

The Future of Organized Labour – Harnessing the Power of Media Technologies

In a digital age, where machines and new technology are threatening to render manual labour largely obsolete, we must ask ourselves; what is the role of organized labour in the future? Historically, the organized withdrawal of labour has seen much success in compelling employers to the bargaining table. In recent years, scholars have noted the decline in the use of the strike as an effective tool. In this essay, I will argue that the future of organized labour will depend on the protection of an unfettered strike model and the use of modern technologies such as social media and mass media to enhance bargaining power by threatening the core of capitalistic corporations: their brand.

Threat of a Strike and Protection of an Unfettered Strike Model

I believe the *threat* of a strike can be incredibly compelling. The inability to make credible strike threats could have adverse effects and reduce (or eliminate) an information gathering function, being the potential of strike threats to elicit information to test the veracity of the other party's position.¹ Under an unfettered strike model, the threat of a work stoppage has been associated with the promotion of collective bargaining efficiency by providing timely and voluntary settlements. Alternatively, a no-strike model prohibits stoppages and refers deadlocked-bargaining directly to compulsory arbitration, resulting in fewer voluntary settlements. The future of organized labour must protect the right to strike, and use the threat of a strike to embolden a union's position.

A recent example signalling the importance of strike threats is the matter of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union Canada ("ILWU") and the B.C. Maritime Employers Association ("BCMEA"). The ILWU issued a strike notice for May 27, citing the preservation of jobs in the face of port automation and site safety concerns². While undergoing

¹ Rose, Joseph B. "Regulating and Resolving Public Sector Disputes in Canada." *Journal of Industrial Relations* 50.4 (2008): 545-559.

² Alam, Hina. "Vancouver Port Workers, Association Reach Agreement" (May 30, 2019) *The Vancouver Sun*. <https://vancouversun.com/news/local-news/negotiations-continue-cl-through-the-night-in-effort-to-avoid-b-c-port-lockout>

limited labour action, the BCMEA announced a lockout for May 31. After bargaining overnight on May 30, the BCMEA lifted the lockout warning and the union withdrew the strike notice,³ avoiding a total closure of Canada's largest port. This is a prime example of the efficacy of the threat of a strike, which must be protected and used by modern unions.

Utilizing Technology and Damage to Corporate Branding

While many unions have found success in the use of threats of strikes, some unions have had to find other points of leverage to advocate for their members. Local 40, or UNITE HERE, of Vancouver, British Columbia, has not had a strike since its inception in 2000. Instead, the union often engages in a practice that has been described as akin to street theatre,⁴ choosing prominent hotels to organize weekly demonstrations and taking to the streets to verbalize the worst parts of their workdays to people walking by and local reporters. Instead of members withdrawing their labour and striking the union utilizes the media, and this activism cuts to the brand of the companies. Anything damaging to that brand is said to be an effective bargaining tool.

A similar strategy used by the Public Service Alliance of Canada ("PSAC") at the Ekati diamond mine in the Northwest Territories in 2006. Due to the geographical location of the mine and the product produced, striking would not have been effective. Instead, the union ran a series of ads in mass media such as the New York Times and The Wall Street Journal decrying Canada's "dirty diamonds", directly attacking the brand of the mine as producing diamonds that were "untainted by human-rights abuses associated with the diamonds from Africa."⁵ Following a

³ Hainsworth, Jeremy. "Port Union to Mull Deal Before Possible Sept. 19 Vote" (June 10, 2019) The Squamish Chief. <https://www.squamishchief.com/port-union-to-mull-deal-before-possible-sept-19-vote-1.23851415>

⁴ Littlemore, Richard. "Do Unions Have a Future?" (March 27, 2013, updated May 11, 2018) The Globe and Mail. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/rob-magazine/do-unions-have-a-future/article10310754/>

⁵ Ibid

public outcry, the union had an agreement within two weeks, and the company has continued to come to the table ever since.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while modern technologies threaten to render manual labour obsolete, there are strategies that use technologies such as social media and mass media that can be of benefit to unions. By utilizing their technologies and harnessing the power of a globalized mass media, employees can cut to the core of a company's business strategy by threatening their most precious commodity: its brand. The future of organized labour rests in its ability to utilize modern technologies to their advantage, and may include the strategic threat of harm to an employee's brand.