

Notes for remarks by

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The Vector Poll™ on Public Opinion in Canada

for the

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Theme II: *Unions and Political Action*
Sub-Theme A: *Building Union Imagination: Agendas, Ideologies and Values*

This is how an opinion researcher responds to the colloquium organizers' hypothesis:

Many unionists feel that they face an existential crisis.

1.

Imagine union history since the 1950's as a series of concentric circles with the core union functions in the centre.

As unions have moved their attention from the centre to the periphery, their share of the work force – and their influence – has shrunk.

Unions in Canada have extensive political action wings.

One runs dental clinics and some operate international aid agencies.

Others are allied with charities.

They advocate against globalization and they campaign for childcare, health care, disarmament, the unemployed, pensioners and other causes.

The result is that some of the most talented people in unions are not working on the core union mission: improving the lives of their members now and recruiting new members.

Anyone suggesting unions focus more on their members and potential members and less on worthy causes stands accused of supporting “business” unionism over social unionism.

But if unions continue to let themselves become distracted from their core “business” of membership satisfaction there will be fewer members to support social action.

Which union is more likely to mobilize the most members for politics, social action and protests – the union with 10,000 members or the union with a 100,000?

Supporters of more social unionism – meaning a greater emphasis on activities unrelated to membership satisfaction – say unions should do both: organize and become community pressure groups and movement.

But successful strategy is about choices. It’s simply impossible, as the data show, to organize nonunion employees through social action.

The result of unions’ shifting their focus from members and nonmembers is an increasingly weaker labour movement with a softer voice in public policy and the economy.

Today whole sectors of the economy – financial services, high-tech, big-box retailing, residential construction – remain union-free.

Facing the crisis, American unions have looked to neutrality agreements and advertising campaigns and hired platoons of additional organizers.

Yet hiring more organizers to sell the traditional union model is the equivalent of trying to save the horse a century ago from competition with the car.

Advertising, more horse salespeople or even a better horse could not withstand the car.

2.

Emblematic of the crisis is the unmet potential of unions.

In Canada and America 30% to 40% of nonunion employees want a union.¹

The rest are deeply ambivalent about unions.(Nearly three in four say they would vote to have an association.)

Most nonunion workers acknowledge that compared with them, union members are better off.

Most also are more afraid of unions than they are of the employer.

They are wary of the seniority system and feel they'll lose their voice at work if there's a union.

Meanwhile union activists seem to have given up too easily on the possibility of meeting membership needs.

Too frequently unions turn to politics – away from the core to the periphery – to achieve what they once did at the core, through organizing and bargaining.

This approach tries to turn history around because labour law reform and the other progressive social legislation that unions want always come after – not before – unions are growing.

It's the recruiting of millions of employees and the transformation of those employees into workers with a union conscience that lead to better social conditions and progressive government.

And obviously labour law reform is irrelevant if employees don't want unions.

Organizing is the lagging indicator.

The leading indicator is membership satisfaction.

¹ Vector Research polls.

Raising membership satisfaction is the single most important thing unions can do to grow again.

- A third of members say most employees don't need a union.
- A third say they get poor value for their dues.

Yet does any union have anyone in charge of membership satisfaction?

3.

An example of a union with a new agenda is the Nova Scotia Government and General Employees' Union.

By opening a call centre, the union is moving away from the traditional model of membership service where workplace stewards handle member problems.

Today given the complexity of the problems employees face and the rising expectations of union members, the traditional model doesn't work because it is impossible for a steward to know as much as the entire union.

The NSGEU call centre, with its toll-free phone number and 'round-the-clock access, puts the union's entire intellectual capital at the fingertips of the members, 24/7.

There are other models unions can imitate – amazon.com, Google and eBay.

You can do practically anything on the Internet... find a mate... get counseling... sell your furniture... get a mortgage... book a trip... view uncensored videos.

But there is nothing you can do at a union Web site to engage a union member ... file a grievance... solve a work-related health problem... get bargaining

advice... talk to a labour lawyer...learn to be a steward... find a better job...
update a blog...compare your pay with similar workers... find a union pen-pal
in another state, province or country.

Union treasurers should like this – the Internet is a way unions could
drastically reduce overheads.

If unions let them, workers would even join unions on-line.

In Vector Polls™ 1 in 10 nonunion employees would join a union on-line.

Extrapolated across the nonunion population in Canada that's 700,000 new
members.

Of course unions are cautious about the 'Net.

The Trades Union Congress posted an article on its Web site last week warning
unions to avoid the Internet because it reinforces individuality at the expense
of solidarity.²

To grow again, it is not laws or money unions need; it's imagination.

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² <http://www.tuc.org.uk/organisation/tuc-8993-f0.cfm>