

# Introduction

“There’s a workers’ movement in Canada? Really? It sure doesn’t feel like it.” This is how many people would probably respond to finding out what this book is about. Yet the website of the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), the main federation of unions and the biggest umbrella organization of the working-class movement, claims it is “the largest democratic and popular organization in Canada with over three million members.”<sup>1</sup> People sometimes refer to unions as “the labour movement.” Why most of the unions that belong to the CLC (like other unions) do not feel much like a movement to most people is one of the questions this book sets out to answer. But before we can examine the working-class movement, we need to take a look at the working class.

## The Working Class?

One of the most significant sources of confusion in looking at anything to do with class in Canada and Quebec<sup>2</sup> is that most people who are part of the working class do not think of themselves as such. Most people assume they belong to the middle class — people “in the middle” — in between the small rich elite and people who live in poverty (Secombe and Livingstone 2000: 59–61). The term “working class” is often associated only with people (usually men) who work in “blue collar” jobs in manufacturing, construction or transportation. But there is a different way of looking at class that more accurately captures how the social structure of the capitalist society we live in is organized.

From this alternative perspective, most people in our society are part of the working class.<sup>3</sup> Everyone who sells their ability to work to an employer in exchange for a wage (whether this is paid in the form of an hourly wage or a salary) and who does not wield truly substantial management authority is part of the working class. This is the case regardless of how much they are paid or how much autonomy they have at work.<sup>4</sup> Unemployed wage-earners are also part of the working class. So too are the unwaged people who live in households that depend on wage income, such as people (mostly women) who work as unpaid caregivers at home. All these people are part of the working class because they share *a common relationship both to the way society is organized to produce goods and services and to other classes in society*, especially the class of employers. That relationship — between people who sell their

ability to work in exchange for wages, on the one hand, and employers on the other — is the central class relation in our society.

The specific kinds of work that people are employed to do changes over time. For example, in the early twenty-first century, the proportion of people who work in factories or as domestic servants in Canada and Quebec is much lower than it was a century ago, while a much larger proportion of people work in office jobs. But the specific kind of work people are hired to do is not the issue here. Nor is their status in society, what they think about their class position, how much money they make or how many years of formal education they have. None of these things determine whether or not someone is part of the working class (though they do influence how people act and think, so of course they matter).<sup>5</sup> What determines the class someone belongs to is their place in the whole system of production. *What people in the working class have in common is that they do not own or control society's means of producing goods and services* (factories, farms, mines, offices, schools, hospitals and so on) *and so they are forced to try to sell their ability to work to those who do* (or to depend on people who are forced to work for wages, in the case of unwaged people in the households of wage-earners).

The working class, then, is much broader and more diverse than is usually thought. Today it includes both high-paid miners and retail staff who make minimum wage. It includes computer game designers (mostly white men) and support workers in health care (mostly women, many of them women of colour). It encompasses citizens and non-citizens. It includes people who work for pay for thirty-five hours a week at one job and do little unpaid work in the household, and others who work for wages part-time on top of long hours of unpaid work taking care of children in the home. In this book, “worker” refers to any member of the working class, whether they are currently working for wages or not.

Many people who are usually thought of as “middle class” — such as nurses, teachers and IT specialists — are, in fact, part of the working class, including many people who have “manager” in their job title. However, employers and self-employed people, such as doctors, lawyers and consultants, are not part of the working class. To complicate things, some people who are legally classified as “independent contractors” rather than “employees” are actually wage-workers — for example, couriers (Bickerton and Warskett 2005). Another complication is that there is hierarchy within the working class. For example, many wage-earners report to other workers — supervisors who themselves are employees without substantial management power (for instance, at a university many administrative support staff report to faculty members).<sup>6</sup> This means the working class is more internally divided than is often recognized.

Knowing who belongs to the working class at a particular point in time

matters, but it does not tell us all that much. There is tremendous variation in how people who share a common relationship to the system of production and the employing class act and think. This is shaped by many forces that happen over time and across space. These include what employers, governments and other state authorities do; the ups and downs of the capitalist economy; how workers respond to forces they do not control; and how they organize themselves or are organized by others. The way that gender relations, racial practices and ideas, and other dimensions of society are structured shape a working class as it actually exists. Mass media, political parties, religion and other influences on how people make sense of the world may also have an impact.

We can see this clearly if we compare the working class in Canada and Quebec today with the working class in, say, 1919 or 1970.<sup>7</sup> We are still talking about a working class, but the class as it exists today is very different from the class as it existed in either of those two earlier times. It is not just that people's lives in the workplaces where they work for pay, in their households and in their broader communities are different. The subtitle of Thom Workman's 2009 book *If You're In My Way, I'm Walking: The Assault on Working People Since 1970* pinpoints a critical feature of what has been happening over the last several decades. Workman summarizes the assault in this way:

When compared with the immediate post-war decades [c. 1945-1975] working people have lost considerable ground... more and more working people have endured awful experiences... watched their wages stagnate and sometimes lose ground to inflation, become terribly anxious about the future, been forced into rotten, low-paying jobs and lost all confidence in the country's social programs. The gains that the working class forged in the first half of the twentieth century have been continually rolled back since the 1970s.... These trends will only worsen as the global economy passes through the current economic crisis. (7)

This assault has been part of a major restructuring of society carried out by capitalists, public sector employers, governments and the top ranks of the civil service. This restructuring — sometimes described as neoliberal — has changed how people work and live. These changes have had a big impact on the relations among workers and between the working class and the employing class. I look at these and some other important changes in society in Chapter Six. For now, it is enough to say that the working class has not only been suffering from a decades-long assault, but that changes linked to this assault have undermined (but certainly not eliminated) workers' resistance to employers and governments, eroded unity and solidarity among working-class people and encouraged many workers to buy into the idea that

they have to support the measures that employers and governments say are necessary for the sake of Canada's (or Quebec's) economic competitiveness. All this has left its mark on the workers' movement.

### The Working-Class Movement

What, then, is the working-class movement? In this book, this term is understood as including all of the organizations through which groups of workers act collectively to defend themselves or improve their conditions of work and life.<sup>8</sup> The largest and best-known components of working-class movements are formal organizations: unions and political parties. There are also other kinds of formal movement organizations, such as community-based groups that take action against racism, sexism or pollution. Working-class movement organization can also be informal. An example of informal organization would be a bunch of people in a non-unionized call centre who work together to persuade their coworkers to all call in sick on a particular day in response to the manager's refusal to deal with their complaints. So working-class movements are made up of a diverse array of formal and informal organizations.

As we will see, the working-class movement in Canada and Quebec today is made up mainly of unions. In this book, people who hold an elected or appointed position in unions are referred to as officials or the officialdom. The officialdom is made up of two groups of people: "officers" (members who are elected or appointed to a position in a union, a minority of whom are "booked off" to perform union work on a full-time paid basis) and "staff" (people who work for unions, who are almost always hired rather than elected from the membership). The term "rank-and-file" refers to the vast majority of union members who hold no official position within the union.

As alluded to in the opening lines of this introduction, some people are skeptical about calling unions today a movement. Some might argue that what New York City subway operator and union activist Steve Downs has said also applies north of the border:

We speak about the labour movement and I think we tend to do it out of habit or maybe generosity or maybe even embarrassment, but there is no labour movement in this city or in this country, frankly... there is no unifying vision, there are no widely-accepted goals, there certainly is no forward momentum. (2009a)

What Downs says about the lack of vision, goals and momentum in US unions is true. Similar things can be said about unions in Canada and Quebec today. Former long-time union staffer Sid Shniad says simply, "organized labour is not functioning like a movement at all," but as "individual, isolated

organizations” (Shniad 2010: 141).

One way of responding to this would be to drop the term working-class (or labour) movement and use another label, like “the mass organizations of the working class.” But I prefer to stick with the term working-class movement and to stress that this concept does not imply anything specific about the character of the organizations in question. Working-class movement organizations can be gaining strength and pushing forward (as last happened in Canada and Quebec between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s [Heron 1996: 85–106]). At exceptional moments, they can pose a radical challenge to the status quo in society (as the Bolivian working-class movement, along with other social movements, did in the early years of the twenty-first century [Webber 2010]). They can also be bureaucratic, divided, in retreat and decaying (as I argue in Chapter Five is the case in Canada and Quebec today).

### Does the Movement Matter?

Why bother to read a book about the workers’ movement in Canada and Quebec today, or to write one? Isn’t the movement an unimportant relic of the early twentieth century, a bit like a dilapidated though once-impressive building that still stands in the downtown of a city whose streets are lined with empty storefronts?

I believe that the working-class movement still matters enormously, despite its very real deficiencies. In Chapter Seven, I make a case that working-class movements are good in ethical terms. To summarize briefly, workers’ movements preserve and enhance human life. They can and do allow people to have better access to what they require to meet their needs and to flourish as human beings. This includes higher pay and benefits, shorter hours of work, better workplace health and safety, less management domination on the job, public services that enhance people’s health and other progressive changes in society beyond the workplace. But even if we set aside the ethical argument for now, there are still two reasons why the workers’ movement today is important.

First, quite simply, the only organizations that workers can use to defend themselves in a society in which they are under assault are their own independent organizations. Unions and other working-class movement organizations today are far from ideal, but they are all that workers have to defend themselves, improve working and living conditions or try to change society in larger ways. The courts have been of little use to workers, since the law generally defends the power of the employing class (Panitch and Swartz 2003; Fudge 2008; Fine 1984). For example, fired workers who go to court claiming unjust dismissal and win almost never get their jobs back. None of the major political parties consistently defends the working class. The NDP, the party traditionally backed by many unions, has never opposed the neoliberal

reorganization of capitalism that has inflicted so much harm on workers over the last three decades (see Chapter Six). Academics, journalists and community leaders supportive of social justice can analyze or speak out against the assault on workers, but perceptive analysis and fine words by themselves have little or no impact on what employers and governments actually do. Workers cannot rely on anyone but themselves, using the existing organizations of the workers' movement, changing them and creating new ones.

The other reason working-class movements matter is that it is through movement organizations that working people can develop their capacities to think and act for social change. Analyzing what is happening in the workplace and beyond and organizing collective action to make progressive change are skills that must be learned. What is taught in schools, colleges and universities — and how it is taught — rarely helps workers to become independent thinkers who can analyze the problems they face in society in ways that are rooted in their needs and experiences. How to organize collective action against injustice is never on the curriculum. Workers' capacities to think and act in their own interests must be nurtured elsewhere in the movement<sup>9</sup> (how much of this is actually happening in the movement today is another issue that will be discussed).

Unfortunately, the working-class movement in Canada and Quebec today is in crisis, as I show in Part One of this book. Its condition is certainly not as dire as that of its counterpart in the U.S.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, it is divided and retreating. Worse, it is changing in ways that add up to a process of decay. Unions are still institutions that regulate employer-employee relations for a large minority of wage earners. But it is becoming somewhat harder for workers to use unions as organizations to resist demands that they give up past gains. Most of the union officialdom is putting up little resistance to these demands for concessions. Democracy within unions is suffering. Unions are becoming more distant from non-unionized workers, as the union presence in the private sector where most people work for wages is now very weak, and people of colour, who are a growing proportion of the working class, are under-represented among unionized workers. Older members dominate many unions and there are fewer young union activists, which distances unions from younger members and youth in general. Political action by unions is increasingly about backing parties and candidates who, rhetoric aside, do not oppose the assault on workers. Unions are becoming less effective for unionized workers and less significant for the working class as a whole. All this means that workers are less likely to see unions as organizations through which they can act together in their own interests. As a result, they are less likely to reclaim unions as working-class movement organizations.

Faced with this situation, what is called for is not just an attempt to energize the movement in its current form but efforts to make sweeping

changes that would reinvent the movement. The working-class movement has been remade in the past to respond to how capitalism changed, and it could be reinvented again as a more effective vehicle for the struggles of working people. This would be a long process, and there are many barriers to transforming the movement, but it is necessary to try. The focus of Part Two is why the movement should be reinvented and why people should try to reinvent it by reforming unions from below and building new workers' organizations, rather than by taking a reform from above approach.

### About This Book

This book is written both for students and other readers whose main interest is simply to understand the subject better and for people who are involved in a union or other activist organization and want to contribute to reviving the movement. It is organized into two Parts. Part One opens with three chapters that examine different dimensions of unions, followed by a brief look at other organizations. The fifth chapter offers an overall assessment of the movement as it currently exists. The sixth chapter explains how it has come to be the way it is. Part Two looks forward, asking the question "why reinvent the movement?" and then considering different approaches to trying to change and strengthen it.

To understand the working-class movement as it exists in Canada and Quebec today, it is more important to examine what people actually *do* through its organizations than what is written in policy documents or what top leaders say in speeches. This emphasis is reflected in this book. Because unions are by far the largest working-class movement organizations, with tens of thousands of active members, most of this book is about unions. Throughout, the focus is on unions at the levels at which most workers encounter them, not on the goings-on among top officers and staff.

Readers who are not familiar with the initials of the names of unions and other organizations can consult the list of acronyms provided. There is also a brief Concepts section where key terms used in the book are defined (most of them are also explained when they first appear in the text). The Resources and Readings section offers suggestions for people who want to deepen their understanding of issues discussed in the book and for people who are (or want to become) activists and are looking for useful resources.

My assessment of unions today is often very critical. This may lead some readers to accuse me of not respecting the many thousands of people whose often thankless efforts keep unions going. In fact, the exact opposite is the case. It is precisely because I respect their hard work and commitment that I believe union activists deserve a serious examination of the movement as it is today, warts and all, and how to try to change it. This is what I have tried to offer readers.