CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

At around 5:30 p.m. on May 1, 2000, in the prairie city of Brandon, Manitoba, about two hundred trade unionists and labour supporters gathered in a Safeway store parking lot. They were there not just to celebrate another "May Day" but also to witness the unveiling of a new banner commemorating a century and a half of labour struggles and gains. The banner, created by local artist Curt Shoultz for the Brandon and District Labour Council, held a particular significance for the assembled workers and their families. Its theme, "Strength in Solidarity," reflected a key element in labour's long history: the recognition that advances can only come "when workers join together and act collectively."

As unionist Jan Chaboyer told the assembled crowd that day, the banner was meant to highlight "the core values and principles of the labour movement, namely, Democracy, Freedom, Social Justice and Equality." Its individual panels, she said, depicted the union members' "historical struggles for `bread, and roses too,' health and safety in the workplace, schools instead of sweatshops for our children, and protection of our natural resources and environment" (Chaboyer and Black 2000).

Chaboyer, the president of a Manitoba Government Employees' Union local of support staff and food workers at Brandon University, and president of the Brandon and District Labour Council, was herself an emblem of labour's particular brand of solidarity. When offered an out-of-scope job at Brandon University, she said she would only accept it if she could remain in the union. The university accommodated her; she went on to do the job at a union rate, considerably below the previous job holder's pay level.

That day Chaboyer went on to tell the gathering that labour's legacy is to be found in the many reforms labour had fought for and achieved: the right to join unions and bargain collectively with employers, the eight-hour day, public libraries and public education, the elimination of restrictions on the rights of citizens to vote and run for office, unemployment insurance, Medicare, the Canada Pension Plan, employment standards legislation, workers' compensation, health and safety legislation, and pay equity and anti-discrimination laws. "Can there be any doubt," Chaboyer said, "that these reforms, and others, have improved the lives of all workers and made our communities better places to live in."

That particular day marked a time when gains made by working people

were under threat across Canada — "in danger," as Chaboyer put it, "of being rolled back or eliminated by governments and corporations intent on driving down labour costs and reducing the size of the public sector in the name of enhancing our global competitiveness." In Manitoba, at least one encouraging development had taken place: the election in September 1999 of a New Democratic Party government in the province. Still, Chaboyer cautioned, that victory would not bring automatic changes in legislation and programs for the better. Although the NDP was known as being more sympathetic to labour than other political parties were, there was still a danger that business interests in the province would push the government to the right. Unions would still have to mobilize their resources and apply constant pressure for progressive change (see chapter 5 for a discussion of the complex relationship between unions and the NDP). "We must resolve to do this," Chaboyer said, "in the months and years ahead." Labour would have to defend its historical gains and, even more, add to its rich legacy:

> We must work together to protect the programs and institutional arrangements that enrich our lives… and we must strive to improve conditions for the victims of our changing economy — the homeless, the hungry, the poor and the disadvantaged. And we must support all workers around the world who are engaged in struggles for the rights and benefits we value as workers and citizens in Canada.

After the unveiling and the speeches the participants formed into a lively "Solidarity Banner March" that wound its way along city streets to a rally at the East End Community Centre. The march followed a route that had been walked many times by workers since the early decades of the twentieth century.

Meanwhile, similar events were taking place that day in towns and cities across the country, as affiliates of the Canadian Labour Congress (trade unions, local labour councils, and federations of labour) joined with workers around the world to celebrate May Day — the International Workers' Holiday (see Foner 1986). The ideas and principles expressed by Jan Chaboyer in her passionate statement were echoed that day in the speeches of hundreds of other union activists. A Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) pamphlet explained that the events were organized "to show our communities who we are, as workers and union activists [and] to let people know we're proud to be working people and union members" (CLC 2000).

Typically, the media paid only slight notice to the labour celebrations. In Brandon the coverage consisted of a ninety-second clip on the local television news and a single photograph of a CUPE banner in the *Brandon Sun*. Given that most of the media in Canada are owned by a small number of

Wages or Profits?

Unions are, generally speaking, advantageous to workers; but employers tend to oppose unions on the grounds that a unionized workforce brings higher wages and benefit costs and places limits on the ability arbitrarily to impose conditions of work and employment. For these reasons relations between capital and labour, between employers and unions, have always been full of conflict, and union gains have always come as the result of bitter and hard-fought struggles.

A Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives study, *Rising Profit Shares, Falling Wage Shares,* demonstrates that the struggles of recent decades have shifted wealth from workers to owners.

"The study finds that Canadian workers' wage share of national income is the lowest it's been in 40 years. If workers' real wages had increased to reflect improved productivity and growth, they could be earning an average of $10,000 more each year on their paycheques (in 2005 dollars). [In contrast] corporate profit shares are the highest they've been in 40 years…. In 2005, corporations banked $130 billion more in gross profits than they would have if the profit share had remained at 1991 levels."

Source: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2007.

large corporations, and that those companies in turn derive most of their revenue from advertising purchased by other large corporations, the low mainstream profile should come as no surprise. Media coverage of union activities tends to focus on strikes, picket-line battles, confrontations with governments, attacks on unions by corporate leaders and politicians, and conflict within and between unions. More often than not, media coverage of such incidents obscures both the issues involved and the significance of the issues. The result is that media reports tend to convey the impression that all unions and their members do is strike, demonstrate, and fight amongst themselves. Reports also often misrepresent the position and objectives of trade unions and create an impression that their activities and actions are invariably contrary to the "public interest." (For a general discussion of the union/media issue, see Hackett and Gruneau 1999.)

Certainly, strikes, demonstrations, and battles with governments are an important part of what trade unions do; and those events should be covered. They represent tactics that unions must use to advance and defend the interests of working people. Then too, conflict does exist within and between unions — but this is something to be expected and welcomed in democratic organizations. Clashes between rank-and-file members and union leadership over collective bargaining agendas, the handling of grievances, and the conduct of strikes, for instance, are commonplace within unions. National and international unions also experience numerous disagreements at conventions, not only over nitty-gritty issues, such as how a union is being run and the perks that union leaders receive, but also over bigger issues relating to union philosophy and vision. Rank-

and-file members frequently rebel against union leaderships when they feel those leaders have lost touch with their concerns and interests.

The trade union centrals, which seek to bring unions together in common cause, also experience internal strife and upheavals. These problems can arise from differences in philosophy, vision, and politics or from attempts to resolve disputes (usually related to raiding) between affiliated unions. The disputes sometimes result in significant ruptures within the trade union central.

While all of this is going on, though, the things that unions do day in and day out for their members, workers in general, and the marginalized in society tend to pass unnoticed.

For example, each and every year in Canada:

- unions negotiate thousands of collective agreements without incident, thousands of workers obtain redress and justice through grievance procedures, and tens of thousands of union members participate in union-organized training and educational programs;
- unions make representations to governments and their agencies calling for increases in minimum wages, tougher health and safety measures in workplaces, more resources for day care, health, education, and affordable housing, improvements in unemployment insurance and social assistance, more resources for training and education, and expanded opportunities for people with disabilities and young people in trouble;
- unions initiate campaigns in opposition to racism and other forms of discrimination and actions by corporations and governments that damage or undermine the living conditions and rights of working people and their families;
- the Canadian Labour Congress and its affiliates contribute to and participate in the New Democratic Party, the United Way, and numerous coalitions involving women's, anti-poverty, Aboriginal, and other organizations seeking to correct inequities in our society; and
- trade union leaders and activists connect with their counterparts in other countries around the world, providing, for instance, aid and expertise to workers in developing countries who are seeking to build a trade union movement and working within international labour organizations to expand worker and trade union rights.

Trade unions and their members are a major force in our society. They may be the one force that consistently stands up for the interests and rights of all people as workers, as family members, and as citizens and community members. Their actions are, moreover, shaped and guided by a vision of a better society: one in which everyone shares in the benefits of economic

The International Erosion of Unionization Rates since 1992:
Unionization rates have been declining in most advanced industrial countries since 1980. Of the twenty countries for which data are available, unionization rates declined in all but four: Republic of Korea (14.7% to 17.6%), Finland (69.4% to 72.5%), Sweden (78.0% to 80.8%), and Norway (58.3% to 58.5%). Between 1980 and 1990 the unionization rate in Canada slipped from 34.7% to 32.9%.

Since 1992 the rates have held their own in two countries (Belgium and Spain). In all others the rates have declined. The proportionate declines were particularly significant in Australia (39.6% to 22.9%), New Zealand (37.1% to 22.1%), Germany (33.9% to 22.6%), Ireland (49.8% to 35.3%), and the United Kingdom (37.2% to 29.3%). The rate for all countries in the European Union combined declined by 21.3% (33.4% to 26.3%). The countries with the smallest proportionate declines were Finland (78.4% to 74.1%), Sweden (83.3% to 78.0%), and Denmark (75.8% to 70.4%).

The unionization rates for Canada were 34.7% in 1980, 33.1% in 1992, and 28.4% in 2003. These declines were below average so that Canada's standing in terms of the unionization rate went from 14 in 1980 to 13 in 1992 and 10 in 2003.

Source: Visser 2006

and social progress; which has no soup lines and people living in the streets, no poverty, and no discrimination; and which is based on solidarity, sharing, and collective action. That vision, though, is at odds with the view promoted by Canada's corporate leaders through organizations such as the Canadian Council of Chief Executives, chambers of commerce, right-wing think tanks such as the Fraser Institute, and the national media. These players favour a society that frees business from restrictions or regulations and subordinates all interests to the operations of markets and monopoly elements and the power of employers.

In recent decades corporations and governments have been waging a concerted and long-term campaign to curtail workers' rights and undermine the power of trade unions. Employers justify this campaign by arguing that worker rights and trade unions impede flexibility in labour and workplaces and impair Canada's ability to compete in international markets. Despite resistance from trade unions, the attack by corporations and employers has met with considerable success. The curtailment of union rights is especially evident in Ontario and Alberta, where changes to labour relations legislation have created greater obstacles to unionization and weakened the capacity of workers to conduct effective and successful strikes. It is also reflected in changes to some collective agreements — changes that have reduced unions' and workers' control over practices such as contracting out and the allocation of opportunities (access to training, or promotions, for instance) within internal labour markets.

In the 1990s the impact of the anti-union campaign was reflected

in declining unionization rates. Trade union membership in Canada in 1992 stood at 4,089,000 members representing 28.4 percent of the civilian workforce and 35.7 percent of non-agricultural paid workers. In 2006 the number of union members was 4,441,000, representing 25.6 percent of the civilian workforce and 30.8 percent of non-agricultural paid workers (HRDC 2006). The declining rate of union membership and the erosion of worker rights and union power pose serious threats to the well-being of working people and their communities. They also undermine the very institutional arrangements that are designed to make Canada a democratic, inclusive, and equitable society.

Surely, a robust and forward-looking labour movement is an essential part of a democracy. A corollary of that point is that it is equally essential that Canadians everywhere not just recognize the key issues and concerns that surround union work but also become willing to take up a discussion of the role of trade unions in our lives, in our country. With this in mind we intend, in the following pages, to explore a number of basic questions.

- How are unions structured and how do they work, in union locals and in trade union centrals (local labour councils, provincial federations of labour, and the Canadian Labour Congress)?
- What do unions do and what have they achieved, for their members, for workers in general, and for all of us?
- Where did unions come from, how have they developed historically, and how do they relate to capital and the state?
- What are the politics of unions, and how have they attempted to advance their politics through partisan political activity, extra-parliamentary politics, and participation in coalitions?
- What are the factors that have emerged in Canada in recent decades to stall the forward momentum of unions, place them on the defensive, and weaken their capacity to shape and influence the course of events in the economy and in society?
- Why is it important to all of us that unions rejuvenate and move forward? What are the critical challenges (both internal and external) that must be met so that this can happen?

Our aim, overall, is not just to provide a richer and deeper understanding of the role and impact of trade unions and the labour movement in Canada but also to emphasize, through the evidence of past and present struggles, the absolutely crucial contribution of unionism to the shaping of a more just and humane society.