

# The Decline of Trade-Unions in the US and Canada

Dispelling the Myths of the Anti-unionists

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In both Canada and the US, private sector union membership has fallen dramatically in the last few decades. Statistics show that Canadian private sector union membership peaked at 33.4% of the workforce in the early 80s, but by 2009 had declined by more than half, to only 16%. In the US, the situation is far worse, down to 7% in 2009, from a high of 29% in the mid-70's. There are, of course, multiple reasons for the continuing decline in private sector union membership, such as the loss of manufacturing and industrial jobs in general due to off-shoring, global competition, downsizing, displacement by technology, and outsourcing.

However, the primary reason for the decline is that, beginning in the 1970's, corporations began a concerted, widespread assault on unions, lobbying government officials for changes in the labour laws that would make it easier for companies to not only sue unions, but also to prevent workers from organizing in the first place. In addition, as more and more of the smaller, independent media sources—many of which were if not pro-union at least sympathetic to the struggles of the average worker—were gobbled up by huge multi-national media corporations, those same giant media enterprises joined in the attack, blaming unions for every failure in a company to make a profit and for every downturn in the economy.

One of the dirtiest, and most successful, smear campaigns engineered by US corporations, and aided by right-wing conservative politicians, was to publically equate unions, which are socialistic, with that "evil communism." Not surprisingly, many in the religious right—already identifying communism with fascists like Stalin and Hitler, and viewing both men as of the devil—readily bought into the "unions=socialism =communism=Satanism" propaganda. To quote Richard Hole from his popular US Christian website:

Many Bible verses indicate that people may be eternally separated from God if they are members of evil organizations like the Trade Unions.

The above quote is but one line in Hole's long tirade against unions, during which he issues one fictional statement after another to support the anti-union propaganda which he has been fed, and which he obviously whole-heartedly believes. Unfortunately, Hole is far from alone. Following is an excerpt from an article written by Melissa McEwen for Shakesville, a progressive blog, entitled "Hillary: Christian Warrior," revealing that, even within the highest ranks of the supposedly left-leaning Democrats—whose primary base has been union members—anti-unionism is alive and well:

(Hillary) Clinton's been an active member of the Capitol Hill cell of The Fellowship ever since she arrived in D.C. in 1993, and her "collaborations with right-wingers such as Senator Sam Brownback (R-Kan.) and former Senator Rick Santorum (R-Pa.) grow in part from that

connection.” Given its Dominionist leanings, the group naturally appeals disproportionately to Republicans—although there are Democratic members, too, in addition to Clinton (like Arkansas Senator Mark Pryor, who believes “the separation of church and state has gone too far”).

The secretive group has its roots in anti-Communism and anti-unionism, has members associated with the anti-union Christian management movement, and is comprised of “a network of sex-segregated cells of political, business, and military leaders dedicated to ‘spiritual war’ on behalf of Christ . . . The Fellowship believes that the elite win power by the will of God, who uses them for his purposes. Its mission is to help the powerful understand their role in God’s plan.”

The above examples of Christian anti-unionism are by no means restricted to the US. In 2009, Harper appointed Doug Cryer and Edward J. Bosveld to the Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board (IMF). Cryer is an evangelical Christian publicly opposed to same-sex marriage. Bosveld has worked for years for the Christian Labour Association of Canada (CLAC), widely regarded as an anti-union organization favoured by construction and other companies trying to avoid dealing with actual unions. For those not familiar with CLAC, it was founded in the US in the 1930’s by the Reform Party, and adopted by Canada’s Reform Party in 1952, but never really took off until the election of pro-corporation, right-wing leaders like Mulroney, Klein, Vanderzalm, and Campbell, in the 1990’s.

Today, CLAC boasts some 50,000 members, and is growing at such an alarming rate that it prompted The Canadian Congress of Labour, in 2008, to do an in-depth study and report on it (web link below, where the full report in .pdf can be read or downloaded). Unlike real unions, wherein the membership elects their executives in true democratic fashion, the membership of the CLAC pseudo-union have no say in executive appointments; nor do they get to vote on important issues, including company-union contract negotiations. In turn, the CLAC executive almost always goes along with corporate demands.

It should be noted that this not an attack on Christianity, for there are many Christians of all denominations (and people of other faiths, as well) who work within and also support private sector unions. Rather, it is an attack on ignorance, most especially the wide-spread ignorance regarding the critical importance of private sector unions to not only workers’ rights, wages, benefits, and safety, but also, even more importantly, to the health of a country as a whole.

Declines in private sector union membership erode the middle-class, divide a country further and further into rich and poor, and, due to decreased tax revenues, inevitably lead to cuts in or else end altogether social programs like healthcare and old age security pensions. Once the middle-class has been destroyed, as it has been in the US, raising taxes is pointless: the poor don’t have money to give, and the pool of the very wealthy is too small to make much of a difference (the top 1% in the US, for example, now has more wealth than the bottom 85% combined).

Statisticians, globally, employ the Gini Coefficient (developed by Corrado Gini, 1912) to rank a nation’s wealth and income disparity, with a value of 0 equating to a relatively equal wealth distribution across the population and a value of 1 equating to maximum wealth disparity. Upon analyzing a range of statistical information available for most nations—Gini Coefficients, union membership percentages, social programs, and crime rates, it is

immediately apparent that the countries with the highest union membership percentages (Sweden, Finland, Denmark and Norway) also have the lowest Gini Coefficients (most equal wealth distribution), the best social programs, and the lowest crime rates. Furthermore, with every decrease in a nation's union membership percentages there is a corresponding increase in the Gini Coefficient.

As of 2009, the US's Gini Coefficient was at .45 (just shy of Mexico's .47), the worst of all industrialized countries. Today, given the economic situation in the US, it is likely that their Gini Coefficient is even worse than Mexico's. Canada's Gini Coefficient is at .33; however, that figure is somewhat misleading due to the far-above-average non-union wages paid by the booming oil and gas industry of the north, as well as the fact that public union membership remains high. Nonetheless, in terms of income equality, Canada now ranks a poor 12th out of the top 17 industrialized nations. And should Canada's private sector union membership percentages continue on the same downward slope, the already large gap between rich and poor will certainly expand.

Importantly, once a country's Gini Coefficient closes in on .40—and Canada could be there within a mere two decades, if not sooner—valuable social programs are no longer affordable, and crime rates begin to escalate. If we are to prevent Canada's seemingly inexorable slide into oligarchical rule, where, as it is in the US, Mexico, China, Russia, many Central and South American countries, and most African nations, the wealth is concentrated in the pockets of the few and the remainder of the population lives in poverty, we must put every effort into re-building our private sector union membership.

Crucial to that effort is information, such as the kind that has been presented here, and spreading, by any means possible, that vital information to the public at large. Equally crucial to that effort is voting for persons and parties during both federal and provincial elections who are left-wing, pro-union and pro-social programs, rather than those who are right-wing, anti-union, anti-socialism, and pro-corporations.

The alarm bells for Canada are already ringing: Continue with the decimation of our unions, and our children and our grandchildren will have a country that is far more like Mexico than the one we have enjoyed up until now.

*NB. Web link below for the important article on CLAC posted by the Canadian Labour Congress*

[www.legassembly.sk.ca/Committees/HumanServices/Bill80/Canadian\\_Labour\\_Congress\\_Appendix\\_1.pdf](http://www.legassembly.sk.ca/Committees/HumanServices/Bill80/Canadian_Labour_Congress_Appendix_1.pdf)

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