

4TH EDITION

**BUILDING
A BETTER
WORLD**

**AN INTRODUCTION TO THE
LABOUR MOVEMENT IN CANADA**

**STEPHANIE ROSS
& LARRY SAVAGE**

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ACRONYMS

ACCL	All-Canadian Congress of Labour
ACORN	Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now
AFL	American Federation of Labor
CAUT	Canadian Association of University Teachers
CAW	Canadian Auto Workers
CBC	Canadian Broadcasting Corporation
CCCL	Canadian and Catholic Confederation of Labour
CCF	Co-operative Commonwealth Federation
CFL	Canadian Federation of Labour
CFLR	Canadian Foundation for Labour Rights
CFNU	Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions
CIO	Committee for Industrial Organization, renamed Congress of Industrial Organizations
CLAC	Christian Labour Association of Canada
CLC	Canadian Labour Congress
CPC	Communist Party of Canada
CSD	Centrale des syndicats démocratiques
CSN	Confédération des syndicats nationaux
CSQ	Centrale des syndicats du Québec
CTW	Change to Win Federation
CUPE	Canadian Union of Public Employees
CUPW	Canadian Union of Postal Workers
FTQ	Quebec Federation of Labour
GMM	general membership meeting
GUF	global union federations
IDIA	Industrial Disputes Investigation Act
IFA	international framework agreements

ISS	International Service Systems, a cleaning company
ITUC	International Trade Union Confederation
IWW	Industrial Workers of the World
MAI	Multilateral Agreement on Investment
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
NDP	New Democratic Party
NUPGE	National Union of Public and General Employees
OBU	One Big Union
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OPSEU	Ontario Public Service Employees Union
PQ	Parti Québécois
PSAC	Public Service Alliance of Canada
RCMP	Royal Canadian Mounted Police
RWDSU	Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union
SEIU	Service Employees International Union
SFL	Saskatchewan Federation of Labour
SPC	Socialist Party of Canada
TFWP	Temporary Foreign Worker Program
TLC	Trades and Labor Congress
TNC	transnational corporation
UAW	United Auto Workers
UFCW	United Food and Commercial Workers
UI	Unemployment Insurance
UNITE HERE	a union serving hotel and service workers
USW	United Steelworkers
WAC	Workers' Action Centre
WIRD	Workplace Information Research Division
WTO	World Trade Organization
WUL	Workers' Unity League

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This fourth edition of *Building a Better World* marks an important transition. Jim Silver and the late Errol Black wrote the first edition back in 2001. The book quickly became a staple in university-based Labour Studies programs and union-based education courses across the country, sparking important discussions about the past, present and future of Canada's labour movement. A second edition followed in 2008.

After Errol Black passed away in 2012, Jim Silver and Fernwood's Wayne Antony approached us about spearheading a third edition that would address the teaching needs of a new generation of Labour Studies students, researchers and union and worker activists. We were honoured to be asked and excited to take on the challenge. The third edition maintained the critical edge of previous editions, but restructured the book in important ways, reorganizing chapters around a set of basic questions concerning Canada's labour movement. The fourth maintains this structure but provides new content and analysis along with updated figures throughout the book. The fourth edition was written in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, which proved to be a significant disruptor to the world of work. We draw on examples from the pandemic to underscore many of the challenges confronting the labour movement, as well as the opportunities for building a better world.

This fourth edition would not have been possible without the invaluable research assistance of James Watson, who laboured tirelessly and with good humour to update the data in this volume. The folks at Fernwood Publishing, as always, have been incredibly accommodating. Thank you to Tanya Andrusieczko for her editorial guidance, Beverley Rach, Debbie Mathers and Jess Herdman for their production assistance, Jenn Harris for copy editing, Anumeha Gokhale for her marketing work, and John van der Woude for the cover design. We are proud

to be associated with one of the leading progressive publishers in the country.

We trust readers will appreciate the revisions in this new edition and hope the ideas, arguments and perspectives put forward will inspire lively debate and discussion in classrooms, union halls and workplaces across Canada.

— *Stephanie Ross and Larry Savage*

EXCERPT

1

WHAT IS A UNION?

On March 19, 2012, Toronto's library workers, members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 4948, set up picket lines that resulted in the temporary closure and loss of service at ninety-eight library branches across the city. The city's 2,300 library workers, three quarters of whom were women and half of whom worked part-time, voted to strike after failing to reach an agreement with the city's library board on the content of a new contract.

The union didn't want to strike. Union members understood that their action would disrupt the lives of library patrons but felt they had little choice. Toronto's then-mayor, Rob Ford, had swept to power two years earlier on a right-wing anti-union platform calling for cuts to and privatization of city services. His administration sent clear signals that library services were not a priority, even though the city's library system is the most widely used in the world (Harden 2013). Toronto librarians had been working to convert more part-time jobs to full-time to improve the living standards of library workers. This goal would prove more difficult in the face of an unsupportive mayor and escalating budget difficulties.

To resist these pressures, the workers would need to work in a united fashion. Individual workers have little power but collectively they can put weight behind their demands. Labour unions provide workers with a vehicle to promote their collective interests with respect to employers, amplifying their ability to influence their terms and conditions of work through a legally binding collective agreement. Without a collective agreement, workers are left to fend for themselves in the workplace, subject to arbitrary management rules and procedures, with few rights and even less power. As a rule, unions are stronger when their members exhibit greater solidarity with one another, seeing and identifying themselves as a group worthy of mutual support and pursuing collective

goals and objectives. Solidarity grows even stronger when union members attract the support of community stakeholders and other groups of workers.

Toronto library workers were able to count on the solidarity of prominent authors and members of the Writers' Union of Canada, who organized a "read-in" and rally in front of the downtown Toronto Reference Library to draw attention to the labour dispute and highlight the value of properly funded libraries. Best-selling Canadian author Margaret Atwood tweeted her support for the striking workers, and at the rally library patrons took turns at a microphone praising the city's library workers and explaining why the services provided by members of Local 4948 were important to them personally. According to media reports, a "rather adorable little boy" stole the show when he asked the crowd of supportive onlookers, if libraries close, "where will the learning happen?" (Dart 2012). Galvanizing support from members of the community who rely on library services was a key part of the union's bargaining strategy. Library workers understood that without a supportive public they could not pressure the city's library board to commit to maintaining adequate library services. This idea was encapsulated on library workers' picket signs: "Libraries work because we do."

After an eleven-day strike, the library board agreed that no full-time positions would be converted to part-time and even agreed to create a limited number of new full-time positions. The board also dropped its proposal to weaken benefit provisions for members, but it did manage to win cuts in employment security provisions for library workers with less than eleven years in the system (Harden 2013).

Strikes, demonstrations and battles with employers are important, but they represent only a small part of what unions do. While these defensive tactics tend to grab the greatest number of headlines, what unions do day in and day out for their members, workers in general and the marginalized in society tends to pass unnoticed. However, the example of the Toronto library workers' successful struggle to both protect library services and improve the working lives of library workers points to several key themes about unions and the labour movement.

WORKERS NEED TO ACT COLLECTIVELY TO IMPROVE THEIR WORKING LIVES

The right to join unions and bargain collectively with employers, the eight-hour day, employment standards legislation, workers' compensation, health and safety legislation, pay equity and anti-discrimination laws were all achieved through workers' collective struggles. In unionized workplaces, unions provide a collective voice for workers through negotiation of collective agreements and legally enforceable grievance procedures designed to obtain redress and justice in response to unfair or unilateral employer conduct. The skills required to operate a union are taught to members through union-organized training and educational programs, thus reinforcing the union's strength and capacity in the workplace.

BEYOND THE WORKPLACE, UNIONS ARE A KEY VEHICLE FOR ACHIEVING A BETTER WORLD

Democracy, freedom, social justice and equality are some of the core values and principles of the labour movement. Organized labour's legacy can be found in the many reforms fought for and achieved throughout history: public healthcare and public education, lifting of restrictions on the rights of citizens to vote and run for office, employment insurance, public pension plans and anti-discrimination laws. These achievements have improved the lives of all workers regardless of union membership. Today, unions continue to advocate and act for social justice, making representations to governments and their agencies for increases in minimum wages, tougher health and safety measures in workplaces, more resources for childcare, health, education and affordable housing, improvements in employment insurance and social assistance, more resources for training and education, and expanded opportunities for young people and disabled people. Unions also play an important role in campaigns to fight 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 in Canada and abroad. Indeed, international solidarity is the key to confronting global capital and ensuring that social justice and economic equality are available to workers regardless of where in the world they reside.

UNIONS FACE IMPORTANT CHALLENGES THAT MUST BE OVERCOME FOR THE SAKE OF UNION MEMBERS AND FOR BROADER SOCIETY

There can be no doubt that the labour movement's historic gains are now in danger. Decades of employer and government assaults on union rights and freedoms have undermined the capacity of unions to enhance and defend economic and political gains for working people. This in turn has facilitated the growing income and wealth gap between the super-rich and the rest of society. Corporations and governments have waged a concerted and long-term campaign to curtail workers' rights and undermine the power of unions. Employers justify this attack by arguing that labour rights and unions impede business flexibility in workplaces and impair Canada's ability to compete in international markets. Despite resistance from unions, employers have met with considerable success. The curtailment of union rights is especially evident in our political system, where changes to labour relations legislation have created greater obstacles to unionization and weakened the capacity of workers to conduct their affairs. It is also reflected in declining union density rates and in changes to some collective agreements—changes that have reduced unions' and workers' control over practices such as contracting out and allocation of opportunities (access to training or promotions, for instance) within workplaces. The labour movement's growing weakness can be directly correlated to increased levels of income inequality, thus pitting various members of the working class ("privileged" unionized workers and precarious non-union workers) against one another in what Thomas Walkom (2010) has described as a form of "reverse class resentment."

Despite these challenges, unions continue to mobilize their resources and apply pressure for greater social justice and to improve conditions for workers, the unhoused, the hungry, the poor and the disadvantaged. Unions are one of the few institutions in society that have the organizational and financial capacity to act as an effective counterweight against the power of employers and governments. This unique power is precisely what makes them a target.

In the chapters that follow, we pose several basic questions about labour unions intended to provide a comprehensive overview of the Canadian union movement's history, structure, purpose, goals, im-

pacts, strategies and political orientations. Chapter 2, “Understanding Unions,” looks at the unique position of workers within capitalist societies and surveys competing perspectives on unions as organizations created by workers. It details various theoretical positions on their “proper” role and evaluates their explanatory potential. The next two chapters focus on labour history. Chapter 3, “Early Union Struggles in Canada,” examines workers’ first attempts to defend themselves against the advance of capitalist industrialization, looking at how these struggles shaped workers’ relationships with employers, governments and specific segments of the working class and caused serious political fissures along the way. Chapter 4, “From Keynesianism to Neoliberalism: Union Breakthroughs and Challenges,” documents the increased strength of the labour movement in the postwar period and its decline in more recent decades. It details the factors that stalled the forward momentum of unions, placing them on the defensive and weakening their capacity to shape the course of events in the economy and in society. These chapters provide the context for more contemporary discussions, beginning with Chapter 5, “Unions in the Workplace,” which examines the core workplace functions of unions (organizing, collective bargaining, grievance handling and strikes), describing both the sources of union power in the workplace and the mechanisms through which that power is exercised. Chapter 6, “Unions and Political Action,” explores some of the key political orientations in the labour movement, describing how unions engage in electoral strategies, social movement–based strategies and judicial strategies to influence the broader political, social and economic context. Chapter 7, “How Do Unions Work?,” delves into the structure of the Canadian labour movement, from union locals to parent unions and from labour councils to union centrals. It examines the question of union democracy, explaining how decisions are made within labour movement structures. Chapter 8, “What Difference Do Unions Make?,” explains the various ways that unions advance equality and improve wages, benefit entitlements, employment standards, occupational health and safety standards and social programs for both union members and non-union workers. Chapter 9, “Who Belongs To Unions? Who Doesn’t and Why?,” provides a demographic portrait of the contemporary union movement, outlining various barriers to unionization and exploring employers’ union avoidance strategies. Finally, Chapter 10, “The Future of Unions: Decline or Renewal?,” evaluates the prospects for union re-

newal given the current hostile political and economic climate, and it assesses the strengths and weaknesses of new approaches to organizing, bargaining and representation. This concluding chapter explains why it is important that unions rejuvenate and move forward while emphasizing the critical challenges (both internal and external) that must be met so that this can happen.

As the authors of this book, our aim is not just to provide a richer and deeper understanding of the role and impact of unions and the labour movement in Canada. It is also to emphasize, using evidence from past and present struggles, the crucial contribution of unionism to the shaping of a more just and equitable society and the stake that all of us have in maintaining a strong labour movement.