

**RETHINKING THE POLITICS
OF LABOUR IN CANADA**

2ND EDITION

STEPHANIE ROSS AND LARRY SAVAGE, EDS.

LABOUR IN CANADA SERIES

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Dedication

For Leo Panitch

Teacher, mentor, socialist and dear friend

EXCERPT

LABOUR IN CANADA SERIES

This volume is part of the Labour in Canada Series, which focuses on assessing how global and national political economic changes have affected Canada's labour movement and labour force as well as how working people have responded. The series offers a unique Canadian perspective to parallel international debates on work and labour in the United States, Great Britain and Western Europe.

Authors seek to understand the impact of governments and markets on working people. They examine the role of governments in shaping economic restructuring and the loss of unionized jobs, as well as how governments promote the growth of low-wage work. They also analyze the impacts of economic globalization on women, minorities and immigrants.

Contributors provide insight on how unions have responded to global labour market deregulation and globalization. They present accessible new research on how Canadian unions function in both the private and public sectors, how they organize and how their political strategies work. The books document recent success stories (and failures) of union renewal and explore the new opportunities emerging as the labour movement attempts to rebuild the economy on sound environmental principles.

Over the past thirty years, the union movement has increasingly been put on the defensive as its traditional tactics of economic and political engagement have failed to protect wages, maintain membership and advance progressive agendas. Yet there has been far too little discussion of how the terrain of Canadian politics has shifted and how this has, in turn, affected the Canadian labour movement. There has also been far too little acknowledgment of working people's attempts to develop new strategies to regain political and economic influence. This series aims to fill these major gaps in public debate.

The volumes are resources that can help unions successfully confront new dilemmas. They also serve to promote discussion and support labour education programs within unions and postsecondary education programs. It is our hope that the series informs debate on the policies and institutions that Canadians need to improve jobs, create better workplaces and build a more egalitarian society.

RETHINKING THE POLITICS OF LABOUR IN CANADA

An Introduction

Stephanie Ross and Larry Savage

Debates concerning the Canadian labour movement's relationship to political action date back to at least the 1870s. Since that time, unionists have advanced a wide variety of both electoral and extra-parliamentary political strategies, several of which proved key to establishing the economic, political, legal and social bases of working-class power in the aftermath of the Second World War. While no national working class in the advanced capitalist world could be said to have "taken power" in the sense meant by socialist revolutionaries, there is no doubt that workers did, for a time, establish a real capacity to demand and win greater economic, political and social justice for the less powerful. Like its global counterparts, the Canadian labour movement played a key role in the expansion of political rights to those without wealth; the creation of the welfare state, the social wage and redistributive public policies; and the promotion of social justice and equality for both working-class people and members of other oppressed groups. Though these advances may have seemed like irrevocable contributions to human progress, they have proven anything but.

Since the mid-1970s, Canadian labour's political influence and capacity to defend, let alone extend, these gains have been seriously undermined by the strategies of both capitalist interests and the neoliberal state. Global economic restructuring, in the form of deregulated international trade, globalized production chains and labour markets and neoliberal policy

shifts, have converged to undermine the material basis of postwar union power. Increased capital mobility has worked to discipline and lower labour's expectations. The spread of precarious work has reduced the strategic power that workers have in many workplaces, sectors and labour markets. Workers' heightened insecurity has made collective organizing more difficult. The worker resistance that has emerged has often been met with actual or threatened job loss, government intervention to contain worker power or both. "Divide and rule" strategies from above have thus actively disorganized and fractured the labour movement, and unions have struggled to find their strategic footing in this changing external environment. The suffering caused (and yet to be caused) by the resulting unravelling of the labour movement's twentieth-century achievements cannot be underestimated. Understanding how and why workers were able to exert this collective power, how they lost it and how they might re-establish it is the central concern of this book.

The prolonged attack on labour has not gone unchallenged. In Canada, the national Day of Protest against wage controls in 1976, the Solidarity movement in British Columbia in the 1980s and the Ontario Days of Action in the 1990s demonstrated Canadian workers' willingness and capacity to resist neoliberal reforms and policies in both collective and politicized ways, even if these struggles achieved few of their stated goals in any permanent way. These past and present struggles, though laden with challenges, contradictions and limits, cannot help but be inspiring: they remind us that people still can and will mobilize against the seemingly overwhelming forces of economic and political power. They also signal that workers are searching for a new kind of politics, even if its exact form remains unclear.

However, in the wake of these mass displays of working-class solidarity, top-down demobilizations and a retreat to familiar party-union relationships and electoral strategies have also been common. And why not, since the victories of the immediate postwar era were to no small extent attributable to the capacity of working-class parties to attract significant votes, whether to form a strong opposition or even to take the reins of government. Prior to the 1970s, labour parties the world over implemented significant elements of the labour movement's economic and political agenda. However, over the last forty years in Canada, traditional electoral strategies have proven extremely limited. When in power, parties linked to the labour movement have increasingly abandoned the

agenda of economic and social equality that brought them to power, opting instead to lower the expectations of their own working-class constituencies in an effort to make peace with capital and govern in the interests of “all the people.” When out of power, labour parties and their adherents have counselled against too-militant protest or too-radical demands and subjected workers to the tyranny of “waiting until the next election,” a limiting political logic that not only diminishes the labour movement’s capacities between election campaigns but also narrows the scope of what properly constitutes labour politics itself. In some ways, this narrow electoralist mentality has driven a wedge between party activists and labour and social movement activists, thus weakening the link between the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary strategies that made previous gains possible. The rise of right-wing populism, aimed at dividing working-class constituencies, has further complicated this dynamic, forcing unions and social democratic parties to confront the strategic challenge of preserving working-class unity and solidarity in the face of populist appeals based on nationalism, nativism and what Tufts and Thomas (2016) describe as “uneven austerity” faced by different segments of the working class.

The limits of the labour movement’s traditional electoral political efforts have spawned calls to take up a variety of new strategies and tactics, including nonpartisan mass protests, issue-based union–community coalitions and direct actions that place immediate pressure on the source of harm. Union participation in the demonstrations against the proposed Free Trade Agreement of the Americas in Quebec City in 2001 and the G20 meetings in Toronto in 2010 demonstrated the willingness of some parts of labour to take up such strategies. More recently, support from some union quarters for the Idle No More and Black Lives Matter movements demonstrate ongoing labour connections to high-profile social movement struggles. However, protest on its own, without concern for controlling or influencing the state’s levers of power, which is central to consolidating gains won through protest, has also proven difficult to sustain. With neoliberal governments generally resistant to social movement demands, whether delivered in the form of polite petitions or mass protests, street politics seems to have hit up against some important limits. Seemingly faced with significant obstacles in every strategic direction, an assessment of the politics, prospects and possibilities for the Canadian labour movement is urgently required.

The question of new and effective political strategies and tactics is all

the more urgent for the labour movement as it braces for a new round of neoliberal austerity measures from all levels of government. As in previous eras, new political identities and strategic repertoires are often forged in moments of heightened struggle and conflict, as workers and their organizations struggle to cope with new circumstances. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, and its deeply gendered and racialized impacts, one of the most pressing questions facing the Canadian labour movement is whether the fight to “build back better” will unify working-class people, providing them with a renewed sense of purpose and collective interest, or divide them, setting workers in sectors that have managed to weather the pandemic against those who have not. This battle raises the much larger issue that a renewed labour politics must confront: Who is it that the labour movement speaks for politically? Whose interests will labour prioritize? How does labour make those commitments real rather than rhetorical?

The chapters that follow, and the critical assessments they contain, take stock of the politics of labour in Canada, and establish a framework for thinking about labour’s past, present and future strategic direction. In doing so, contributors to the book have adopted an expansive understanding of the terms “working class” and “labour movement” and, by extension, the kinds of organizations and strategies to be included in a discussion of “labour politics.” As Craig Heron (1996) reminds us, the labour movement has always encompassed a wide range of people and organizations produced by working-class communities for their own collective self-defence, and historically its influence stretched far beyond official membership lists. As such, “working class” also had a broad meaning, encompassing all those whose survival depended on their capacity to labour for others, whether they actually engaged in waged work or not. However, particularly since the Second World War, both the working class and the labour movement have come to be understood much more narrowly. “Working class” has meant waged — and especially white, male, industrial — workers, and the “labour movement” has meant state-certified workplace-based unions and their political parties. “Labour politics” came to be understood as unions’ (and their members’) engagement in elections via political parties. However, this understanding of both the movement, its constituency and its political expression is historically specific and, as Donald Swartz and Rosemary Warskett (2012) have argued, premised on a false separation of the “economic” and the “political” spheres in capitalist societies. Contrary to this tendency, this book brings together what has been the

subject matter traditionally discussed as “labour politics” with an analysis of newer (or rediscovered) forms of working-class organization and social movement–influenced approaches to politics increasingly important in the Canadian labour movement. In other words, while unions and political parties remain important, so too are the new extra-parliamentary organizational forms and movement-based or judicial strategies that have emerged alongside, and sometimes in opposition to, these longstanding approaches. In this manner, the book seeks to take stock of these new forms of labour politics, understand their emergence and assess their impact while acknowledging that the way forward remains unclear, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

CONTEXTUALIZING LABOUR AND WORKING-CLASS POLITICS IN CANADA

The first section of this book explores the various political perspectives and strategies at play in the Canadian labour movement, seeking to put these political-ideological orientations into their historical, political-economic, social and cultural context. Stephanie Ross and Larry Savage explore the state of labour politics in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. On the one hand, they argue the pandemic created an unprecedented opening for organized labour to build broader forms of solidarity around class-wide demands for the expansion of universal social protections like paid sick days, universal public child care, basic income and pharmacare, and to integrate gender and racial justice into these demands in new and important ways. On the other hand, they make the case that the differential impact of the pandemic on various sections of the working class saw some unions eschew more universal strategies in favour of a more politically expedient defensive unionism aimed at protecting a narrow community of interest from the negative effects of the pandemic. Ross then explores the conceptual categories of business unionism and social unionism, commonly used to classify different approaches to workers’ interests, identities and strategies. Ross points to their much more complex concrete expressions and argues for a more careful assessment of different forms of workers’ political activity, particularly since so many strategic recommendations for the movement’s revival emphasize the centrality of social unionism to renewal. These two chapters share a common concern with the factors that shape the expression of labour and working-class politics and the relationship between collective identity, organization and political strategy.

While workers' common dependence on their capacity to sell their labour power provides them with a powerful shared experience of structural inequality, it would be unwise to take for granted some essential working-class identity that springs automatically from their location in the relations of production. Those relations provide the basis for working-class communities and organizations, but there is a wide range of variation in how workers experience and understand class. The boundaries of working-class communities and the allegiances they invoke have always been shaped by occupation, region and nation, gender, race and ethnicity and sexual orientation, as well as the relative economic success of different segments of the working class. Though materially grounded, the construction of workers' collective identities and shared interests has always itself been a political *project*, the subject of contestation whose outcomes are open and indeterminate.

As such, contributors to this book do not assert some essential or romanticized working-class identity against which concrete expressions are measured and found wanting. Rather, they explore the processes by which class identities and allegiances are given particular political expression at given moments in time, and explore the effects of these expressions on the labour movement's (in)capacity to mobilize, represent and attract the allegiance of a demographically diverse working class. They also explore the implications of defining the "working class" in particular ways, of including or excluding groups of workers and of defining certain kinds of interests and priorities as the (il)legitimate subject of the labour movement's attention. In that sense, labour politics is a central part of the historically contingent process of class formation.

Understanding labour politics as part of the process of class formation requires us to pay attention to the factors that, as Therborn (1983) puts it, form, re-form, and de-form working-class consciousness and hence politics, factors that are both external and internal to the labour movement itself. The business lobby and antiunion governments play a key role here by rolling back labour rights and seeking to undermine the autonomy and organizational basis of unions (Ross and Savage 2018). These legislative attacks are assisted by corporate media outlets, which act as key forces of enculturation by casting unions as organizations of collective self-interest and framing the working class — and especially the working poor and racialized minorities — as victims of their own individual poor choices (Martin 2004). However, the right-wing demonization of working-class

people and their unions can only explain part of the hostility that the labour movement faces today (Soron 2018). Workers' own organizations play a central role in defining and reproducing working-class identities and consciousness. Insofar as many workers fail to see themselves reflected in the labour movement's messages, priorities or organizations, this is not merely a right-wing fabrication. Rather, it reflects real inequalities among working-class people that have been allowed to grow, and to which unions have paid insufficient attention (Ross 2018). Instead, unions have left much of the task of addressing broader societal and economic inequalities to their social movement or political allies, with decidedly mixed results.

THE CHALLENGE OF ELECTORAL POLITICS

The rise and apparent fall of the postwar social democratic project has unquestionably coloured the labour movement's relationship to electoral politics, its engagement with particular political parties and voting strategies. These relationships are the subject of the second section of the book. Elections have always been a central preoccupation of labour politics in Canada. Alan Ernst and Bryan Evans provide a critical assessment of labour's longstanding relationship with the New Democratic Party (NDP) and question whether the party can credibly be described as the political arm of the labour movement given the party's diminishing interest in the policies historically associated with social democracy. Ernst and Evans argue that the contemporary NDP-union relationship has been shaped by the ascendance of neoliberalism, sometimes helping to reinforce the alliance but often leading to greater distance between the two.

Peter Graefe provides an analysis of labour politics in Quebec, arguing that the distinct trajectory of Quebec unions caused the movement to adopt political strategies that diverged from those of the Canadian labour movement as a whole. Graefe draws on the unique aspects of Quebec labour politics to explore which strategies potentially hold promise for unions in the rest of Canada. His chapter reminds us that the politics of labour in Canada has always been fragmented. We falsely homogenize and dehistoricize labour politics by assuming that coalescing around social democracy, and specifically the NDP, represents a permanent political expression of the labour movement. Instead, there has always been debate within unions, both in Quebec and in the rest of Canada, about how to best represent workers' interests electorally.

That said, all the electoral strategies pursued by labour have had to

confront the fact that capital has managed to set the broad framework for what constitutes “acceptable” politics and policy in Canada. Part of the challenge of working-class electoral politics rests with the very nature of the capitalist state, and its role in reproducing effective conditions for capitalist economic and social relations. Even when parties sympathetic to labour are elected, they have found it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to implement their agendas. This limitation on labour parties’ ability to use the state apparatus to implement workers’ agendas is longstanding (and certainly not specific to Canada), but capital’s ability to discipline “disobedient” governments has grown dramatically since the mid-1970s. The increased dominance of neoliberal political discourse has prompted some unions and labour parties, to varying extents, to internalize neoliberal imperatives, accepting them as the new status quo or as part of the basic framework for economic, political and social decision-making. In short, the labour movement and its political allies sometimes chase short-term goals to gain power or wield more influence, rather than imagine ways of using that power or influence to transform society.

Larry Savage picks up on this last point by exploring the labour movement’s contemporary engagement with anti-Conservative strategic voting campaigns — a tactic that has become increasingly widespread. He argues this approach has consistently undermined labour’s capacity to develop a political alternative to neoliberalism and demonstrates that such short-term tactical calculations can sometimes lead to the collapse of broader strategic options for the labour movement, thus stunting the movement’s ability to create new political options for itself.

THE PROSPECTS OF EXTRA-PARLIAMENTARY ACTIVISM

The weakness of social democratic labour parties in the electoral sphere has in many ways contributed to the varied and expanding terrain of labour politics outside of, or parallel to, traditional electoral politics. These strategies have also emerged due to discontent with the limits of “responsible” workplace-based unionism and the related strategies and tactics institutionalized in the postwar era. Union practices of the 1950s and ’60s were found wanting both in terms of the kinds of workers they represented and the methods they adopted to defend those workers’ interests. The dominant pop cultural image of the hard-hatted industrial white male union member stems from this era, but so too does the demographic transformation of the working class as women and various

minorities populated the burgeoning public and private service sector. Beginning with the antiracist human rights movement in the 1950s, and joined by the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, a range of groups fought for inclusion in union structures and decision-making processes, challenged prevailing and narrow definitions of “union issues,” and pressed for the adoption of strategies and tactics used by the social movements of oppressed communities. In their struggle for inclusion, women, Indigenous people, queer workers and racialized workers injected new life into labour politics, through the expansion of the union agenda to include issues outside the workplace and the greater use of community-based coalition strategies.

Many unions in Canada have increasingly recognized that the working class has always been more diverse than their organizations encompassed, a realization prompted by changes in their membership make-up and struggles for recognition by these groups. Such unions have made efforts, albeit uneven, to broaden their appeal and representativeness in response. However, longtime labour movement and antiracism activists Winnie Ng and Carol Wall make the case in their chapter that unions’ equity, diversity and inclusion initiatives have generally failed to address deeper issues of systemic racism and colonialism, thus inhibiting the development of an effective multiracial working-class movement. Drawing on their years of experience as labour movement activists in a variety of union organizations, including the Asian Canadian Labour Alliance and Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, respectively, Ng and Wall pull no punches as they challenge the white-dominant narrative of power and privilege in the politics of labour. They argue for a complete overhaul of labour movement structures and practices with a view to overcoming barriers to full participation for racialized and Indigenous union members and staff in all aspects of union life. In their exploration of the relationship between organized labour and Indigenous politics, Suzanne Mills and Tyler McCreary also detail union initiatives to ensure Indigenous voices are heard in unions’ decision-making structures and to support solidarity building between settler workers and Indigenous communities. However, both chapters point out that, despite important strides in recent decades, unions still have a long way to go on the equity front. Unions’ commitment to social justice and equality for people of colour, Indigenous people and other minority groups remains limited by unions’ economistic understandings of workers’ interests, sectionalist

definitions of their constituencies and attachments to hierarchies among workers about who is capable and deserving of leadership and whose voices really count.

In many ways, the postwar labour relations framework, and unions' acceptance of it, continues to restrict the labour movement's agenda, membership and strategic options. As a result, a host of new organizations have emerged to mobilize and represent segments of the nonunionized working class in Canada. As Simon Black explains, the rise (and return) of community unionism since the late 1960s is in part a response to the growing numbers of unemployed and poor workers displaced by deindustrialization and technological change and therefore separated from a workplace on which to base their activism. Union-community coalitions and workers' centres have also arisen because unions have lacked the capacity, interest or strategic foresight to represent sections of the working class that fall through the cracks of traditional models of union representation: poor workers, immigrant and migrant workers and workers in sectors dominated by part-time or contingent work arrangements. Black's contribution reminds us that unions have not entirely confronted the very particular model of working-class representation entrenched in the postwar era, which may have worked for a subset of the working class but has real limits in the "new economy."

Karl Gardner, Dani Magsumbol and Ethel Tungohan pick up on this point in their chapter on the politics of migrant worker organizing in Canada, arguing that the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed a longstanding contradiction underpinning Canada's immigration system, namely that migrant labour is treated as simultaneously essential and disposable. Gardner, Magsumbol and Tungohan explore the various ways migrant workers have worked to defend their interests, underscoring how their status as noncitizens has historically made their relationship to traditional union structures fraught. Unsurprisingly, movement-based organizations and strategies have therefore played an important role in migrant worker organizing in Canada.

Indeed, all movement-based workers' organizations share a tendency towards extra-parliamentary and direct action strategies, using mass mobilizations of their membership to target and pressure economic and political power holders, not least because they are not subject to the same "boundaries of constraint" that the law places on unions. Dennis Soron adds another dimension to this discussion with his exploration

of labour's participation in coalition building on the issue of environmentalism. In a very sober assessment of the obstacles that both labour and environmental activists face in sustaining alliances that go beyond a single environmental issue or campaign, an insight that applies to a full range of union–community coalitions, Soron argues that social unionism, as a general union commitment, is not enough, given the real material conflicts to sort out between different ways of defining and acting on “workers’ interests.”

All this raises a broader question of the relationship between different kinds of strategies and tactics, especially the relationship between direct action and street protest, on the one hand, and more institutional electoral and workplace-based strategies, on the other. In some ways, whether implicitly or explicitly, new working-class organizations are often conceived as alternatives to unions that have managed to escape the limits of institutionalization. Undoubtedly, the law has worked to contain both workers’ militancy and radicalism, and has atrophied unions’ mobilizational capacities by removing the need for a wide layer of members to participate in the collective defence of gains. However, “permanent” mass mobilization is also difficult to sustain, and other ways of making gains “permanent” are needed. While the emergence of new organizations based on direct action highlights the limits of the law, they do not resolve this challenge, not least because the law can be used to discipline movement organizations as well.

Ironically, given the pressing need for greater organizational and strategic innovation, the focus of labour politics in Canada remains the defence of existing models of union representation against attacks by right-wing governments. In their exploration of the labour movement’s engagement with the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, Charles Smith and Alison Braley-Rattai consider the labour movement’s pursuit of legal strategies as a method of advancing its strategic interests. Smith and Braley-Rattai point out that unions retreat to the judicial sphere when they are unable to press their demands effectively in either the economic or political spheres. However, they argue that labour’s judicial-based strategies have produced mixed results. Ultimately, in granting small protections to unions, courts have simultaneously reinforced legal constraints on workers’ ability to organize, associate and challenge the inequalities inherent in the employment relationship. This and discussions elsewhere in the book call on unions to consider more carefully

what in the postwar model of labour relations is worth defending, what needs to be transcended and what never really worked to create power for workers in the first place. In this sense, the law both enables as well as constrains, and the labour movement must think more carefully about how to intervene in this dynamic.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

From the growing levels of income and wealth inequality in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, to capital's consistent ability to tame governments willing to reject neoliberal imperatives, to the disorganization of unions and division, resentment and persistent hierarchies within the working class, workers seeking to transform society face huge obstacles. This second edition of *Rethinking the Politics of Labour in Canada* aims to clarify some of these significant obstacles and explore the various routes open to the labour movement in its ongoing efforts to rethink political strategies. This rethinking will undoubtedly continue to be a difficult task. Although the times increasingly call for political strategies that are more radical and militant, working-class politics is not inherently so. A renewed sense of political vision and strategic direction will not come automatically from mere lived experience, and must be fought for and consciously constructed in the debates that workers' organizations are now having about how to best confront a multitude of challenges. Critical education inside and outside of unions is crucial to shaping workers' consciousness, political and organizational capacities and sense of what is possible and necessary. We hope the new and revised edition of this book contributes to this process.