

I: A Moment of Truth for Canadian Unions

After two decades of fighting mostly defensive battles against the pressures of globalization, employer aggression, hostile government policy, and public cynicism, the trade union movement in Canada faces an enormous and historic moment of truth.

These truths are well known:

- Continued erosion of union density, especially in the private sector (17% and falling).
- Failure of union organizing efforts to offset plant closures and keep up with labour force growth.
- Decline in labour's share of national wealth; stagnant or falling purchasing power for working families.
- New levels of political hostility from right wing governments. Examples: Harper's 3 interventions in free collective bargaining in 6 months; new anti-labour attacks expected in Saskatchewan; attacks on CUPE contracts in Toronto; anti-labour laws in 20 US states.
- Aggressive attacks by global employers on key contract provisions, and the foundation of unions. Examples: Vale and US Steel conflicts with USW.
- A dramatic generational change in the unions as union veterans retire, and unions face new challenges in appealing to, organizing, and servicing young people.
- Growing negative public opinion of unions, and the view that unions are self-interested and outdated.
- Paralysis and dysfunction of some (not all) labour centrals.
- Failure of the labour movement to date to significantly restructure and address issues of too many unions (57 CLC affiliates), ability to initiate and lead powerful campaigns, and lack of coordination and duplication of labour movement services and resources.

If unions do not change, and quickly, we will steadily follow U.S. unions into continuing decline. Canadian private sector union density is already as low as it was when Reagan defeated the U.S. air traffic controllers. We must reverse the erosion of our membership, our power, and our prestige.

There is clearly opportunity for unions in the present moment, not just threats. Global capitalism is proving itself incapable of righting itself, and we are likely at the beginning

of a long period of economic turmoil and stagnation. Public concern with inequality, and the excesses and irresponsibility of the rich and corporate leaders, is growing – as reflected in the surprising support for the Occupy movement. If unions can position themselves as a legitimate voice of this discontent, and channel Canadians’ anger and worry in progressive and effective directions, we could emerge from the current crisis stronger and more confident – just as unions emerged stronger from the 1930s, thanks to innovation in organizing and bargaining strategies, and a willingness to directly confront the political and economic failures of that daunting time.

II: For a new kind of Canadian unionism

In this worrisome context, the leaders of CAW and CEP recently met to discuss how the labour movement must respond. They considered in particular the possible impact that a new Canadian union could have in rebuilding the movement’s power and capacity to innovate.

It was agreed that the Canadian labour movement in 2011 needs revitalization, greater strength and a new social influence. It was also agreed that Canadian labour, and each of our unions, will undergo major changes in the period ahead as our economic and social conditions are transformed. CEP and CAW have an opportunity now to lead and shape this change, rather than waiting passively and having change forced upon us.

We believe there is a need for a new force in the Canadian labour movement, with the ability to succeed and grow in a way that our present unions cannot. Such a new Canadian union could open important opportunities to build on our traditions and past successes, and also to create a new identity, a new presence, a new “brand,” and new power – for worker rights and social change.

The purpose of a new union is not just to create a “bigger” organization. Other unions have tried to do that, and the results were often discouraging. While there are important benefits from becoming larger, reducing duplication, and capturing synergies in infrastructure and servicing, the labour movement today needs more. The formation of a new union must be founded on a desire and willingness to modernize our practices, to innovate with new models of organizing and servicing, and to rebuild our image with workers.

Such a new union would have to speak to Canadians in a new way. It must reflect a dynamic, sectoral and community-based workers' movement that is more attractive and more relevant to workers' needs than our present day organizations. A new union must have a critical mass, and the size and resources to win crucial struggles, organize successfully and wield political influence as a social union. It must be willing and able to develop new methods of organizing and representing workers in today's precarious, hyper-flexible labour market. It would require qualities, priorities and strategies that would overcome the economic, political, and cultural adversities and obstacles that now stand in our way.

The qualities, priorities, and strategies of a new union must be the product of extensive dialogue and debate and visioning. However, the following opportunities and principles for a new union were mutually agreed in this opening discussion. The initial discussion also identified some of the questions and challenges that be faced as we move forward.

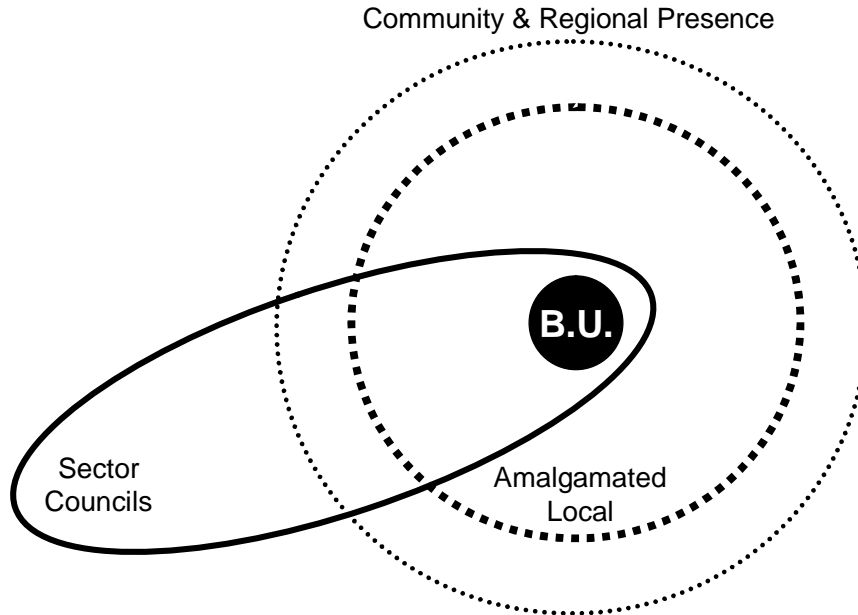
III: Features and strategies for a new union to succeed

- While larger size alone is not sufficient reason to form a new union, there are some ways in which “bigger IS better” for a new union:
 - More membership.
 - More visibility / credibility / influence with public, government, employers.
 - More economic clout when needed.
 - Larger strike fund for the “epic battles” with corporations that seem to be occurring more often.

- The formation of a new union would be an opportunity to build a “brand” image and visibility for a new kind of national Canadian industrial unionism. This improved brand image will be essential for attracting more individual workers to want to join a union:
 - A new union will be defined not by who we are (eg. autoworkers, paperworkers, etc.) but by what we think and what we do.
 - The new union must be associated with the highest quality of representation for its members (accountability, effectiveness, fighting capacity).
 - A new union must preserve sector identities and structures (eg. pattern contracts) within the unified, diverse structure of the overall union.

- A new union may create a wave of change in Canadian labour, and attract other partners. A new union should be open to all who share the vision of a stronger, larger, Canadian social union.
- The new union can combine its resources and use them more efficiently in many areas:
 - Economies of scale in research / education / legal services.
 - Combined infrastructure (administration, buildings, etc.).
 - Avoid duplication in servicing.
- A new union would use the opportunity of its founding to restructure its locals to provide a stronger, more community-focused critical mass within each local:
 - Amalgamations of smaller locals into larger community locals.
- A new industrial union would aim to strengthen and expand its presence and critical mass in key sectors of the economy:
 - Revitalize and expand sector-based bargaining.
 - Consolidate and strengthen sectoral councils & bargaining structures.
 - Put more attention & resources into developing alternative economic development visions for each sector.
- A new union would define itself as a force fighting for all workers, not just its own members.
 - Offer services and support to non-union workers engaged in struggles and conflicts.
 - Put top priority, creativity, and resources into innovative campaigns to organize new members.
 - Develop more effective & sustainable ways of servicing small bargaining units.
 - Use its amalgamated local structure to present a clear presence as the voice of workers in each community, and engage regularly in local campaigns and struggles.
 - In this way, the combined resources and higher profile of the new union is used to build a genuinely new form of trade unionism: a unionism that is equated with the broader fight of all workers for justice and security.
- A new union would aim to spark a “culture shift” among staff and local union leadership, to go beyond “servicing” and view their work as movement-building.

- More focus on organizing new units.
- More engagement with community campaigns & social unionism.
- A new union would aim to strengthen the activity of the existing labour centrals (CLC and provincial federations), one way or another:
 - Inspire them and push them and embarrass them into a more forceful vision of action.
 - Failing that, the new union must undertake to perform those broader “movement” functions itself (by undertaking its own campaigns and other initiatives). This new union will have better capacity to “do the job itself” – in a non-sectarian way, with the ultimate goal of inspiring the rest of the labour movement into great activism.
- A new union would aim to articulate a broader critique of the current socio-economic system (neoliberal capitalism), and position itself as fighting for long-run social and political change, not just incremental economic progress for its members.
- The new union’s organizational structure would reflect the different major ways in which union members engage, including:
 - Being able to organize and represent members in the workplace, including in small bargaining units.
 - The bargaining units are organized into larger local unions, which have critical mass and resources to allow strong leadership development, engagement in the broader life of the union, and an active community profile and presence.
 - Within each community, the local unions have capacity to project a unified face and a higher degree of involvement in local or regional campaigns, struggles, and politics.
 - The union is also organized sectorally, using its critical mass to set industry-wide standards and fight for alternative visions of sector economic development.
 - The national union undertakes conventions, councils, and campaigns which engage and unify all parts of the union.
 - The new union would have the bargaining unit at its base, but interact with a larger, public community, while preserving a strong sectoral identity, as represented in the following diagram:



IV: Open Questions Facing a New Union

The discussion between CEP and CAW leaders identified a number of questions requiring further discussion and consensus building.

- What is the best form of democratic engagement for members in different regions? What kind of regional structures and representation are required?
- How can a new Canadian union provide representation and services to non-union workers?
- What is the new union's approach to party politics? While each union agrees on the need for labour political action and engagement in electoral and extra-parliamentary struggles, and each union agrees that unions must make independent political decisions in the interest of working people and their membership, there are differences in the current approach of CAW and CEP. While CEP National Union is affiliated to the New Democratic Party, the CAW has no official affiliation at the national level. How would a new union engage in national politics and with the New Democratic Party?

V: Common Strengths of Two Great Unions.

CEP and CAW have several common features and strengths.

- Canadian
- Diverse private sector membership (though some public sector representation)
- Strong servicing model
- Strong sector identities and commitment to pattern bargaining
- Bargaining committees own bargaining; all contracts ratified by secret ballot
- Central commitment to social unionism, community engagement, political activism
- Recognition of need for Quebec autonomy

Most significantly, based on the level of consensus reached by CAW and CEP leaders on the need for a new Canadian union, we agree to share these views with the democratic leadership of our respective unions for further discussion.