

Union Renewal: Meaning, Rationale, Strategies and Experience

Pradeep Kumar
Queen's University

Presented at the CAW-CEP workshop
Feb 25, 2012

Outline of the Presentation

- **Meaning of union renewal: what is it really about?**
- **Why the growing emphasis and urgency?**
- **Key renewal strategies**
- **Canadian Experience with union renewal**
- **Role of federations: Could they become the catalyst of change?**

■ Meaning Of Union Renewal

A variety of terms, eg. renewal, revitalization, rebuilding, revival ,re-kindling ,transformation , rethinking ,**but, they all mean the same,i.e.**

- renewal is a **process of change** to rebuild the organizational and institutional strength of the labor movement, capable of defending and advancing the interests and rights of workers .
- it refer to a variety of actions/initiatives by labor organizations , individually or collectively ,to strengthen their power/capacity and resources
- - it assumes that unions control their own destiny. It does no good to simply blame employers or governments without confronting the “realities” and demonstrating the courage and willingness to take bold initiatives for change

The message is clear : Unions need to adapt and undertake innovations in their structures , policies and practices to meet the challenges of a fundamentally different external and internal environment with a view to become a more effective and dynamic institution of workers .

What does union renewal entail?

- **Union renewal requires well planned and coordinated organizational change to:**
 - 1) rebuild and expand union capacity to respond to the strategic challenge of organizing the unorganized ;
 - 2) engage in creative bargaining to meet the “unfilled needs” of a diverse group of workers and to influence the nature and direction of workplace change at the same time providing an effective response to uncertain and changing markets and technology ;
 - 3) devise new ways to shape public policy through a coordinated political action strategy;
 - 4) initiate structural change in organizational culture to promote worker and community activism and encourage greater rank-and file participation in union decision making , and
 - 5) build solidarity and a worker-centered societal vision to be a catalyst of progressive social and economic change.
- **The end result is a stronger labor movement capable of challenging the neo-liberal agenda designed to leave the working class “unionless and defendless”?**

What kind of union is a renewed union?

- *“renewed unions” are effective as well as dynamic (that is they are democratic, inclusive, participative and transparent in their decision making, and grass roots based)*
- *they have the power and capacity to restore their political and economic influence to advance and defend worker interests and rights in a “hostile political and economic environment”*

Differing Perspectives and many questions!

- *While there is a general consensus that unions need to be effective and dynamic , there are differing perspectives and many questions on what does change entail , how to build power and capacity, what kind of power and capacities need to be built ,who is going to build them, whether rebuilding should be individual union based or a more coordinated action to revitalize the labor movement .*
- *More important, there is little discussion among union activists on the process of union renewal and little time (in “the busy world of trade unionism”) and inclination to reflect on their work or the basic union mission.*
-

■ Why the growing emphasis and urgency

- The main reason for urgency on union renewal is the declining union power and influence due to a fundamentally different political, economic and social environment hostile to unions , combined with a sense of complacency and possibly a” battle fatigue” among unions after more than two decades of defensive struggles (see page 1 of the CAW-CEP discussion paper on the “truths”). As the paper notes “if unions do not change , and quickly, ... reverse the erosion of membership ,power and prestige” they could steadily follow U.S. unions into a continuing decline .
- Four key factors behind waning union role and influence are noteworthy:
 - 1) **A steady decline in union density** associated with a marked slowdown in organizing activity, **erosion in bargaining power**, increasing employer demands for concessions in wages and benefits (in both public and private sectors) , changing orientation of public policy towards neo-liberal solutions(like privatization, deregulation, and contracting out) , and growing attempts to weaken labor standards and labor rights;
 - 2) **Increasing workforce diversity** with varying worker needs, aspirations, and expectations in the face of deteriorating quality of work-life with a poor, uncertain, and at times unsafe work environment and relationships.
 - 3) **Poor union image** and growing negative public opinions, fostered at times by the media(see Fred Wilson’s presentation on recent CLC poll on Public Perception of Unions) , and

4) **Weakening union solidarity** due to inter union divisions and rivalry perpetuated by raiding and policy conflicts.

-declining union strength and influence most visible in trends in union density (see Chart 1):

The Chart shows:

- a steady increase in membership ,largely due to expanding public sector employment , but slowly falling overall union density . There is growing evidence that public sector union membership and density may be eroding in the years ahead due to cutbacks in public services including education and health.

- a marked decline in private sector density (in almost all industries) from 30 percent in 1981 to 16 percent in 2011,particularly pronounced in mining and manufacturing(see **Appendix** on Pattern of Growth). Note that union membership in the private sector over the past ten years has remained unchanged.

- A pervasive drop off in organizing activity –in number of applications, number of certifications as well as employee coverage. Ontario exemplifies the serious downturn in organizing efforts and outcomes where the number of newly organized workers over the past ten years has more than halved compared to 1980s and 1990s.

Fears that unless organizing trends are reversed , union density could fall to the levels in the United States ,leading to a marginalized union role and influence .

■ Key Renewal Strategies

- Coordinated organizing through innovative tactics and strategies emphasizing rank and file involvement and participation;
- Organizational restructuring through mergers, rationalization using new technology and a reassessment of goals, structures, policies and practices;
- Coalition building and alliances at both local and national levels;
- Grass roots political action to expand activism and worker mobilization on community issues, preferably through federations at various levels
- International solidarity through exchange of information, and inter-union cooperation and mutual aid for coordinated action and campaigns;
- Expanded program of training, education and research, and
- Wherever feasible and desirable, labour –management “partnerships” in areas of mutual interests (eg. training).

The experience suggests that the various strategies need to be integrated into a common agenda. No single strategy can lead to a union renewal.

■ Canadian Experience with union renewal

Judging by the findings of two national surveys of innovations and change in labor organizations in Canada (in 1997 and 2001), and the more recent case studies of major unions and campaigns, Canadian unions have been engaged in union revitalization in one form or another for over two decades. Among the major innovations/changes have included:

- reviews of goals and objectives, organizational structures, communication with the rank and file, community groups, political affiliations (esp. the link with the NDP), organizing and bargaining strategies, and relationships with employers on areas of mutual interests, and future directions;
- Mergers, leading to a marked consolidation of membership in few large unions who are now more “general” unions rather than industrial/occupational unions. Mergers have been attributed to intensified inter-union competition, rivalry and divisions.
- Greater attention to member services, rank and file communications, education and training using new technologies.
- Changes in union staff profile to reflect new demographics. There has been greater hiring of women and people of colour with emphasis on specific programs for better representation of women and minorities.
- Initiatives to institutionalize dialogue and communications with employers through various forums (eg sector councils, and trade issues).
- Changes in bargaining strategies towards social issues as well as participation in workplace change based on unions’ independent agenda.

While these innovations, especially those relating to self-assessment, inclusiveness, and receptivity to changing demographics, are significant accomplishments however, they represent an incomplete transformation. In large part the changes have been adhoc or piecemeal, experimental without any long term planning, uneven, patchy and highly diverse and confined to few major unions. There has been little or no involvement of federations,

except possibly Quebec Federation of Labour. Consequently **the union renewal process in Canada has been slow and incremental, raising questions about its adequacy and sustainability. It has been argued that revitalization is no longer feasible without a coordinated action and integrated strategy.**

▪ **Role of federations: Could they become catalyst of change?**

Labour Federations play a pivotal role in shaping the nature and direction of the labour movement. The nature and scope of their role depends on power and authority of federations, their relationship with the affiliates (especially with the large “general” unions), and the institutional and environmental context. In the past two decades, there has been an increasing debate and discussion on the role and functions of federations in designing and implementing union renewal strategies. It has been noted that:

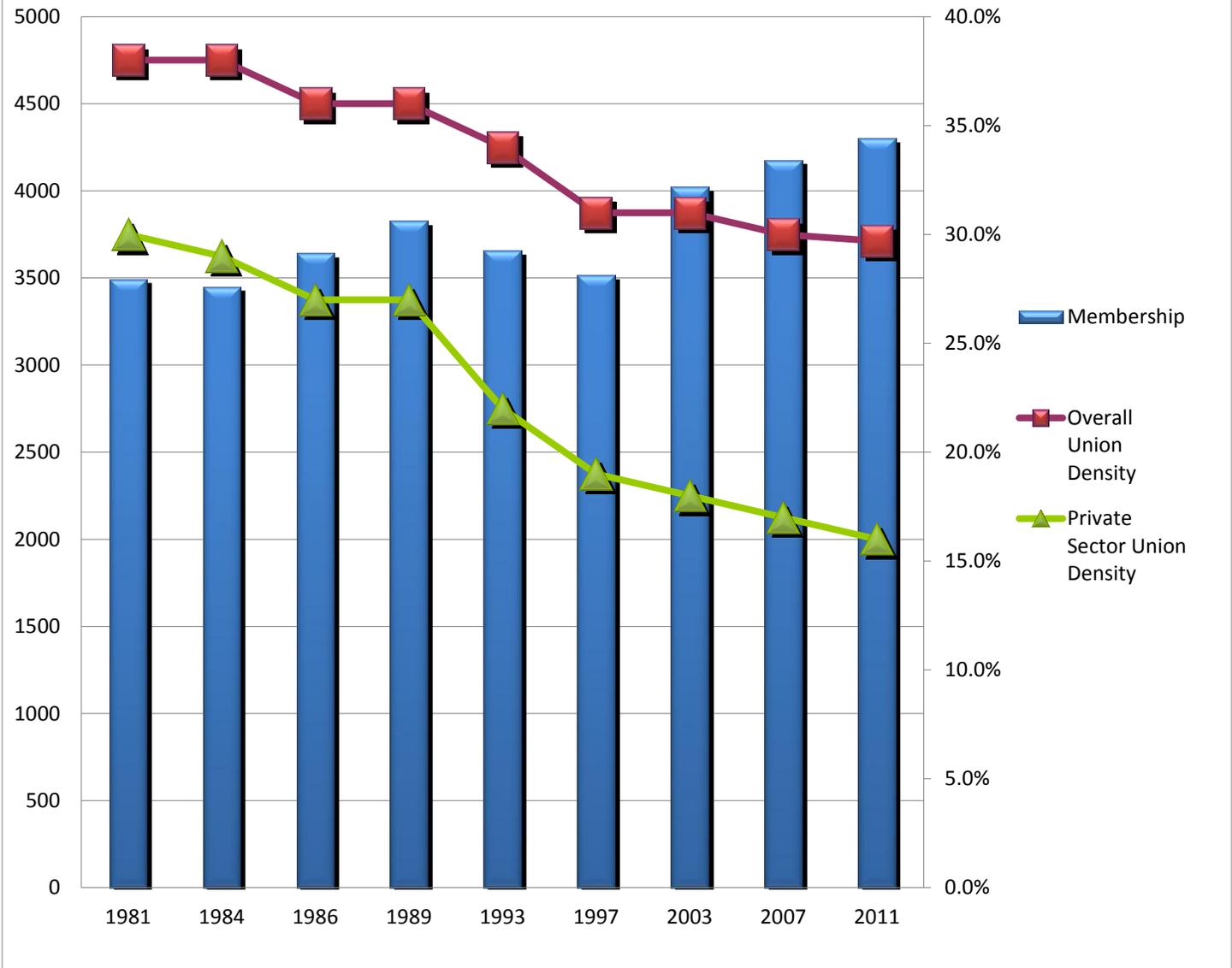
- Federations can ,and do , make significant contribution to the process of union renewal through consensus –building on strategic common vision , development of appropriate strategies , providing support systems ,monitoring ,coordinating, and evaluation of the change process, in particular highlighting the best practices, and improving public perceptions through community campaigns.
- Comparative studies of federations in United States, U.K., and Canada – countries with a similar institutional and environmental context-indicate that while the TUC in U.K. and the AFL-CIO in the United States have been very pro-active in initiating , coordinating , supporting and monitoring the process of change, as well as building links with non-union community groups , the CLC has been generally passive and detached, leaving affiliates to initiate and supervise the innovations according to their needs and resources. The TUC experience is highly instructive. The federation has advanced renewal efforts through coordination, support, and monitoring of initiatives taken by affiliates. It has been able to secure their commitment and cooperation using internal communication and joint approaches.
- In Canada, while some provincial federations and local councils (eg Toronto and York Council, Alberta and Newfoundland federations) have assumed an activist role, an integrated and coordinated strategy has been lacking. Part of the reason behind federations’ ineffective and weak involvement in union renewal has been lack of resources, inter-union divisions and a clear mandate.

In the Canadian context, with our highly decentralized political and institutional framework, it is extremely important to discuss the potential role of federations at all levels in widely diffusing and accelerating the pace of change. Particular attention may

be desirable on strengthening the role of local labor councils and provincial federations. They can be instrumental in facilitating the mission of building coalitions with community organizations and in coordinating the efforts of union affiliates and non-labor groups (eg Worker Centers). The TUC initiatives at the national level(eg Equity Audit, support mechanisms for Organizing) and the AFL-CIO's efforts to revitalize central local councils and promoting mobilization of non-union workers through "Working America " and alliance with workers' centers may be worth reviewing .

Union renewal /labor movement revitalization will remain fragmented and ineffective without a coordinated approach and a common vision and agenda. Merger discussions are an opportune time to reflect on current state and future prospects . As the Discussion Paper rightly notes "there is clear opportunity for unions in the present moment ".

Trends in Union Membership and Density



Source: Based on data in Morissette, Schellenberg and Johnson 2005 and Statistics Canada

Appendix

Pattern of Union Growth, 2001-2011

- Areas (not mutually exclusive) where **both** union membership and union density have gone up slightly :
 - Women
 - Young workers (age 15-24)

- Part-time workers
- Finance, insurance and real estate industry
- Building services
- Accommodation and food services, and
- Federal public service
- Areas where **only union membership** has increased but density has remained unchanged /or slightly declined
 - Provincial and municipal public service
 - Men
 - Older Workers (age 45+)
 - Workers with post-secondary/university education
 - Full time workers
 - Construction industry
 - Retail Trade
 - Transportation
 - Education and health
 - Professional, technical ,and scientific services
 - Information, cultural and recreational services
- Areas where **both** union membership and density have **declined or remained unchanged**
 - Forestry , fishing and mining
 - Manufacturing
 - Wholesale trade
 - Workers in 25-54 age group
 - Workers with less than secondary education

Union membership growth during 2001-2011 was largely due to public sector (esp education and health services)

Source: Data from Statistics Canada