

Canadians' Views on Unions

In the spring of 1997, the Work Research Foundation (WRF) commissioned a national survey to examine current Canadian attitudes towards labour unions. The WRF was particularly interested in exploring current views toward unions as democratic organizations, especially in the areas of membership requirements, work place practices, and union policies.

Recognizing the importance of getting an objective and credible reading of public opinion, the Foundation asked sociologist Dr. Reginald Bibby of the University of Lethbridge, a well-known and highly regarded social trends analyst, to oversee the survey. He in turn made arrangements with the Angus Reid group, one of the country's top pollsters, to carry out the data collections as part of their monthly national omnibus surveys.

The items which appeared in the survey were written by Dr. Bibby in collaboration with Work Research Foundation personnel. In order to facilitate the examination of attitudes toward some aspects of unions over time, a number of pertinent items from early Gallup polls were included. A total of nine items were used, along with two items inquiring as to the union membership status of both the respondent and others in the respondent's household.

The Angus Reid Group collected the data by telephone between February 19th and 24th, 1997, using a representative sample of 1,504 adults. A sample of this size permits highly accurate generalizations to the Canadian adult population-about 3 percentage points, plus or minus, 19 times in 20.

The Prevalence of Union Membership

The first item in the question set asked respondents to estimate what percentage of Canadian workers they think are members of labour unions. The actual figure is 34%. (Note 1). Generally speaking, there is a tendency to overestimate the extent of union membership. About one-half of Canadians think at least 50% of workers are union members. Close to two-thirds say the figure is at least 40%. Just under 2 in 10 accurately estimate the membership figure to be between 30% and 39%. Differences in awareness across the regions of the country are fairly minor.

Approval of Unions

In 1961, a Gallup poll found that 66% of Canadians said that they approved of unions; 23% disapproved while the remainder did not offer an opinion. Today, the approval level has slipped to 57% while disapproval has increased to 39%; far fewer people these days are reluctant to offer their views.

Union approval is somewhat higher among younger adults than it is among older adults.

Variations in approval are also minor by both education and income. University graduates are no more likely nor any less likely than Canadians who didn't finish high school to say that they approve of unions. The same is essentially true of "the rich" versus "the poor."

As would be expected, union members are far more inclined than respondents who

have never been members to express their approval of unions; however, former union members are considerably less likely than current members to indicate that they approve of unions.

Employment and Mandatory Membership

Canadians were asked about a number of fairly standard practices characterizing unions in their dealing with workers-whether respondents think such practices "continue to be appropriate or, in some cases need to be changed."

One issue raised was that of union membership as a condition of employment. The item read: Concerning membership, do you believe that you, as a qualified worker, should be able to work for anyone willing to hire you, whether or not you belong to a union?

Forty years ago, in 1957, Gallup put the same question to Canadians. At that time, 80% said, "Yes." Today, the proportion of the population agreeing with the statement stands at 90%. Given such a high level of agreement, there is limited variation by characteristics such as region, age, gender, education, income, and being a union member (80%) and not being a member (95%).

Another issue examined was that of workers being required to join a given union, if that union is the choice of most of the workers. The item was worded as follows: As you may be aware, present law allows unions to require that all workers in a company join the union if the majority of workers have chosen that union. Should workers in this situation be required to become a member of the union?

A majority of 61% of respondents answered, "No".

Here there is a sharp difference between union members and others: 6 in 10 members, regardless of their age or gender, maintain workers should have to join the prevalent union, compared to just 4 in 10 former members and 3 in 10 who never have been members.

The expectation of membership is highest in B.C. (49%), lowest in Ontario (36%) and Alberta (34%).

These findings suggest union members agree with most other Canadians that being a member of a union should not be a requirement for getting a job. However, more than 6 in 10 union members insist that once new employees are hired, they should be required to join the union which has been chosen by the majority of workers -- a position which is held by only a small minority of Canadians who have never been union members.

Uses of Dues of Non-Members

The 61% of survey respondents who indicated that new workers should not be required to become members of the prevalent union were asked what they feel should happen to the money that would have been paid as union dues - "should it be paid to the union, should it be kept by the individual, or should it be paid to a charity?" Here respondents, regardless of whether they approve or disapprove of unions, tend to have fairly similar opinions.

The dominant sentiment, expressed by around 60%, is that the money which would have been paid as dues to union should be kept by the individual who doesn't wish to

join the existing union.

The second most commonly held view, shared by some 30%, is that such funds should be paid to a charity.

Only 17% of those who approve of unions and 3% who do not approve of such organizations say that the money should be paid to the union.

Put together, these findings on membership and dues indicate that 61% of Canadians do not think that new workers should be required to join an existing union and 56% of people across the country are opposed both to forced membership and to workers being forced to pay dues to unions. Conversely, 44% of Canadians either feel that membership in the dominant union should be required (39%) or that dues from workers who decline membership should be paid to the union (5%).

Restrictions on Bidding for Jobs

The survey attempted to explore how Canadians view current laws that permit unions to restrict the bidding for some jobs to companies that have contracts with unions. In explaining the practice to respondents, interviewers said, "For example, a construction company must award the plumbing contract to companies associated with a particular union."

Only 25% of Canadians feel that unions should be able to restrict bidding when projects are publicly-funded.

Even among union members, less than 40% favour the restricting of bidding to union-associated companies when publicly-funded projects are involved.

When projects are privately-funded, the endorsement level for restricting bidding to union-related companies increases only marginally—from 25% to 28%.

The message heard seems clear: Canadians as a whole, including union members, do not favour the restricting of bidding on projects to companies associated with unions, regardless of whether the funding sources for the work are public or private.

Use of Union Dues for Non-Union Activities

Survey participants were reminded by the interviewers that "compulsory union dues are used primarily for union business—such as collective bargaining, and the administration of collective agreements." The interviewers went on to say, "But a portion of the union dues is often used for other purposes, such as the support of a political party or other non-union activities." Respondents were then asked: In your opinion, should contributions to support "non-union activities" from union dues be on a voluntary basis, or should they be mandatory for everyone covered by the union agreement?

Some 82% of Canadians indicate that such contributions should be voluntary. What's more, the sentiment is highly pervasive.

Of particular importance, union members are virtually as likely as previous members and people who have never been members of unions to say that they prefer the "voluntary" use of dues for non-union activities.

A comparison with the results of an April, 1987 Gallup poll that asked the same question suggests the strong tendency to favour the voluntary use of union dues for highly varied purposes has remained fairly steady over the past decade.

Is Confrontation Still Necessary?

The union items in the national survey concluded with a question probing the kind of posture that Canadians think unions and employers should tend to have toward each other today. Specifically, respondents were reminded that "historically, unions and employers have often had a confrontational approach to each other." They then were asked: Do you think such a style is still necessary, or do you think that unions and employers can cooperate?

The dominant feeling characterizing close to 9 in 10 Canadians is that confrontation is not necessary-that unions and employers in the late 90s are capable of cooperating with each other. Once again, the uniformity is striking.

A solid majority of almost 80% of union members maintain that cooperation is possible, although a core of some 20%-almost double that of former members and non-members-insist that the style of confrontation continues to be necessary. \

Conclusion

The survey has produced a number of decisive findings:

1. Canadians tend to substantially overestimate the extent of union membership. The exposure and influence of unions appears to contribute to a sense on the part of both non-members and members that membership is considerably more extensive and inclusive than it is.
2. A slight majority of Canadians continue to approve of unions, but the numbers have declined about 10 percentage points since the 1960s. Rather than being associated with a shift among younger people, approval levels are actually highest among young adults. However, the disapproval level among previous union members is similar to that of people who have never been members-pointing to a possible disenchantment factor for many former members.
3. Some 90% of the population do not believe that union membership should be a condition of employment; further, about 60% of Canadians do not agree that a worker, once hired, should be required to join the union chosen by the majority of workers. There is considerable difference of opinion on this latter point between union members and others.
4. To the extent respondents do not believe that membership in the predominant union should be mandatory, most also reject the idea that union dues should be mandatory. Apart from what might be prescribed by law, approximately 6 in 10 Canadians maintain that both union membership and the payment of union dues should be voluntary.
5. Some 75% of people across the country maintain that there should be no union restrictions on bidding involving either publicly-funded or privately-funded projects. Such sentiments are held by about 65% of union members

and 80% of others.

6. More than 80% of Canadians say that the use of union dues for non-union activities should be voluntary. Union members are as likely as other people to express such thoughts.
7. No less than 86% of the population believe that cooperation is now possible between unions and employers. This figure includes 78% of current union members.

What also is clear is that, while Canadians may agree with some traditional union policies, very few-including union members-are endorsing more than one or two of the policies presented to them in the survey. Some 40% may agree that new workers should join "host" unions; but only 15% for example, also think bids should be restricted on private projects. The number keeps shrinking as additional issues such as dues and confrontation are raised. Less than 1% of Canadians endorse all six policies.

It should surprise no one that the culturally prevalent themes of freedom, consultation, and cooperation run through these findings. The mood of the country is one where freedom should be experienced in the workplace-where people and companies should be able to work when they are qualified to work, where individuals have a measure of freedom in joining unions and paying dues, and have input into how their dues are being used. And overall, Canadians are maintaining that, in the late 90s, cooperations between unions and employers is both possible and preferable to confrontation.

The anticipated response of some leaders to these survey results may well provide insight into why these freedom, consultation, and cooperation themes have had difficulty finding their way into the workplace. Nevertheless, it is to be hoped that these findings will provoke and stimulate, and thereby contribute as necessary to change that elevates life for workers specifically and Canadians more generally.

Note 1: Source: Directory of Labour Organizations in Canada, 1996. Human Resources Development Canada. Catalogue number L2-2/11996:xiv. Ottawa: Public Works & Government Services, Canada.