 36). Many adult women are also part-time, but this has remained around 20% of the total female labour force for two decades (Bernier 1995: C-5). Most striking in the part-time employment trend is the leap in involuntary part-timers, from 11% to 35% between 1975 and 1993 (Noreau 1994: 26).

Self-employment is another touchstone of the new economy, having strong ideological appeal in a neo-liberal era that promotes self-reliance. While self-employment has inched up from 11% of the labour force in 1975 to 15% in 1994, its composition has changed even more. From 1989 to 1994, own account self-employment increased from 7% to 9% of the labour force — these are the contract workers, but most fall outside the scope of unions under existing legislation (Krahn 1995).

This labour market restructuring has contributed to greater polarization in incomes and job rewards, although less so in Canada than in the U.S. (Morissette et al. 1993). The increase in NSW is a factor, because these jobs tend to be low-paid and provide few intrinsic rewards or benefits and little security (Krahn 1992). However, temporary, part-time and

contract employees are increasingly found across the economy, and involve professionals and other “knowledge” workers, especially in government, social services, and some areas of health care. And substantial numbers of non-standard workers are already part of the union movement. Unions represent 25% of part-timers, compared with 35% of employees in full-time jobs (Statistics Canada 1994, General Social Survey).<sup>2</sup> Similarly, 27% of workers in temporary jobs (some are also part-timers) are unionized, compared with 36% in permanent jobs. A strong selling point for unions is that unionized temps earned \$4.75 per hour more than their non-union counterparts in 1991, a much greater union wage advantage than the \$2.75 per hour average differential among permanent employees (Schellenberg and Clark 1996: 19).

This discussion of non-standard work raises the spectres of increasing economic inequality and declining living standards. Both are happening in Canada (Morissette et al. 1993). From a union perspective, it is important to recognize that the changing distribution of income in the past fifteen years largely results from the increasingly polarized distribution of work hours. As unemployment has risen, so too has the number of individuals working 50 or more hours weekly (now 11% of the workforce). This point has major implications for how unions approach issues such as overtime, job sharing and flexible scheduling.

### *JOB GAINS AND LOSSES*

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Union planning also requires a careful examination of where job gains and losses have occurred. In the past 50 years, the service sector has mushroomed from 1.9 million workers to 9.9 million, or from 40% of the labour force in 1946 to 75% in 1995. There was a doubling of the number of workers in the goods producing sector in this 50-year period, growing to 2.7 million. Employment in the primary sector was halved, from 1.4 million to 700,000 today or 5% of the total labour force (Bernier 1995: C-8). Most recent job creation has been in services. For example, between 1986 and 1991 service sector employment grew by 16%, compared to 2% in the goods producing sector (Statistics Canada, *The Daily*, 2 March 1993).

It is true that managerial, professional, and scientific/technical jobs in the “upper tier” service industries have been increasing at a faster rate than other jobs. Looking at rates of growth by industry, the biggest increases were in business services, such as computer and related services, architectural and engineering services, scientific and other techni-

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2. This and all subsequent references to the 1994, and the 1989, General Social Survey (GSS) report my analysis of the micro-data files, previously unpublished.



cal services, and accounting and bookkeeping services. Yet business services only account for 12% of all employment in 1991 (Krahn and Lowe 1993: 70). The “lower tier” retail and consumer service industries are much larger, accounting for 26% of total employment. In short, the service sector has highly stratified job conditions and rewards. When absolute size as well as growth rates are considered, it seems unlikely that the knowledge-based services will overtake lower-tier services. The public sector is the largest component of upper-tier services, accounting for about 24% of total employment in 1991. But downsizing and deficit-reduction strategies are reducing absolute numbers (Hughes et al. 1996: 271).

Looking at employment shifts by occupation, the 1980s recorded the highest rates of growth in managerial, administrative, social sciences, natural sciences, engineering and related occupations — again fuelling images of post-industrialism (Statistics Canada, *The Daily*, 2 March 1993; Krahn and Lowe 1993: 74). Such jobs traditionally have been ineligible for unionization, or difficult to organize. These knowledge workers’ share of total employment increased from 13.2% in 1981 to 19.6% in 1991. However, this growth is overshadowed by the enormous size of clerical, sales and service occupations, which are well down the hierarchy in terms of skill and rewards. While these three occupations’ share of employment fell slightly in the 1980s (from 41.4% to 39.4% of total employment), they still account for two in five jobs in Canada.

Similarly, we should recognize the continuities in employment patterns. For example, clerical work has been the largest occupation for decades, and has been adapting constantly to technological innovation (Lowe 1987). When planning new organizing, unions should be guided as much by what has been happening in the recent past as by anticipated future changes. Predictions of a labour force populated by knowledge workers, or of masses of marginalized contingent workers, are not supported by the above evidence.

#### *FUTURE LABOUR DEMAND*

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Can we confidently say anything about future job losses and gains, which surely is a crucial question for unions? The Canadian Occupational Projection System (COPS) is perhaps the best method available, albeit flawed, for projecting future labour demand in Canada (Human Resources Development Canada 1996).<sup>3</sup> COPS projects an average annual employment growth between 1996 and 2000 of 1.9%, which in all likeli-

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3. The COPS projections reported here were prepared for me by Human Resources Development Canada, Economic Services Branch, Edmonton.

hood will exceed the rate of increase in the labour supply. Only two industries are predicted to grow at faster annual rates: construction (4.6%) and consumer, business and personal services (2.9%). This translates into 148,257 construction jobs and 630,308 service jobs. The biggest decline is expected in public services (.46% annually), where 14,486 jobs will disappear. This suggests accentuated polarization and segmentation, as jobs are created at both the top and bottom of the labour market.

COPS also projects higher than average growth rates in the following occupations: senior management; business and finance professionals; natural and applied science (engineering) professionals; some sales and service occupations; transportation occupations; and some manufacturing occupations. The largest absolute gains will be in skilled transportation and equipment operating (137,756 jobs) and middle/lower management (129,887 jobs). Clerical growth will likely slow. The numerical increases in "intermediate" (125,001 jobs) and low-skill (106,920 jobs) sales and service occupations far outweigh the number of new middle and lower management jobs. In terms of the educational and skill requirements of new jobs, the majority will not need post-secondary education (Canadian Labour Force Development Board 1994: 20-22).

These projections don't take into account key factors such as the changing character of labour supply, demographics, and the rate of technological change. COPS also masks the changes documented above in work arrangements and the resulting labour market polarization. Moreover, some past COPS projections have been inaccurate (Osberg et al. 1995: 173). Still, forecasts by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) parallel COPS trends. Most U.S. occupational growth projected until 2005 is in low-paying service positions (Edmonson 1996: 7). The BLS projects that at the turn of the century, 70% of all jobs in the U.S. will not require post-secondary education (National Centre on Education and the Economy 1990: 3).

#### *ANALYZING UNION MEMBERSHIP PATTERNS*

While there has been some discussion of the forces shaping the future of unions in Canada (Coates 1992; Kumar 1995), there is no systematic analysis of future union membership trends. In the U.S., some researchers have projected the shrinkage of private sector union membership (Freeman 1989). If Canadian unions were to use the COPS predictions, above, then construction unions and the Teamsters can expect an upswing, public service unions need to expand their horizons beyond government, and occupations in low-tier services (retail, personal services) will be the greatest potential source of new recruits.

The profile of Canadian union membership was stable in the 1980s, showing little change in terms of either industry or occupation. And the overall unionization rate has hovered around 33% for the past three decades (Galarneau 1996). In order to provide the most up-to-date details of industry and occupation patterns of union membership, I have analyzed the 1994 General Social Survey micro-data file (Statistics Canada 1994, GSS). In terms of the occupational distribution of union membership (calculated as a percentage of all wage and salary earners, excluding the self-employed), four occupations stand out as having the largest numbers of unorganized workers: manufacturing and processing occupations (35% unionized, but 1.08 million unorganized); clerical occupations, still the largest occupational group, which is 30% organized but with 1.3 million unorganized; service occupations (a diverse category, comprising protective services such as fire-fighting, security, police; food catering, preparing, serving; service jobs in hotels and motels, tourism, cleaning, and hair care) 26% organized but just under 1 million unorganized; and sales occupations, which are only 7% unionized but with slightly more than 800,000 unorganized.

Shifting our focus from occupations to industries, three industrial sectors with below-average unionization each have over 1 million unorganized: manufacturing, retail, and consumer services. Only manufacturing has a current union density approaching the national average. Given that the level of unionization in an industry is a good predictor of propensity to join, manufacturing and service workers should comprise most of the new recruits for at least this decade. Retail workers will be more difficult to organize, as past experience has shown. Yet even in a service economy, manufacturing workers are central to the future of unions. As John Myles (1993: 126-127) has argued, "manufacturing matters" in a post-industrial economy.

#### *FIRM CHARACTERISTICS AND UNION MEMBERSHIP*

Also important is the kind of organizations creating or eliminating jobs. Firm size is particularly relevant, because it has direct bearing on union recruitment and, ultimately, on unionization levels. Small firms have accounted for a disproportionate share of employment growth since the late 1970s (Picot et al. 1994). Big business and large public sector institutions are downsizing. So the chances of downsizing casualties being unionized are very high, while the chances of new jobs being located in unionized settings are very low.

Evidence to back this up can be found in the 1994 GSS: 6% of employees in firms with less than 20 workers are unionized, yet these

firms employ 23% of all wage and salary workers (also see Galarneau 1996: 51). Workers in firms with between 20 and 99 employees are 19% unionized, and account for about 17% of the workforce. The next tier, those with 100 to 249 workers, are far more unionized: 37%, but only account for 9% of the workforce. The largest firms (1000 or more workers) account for 37% of the workforce and have a unionization level of 48%. In absolute numbers, there are over 3.5 million unorganized workers in workplaces with fewer than 100 workers, and they tend to be younger (under the age of 25). These smaller workplaces are clustered in the consumer services and retail sectors, where many barriers to unionization exist.

### *CHANGING LABOUR FORCE DEMOGRAPHICS*

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To round out this discussion, it is useful to examine the changing labour force demographics. COPS or BLS projections only indicate the expected demand for certain occupations, rather than the kinds of workers likely to be filling those jobs. There is broad consensus that the labour force is being reshaped by three demographic forces: aging, especially of the huge baby boom generation; the feminization of the workforce; and increasing cultural diversity as more visible minorities and Aboriginals enter the labour force. I will focus on feminization and aging, which are fundamental to future union membership growth.

Workforce feminization has had profound consequences for employers, unions and society as a whole. Women's labour force participation rates have risen steadily in the past four decades, levelling off (perhaps only temporarily) at over 57% by 1995 (Statistics Canada 1995, *Canadian Social Trends*: 35; Basset 1994). As a result, women have been joining unions at a far greater rate than men (Krahn and Lowe 1993: 253-254). Dual-earner families comprise over 60% of all two-parent families, and 15% of all mothers in the workforce are single parents. The largest share of employment growth among women has been among mothers of young children. The participation rates for women with at least one child at home under age 6 jumped from 48% to 66% between 1981 and 1991 (Logan and Belliveau 1995). Because these changes are occurring at a time of declining real incomes and greater work intensity, work-family conflicts and stresses have become major problems. Severe "time-crunch" stress was reported by 23% of all dual-earner women, as well as 16% of all dual-earner men, in the 1992 General Social Survey (Frederick 1993; also see Stone 1994). In a survey jointly conducted by the Alberta government and the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees, 49% of males and 51% of females reported that work-family conflicts caused them stress (Alberta

Government 1991). Furthermore, female and male baby-boomers are increasingly taking on elder care responsibilities (Work and Eldercare Research Group 1993).

Employers are beginning to address work-family conflicts, given the impact on productivity, notably rising absenteeism among women with childcare responsibilities (Akyeampong 1992). Work-family issues also should be a high priority for unions because these reflect the needs of many current and prospective members, especially women. While Canadian workers want a better balance between their job and their personal life, only about 16% have flexible work hours (Akyeampong and Siroomian 1993). Few unionized employees have job or work sharing, and fewer than one in five have job-related educational leave (Meltz and Verma 1993). Unions could use to their own advantage employers' rhetoric of family-friendly workplaces. The challenge will be how to achieve flexibility that will benefit workers, and at the same time contribute to improved productivity through reduced absenteeism, turnover and stress, while not compromising the union's integrity.

Aging also has major implications for union membership. The workforce is aging and the relative size of the 15-24 year old cohort has shrunk from 26.4% of the working age population in 1971 to 17.7% (Betcherman and Morissette 1994:1). The aging of the huge baby boom generation, the front end of which is now turning 50, has pushed the issues of retirement and pensions into the public spotlight. It also raises the problem of renewal within union ranks. Because of the smaller youth cohort today, a much higher percentage of young workers need to be recruited to maintain membership levels. Given that in 1992 there were 835,000 fewer workers ages 15-24 than in 1980 (when the size of the youth labour force peaked), unions must work even harder to recruit youth.

Against this background, it is important to examine the demographics of union membership patterns. Unionization rates among 15-24 year olds declined from 16% to 13% during the 1989 to 1994 period (Statistics Canada 1989 and 1994, GSS). There also was a slight drop (27% to 26%) among 25 to 34 year olds in the same period. Unionization rates actually increased slightly in the 35 to 54 age group, while declining from 31% to 27% among 55 to 64 year old workers.

Young workers present union organizers with contradictory characteristics which can either inhibit or facilitate union joining. On one hand, workers in their teens and twenties tend to be transient, with a much higher rate of job-changing than older workers (Veum and Weiss 1993). Workers under the age of 25 are concentrated in jobs that have below-average unionization levels, such as service (mainly food and beverage

preparation and lodging and accommodation) and sales occupations, which also are growing areas of youth employment (Statistics Canada, *Labour Force Annual Averages* 1993). The 1994 unionization rates in these occupations were 25.5% and 7.4% respectively, compared with a labour force rate of 32.5% (Statistics Canada 1994, GSS). As already noted, such jobs tend to be in smaller firms which traditionally have been more union-resistant. But on the other hand, young people entering the labour market during the last 15 years have experienced the brunt of economic hard times. Unemployment, declining wages and non-standard employment have been far more pronounced among workers under age 25 than among older workers. Also fuelling the disillusionment of "Generation X" is their rising educational attainment, which is largely a response to the tight job market. Unlike previous generations, youth entering the labour market since the early 1980s can't count on achieving a better living standard than their parents.

These economic circumstances could heighten interest in unions. This is evident from my longitudinal study of school-work transitions in Edmonton, Toronto and Sudbury between 1985 and 1989 (see Krahn and Lowe 1991 for details). Some 28% of employed high school and university graduates in this three-city sample (n=1379) were union members four years after graduation, in 1989. Among non-members, 38% were willing to join a union. This "latent unionism" is much higher among previous union members: approximately 53% of those who had been union members when surveyed in 1986 or 1987 would join again in 1989. It is also higher among women (41%), compared with men (34%). The fact that organizations such as the CLC and the CAW have recently addressed the challenges of organizing young workers signals the shift in emphasis needed to rejuvenate the labour movement.

### *WORKERS IN TRANSITION*

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The concept of "transitions" is now commonly used to describe workers' experiences in the labour market. The increasingly complex and prolonged school-to-work transition for young people and the growing diversity of transitions experienced by older workers as a result of "early retirement" or layoffs underscore the need to adopt a more dynamic view of the labour market. Public policy has begun to focus on the role of labour force readjustment mechanisms in minimizing the disruptions caused for workers of all ages making transitions in and out of jobs (Canadian Labour Market and Productivity Centre 1993). How much "flux" is there in the labour market? The most accurate snap-shot we have, from the Labour Market Activity Survey, shows that in 1986 and 1987 (good

years for the economy), 48% of the working age population (15-64 years) changed their labour force status every 7 months (Ross and Shillington 1991:5). While more research is needed to determine whether there are more transitions today than several decades ago, fragmentary evidence suggests that labour market mobility may be no greater now than in the early 1980s (e.g., Heisz 1996).

From labour's perspective, organizing strategies must be able to accommodate the transitions workers are now experiencing. Job changes have an obvious impact on union membership. For union organizers, it is useful to think in terms of workers being mobile rather than stationary. According to the 1994 GSS, approximately half of 25-44 year-old union members were also union members in their first job. This means that there are approximately 550,000 workers who belonged to unions in their first job but who don't now belong. Even accounting for some who have moved into jobs outside the scope of bargaining units or who harbour negative feelings about their union experiences, there still is a large potential pool of latent support. Moreover, these data also raise questions about how union membership could be made more "portable" especially for workers changing jobs within the same occupation or industry. Thus it is important for unions to explore occupational-based membership, different membership categories, and an increased range of employment-related services that workers could carry into non-union workplaces (Freeman 1995: 533-534; Cobble 1991; AFL-CIO 1985; Chowcat 1995).

#### *JOB QUALITY AND THE RHETORIC OF HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT*

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Another pressing concern for workers is job content. Challenging, interesting work that provides opportunities for self-direction and self-development has long been a top priority for most workers. With continuously rising educational levels, jobs must become more skilled and knowledge-intensive to meet this need. So unions must go much further in developing a worker-centred perspective on human resource development, given that employers and government are now setting this agenda. The concept of "life-long learning" is shifting the onus for human resource development onto the individual. Not that individuals shouldn't take responsibility; indeed, employed Canadians are actively pursuing their own educational upgrading (Lowe 1992: 51-54). And young workers, in particular, may be on the leading edge of the life-long learning trend, continuing to acquire employment-relevant education long after graduation (Lowe and Krahn 1995).

Canada is becoming a knowledge society mainly because of workers' own educational initiatives, and less so because of the rising skill content of the jobs they perform. We rank among the best educated nations in the world, with more than 40% of workers possessing a university degree or other post-secondary credential (Lowe 1992: 50). Yet large numbers of employees perform jobs that are low-skilled and require less education than they have. Almost one in four employees (23.1%) feel overqualified for their jobs (Statistics Canada 1994, GSS). This underemployment is higher among non-union workers than union members (25.1% versus 19.2%).

Business criticisms of young workers' job-readiness underlies various initiatives to influence the educational curriculum. The Conference Board of Canada, with its employability skills profile and its active promotion of school-business partnerships, has been at the forefront of this trend (e.g., McLaughlin 1992; Bloom 1991). This corporate agenda for education could become dominant, unless challenged by unions. Unions must become important "partners" at the community level, linking classrooms with the work world. Young workers must be the prime target of organizing drives, so ideally they should leave school with an understanding of what unions can provide them. A broader definition of partnerships opens the way for this. When employers complain about the deficiencies of the education system, or imply that workers lack qualifications, they need to be reminded that their recruitment processes and work systems under-utilize the talents of a considerable proportion of the workforce.

A number of recent U.S. studies suggest that what employers are most concerned about is not a lack of "hard" skills among new workers, but whether they have appropriate work attitudes (Cappelli n.d.). For unions, this means that employers' attempts to win the minds of workers is extending into the educational system. Yet another compelling reason to address human resource development issues is that the "dumb job" phenomenon is a source of worker stress and dissatisfaction. No wonder high-performance work systems appeal to workers, given that 23% of Canadian workers view their jobs as requiring very few skills and 26% lack freedom to decide how to do their work (Statistics Canada 1994, GSS). Job quality could be a basis for collective action, especially among well-educated young workers whose expectations are still high.

The information technology revolution, coupled with economic globalization, has heightened concerns that Canada will lose out to competitors such as Japan and Germany unless workers become better skilled. In fact, there is a surplus of computer literacy in this country. In 1994, over two-thirds (68%) of the employed were computer literate, but only half of the employed (and even fewer self-employed) actually used a computer



in their work. The point is that entrenched job structures deprive workers of opportunities to use and develop their talents.

When unions address this issue they confront traditional management prerogatives. Yet management inadvertently placed the issue on the collective bargaining agenda by heralding the virtues of the learning organization and promoting human resource development. Because most workers want to use their brains on the job, unions could devise alternative strategies for empowerment on these grounds. Research shows that workers whose jobs allow them to make decisions and develop their abilities are going to be more innovative and adaptable, healthier physically and mentally, and more involved in their workplace and community. The diverse literature on this topic makes a powerful argument for massive work reform (e.g., Zuboff 1988; Karasek and Theorell 1990; Kohn and Schooler 1983; Lowe and Northcott 1995).

High quality training and on-going learning also improve a worker's employability should he or she have to, or want to, seek another job. As Locke, Kochan and Piore (1995: 150) argue, perhaps the greatest employment security a firm can provide is "continuous training and development opportunities" to increase external employability. But if unions are to influence this goal, they will require a fresh approach to creating partnerships with management (Martin 1995: 119).

### *CONCLUSION*

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I have laid out a range of issues for unions to consider as they plan for the twenty-first century workplace. These include the importance of part-time and temporary workers among future unionists, the urgency of recruiting young workers, and of addressing human resource development issues that management has already placed on the change agenda. Balancing work and family, job quality and "learning" also must become priorities for unions. And union strategists need to respond to the needs of the sizable number of workers who feel undervalued and underutilized.

These arguments also apply to unions as employers; unions also need to be more attentive to their own human resources. As my study of workload among the Canadian Union of Public Employees' own staff members revealed, many union representatives and office workers are at risk of burning out trying to meet heavy job demands (Lowe 1990). CUPE's response was to hire more staff, including a human resource professional, create a full-time staff development and training position, and establish procedures to deal with workload complaints. However, now

some unions face declining revenues, even when their membership may be growing. Clearly, this is a difficult context in which to follow CUPE's lead in addressing workload problems.

Nonetheless, unions as organizations must consider doing things differently. Innovative and flexible approaches to union services, a trend that began in the mid-1980s with the AFL-CIO's (1985) report on the changing situation of workers and their unions, must be pursued. The threat to unions posed by the new human resource management and high performance work systems can be reduced if unions counter with a clear vision of their own. But this can't be a retreat. More broadly, the public debate about the future of work is up for grabs. Unions can articulate the concerns of those workers who now lack a collective voice, counterbalancing the dominant strains of management.

Two themes are woven through my discussion. One is that the shape of the future is visible today. The other emphasizes that what kind of workplace emerges tomorrow depends on the decisions and actions taken today. As Peter Drucker (1993: 16), the dean of management gurus, has asserted: "surely this is a time to *make the future* — precisely because everything is in flux." For unions, the implication of Drucker's message is that the future of work will be in large part what they create.

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## RÉSUMÉ

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### L'avenir du travail : implication pour les syndicats

Il est essentiel que les syndicats s'interrogent sur les pressions actuelles intenses pour le changement en milieu de travail. Loin d'être aussi catastrophiques que d'aucuns l'ont suggéré, ces forces posent autant de dilemmes importants aux syndicats que de perspectives d'avenir. Nous soutenons ici que si les syndicats font face aux défis de ces courants de changements en milieu de travail, ils continueront de défier leurs critiques en démontrant leur rôle positif en société démocratique. Nous posons deux questions : quelles sont les tendances pour l'avenir du travail ? Comment les syndicats peuvent-ils réagir pour revigorer le mouvement syndical au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle ? Une analyse détaillée de données et de recherches canadiennes permet d'identifier les principales causes exerçant déjà des pressions pour le changement dans les milieux de travail. En somme, le profil des milieux de travail de demain est visible aujourd'hui.

L'environnement économique des années 80 et 90 a créé des bouleversements humains et organisationnels. Un chômage élevé persistant, les réductions d'effectifs, la globalisation de l'économie, le changement technologique constant, la polarisation des conditions de travail et des revenus, le poids des déficits et dettes publiques et la crise du management ont redéfini le travail. Une littérature abondante sur l'avenir du travail a surgi et a débattu la nature et les implications de tous ces changements, le tout accompagné d'écrits normatifs sur la gestion. On retrouve les auteurs sur l'avenir du travail en deux grands groupes : les optimistes, champions du changement et les pessimistes, critiques du changement. Entre les deux, on retrouve un troisième groupe qui prône des réactions politiques pour façonner le changement dans des directions spécifiques.

Beaucoup d'écrits sur l'avenir du travail sont faibles en analyse et grandement spéculatifs. Après lecture d'écrits récents sur la gestion normative, il est important de se rappeler que les réformes prônées sont rarement facilement et complètement appliquées dans les organisations de travail. Cela est d'ailleurs logique avec l'histoire de la pratique de la gestion. Les recherches récentes sur les systèmes de travail hautement performants, par exemple, suggèrent que peu d'employeurs canadiens aient complètement implanté ces changements. Plus que tout, les écrits futuristes sur le travail et la gestion indiquent que nous sommes à un tournant historique où le chemin est ouvert pour de nouvelles idées et approches. Cela signifie, pour les syndicats, que dans un environnement où l'avenir



du travail est discuté, c'est une occasion d'influencer le débat en proposant des choix clairs. La façon dont le travail sera organisé et géré sera déterminée par des négociations et des conflits de pouvoir dans lesquels les syndicats peuvent jouer un rôle vital.

Les syndicats doivent se prononcer sur les contradictions profondes affectant la vie des travailleurs aujourd'hui. Par exemple, alors que plusieurs travaillent plus d'heures à un moment de leur vie où ils veulent travailler moins, parce qu'ils n'ont pas d'autre choix économique, plus de 1,5 millions de personnes sont sans emploi. De plus, malgré toute l'insistance sur les organisations orientées vers les individus, les réductions d'effectifs demeurent la stratégie dominante des employeurs, et le syndrome du survivant est le malaise des années 90. Au plan technologique, contrairement aux prévisions voulant que les ordinateurs détruisent des emplois, la majorité des travailleurs canadiens attribuent l'amélioration de leur emploi aux ordinateurs et peu accusent l'automatisation pour les pertes d'emploi. Alors que les travailleurs peuvent trouver attrayant la notion « d'organisation apprenante », les employeurs canadiens ont jusqu'à maintenant un pauvre dossier de formation et sous-emploient une grande proportion de leur main-d'œuvre. En effet, la majorité des emplois créés le sont dans le tiers inférieur du secteur des services et non dans les secteurs des techniques de pointe de la « nouvelle économie ». Il est certes vrai qu'il y a une grande préoccupation au sujet du chômage et de la sécurité d'emploi, mais il ne faudrait pas perdre de vue le fait que plusieurs travailleurs veulent aussi un emploi à la fois flexible et stimulant. Ces forces contradictoires présentent une image fort différente de celle présentée par les futuristes. En examinant ces tendances, nous soulevons des sujets concrets de réflexion pour les syndicats lors de leur définition de stratégies d'organisation et de négociation collective pour le XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle.

Ainsi, les syndicats devraient considérer l'importance des travailleurs à temps partiels et des travailleurs temporaires parmi les syndiqués, l'urgence de recruter des jeunes travailleurs et de questionner les aspects du développement des ressources humaines que les gestionnaires ont déjà inscrits à leur ordre du jour. Les syndicats doivent également se prononcer sur ces sujets cruciaux que sont l'équilibre travail-famille, la qualité de l'emploi et la formation. Les stratèges syndicaux devraient aussi se demander comment organiser une bonne proportion des travailleurs qui se sentent sous-évalués et sous-utilisés. De plus, les syndicats doivent examiner leurs propres pratiques de gestion des ressources humaines pour poursuivre des approches plus innovatrices et plus flexibles pour les services syndicaux. La menace posée aux syndicats par la nouvelle gestion des ressources humaines et par les systèmes de travail à haute perfor-

mance peut être réduite si les syndicats se donnent une vision claire. Alors que le débat public sur l'avenir du travail s'intensifie, les syndicats peuvent jouer un rôle clef en parlant pour ces travailleurs sans voix collective, contrebalançant ainsi les tendances dominantes de la gestion.

## **RESÚMEN**

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### **El futuro del trabajo : La implicación de los sindicatos**

Cuales son las tendencias que están impactando el futuro del trabajo ?, Como pueden los sindicatos responder en formas que puedan animar al movimiento laboral en el siglo 21 ? Este articulo responde a estas preguntas mediante el análisis de la literatura sobre el futuro del trabajo, seguido de un análisis en detalle de el mejor ejemplo canadiense de las fuerzas en acción que ya se encuentran en trabajo para cambiar el ambiente de trabajo. La forma de el medio de trabajo del futuro es visible hoy en día. Los sindicatos continuaran jugando un papel primordial en la sociedad canadiense mediante la adaptación de sus métodos de negociación colectiva y organización al siempre contradictorio arco iris formado por la economía, el mercado laboral, las organizaciones, la administración de los recursos humanos y las tendencias demográficas en evidencia hoy en día.