

**INSTITUTIONAL AND CONCEPTUAL  
PERSPECTIVES  
ON UNION RENEWAL**

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## **PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE PRESENTATION:**

\$ Union Renewal is becoming a popular area of academic and union research:

- Growing volume of literature in the form of books, articles, symposia, surveys, policy discussion papers, including papers from unions such as SEIU in the United States, and CAW in Canada.
- A subject of some discussion and debate in union conventions and conferences (eg. CLC conference on the issue last October).
- As yet only limited research and writing on union renewal exists in Canada B hence the need for this text.

\$ Purpose of this presentation is to highlight key institutional and conceptual perspectives on union renewal based on a review of burgeoning literature.

\$ Key issues discussed are:

1. Meaning and concept of union renewal;
2. Rational of union renewal;
3. Thesis of union renewal;
4. Major renewal strategies;
5. Obstacles in the change process;
6. Facilitating factors in the change process;
7. Experience with renewal in a comparative context; and
8. Challenge of union renewal in the Canadian context.

### **1. Meaning and concepts of union renewal**

\$ A variety of terms, renewal, revitalization, rebuilding, rebirth, revival, resurgence, reinventing, rekindling, transformation;

- \$ Whatever the term, they refer to the variety of actions/initiatives taken or needed by labour organizations to strengthen themselves in the face of their declining role and influence in the workplace and society;
- \$ Emphasis on adaptation and adjustment to a *fundamentally* different external and internal environment through *innovations and change in organizational structures, leadership, policies and practices with a view to becoming a more effective institution of workers*;
- \$ Differences
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- \$ A combination of the two under this perspective is to move away from servicing for business unionism orientation to social movement unionism participation of the components of process, realize that two may be interrelated and not mutually exclusive;
- \$ The alternate Amutual-aid@ perspective advocates a shift from narrow servicing approach to a mutual aids logic of unionism characterized by greater involvement and participation of workers in the life of unions to secure their commitment and instrumental legitimacy. This may not be entirely consistent with social movement unionism, although questions remain on mutual aid for what.

## 2. Rational of union renewal and challenges of adaptation and adjustment

- \$ Declining union strength and influence:
- Declining union density, bargaining power, inactive membership and political influence due to increasing employment in non-union sectors and insufficient organizing, growing employer power, hostility towards unions and rising demands for concessions at the bargaining table, and changing orientation of public policy towards deregulations, privatization and other market-oriented solutions.

- Growing workforce diversity with varying worker needs and aspirations and increasing membership expectations in the face of deteriorating quality of work-life.
- Poor union image and worker resistance to unionization.
- Weakening solidarity among unions due to fragmentation and divisions and lack of unity and cohesion.

#### \$ Strategic Challenges facing unions:

- Expanding representation
- Engagement in workplace change
- Restoring influence on civil society
- Modifying structures of decision-making to promote activism, and democratization to provide better representation to diverse groups of members
- Organizational modernization to improve rank-and-file communication, effective servicing and foster greater member participation and involvement in union decision making
- Raising the profile of the labour movement to improve public image and create a shared vision
- Coordinating action to shape social and economic change

### 3. Thesis of union renewal

Over the last several decades there has been an extensive debate on the extent to which economic, political and institutional changes

Union renewal is therefore an organizational change to:  
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 òHs that the recent literature has demonstrated to have the most explanatory value.

1. Rebuild and expand union capacity to respond to the strategic challenge of organizing;
2. Engage in creative bargaining to meet ‘unfilled needs’ of a diverse group of workers, and to influence the nature and direction of workplace change;
3. Devise new ways to shape public policy;
4. Initiate structural change to build local activism and encourage greater participation of rank-and-file in union decision-making; and
5. To build solidarity and a worker-centered view of the world so as to become a catalyst of progressive social and economic change.

#### **4. Key Renewal Strategies**

- \$ Organizing the unorganized through innovative tactics and strategies, emphasizing rank-and-file involvement and participation
  - Elements of strategies (Bronfenbrenner and Hickey 2004)
  - Card check and Neutrality agreements
  - Building an Organizational Culture
- \$ Organizational restructuring for efficient resource utilization
  - Mergers for building capacity and resources
  - Rationalization and modernization through the use of new technology for better servicing and more strategic allocation of resources
  - Changes in structures for greater rank-and-file involvement and participation as well as giving representation to new groups
- \$ Coalition-Building
  - United Front or ‘Fusion’ with social groups (Clawson)
  - Community level alliances
- \$ Labour-management ‘partnerships’ in areas of mutual interests and engagement in workplace change for better union image and instrumentality perceptions, eg. training
- \$ Grass roots political action to expand activism and to promote mobilization for progressive social change
- \$ National and international solidarity, emphasizing community of interests

- Inter-union cooperation for coordinated action, campaigns and collective bargaining
- International links and exchange of information

\$ Expanded programs of education, training and research

\$ Improving public image through media relations

## **5. Obstacles to change**

Obstacles both internal and external: among the external barriers include the degree of employer resistance and the effectiveness of their anti-union strategies, and the political environment which may be supportive of or a constraint on employer behaviour.

Worker resistance, either due to fear of job loss, employer reprisal, ideology of individualism or negative union instrumentality perceptions, a potent factor. A hard core of unionized workers in Canada and the United States opposed to unionization despite their positive image of unions (see Meltz and Lipsett 2003).

Among the internal obstacles include:

1. Lack of full awareness of challenges facing unions
2. Inadequate/fragmented commitment to change on the part of leadership/staff/members
3. Skills and attitudes of leaders and staff
4. Risks in moving from a servicing to social movement orientation
5. Gender and ethnic mismatch between leaders and workforce
6. Internal divisions between unions, creating difficulties for multi-union coordinated organizing, bargaining, and political action
7. Recent trend towards general unionism, promoting raiding and inter-union conflicts
8. Organizational structures and culture of unions preventing shift of priorities from servicing to rank-and-file mobilization
9. Inadequate resources and poor allocation for education and training

10. Lack of strategic planning and careful evaluation and prioritization
11. Tension between unions affiliates and federations, particularly in decentralized labour movements
12. Bureaucratic inertia

## **6. Facilitating Factors in the Change Process:**

- \$ Rank-and-file solidarity;
- \$ Extent of decline in union strength, e.g. action due to crisis
- \$ Organizational culture re. Internal democracy, tradition of struggle, involvement in community affairs and organizations;
- \$ Leadership re. experience, vision, style of governance, etc.;
- \$ Education, research and communication networks;
- \$ Union effectiveness re. various functions; and
- \$ Resource availability.

## **7. Experience with union renewal in a comparative context:**

- \$ Considerable literature now on the state of union renewal in both developing and developed countries. Major references include Cornfield and McCammon 2003, Fairbrother and Yates 2003, March 2003 issue of European Journal of Industrial Relations and two ILO studies, Jose 2002 and Olney 1996.
- \$ The literature on U.S. renewal experience particularly voluminous. Among the recent contributions include Milkman and Voss (2004); Turner, Katz and Hurd (2001), Clawson 2003, Bacharach et al (2001), Bennett and Kauffman (2002), Lopez (2004) Bronfenbrenner et. Al. (1998).
- \$ Experience in Anglo-Saxon countries with similar cultural norms (U.S., Canada, U.K., Australia and New Zealand) discussed in Fairbrother and Yates, (2003).
- \$ General consensus that union movements are losing their strength and influence, in varying degrees, almost everywhere in the face of pervasive neo-liberal ideology.

- \$ Consequently, heightened awareness for the need to change union structures, develop innovative strategies and approaches for organizing, bargaining, servicing and political action, and foster greater worker involvement and participation in union decision-making.
- \$ Union responses shaped by institutional constraints and political context.
- \$ Organizing the main focus of union renewal in countries with declining union membership and where membership strength is the dominant source of union influence. This is particularly the case of Anglo-Saxon countries where IR systems are highly individualistic and where the focus of union renewal has been organizational restructuring through union mergers, building social partnerships and stepped up political action to mobilize workers on macro economic and social security issues. In Australia, the focus of union renewal has been playing a key role in the development of public policy (Fairbrother & Vetter 2003). In the UK, the focus of union renewal has been playing a key role in the development of public policy (Fairbrother & Vetter 2003). In the NZ, the focus of union renewal has been playing a key role in the development of public policy (Fairbrother & Vetter 2003). In the NZ, the focus of union renewal has been playing a key role in the development of public policy (Fairbrother & Vetter 2003).
- \$ In almost all countries, both developed and developing, mergers and rationalization of union structures, and political action for worker mobilization, stepped up political action and developing agendas to negotiate workplace change.
- \$ Despite the wide variations in institutional and political context, social movement unionism is a growing trend in many countries. In the UK, the focus of union renewal has been playing a key role in the development of public policy (Fairbrother & Vetter 2003). In the NZ, the focus of union renewal has been playing a key role in the development of public policy (Fairbrother & Vetter 2003). In the NZ, the focus of union renewal has been playing a key role in the development of public policy (Fairbrother & Vetter 2003).



\$ However, as a critic of social movement unionism in the American context notes, given the history of worker conservatism, bureaucratic rigidities within unions, and other external and internal obstacles Union revitalization will be an extremely difficult uphill struggle.@

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## 8. Challenge of union renewal in the Canadian context: 1<sup>a</sup>

\$ The unionization rate of 32.5% Canada-wide remains in the mid-range of unionization when compared internationally B not nearly the decline to 13% as in the United States but not nearly as high as in the Scandinavian countries. Yet ship page is evident, particularly in the private sector and success is limited in sectors where there is employment growth.

\$ Challenges of adversity arising out of growing anti-union attitudes and behaviors of employers encouraged by both increasing North American economic integration and unsupportive neo-liberal public policy orientation.

\$ Opportunities for mobilization of workers through activism, involvement and participation using the current climate of insecurity, uncertainty, and growing worker stress and dissatisfaction in and beyond the workplace.

\$ Growing willingness of youth, minorities, women and disadvantaged workers to join unions also provide incentives for union renewal.

\$ Need to rethink current strategies of bargaining, political action, organizing and coalition-building.

\$ Stepped up organizing efforts through coordinated drives, increased resources and more innovative approaches.

\$ Given our decentralized framework, locals will have to be catalyst for change, aided by appropriate supporting vertical and horizontal networks of support.

\$ Stronger community alliances through more effective and pro-active local labour councils.

\$ Greater emphasis on research, education and communications, making better use of internet, new information technologies, and our relationships with academics.

- \$ Better coordination between local and national offices.
- \$ Bargaining priorities to focus on issues of concerns to communities and Anew@ workforce.
- \$ Increased political action by building inter-union solidarity and community alliances.
- \$ To state that the union movement across Canada, with the possible exception of Quebec, is undergoing wide spread union renewal is to misread the current reality. At the same time unions have made some progress, as the Murray-Kumar survey reveals.
- \$ In some instances one finds extensive membership activism and empowerment. It is precisely these initiatives that can assist unions and members to overcome the obstacles noted and which we hope to capture in this text.

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