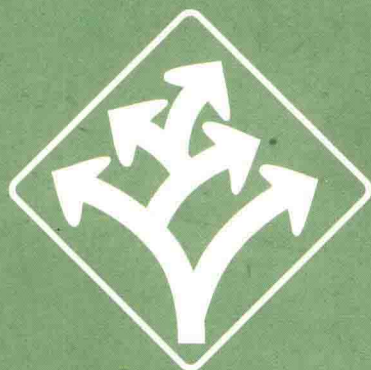


LABOUR IN CANADA

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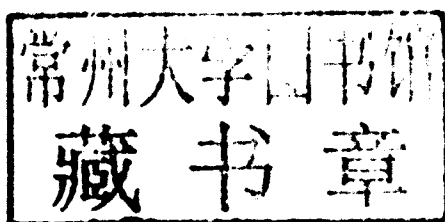
RETHINKING THE POLITICS OF LABOUR IN CANADA



EDITED BY
STEPHANIE ROSS & LARRY SAVAGE

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STEPHANIE ROSS
AND LARRY SAVAGE



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LABOUR IN CANADA SERIES

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

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

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

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

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

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RETHINKING THE POLITICS OF LABOUR IN CANADA: AN INTRODUCTION

Stephanie Ross and Larry Savage

Workers in Canada and around the world are under concerted attack. From the first crises of the Keynesian era in the early 1970s to the Great Recession of the late 2000s, employers and governments everywhere have worked tirelessly to remove the economic, political, legal and social bases of working-class power established in the aftermath of the Second World War. While no national working class in the advanced capitalist world could be said to have taken power in the sense meant by socialist revolutionaries, there is no doubt that workers had, for a time, established a real capacity to demand and win greater economic, political and social justice for the less powerful. Like its global counterparts, the Canadian labour movement played a key role in the expansion of political rights to those without wealth, the creation of the welfare state, the social wage, redistributive public policies and the promotion of social justice and equality for both working-class people and members of other oppressed groups. Though these advances may have seemed like irrevocable contributions to human progress, they have proven anything but. Since the mid-1970s, Canadian labour's political influence and capacity to defend, let alone extend, these gains has been seriously undermined by the strategies of both capitalist interests and the neoliberal state. The suffering caused (and yet to be caused) by this unravelling of the labour movement's twentieth-century achievements cannot be underestimated. Understanding how and why workers were able to exert this collective power, how they lost it and how they might re-establish it are the central concerns of this book.

The concerted attack on labour has not gone unchallenged. In Canada, the national Day of Protest against Wage Controls in 1976, the Solidarity Movement in British Columbia in the 1980s and the Ontario Days of Action in the 1990s demonstrated Canadian workers' willingness and capacity to resist neoliberal reforms and policies in both collective and politicized ways, even if these struggles achieved few of their stated goals in any permanent way. These past and present struggles, though laden with challenges, contradictions and limits, cannot help but be inspiring: they remind us that people still can and will

mobilize against the seemingly overwhelming forces of economic and political power. They also signal that workers are searching for a new kind of politics, even if its exact form remains unclear.

However, in the wake of these mass displays of working-class solidarity, top-down demobilizations and a retreat to familiar party-union relationships and electoral strategies have also been common. And why not, since the victories of the immediate post-war era were to no small extent attributable to the capacity of working-class parties to attract significant votes, whether to form a strong opposition or even to take the reins of government. Prior to the 1970s, labour parties the world over implemented significant elements of the labour movement's economic and political agenda. However, over the last thirty years in Canada, traditional electoral strategies have proven extremely limited, if not counterproductive. When in power, parties linked to the labour movement have increasingly abandoned the agenda of economic and social equality that brought them to power, opting instead to lower the expectations of their own working-class constituencies in an effort to make peace with capital and govern in the interests of "all the people." When out of power, labour parties and their adherents have counselled against too militant protest or too radical demands and subjected workers to the tyranny of waiting until the next election, a limiting political logic which not only diminishes the labour movement's capacities between election campaigns but also narrows the scope of what properly constitutes labour politics itself. In some ways, this narrow electoralist mentality has driven a wedge between party activists and labour and social movement activists, thus weakening the link between the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary strategies which made previous gains possible.

The limits of the labour movement's traditional electoral political efforts have spawned calls to take up a variety of new strategies and tactics, including non-partisan mass protests, issue-based union-community coalitions and direct actions that place immediate pressure on the source of harm. Union participation in the demonstrations against the proposed Free Trade Agreement of the Americas in Quebec City in 2001 and the G20 meetings in Toronto in 2010 demonstrated labour's willingness to take up such strategies. However, protest on its own, without concern for controlling or influencing the state's levers of power, which is central to consolidating gains won through protest, has also proven difficult to sustain. With neoliberal governments generally unmoved by social movement demands, whether delivered in the form of polite petitions or mass protests, street politics seems to have hit up against some important limits. Seemingly faced with dead ends in every strategic direction, an assessment of the politics, prospects and possibilities for the Canadian labour movement is urgently required.

The question of new and effective political strategies and tactics is all the more urgent for the labour movement as it braces for a new round of neoliberal austerity measures from all levels of government. As in previous eras, new political identities and strategic repertoires are often forged in moments of heightened

struggle and conflict as workers and their organizations struggle to cope with new circumstances. In the early twenty-first century, one of the most pressing questions facing the Canadian labour movement is whether the fight to prevent government cuts to public sector jobs and services will unify working-class people, providing them with a renewed sense of purpose and collective interest, or divide them, setting those who have been able to negotiate strong collective agreements for themselves against those who have not. This battle raises much larger issues that renewed labour politics must confront: who is it that the labour movement speaks for politically? Whose interests will labour prioritize? How does labour make those commitments real rather than rhetorical?

Working-class people and their organizations must confront these issues in a hostile political and ideological climate in which, rightly or wrongly, unions are seen as defenders of sectional rather than the general interest. The negative effects of the Great Recession of the late 2000s and the longer-term decline in working-class wages and living standards have made it much more difficult for unionized workers in general, and public sector workers in particular, to defend their collective agreements and their rights to dignified and secure work. This fragmentation of working-class identity and community and the public's chilly response to public sector workers' claims was highlighted in the late 2000s by the backlash against a series of high-profile public sector strikes. As Tom Walkom has argued, the political right has mastered the art of mobilizing "reverse class resentment" based on the real feelings and experiences of insecurity of many working-class people. In his own words:

Today, class resentments have been turned on their head. The focus of anger is not the silk-hatted capitalist but his unionized workers, with their job protection guarantees, their pension plans and their good wages.... Increasingly, in the world of media and popular culture, it is not the rich who are blamed for their excesses but the poor — the undeserving welfare recipient, the shiftless single mother, the employment insurance cheat. Resentment has become a potent tool of the right.... The left's resentments were predicated on the notion that if some are privileged, all should be. For all of its problems (and resentment is a difficult force to control), it was at least optimistic. At its best, it encouraged people, through their governments, to improve the lot of those who were hurting. The new resentment is based on the presumption that if I don't have something, neither should you. Its aim is not to improve anyone's lot but to cut down to a common level of misery those uppity enough to think they deserve better. (Walkom 2010)

With more jobs cuts, privatizations and legislative curbs on workers' rights to bargain and strike on the horizon, it remains an open question whether the labour movement has the capacity to understand the appeal of the right-wing message to other workers, to turn that resentment towards its proper targets and to unify with the broader community against the neoliberal right.

The chapters that follow, and the critical assessments they contain, take stock of the politics of labour in Canada, and establish a framework for thinking about labour's past, present and future strategic direction. In doing so, the contributors have adopted an expansive understanding of the working class, the labour movement and, by extension, the kinds of organizations and strategies to be included in a discussion of labour politics. As Craig Heron (1996) reminds us, the labour movement has always encompassed a wide range of people and organizations produced by working-class communities for their own collective self-defence, and its influence stretched far beyond official membership lists. As such, "working class" also had a broad meaning, encompassing all those whose survival depended on their capacity to labour for others, whether they actually engaged in waged work or not. However, particularly since the Second World War, both the working class and the labour movement have come to be understood much more narrowly. Working class meant waged — and especially white, male industrial — workers, and the labour movement meant state-certified workplace-based unions and their political parties. Labour politics came to be understood as unions' (and their members') engagement in elections via political parties. However, this understanding of the movement, its constituency and its political expression is historically specific and, as Rosemary Warskett and Donald Swartz argue in the first chapter of this volume, premised on a false separation of the economic and the political typical in capitalist societies. Contrary to this tendency, this book brings together subject matter traditionally discussed as labour politics with an analysis of newer (or rediscovered) forms of working-class organization and social movement-influenced approaches to politics increasingly important in the Canadian labour movement. In other words, while unions and political parties remain important, so too are the new organizational forms and strategies that have emerged alongside, and sometimes in opposition to, these longstanding approaches. In this manner, this book seeks to take stock of these new forms of labour politics, understand their emergence and assess their impact, while acknowledging that the way forward remains unclear.

CONTEXTUALIZING LABOUR AND WORKING-CLASS POLITICS IN CANADA

The first section of this book explores the various political perspectives at play in the Canadian labour movement, seeking to put these political-ideological orientations into their historical, political-economic, social and cultural context. Rosemary Warskett and Donald Swartz explore the narrow and legalistic form of labour solidarity entrenched and institutionalized in the wake of the Second World War, and argue that the seeds of labour's current political impasse are to be found in that era. Stephanie Ross explores the conceptual categories of business unionism and social unionism commonly used to classify different approaches to workers' interests, identities and strategies. Ross points to their much more complex concrete expressions, and argues for a more careful assessment of different forms of workers' political activity, particularly since so many strategic recommendations for the movement's revival emphasize the centrality of social

unionism to renewal. These chapters share a common concern with the factors that shape the expression of labour and working-class politics, and in particular, the relationship between collective identity, organization and political strategy.

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

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

Understanding labour politics as part of the process of class formation requires us to pay attention to the factors which, as Therborn (1983) puts it, form, re-form and de-form working-class consciousness and hence politics, factors which are both external and internal to the labour movement itself. In the current moment, the corporate media is a key force of enculturation, with its normalization and universalization of middle classness, framing of the working class — and especially the working poor and racialized and sexual minorities — as victims of their own poor choices, and casting of workers' organizations as collective attempts to gain unfair advantage or compensate for a lack of individual ability or initiative. These powerful messages have detached many workers from identification with the labour movement. However, the right-wing demonization of working-class people and their unions can only explain part of the hostility that the labour movement faces today. Workers' own organizations play a central role in defining and reproducing working-class identities and consciousness. Insofar as many workers fail to see themselves reflected in the labour movement's messages, priorities and organizations, this is not merely a right-wing fabrication. Rather, it reflects real inequalities amongst working-class people that have been allowed to