



Workers of Tomorrow: **The Promise and Problem Of Young Workers and Unions**

Executive Summary

Young workers today work in some of the lowest-paying, lowest-status, least-secure jobs in the economy. As a result of corporate globalization and years of contracting out and downsizing, dead-end McJobs in the fast food, retail and entertainment industry are the only option available to the overwhelming majority of youth in Alberta and Canada.

YOUTH AT WORK

Young workers, usually defined as between 15 and 24 years old, make up about 15 percent of the population and approximately 18 percent of the workforce. The workforce in Alberta is the youngest of any province in Canada.

Globalization has meant major shifts in how and where Canadians work, and youth have been especially impacted by the growth of the services sector and the rise of non-standard employment such as part-time and temporary work.

In 2000, jobs in the service sector accounted for about 75 percent of all jobs in Canada, and roughly a third of these jobs are in the lower-tier food and retail services sector. 75 percent of all youth employment is in the service sector, where youth are subjected to high-stress,

low-wage jobs where injuries and abuse is frequent.

The 1990s also saw a growth in part-time and temporary employment. In Alberta, one out of five jobs is now part-time. 44 percent of all youth jobs are part-time, more than double the rate of 25 years ago. Taken together, youth and women account for almost 75 percent of all involuntary part-time workers. One-third of youth work in temporary jobs, and almost two-thirds would prefer permanent work if it was available.

Youth employment is far more impacted by economic downturns, and is slower to recover. The participation rate for youth is 71 percent, compared to 88 percent for older workers. Only 63 percent of youth are employed, compared to almost 85 percent of older workers, and the official unemployment rate for youth is 10.7 percent, more than double the 4.3 percent unemployment rate of older workers. Almost two-thirds of all minimum wage workers are youth.

Post-secondary education has become a necessity for youth hoping to escape the services sector, but increasing tuition is making university inaccessible for many youth. With tuition approaching \$5000 a year in Alberta, 70 percent of students are in debt, to an average level of \$20,000.

Youth at risk, including aboriginal youth, young workers of colour, youth with disabilities, and youth from disadvantaged backgrounds find the job market even more difficult. Youth from these groups attain lower level of education, and employment and participation rates are lower even with similar levels of education to other youth.

YOUTH IN UNIONS

Despite their poor work conditions and a high willingness to join unions, unions are not a significant factor in sectors and worksites where youth work.

- the unionization rate for the private sector, where most youth work, is only 18 percent;
- only one in four part-time and temporary workers belong to a union;
- less than 13 percent of workers in sites with less than 20 employees, where half of all young workers are found, are in unions;
- in Alberta only 3.5 percent of workers in accommodation and food services belong to unions.

Nationally, all this adds up to a unionization rate of only 13.5 percent for young workers, less than half the national average, or just over one out of every ten young workers.

There are numerous reasons why unions have had difficulty in organizing young workers. Organizing casual, transient, part-time young workers spread out over a number of shifts in small workplaces is often difficult for a union to justify in terms of cost and return. High turnover increases the risk of decertification, and many employers in the sector are large multinational corporations who actively fight union drives. For their part, young workers are unfamiliar with what unions do and how to contact them, and many are hesitant to go to the trouble of organizing what they see as a temporary job.

More problematic is the fact that for a large majority of unions, organizing new, young members is simply not a high priority, despite statements to the contrary. Unions commit most of their resources to servicing current members, and jurisdictional battles have emerged in the

past when drives aimed at young workers happened.

Youth in unions are also unfamiliar with their union, and few are actively involved. One study showed that over 30 percent of young workers at a worksite couldn't name their union. Many youth also see the union as primarily serving the needs and interests of older workers. Balancing work and school means that it is difficult for youth to participate in meetings or meet with reps.

Youth do not see themselves represented amongst the people in power in unions, and they are underrepresented at union events such as schools and conventions. Where youth are encouraged to participate, many perceive a certain tokenism, or the delegation of one person to be the "youth" for the union.

LOOKING FORWARD AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is a critical time for unions in Canada and Alberta. Union density is approximately 10 percent lower than at the start of the 1990s, and half the union members are concentrated in the public sector. The rate in Alberta is the lowest in Canada and hovers at 12 percent in the private sector and under 4 percent in retail services.

To maintain their present strength, unions must begin to organize more members, and organizing and involving more young workers is a critical part of this, because:

- youth are underrepresented in unions and work in some of the worst jobs for the least pay;
- the baby boom generation is aging and in the coming decades there will be a major shift in workplace demographics;
- a concerted effort at organizing youth will mean more representation in areas where unions have lower influence such as retail services, part-time and temporary positions, small workplaces and in the private sector;
- youth are a major part of the anti-globalization movement, and will bring new knowledge, diversity and ways of organizing to the labour movement;
- youth are at the cutting edge of art and music, which has always played a critical role in the labour movement.

The recommendations below are suggestions of changes the AFL and its affiliated unions can implement to bring more young workers into unions and empower them to be more involved union activists.

- Within the AFL, as well as within affiliated unions and labour councils, youth structures such as standing youth committees should be set up to give youth access to decision making and to ensure that youth voices are heard.
- Space must be created for youth by actively reaching out to youth and creating structures which encourage their participation in schools, conferences and events, including:
 - Reserving a certain portion of spots per union for AFL schools and conferences for young workers;
 - Creating youth delegate status for AFL Convention;
 - Offer and run youth-centered courses at schools even if attendance is low.
- Resources should be committed to carrying out programming aimed specifically at young workers and activists, including intensive programming such as Solidarity WORKS!
- Young workers have little knowledge of their rights or unions, so effort should be put into reaching youth with information to empower them as workers.
- Unions must do a more effective job of communicating with young new members and

introducing them to unions and what services unions provide their members.

- The AFL should support young activists on issues that are important to them, including providing meeting space and photocopying, speakers for events, participating in teach-ins, mobilizing members to support causes important to youth.
- The definition of 30 and under for youth should be lowered to 26 and under to be in line with the CLC definition and to more accurately reflect common experience and life situation.
- Unions must organize more youth and more youth-dominated sectors by committing more resources to organizing, and supporting initiatives such as the Prairies Organizing Institute. New ways of organizing which include young workers and activists themselves should be explored.
- Worker Centres should be established as an important component in supporting and involving youth the labour movement by providing services, educating youth on their rights as workers, and providing information and an accessible entry point to unions.

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INTRODUCTION

Young workers of today work in some of the lowest paying, lowest-status, least-secure jobs in the economy. Dead-end McJobs in the fast food, retail and entertainment industry are the only option available to the overwhelming majority of youth in Alberta and Canada.

Globalization and the expansion of free-trade agreements such as NAFTA and the World Trade Organization in the 1990s have resulted in massive changes in the Canadian economy. Compared to a quarter-century ago, young workers have far fewer opportunities in what are traditionally considered “good jobs.”

Corporations, with the tacit or explicit support of governments of all levels, have pursued the elimination of “market distorting” regulations in the labour market. Driven by increased competition brought on by globalization and the freedom for multinationals to move capital anywhere around the globe, labour “flexibility” has become a priority. In the lives of young workers, flexibility means minimum wages below the poverty level, precarious employment, no benefits, and no job security.

The irony is that the corporations who employ young workers under such conditions are amongst the wealthiest and most powerful in the world. As an

example, Yum! Inc. is the world’s largest restaurant system, including fast-food restaurants KFC, Taco Bell, A&W and Pizza Hut. In 2001, it generated \$22 billion worth of sales. It is no exaggeration to say that this tremendous wealth is built on the backs of low-wage youth workers who toil at front counters and at fat-fryers.

At the same time, young workers are underrepresented in the ranks of organized labour. Broadly speaking, unions are not a significant force in the sectors of the economy where youth are working, and age is one of the best ways to predict if an individual is likely to be unionized. As a general rule, the younger you are, the less likely it is that you will belong to a union.

Many of the structures of the labour movement are ill suited to effectively organize young workers in small, high-turnover, part-time service industry jobs. Many unions view the places where youth work as too difficult and costly to organize and service. Not only are many unions not actively trying to organize youth, but they are often dismissive when youth take the initiative to contact them.

With a few notable exceptions, look around any union convention, school or meeting and you are unlikely to see more than a handful of young workers, if any. Many older workers view young workers as a threat to their jobs or as having not “paid their dues” within the union.

Many young workers view unions as intimidating, inaccessible and rigid, even when they are dues paying members.

Clearly, the labour movement must address the issue of young workers, and there has been increasing interest lately by unions to confront the problem. Unions and central labour bodies are recognizing that with an economy dominated by the service sector and an aging workforce, they have to start reaching out to youth to avoid diminished influence in the coming decades.

While there are a number of youth initiatives being spearheaded, the majority of unions still lack an effective approach to youth. With some exceptions, there has been far more talking the talk than walking the walk when it comes to young workers.

In this paper, we will take a snapshot of the reality for young workers in the job market in Alberta and Canada. We will also look at the experience of young workers with unions and without unions, in order to frame the discussion of the challenges facing unions in connecting with and integrating young workers. Finally, the paper will outline a series of recommendations for the AFL and unions in Alberta to more effectively and genuinely reach out to, include and empower young workers.

By looking at the issue of young workers and unions, the AFL hopes to encourage a greater focus on young workers within the Alberta labour movement and illustrate the critical importance of young workers to unions in Alberta. There are very real barriers to unions organizing young workers into unions and giving them the space and tools to allow them to become active trade unionists, but they are barriers that must be overcome. Organizing the workers of tomorrow today will take time and resources, must be done differently and must be done deliberately. But it must be done.

PART ONE

Youth Today

Defining Youth

When looking at youth and young workers, it is important to be clear exactly whom we are talking about.

The Alberta Federation of Labour defines youth as 30 and under, while the CLC defines youth as 26 and under. Youth is usually associated with the period of time in which an individual is transitioning from a life dominated by school to a life dominated by work.

There is a definite trade-off associated with extending the age range we define as youth. While changing realities and an aging society suggests the definition should be expanded, the more the range is extended, the less shared experience and common life situation exists. For example, the situation of a 15 year-old, in junior high or early high school, perhaps never having worked, and likely living with parents, is vastly different than that of a 30 year-old who is either in post-secondary education or has been in the post-school job market for approximately a decade. By using 30 and under as its definition of youth, the AFL is straining the useful definition of youth.

For the most part, researchers and statisticians in Canada define youth as being between the ages of 15 and 24 and so, figures used throughout this paper typically refer to this age group. For the reasons outlined above, it is common practice to sometimes further divide the youth category into teenagers (15-19) and young adults (20-24). Unless otherwise noted, the terms "youth" and "young workers" are used interchangeably.

Youth at Work

Youth in Alberta and across Canada are facing a complex reality in today's economy. Years of globalization-driven downsizing and privatizing have left them with fewer and fewer chances of getting what are considered "good jobs."

At the same time, youth are told that to be successful in today's economy, more education than ever before is required. This fact, coupled with post-secondary tuition that is rapidly increasing, has put youth today in a tight squeeze.

The unfortunate reality for young workers is longer stays in school with higher tuition, fewer jobs in manufacturing and public administration which forces them to work in the low-paying service sector, meaning higher debt loads

at the completion of school and fewer job options once in the full-time job market.

Young Workers in Alberta

About 15 percent of Alberta's population, or just fewer than 440,000 Albertans, are youth. Because of Alberta's strong economy, which attracts migration from other regions, the workforce in Alberta is relatively young compared to other provinces in Canada.

Of the roughly 1.7 million workers in Alberta recorded in the 2001 census over 300,000, or about 18 percent, are young workers. Alberta has the youngest workforce of any province in Canada.

Between 1996 and 2001, there was a 20 percent growth in the youth labour force in Alberta, more than double the Canadian average.

Bad Jobs

The process of globalization has had an enormous impact on the where and how Canadians and Albertans work. With increased international competition encouraged by free trade agreements, Canadian companies have created and forced employees to accept more "flexibility" in work arrangements. Flexibility takes many forms, which Albertans are familiar with: contracting out, downsizing, precarious employment, speeding up work and adding new duties.

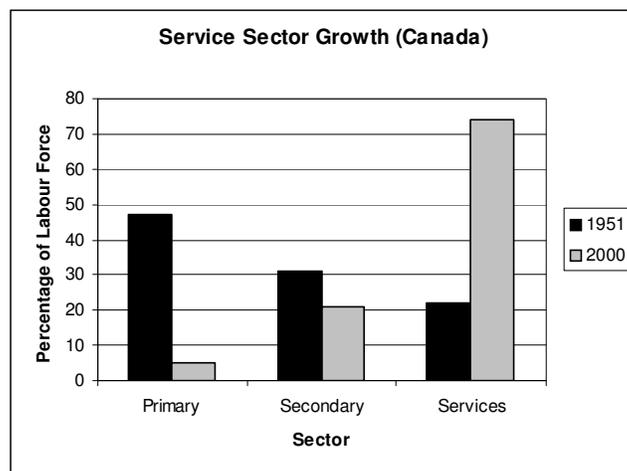
This process has been seen most acutely in provinces such as Alberta, Ontario and now British Columbia, where right-wing governments have cut public services and relaxed labour laws protecting workers.

The growth of the service sector and the rise of non-standard employment are two closely related changes that have impacted young workers the most.

Service Sector

Over the past fifty years, there has been a dramatic shift in the ratios of the primary sector (agriculture, mining, forestry, etc.), the secondary sector (manufacturing and construction), and the tertiary sector (services).

Fifty years ago, less than half of all employed Canadians worked in the service sector. By 2000, services in Canada accounted for 74 percent of employment, with 21 percent working in secondary services, and only 5 percent in primary industries.



Because of the diversity of the sector, it is useful to divide services into upper-tier (distributive, business, education, health and welfare and public administration) and lower-tier (retail trade and other consumer services).

In Alberta, as of January 2003, 27 percent of jobs were in lower-tier services, 46 percent were in upper-tier services, and the remaining 27 percent were in goods-related industries. There are more jobs in retail service and accommodation than in all occupations related to producing actual goods.

There is a significant gender and age bias in the breakdown of employment. 75 percent of all youth employment is in the service sector. Women and youth are overwhelmingly more likely than men to have jobs in lower-tier services.

The lack of good service-sector jobs for youth is most striking in the public sector. According to the Canadian Union of Public Employees, between 1979 and 1999, the number of young public sector workers dropped by over 46 percent in Canada.

The reality of most young people in the service sector is one of high stress, low status and low wages. Both management and customers frequently abuse retail workers, often as a result of an unrealistic pace of work being put on the shoulders of too few workers. The pace often requires workers to ignore health and safety concerns to keep up with demands. Work tasks are often repetitive and routinized to the smallest level of detail and continually refined to save time. Constant workplace surveillance is common as many managers have little trust in workers.

Many service-sector jobs are viewed as low-status, meaning that workers in them get little respect from the public, managers, or the corporations they work for. Viewing employees as unskilled and almost instantly replaceable and reducing their role to a series of boring repetitive tasks is typical in the industry. The undervaluing of the work done by retail service workers is one of the most unfortunate aspects of working in the sector.

Insecure Employment

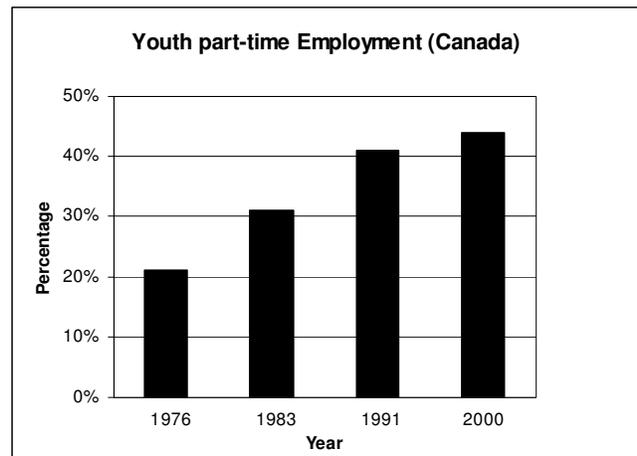
Closely related to the expansion of the services sector, is the growth of non-standard employment. Part-time and temporary work are the most common forms of non-standard work, but people who work more than one job and the self-employed also fall into this category. Since non-standard jobs usually pay less, provide fewer benefits and have less employment security, the increase in non-standard work means an increase in the precariousness of employment.

Paid full-time employment growth in the 1990s was almost non-existent. The growth in self-employment and part-time work accounted for 80 percent of all job growth in the 1990s. Temporary work more than doubled in the first half of the 1990s. In Alberta, part-time work now accounts for one out of every five jobs.

Almost half of all Canadians working in lower-tier services at the end of the 1990s were working in non-standard job arrangements.

Because youth are over-represented in these jobs, young workers, particularly young women are most likely to be working in part-time and temporary jobs. In 1976,

youth part-time employment stood at 21 percent. By 2000 it had more than doubled to 44 percent, or just under half of all youth jobs.



Being both young and female makes it even more likely that an individual will face part-time employment. In 2000, the part time rate for young women was 51 percent, compared to 37 percent for young men.

Of course, much of the part-time employment amongst youth is due to the fact that they are juggling school and work, and prefer to work part-time. 95 percent of those attending school full-time had part-time work, and the majority of these workers are satisfied with this work arrangement.

More problematic is involuntary part-time work, where individuals would prefer full-time work if it was available. The share of involuntary part-time work has more than doubled for youth over the last 25 years. Over 20 percent of youth not attending school are working part-time and more than half of them are doing so involuntarily. Taken together, youth and women account for almost three-quarters of involuntary part-time workers.

Temporary employment also disproportionately affects youth. In 2000, one-third of young workers were in a temporary job. This is a problem both in lower-tier retail services, as well as in upper-tier service jobs available

to youth, where it is easier to offer a young, new employee a contract position rather than a full-time position. While some young workers choose temporary work, most do not. Two-thirds of young workers say they would prefer permanent work.

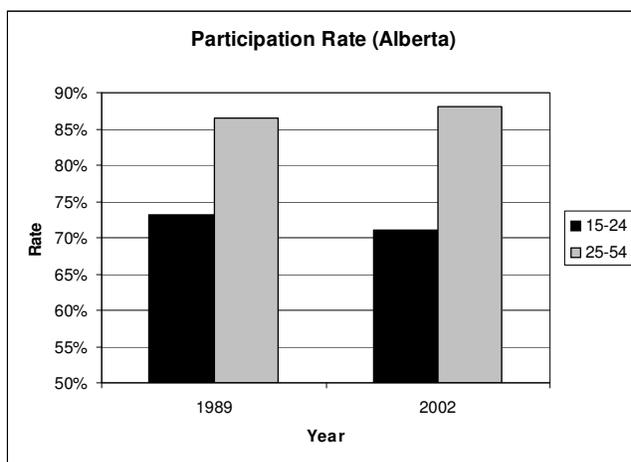
In total, 64 percent of young women and 52 percent of young men hold some type of non-standard job.

The Youth Labour Market

Typically, youth employment is impacted much more by economic downturns than adult employment. Young workers are often the first to lose their jobs when cutbacks occur or a recession hits, and youth employment recovers much more slowly than adult employment once a recession is over.

Participation Rate

Since 1989, the proportion of youth participating in the workforce in Alberta has dropped, although not as much as for youth in the rest of Canada. In 1989, 73.2 percent of Albertan youth were in the labour force. By 1997, it had bottomed out at 68.6 percent and by 2002 has recovered somewhat to 71 percent.



By comparison, the participation rate for workers in the prime working ages of 25-54 has grown over the same period. In 1989, 86.5 percent were in the workforce, and it has grown steadily to 88 percent in

2002. In other words, youth participation in the workforce in Alberta is approximately 20 percent less than prime age participation.

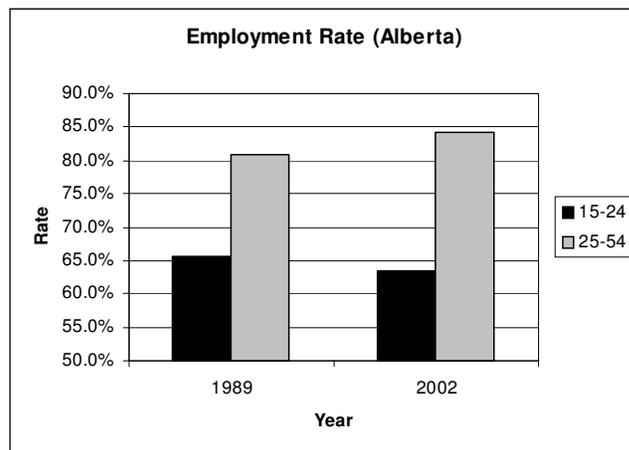
While a significant portion of the decline is because of deteriorating labour market conditions, another major factor is that school enrolments have grown over the period. Less youth working because they are attending school for longer is, of course, not a bad thing and shows that youth more and more recognize that more schooling is necessary in today's job market.

There are segments of the youth population that are troubling, however. In 1999, about 10 percent of teenagers were neither in school nor working. This group tends to be amongst the least educated of all youth and are likely to poor employment opportunities in the long-term.

Employment Rate

Through the 1990s, the employment rate for Alberta youth dropped and the gap between youth and adult employment widened. In 1989, 65.6 percent of young workers were employed, a figure which dropped to a low of 59.9 percent in 1993. In 2002, only 63.4 percent of youth were employed.

For workers aged 25 to 54, 80.9 percent were employed in 1989. The figure dipped slightly with the recession of the early 1990s, but has grown to reach 84.2 percent today.

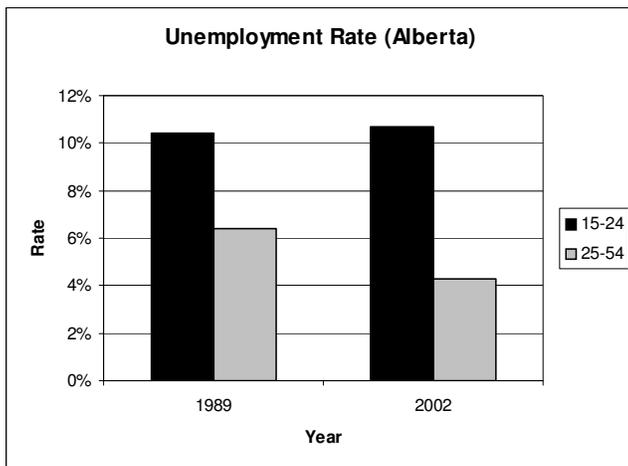


In other words, in Alberta through the 1990s, the gap between the youth and adult employment rate has grown from 15 percent to 20 percent in a decade.

Unemployment Rate

Unemployment amongst young workers in Alberta has been relatively consistent through the 1990s. In 1989, youth unemployment was 10.4 percent and it reached a high of 13.7 in the early 1990s. In 2002, it was 10.7 percent. The actual number of youth without work is even higher, as unemployment figures exclude certain workers without a job, such as discouraged workers.

The youth unemployment rate is consistently well above that of older workers, and the gap is widening. In 1989, when 6.4 percent of prime-age workers were unemployed, the youth unemployment rate was roughly one and a half times that of adults. Throughout the 1990s, the gap widened and youth unemployment rates were consistently between two and three times higher than the adult rate. In 2002, the youth unemployment rate for youth was two and a half times higher than the rate for Alberta adults of 4.3 percent.



Minimum Wage

Alberta's minimum wage of \$5.90 is the lowest in the country, and after adjusting for inflation, has been dropping in real terms since the mid-1970s. While just

under 5 percent of employees work at the minimum wage, and almost two-thirds of them are youth.

With rising tuition rates and the ever-increasing necessity of post-secondary education in the job market, Alberta's minimum wage makes life difficult for young workers. Minimum wage incomes are below the poverty line in all provinces, and for those working full-time for the whole year, Canada's minimum wage works out to only 34 percent of average earnings.

In British Columbia, an age-graded two-tier minimum wage has been instituted, with a lower minimum for young workers with less than 500 hours of experience. The Federal government is also looking at how to encourage such systems across the country to "help" youth enter the labour market more quickly.

Health and Safety

Young workers are far more likely than their older co-workers to be injured on the job. In 2001, more than half of Alberta's workplace injuries occurred during a worker's first year on the job. Workers under 25 were 33 percent more likely to have suffered an injury on the job.

The rate of lost-time claims (injuries which resulted in at least one day of lost work) in the retail and wholesale services is considerably higher than in other services and much higher than mining and petroleum development.

School

Post-secondary education has become an increasingly important factor in finding a good job in today's economy. According to the 2001 census, 61 percent of all Canadians ages 25 to 34 had at least some education beyond high school. As a result, young people are spending more time making the transition from school to work and the boundary between student and worker is becoming increasingly blurred.

During their school years, young people are employed overwhelmingly in service sector jobs, and upon leaving their school years are entering an increasingly polarized job market. Those with higher education are moving

into good jobs in professional and business services, while those with lower levels of education remain trapped in lower-tier services. Four out of ten high-school graduates and one out of ten university graduates were still working in lower-tier services two years after leaving school.

Average annual income for people with university degrees was almost \$62,000 according to the latest census. Those with only a high-school diploma earned \$25,000 less per year. Clearly, post-secondary education is the becoming the dividing line between winners and losers in the job market.

At the same time, cutbacks to government funding are making it increasingly hard for students to afford an education in Alberta. Alberta has been ranked dead last for three years in a row in terms of post-secondary accessibility and affordability, and has the highest tuition of any western province. Tuition fees in the province have more than doubled in the past decade, and one year of university tuition is now over \$4000. Both the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary have also begun differential tuition for some faculties such as medicine and law, raising annual tuition for these faculties to the \$10,000 range.

The combination of increasing tuition, longer stays in school and low-paying, part-time jobs has led to a crisis of student debt. Recent studies show that over 70 percent of students are in debt, and 20 percent rely not only on government funding, but also on private loans and lines of credit. The average student debt in Alberta is almost \$20,000.

The increasing necessity of post-secondary education and increasing costs of attending school shatter the often-held myth of student workers as merely working for pocket money. Increasingly, young workers are balancing school and work and accumulating debt in order to avoid a future of low-paying retail sector work.

Youth at Risk

While the work situation for most youth in Canada and Alberta is bleak compared to adults, aboriginal youth, visible minority youth, youth with disabilities and youth from disadvantaged backgrounds face even greater

challenges.

Aboriginal Youth

Aboriginal youth are amongst the fastest growing segment of Canada's youth population, especially in Saskatchewan. Almost one out of every five aboriginal person is a youth, compared to 13 percent of the general population, and in a decade the Aboriginal youth population is expected to grow by 20 percent.

In 1996, two-thirds of Aboriginal youth had not completed high school and were three times more likely than other Canadians to have dropped out of high school. They were one-fifth as likely to have a university degree.

Not surprisingly, Aboriginal youth have lower employment rates, lower participation rates, and higher unemployment compared to other youth. Less than half of aboriginal youth were in the labour force, compared to almost two-thirds of other youth. Only one-third were employed, compared to over half of other youth.

Racism and other barriers impact the job prospects of Aboriginal youth, as for the same level of educational attainment, Aboriginal youth have lower employment and participation rates.

Young Workers of Colour

The population of youth of colour increased significantly in the 1990s, reaching 13 percent of the total youth population in the 1996 census.

As with aboriginal youth, there is a striking difference between young workers of colour and other youth in rates of employment. The 1996 census shows that only two out of ten young workers of colour without high school are employed and those with high school diplomas have employment and participation rates over 20 percentage points below other youth.

Youth With Disabilities

Disabled youth have much lower rates of high school completion than other youth. Three in five had not finished high school and only three in ten had completed

post-secondary education. Only one-third of disabled youth were employed and less than 45 percent were in the labour force. Again, even with the same level of education, labour market indicators for youth with disabilities are lower than for other youth.

Disadvantaged Youth

A number of factors amongst youth have been shown to increase the risk of not completing high school, and therefore increase the risk of being trapped in insecure service-sector jobs. Youth living in poverty, living with single parents or no parents, having parents with lower educational attainment or low employment status all impact the likelihood that a youth will complete the education required for a good job.

A study in the mid-1990s showed that one third of children from families with low income had not completed high school, and they were 50 percent more likely to have not completed high school than the children of the richest quartile were. With increasing tuition, it is becoming even harder for young people living in low-income families to afford the post-secondary education necessary to climb out of the lower-tier services job market.

PART TWO Youth in Unions

The information above shows what most people believe: young people overwhelmingly work in bad jobs in the retail sector, with no job security, no benefits, low wages and no connection to a long-term career. Abuse by employers is rampant, and the respect shown to them as workers is minimal. They are employed by large multinational corporations who make billions of dollars in profits off their labour.

In many ways, young workers are most in need of the benefits and protections that unions offer their members, and the conditions they work under is more than enough to encourage them to join a union. Unfortunately, unions are not a significant force in the sectors and worksites where youth work. By all measures likely to involve jobs held by young workers, unions are failing to reach and

organize young people.

Unionization rates in Alberta are the lowest of any province in Canada. The latest numbers show that just over 22 percent of workers in Alberta belong to unions compared to just under 30 percent nationally. Canadian unions have done a far better job of weathering globalization than have unions in the United States, the UK and Australia, but the relatively high overall rate hides a great diversity within different segments of the population. Looking at the areas where youth work today, a more alarming picture emerges.

The public sector in Canada boasts a unionization rate of almost 75 percent, while the unionization rate for the private sector, where most youth work, is only 18 percent. Even the roughly 10 percent of young people who manage to get jobs in the public sector are still a half to a third less unionized than their older co-workers.

While one out of three workers employed in full-time jobs belongs to a union, only one in four part-time workers do. One in three permanent workers are unionized, but only one in four temporary workers are. Workers who have had their job for less than a year have a unionization rate of less than 15 percent.

The likelihood of unionization increases as workplaces get bigger. More than half the employees working in workplaces of over 500 people are unionized, while less than 13 percent of workers in sites with less than 20 employees, where half of all young workers are found, are in unions.

Workers in the retail accommodation and food services have a unionization rate of only 7.6 percent nationally. This rate was even lower for the young workers in the sector, who have a unionization rate of only 3.2 percent. In Alberta in 2000, only 3.5 percent of workers in accommodation and food services belonged to unions.

Nationally, all this adds up to a unionization rate of only 13.5 percent for young workers, less than half the national average. In other words, only slightly more than one out of every ten young workers belongs to a union. Put simply, unions are not a factor in the lives of most young workers.

Latent Unionism

Despite being concentrated in sectors underrepresented by unions, a relatively high number of young workers would like to join a union. A number of studies through the 1990s have indicated what Alberta sociologist Graham Lowe calls “latent unionism” amongst young workers.

A 1996 study showed that roughly a third of both recent high school and university graduates who were working in non-union workplaces said they would support joining a union if given the opportunity. A national poll conducted by the Canadian Policy Research Network in 2000 similarly found that a quarter of non-union employees would join a union if one existed in their workplace.

Studies have shown that younger workers express higher than average interest in joining unions. This is not surprising since the main reasons people give for wanting to join a union are a lack of trust in one’s employer, not having a supportive work environment, and dissatisfaction with pay and job security. As we have seen, the life of a young worker involves all these.

The willingness of younger workers to join unions, despite a media and general atmosphere hostile to unions, is a positive sign. However, studies have also shown that as workers gain more work experience and undergo workplace socialization, there is a reduction in pro-union attitudes. This fact underlines the importance of organizing young workers early in their work life.

The question must be asked why, despite poor working conditions and a favourable attitude towards joining unions, are so few young workers union members?

Barriers to Organizing

There are, of course, very legitimate barriers to organizing young workers. Organizing casual, transient, part-time young workers spread out over a number of shifts in small workplaces is often difficult for a union to justify in terms of cost and return. Paying a staff member of a union to organize a dozen workers making minimum wage at a fast-food outlet rarely makes financial sense in either the short or the long-term. In many cases, it is

almost impossible to recoup organizing costs from members’ dues. Given the rapid turnover in the retail service sector, it is entirely likely that in a year the entire workforce will be different, making the risk of decertification that much greater.

Especially in Alberta, with our employer-friendly labour legislation, winning a certification vote at the end of a successful organizing drive in the service industry is hard. Many young workers are employed by large corporations who have the resources to fight organizing drives. Alberta laws give employers up to ten weeks to campaign against the union in the workplace once proof of majority worker support is demonstrated. Young workers, who likely have never had experience with a union, are frequently naïve about their rights as workers and what an employer can and cannot do. Cutting hours, shuffling schedules, firing pro-union employees and intimidation are not unusual tactics employed by fast-food corporations to avoid unions making a toehold. In the extreme, some corporation go to the length of shutting down rather than become unionized. As the saying goes, a unionized McDonald’s is a closed McDonald’s.

The majority of young workers have no real knowledge of what unions are, what they do, or how to organize one. Labour issues and workers’ rights are seldom taught in schools and the coverage of unions in the media is typically negative and only when strikes occur. Unions overall have done a poor job of making themselves visible to young workers. When the AFL held a roundtable with young workers in Edmonton last fall, almost all participants indicated that they had no idea who to call if they wanted to form a union, no idea what the process was, or what unions were even actively organizing. Even amongst those youth who are pro-union and interested in being involved with unions don’t know how to go about contacting them.

Worse yet, from the perspective of most youth, the attitude towards going through the strain of organizing a union is “why bother?” Despite the fact that the period of stop-gap labour in the life of a young worker often lasts five or ten years, any one particular job in the service sector is unlikely to be viewed as being permanent or even long-term. Because most youth are not aware of their rights as workers, and typically experience one-way authority in most aspects of their lives, often the

only response to poor working conditions is to quit and find work elsewhere. The idea of staying in a bad job and going through months of added stress to struggle for a union is simply not worth it. With a lack of any real protection under labour standards, fear of employer reaction and job loss is very real.

While these barriers are very real, they are certainly not insurmountable, and are minor compared to the challenges of union organizing in the industrial sectors in the early days of trade unionism.

More problematic is the fact that for a large majority of unions, organizing new, young members is simply not a high priority, despite statements to the contrary. In many unions, the highest priority goes towards servicing workers who are already members and, in the face of constant threat of downsizing, protecting jobs. Organizing new members, let alone new young members is simply not the main concern for most unions, and the budgets committed to organizing reflect this reality.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, when unions have in the past made a serious effort at organizing young workers, there have been jurisdictional battles between some of Canada's largest unions. The statement that sums up young activists frustration at this problem is "stop fighting over us and organize us!" For young workers who are tired of poor working conditions and pay, the history of differences between unions and territoriality are irrelevant.

Young Workers in Unions

Even for youth who are members of unions already, there are barriers to participation. Many unions do a poor job of introducing new members to the union. Given the high turnover in the retail service sector and the likelihood that youth have little or no experience with unions, this is a serious problem. A significant portion of young union members are likely to know little more than the name of their union, if that. One survey of young unionized grocery store workers in Ontario found that over 30 percent didn't know the name of their union. For many young workers, the only interaction they have with their union is when they see their dues deducted off their paycheck or when they see a union newsletter on the lunchroom table.

Many unionized youth see the union as primarily serving the needs and interests of their older, adult co-workers. Structures such as seniority, dues deducted based on hourly wage rather than as a percentage of overall earnings, and benefits which are not available to part-time or temporary employees all contribute to these perceptions. Collective agreements which negotiate deductions for pension plans or mandate no split shifts are viewed at best as irrelevant and at worst actually negative by young workers. The simple reality is that youth often have different priorities than adults, but to the extent that youth are not represented in executive positions, staff, or involved in the bargaining process, these priorities are often not reflected.

This is, of course, not to say that unionized youth do not see unions as useful or positive. Young union members clearly enjoy a union advantage in wages, access to benefits, and protection from arbitrary discipline or termination:

Occupation	Union		Non-Union	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
Cashier	\$ 10.79	\$ 12.20	\$ 7.80	\$ 7.83
Salesperson	\$ 10.90	\$ 13.08	\$ 8.83	\$ 12.08

Source: www.workrights.ca

Benefits	Unionized	Non-Unionized
% covered by employer pension plan	79.9%	26.6%
Supplemental Health care	83.7%	45.4%
Dental plan	76.3%	42.6%

Source: www.ufcw.ca

Working in unionized workplaces can go a long way to reducing the stigma and many of the most negative elements of the retail service industry. Youth clearly feel fortunate to have unionized jobs when they look at their non-unionized peers. However, the bulk of union interventions are single events such as the handling of a grievance rather than dealing with ongoing, structural problems faced by young workers in the service industry.

Many unions are very staff-centered, with little interaction or ongoing involvement from rank and file membership. Problems which exist across age-groups are magnified for youth. For example, staff representatives who work a standard workweek are

unlikely to visit the workplace on weekends or weekday evenings, when student workers are likely to be at work.

Youth schedules of balancing school and work mean that it is often difficult to participate in regular union meetings which are typically held weekday evenings when students are likely to be working. Location of union halls away from the city centre or major transit routes adds another barrier for youth without access to their own vehicle. For those youth who do participate, the language and procedure used at meetings is often confusing and discourages youth from participating or returning. Materials that are produced by unions contain similar language and are often designed in a way that does not appeal to youth.

For the most part, youth do not see themselves represented amongst the people with power at union or union central meetings, adding to a feeling that a generation gap exists. At the roundtable in the fall, participants said that the bureaucracy of unions is intimidating and that they often feel a certain tokenism towards youth.

All these factors add up to a certain perception amongst adults and older trade unionists of youth. Many complain that youth do not participate in their union or don't take the time to come to meetings. The idea that youth have not yet put in their time either in the workplace or in the union is common. Rather than recognizing that barriers exist which discourage youth participation in unions, the idea that youth are just lazy is a simple one to accept. Fed by media images of alienated or lazy youth, many older people see the retail sector rite of passage that youth go through as building character or preparing them for the remainder of their work life.

Youth are significantly underrepresented at union events such as schools, conferences and conventions. Many unions see participation in these events as rewards for time put into the union and therefore tend to be biased towards sending older members. Some unions actually write such bias into their rules and regulations. Quite legitimately, unions are hesitant to spend the resources to send a young member, who may not be a union member a month later, to attend a school to become educated. These problems are magnified by a general disconnect with the rank and file. Often the same people

are sent over and over to events because they know that they happen every year and request to be sent. Many young members don't request to participate in union events simply because they don't know that they are happening or what the process is for applying. The impact is easy to see; at almost any union event it is unlikely that there will be more than a handful of youth delegates.

Tokenism within youth structures is another common problem. Unions often satisfy themselves by appointing a single individual to be the "youth person" rather than encouraging the participation of a range of youth. Where they exist, youth committees and youth chairs often feel that they are there to do youth programming or tell the union what youth think, rather than having access to the power and influence to actually change how the union overall operates to make it more youth friendly.

Unions and Youth Activists

A final area where unions have frequently failed to connect with youth in Alberta is with the activist community. Broadly speaking, the labour movement in this province is not thought of as a vehicle for taking action. Young activists are more likely to form into ad hoc groups or join non-governmental organizations rather than participate through labour structures. This is not to say that activists do not view unions as important or as part of the social movement, but their interaction with unions is far more likely to be in coalitions or through the request of financial support or access to other resources.

Amongst some elements of the social justice movement, especially environmentalists, the perception is that unions only get involved in broader struggles out of self-interest or to protect the jobs of union members no matter the cost. While not entirely accurate, some high-profile examples and a media eager to discredit unions have definitely encouraged this view.

Activists frequently perceive the labour movement as bureaucratic and top-down, in contrast to the informal, consensus-driven activism that has been embraced within the anti-globalization movement. The perception that unions are only interested in servicing their members and that there is no place for militancy or

new ideas is common. The image of unions as big, slow and resistant to change is often encountered with activists. Many activists are intimidated and confused by the labour movement and are unsure of the structure or who to contact with questions.

PART THREE

Looking Forward

It is a critical time for unions in Canada and Alberta. While union density has been relatively stable compared to other western countries, it is approximately 10 percent lower than at the start of the 1990s, and half the union members are concentrated in the public sector.

Over the past few years, over 1.5 million jobs have been created in Canada, but only 180,000 new union members have been added, well below the 30 percent new unionization rate needed to maintain current strength. In Alberta we face an even greater challenge. Our unionization rate is the lowest in the country, and hovers around 12 percent in the private sector and under 4 percent in retail services.

Looking at the pace of growth in the Alberta economy, in the private sector, and in the services sector, unless something changes, the next decade could see a staggering drop in the density, strength and influence of unions.

While not the only solution to the problems facing unions in Canada and Alberta, organizing and empowering more young workers must be a key priority in the coming years for a number of reasons.

First, youth are underrepresented in the labour movement and work in some of the worst jobs for the lowest pay. While many people view hairnets and fat-fryers as temporary rites of passage, the reality is that many youth are working in these jobs for five or ten years. The labour movement has a proud history of struggling to organize exploited workers to improve their conditions and give them a collective voice. Nowhere is the need for solidarity more evident than a lone teenager facing off against a multi-billion dollar corporation.

Second, the aging baby boom generation will drive a major shift in workplace demographics in the coming decades, especially in certain occupations. If nothing changes, a considerable portion of future nurses, teachers and trades people will have little or no union experience or training. Since youth are more pro-union earlier in their work lives, it makes sense to organize young people where they work today. The retail service sector is where most workers now start their work life, and if they are not involved in positive ways with unions from the start it becomes more challenging later in life to overcome the opinions formed by anti-union media, government and employers.

As we have seen, youth are concentrated in sectors of the economy which are the dominant growth areas: retail services, part-time and temporary positions, small workplaces and in the private sector. A concerted effort at organizing youth will by definition bring more union representation to areas of the economy where union influence is minimal.

From the Battle of Seattle to the growing movement against the war in Iraq, youth are leading the struggle against corporate globalization, and introducing new or improved forms of effective organizing and action. The knowledge, diversity, energy, creativity and contacts young activists bring to the labour movement are sorely needed if organized labour in Canada is to be successful in combating corporate globalization.

Finally, throughout the history of the labour movement, art and music have played a key role in inspiring and attracting workers to organized labour. Young artists who are at the cutting edge of music, art, graphic design, electronic media, and creative resistance are needed to reenergize this critical aspect of the labour movement.

Part Four

Recommendations

The recommendations below are suggestions of changes the AFL and its affiliated unions can implement to bring more young workers into unions and empower them to be more involved union activists.

As shown in the first section, young workers face numerous challenges in their jobs and in society. While many of the recommendations, particularly the ones aimed at increasing the unionization rate of youth, will help address these problems, the labour movement can also improve working conditions for youth by:

- Continuing to campaign against corporate globalization and the expansion of free trade regimes which are eliminating many opportunities for young workers;
- Continuing to campaign against the Klein government's agenda of privatization and public service cutbacks;
- Undertaking lobbying to encourage more programs aimed at tackling youth unemployment;
- Participating actively in apprenticeship and training programs, especially in sectors which are facing the most severe workforce shortages due to the aging workforce;
- Exploring encouraging minimum hiring quotas for youth in certain industries;
- Lobbying for an increase in the minimum wage in Alberta;
- Campaigning for a living wage;
- Being involved in campaigns against rising tuition in post-secondary education, including lobbying for sufficient provincial funding for education at all levels.

As far back as the middle of the 1990s, unions and central labour bodies recognized, and stated, that youth must be central in outreach and organizing initiatives. While some have been quite progressive in their approach to the lack of union representation amongst youth, the labour movement as a whole has not provided the resources or the commitment necessary to seriously address the problem.

The problem of young workers in unions is tied into many of the structures and habits of the labour movement. As such, it is a complex problem requiring a solution more involved than a token youth position or edgier print materials. It is a process that will take a commitment of resources and a willingness to embrace new ideas, share power and change old ways. As the CLC national youth representative put it: "Labour doesn't just need a face lift, or image change, they need

a cultural change. This means a workers' culture that fights for young people's issues."

The labour movement needs to take a long-term view of the value of youth organizing. We need to recognize that youth will change jobs and occupations as they grow older, and that greater involvement with unions at all stages of their education and work life will benefit the movement as a whole. The burger flippers of today are the doctors, teachers, nurses and trades people of tomorrow.

The labour movement must also recognize that while "youth" is a useful term, it disguises a world of diversity. Issues of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class and background must be integrated into youth initiatives as much as they must be throughout the labour movement as a whole.

For any youth focus to be legitimate and successful, youth must drive the process themselves. This is not to say that older trade unionist have no role to play, because it is they who need to commit the resources, provide the mentoring and femtoring, and create the space today to allow young workers to play a central role in the future direction of the labour movement.

What follows are a series of recommendations for actions that can begin to create a space for young workers within the labour movement in Alberta. While it is not expected that all will be acted on, it is a glimpse into the type of integrated approach and cultural shift that will be necessary to legitimately organize more youth and empower more youth to be active in the union.

It is time for the labour movement to commit to young workers with more than words. As the 1999 CUPE Policy Statement on Youth states, "It doesn't take a crystal ball to know that a union without young, active members is a union without a future."

And, as Edward Abbey says, "Sentiment without action is the ruin of the soul."

Youth Positions

Within the AFL, as well as within affiliated unions and

labour councils, youth structures should be set up to give youth access to decision making and to ensure that youth voices are heard. Youth is a diverse category, and appointing one person to represent the youth of an entire union is unrealistic and insufficient. To this end the AFL should:

- Create a standing Youth Committee or working group and encourage the participation of youth from a diversity of the affiliated members. Given the low unionization rate of youth, positions for community youth who do not belong to unions and funding, where possible, to allow them to attend should be made available.
- Encourage affiliated unions and district labour councils to create youth committees and youth representation positions.
- Make efforts to ensure a youth voice on other standing committees to reflect youth positions on bargaining, women's issues, health and safety, political action and human rights.

Creating Space for Youth

As with other equity-seeking groups, space must be created for youth. This means actively reaching out to youth and creating structures which encourage their participation. Union schools and conventions are a key way to involve youth more with their unions. But, it is simply not enough to send out a general notice or tack up a poster on a bulletin board and shrug when no youth apply; effort must be put into identifying young leaders and encouraging their participation. Unions have to take chances on youth and recognize that familiarizing youth and giving them positive experiences with the labour movement in general is just as important as a single union benefiting. Some mechanisms which may help create space for youth are:

- Reserving a certain portion of spots per union for AFL schools and conferences for young workers. Youth make up over one in ten workers and should be represented in at least this proportion at events.
- Creating youth delegate status for AFL Convention so youth can be sent without displacing older workers. Youth delegate credentials have been introduced for Conventions at both the SFL and the CLC.
- Offer and run youth-centered courses at schools

even if attendance is low. Because youth are underrepresented in unions and few are sent to schools, the few youth courses which are offered are often cancelled.

Some of these mechanisms may require extra funds to be allocated, but such expenditures should be looked at as an investment rather than an expense.

Youth Programming

Resources should be committed to carrying out programming aimed specifically at young workers and activists. Youth-focused courses at schools and conferences aimed at youth are positive initial steps, and as noted above should be offered even if under subscribed. It is vitally important that youth themselves are involved in the development of such programming, which further reinforces the need for there to be formal youth structures in place.

More intense youth programs like Solidarity WORKS!, which give youth more in-depth experience with labour, should also be offered and affiliates should be encouraged to support and participate in such programming. Summer youth internships at unions and central labour bodies, which can be supported in part by government funding for youth employment such as STEP, should be encouraged.

Given the under-representation of young workers in unions, collaboration between unions, District Labour Councils, and even Federations of Labour of different provinces on youth programming may be an option which would reduce the resources required.

Other means of reaching youth, such as through sponsoring of music and arts festivals that appeal to youth, such as the street party component of the Mayweek Festival in Edmonton and the CLC's Stomping Chaos, are other means to reach youth. Events such as this also help to break the stereotype of unions as stale and outdated, and almost out of necessity have to involve youth from the arts community and unions in the planning and organizing of the events.

Efforts should also be made to showcase the contributions youth are already making to the labour

movement and the social justice movement in general.

Workers' Rights and Union Education

Due to poor education and media coverage of workers' issues and rights, many young workers have little knowledge of their rights or unions. Effort should be put into reaching youth with our own information in order to empower them as workers.

Initiatives such as the Aspen Foundation are positive means to educate and empower youth. Other outreach to high schools and universities should be undertaken through social justice and activist groups. In Alberta, there are now two Public Interest Research Groups (PIRGs) on university campuses which are excellent means to reach progressive youth and the student body. Placing information in college and university information centres should also be explored.

Outreach materials should be designed with language and visual style that appeals to youth. Information for youth on worker's rights and unions should also be made readily available via the internet in clear language and advertised on unions websites, activist websites (such as activist.ca), and youth-oriented sites (such as youthone.com). Information on how to organize and contact unions should be prominent and inquiries should be followed up on promptly. Many unions are beginning to establish youth-oriented websites with content and formats more directed at young workers.

Establishing Worker Centres which are centrally located and accessible to non-unionized workers can also provide a venue to educate young workers by reaching them in their own communities.

Union Orientation

Unions overall must do a more effective job of communicating with new members and introducing them to unions and to what services unions provide their members. In talking to young trade unionists, it is shocking to find how many are unfamiliar with the basics of their union or the labour movement.

Union orientation packages which include the basics of who to contact within the union as well as how to get

involved in the broader labour movement should be provided to new members. A key element to effectively approaching and engaging new young union members is to encourage youth steward positions. Young shop stewards are a means by which to involve more youth, and mean that young workers will be approached and interact with peers who can relate to their struggles as young workers.

While nothing will replace face to face interaction with rank and file members, finding news ways of communicating directly with members, such as through the use of email lists and frequently updated websites can increase the level of interaction between young workers and their union or the AFL. Such mechanisms can also be used to more effectively inform youth about events such as schools and conferences and increase the likelihood that they will apply to attend.

Outreach to Young Activists and Community Youth

It is vitally important that unions and the AFL support young activists on issues that are important to them. Labour has often done a poor job of supporting issues outside of its own sphere of interests, but has been making significant effort to change this recently. The famous "March to Nowhere" in Quebec City was a turning point for some in labour, and the involvement of unions in the G8 organizing was extremely positive for activists.

Providing support in the form of meeting space and photocopying, providing speakers for events, participating in teach-ins, mobilizing members to support causes important to youth, and providing financing for events are all tangible acts of solidarity with youth activists. Solidarity in the fight against skyrocketing university tuition and the expansion of free trade, to name just two issues, is important in building relationships with youth activists. In addition, tangible acts of solidarity and mobilization are frequently returned as evidenced by the support of numerous student activists for the striking workers at the Shaw Conference Centre.

In addition to supporting youth activists on their issues, it is important that labour undertake campaigns which

help youth. Fighting for a higher minimum wage or running living wage campaigns are examples of campaigns that will have a direct impact on the lives of young workers and benefit the labour movement as a whole.

Age Limit

The definition of 30 and under for youth should be lowered to 26 and under to be in line with the CLC definition and to more accurately reflect common experience and life situation.

This is not to say that older youth should be excluded from participating, but it should be recognized that there is incredible diversity within the under-30 age group. Older youth can play an important role in mentoring/femtoring younger activists, but a youth committee should not be dominated by individuals over 26. A lack of participation by youth should not be fixed by re-defining the term to make it easier.

However, it is critically important that time and effort is put into ensuring that when individuals are no longer officially classified as youth, they are not simply dropped. The point of bodies like youth committees should be to provide youth with the training and opportunities to allow them to transition into positions of influence and leadership in their late 20's and early 30's.

Unions and the AFL should concentrate on building seamless transitions from Kids Camp into youth committees and into key leadership roles within unions, where individuals are guided at each step by others who can act as mentors or femtors.

Organizing

Put bluntly, unions must organize more youth and more youth-dominated sectors. In general, the labour movement in Alberta is not actively or aggressively organizing, but for youth the problems are magnified. To sign up more young workers, the way organizing is done must be addressed by the labour movement.

One key is to involve more youth as organizers, both within and outside of formal organizing drives. Worker Centres and active training of young volunteer

organizers is one way to address both the high cost of organizing in the service sector as well as a way to ensure that young workers are being approached by their peers. Many young activists are interested in helping to organize their workplace, as well as other youth. Training young organizers also creates a pool of youth who are actively discussing worker's rights and unions with friends as well as coworkers, taking advantage of the fact that youth are much more motivated by peer advice than by others. This helps to address the fact that due to low unionization rates, it is unlikely that youth are hearing about unions at all, let alone specifics about how to go about joining one.

The AFL can play a central role in the development of coordinated organizing through the planned Prairies Organizing Institute. Providing schools and training for rank and file members, youth and non-unionized workers in youth-dominated sectors should be a key role for the Institute. It can also help through the development of organizing material that is tailored to young workers which can be distributed to locals and used in training. Combining this type of support with a community-focused approach that is backed by Worker Centres can result in youth-specific organizing along the model which was used by SEIU in their Justice For Janitors (J4) campaigns.

As a part of the Organizing Institute, coordinating committees made up of organizers from different unions can be established to assist in planning and research for organizing drives aimed at youth. Strategies such as targeting image-conscious corporations, establishing dispute protocols, and working with youth to identify promising targets for organizing drives can be more effectively coordinated. In conjunction with worker centres and union-community youth committees, activists willing to assist in drives, distribute material or act as flying squads for employers who are blocking union drives can be identified. Greater involvement of community members, youth activists, immigrant centres and other non-union structures is a critical component.

To overcome some of the cost barriers to organizing in the services-sector, thought must be given to finding ways of moving away from the single-shop, single-union, single-employer organizing model. Variations on classic

arrangements, ranging from coordinated drives aimed at organizing specific chains to concepts such as open-source unions, and “closed-shop” occupational unionism should be looked at to determine their feasibility.

Unions overall must begin to commit more resources to organizing. Combined with the other tools outlined, most notably a volunteer base of engaged rank and file and community activists, a greater commitment of resources and coordinated organizing efforts can pay off. While few unions in the United States have reached the mark set by the AFL-CIO to earmark 30 percent of their budgets to organizing, some unions have begun to shift more resources to organizing with considerable success. A similar shift is needed now in Canada in order to avoid the declines in union density witnessed south of the border.

Worker Centres

Worker Centres are an important component in supporting and involving both non-unionized youth and youth activists with the labour movement. By providing services, educating youth on their rights as workers, and providing information and an accessible entry point to unions, Worker Centres can help to break down the barriers and intimidation that prevent greater youth

involvement with unions. They have a history of some success in Canada, including the Canadian Union of Postal Workers’ Centre in Winnipeg and the Toronto District Labour Council as well as some campus-based resource centres.

Worker Centres can also act as springboards for organizing in the service industry and other non-unionized sectors by providing contact with workers who wish to unionize, providing training in organizing skills and attracting volunteers for organizing drives. They are an entry point in the community for young people who don’t know how to contact unions or access services such as WCB and employment insurance.

In addition, Worker Centres are tangible means for labour to support young activists on their own issues by providing access to resources such as meeting space and photocopying. While seemingly small gestures of solidarity, access to these resources is key for young activists and benefits the labour movement by increasing interaction with activists, encouraging more action on social justice issues, and introducing activists to the labour movement.

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