

Planning for Generational Change: Youth and the CAW

Yesterday And Tomorrow

In the 1960's an explosion of youth protest rocked the world. That upsurge affected, and was affected by, waves of militancy within the working class. In Canada, the labour force was growing faster than in any other industrialized country. Sectors like auto which were at the base of our union, led all others in growth, and over the decade, membership in the UAW/Canada doubled. Young workers, confident that the loss of one job could quickly be replaced by another equivalent job and buoyed by the social climate, challenged their employers in the workplace and (often) their own trade union leaders. That militancy, combined with lessons learned from older co-workers who had earlier built the union, shaped a great number of the current leadership and membership of our union.

In 1970, reflecting on these changes taking place, Walter Reuther commented that "...there is a different kind of worker than we had twenty-five to thirty years ago." Ironically, another twenty-five to thirty years after 1970, we are again talking about the transition to a "different kind of worker". Within the next decade, this generational shift in our activists, - a change which has in many cases already begun, will accelerate.

The first generation of our union emerged in the thirties and forties, in the context of the Great Depression, World War, and the rise of a wide range of social movements (the most important of which was the birth of industrial unionism in the mass production industries). The second generation, which included many workers not then in the UAW/Canada, arrived alongside the militant and socially rebellious sixties. The third generation, living through quite different times, will soon be with us. Are we ready?

Young Workers, Renewed Unions

The challenge for us is how to pass on what's been best about our union, and how to work with this new generation to prepare for a new era. We desperately need the active participation of young workers - not just to add to our membership base but to bring renewed and enthusiastic energy, ideas, and challenges. At the same time, we also have something to offer: a vehicle for fighting back to get some input into what happens to them in the workplace and in society, for responding to health and safety concerns, unilateral employer decisions on scheduling, disregard for legislated labour and human rights standards, the low wages young workers get when they do get jobs (a recent government study revealed that the average real wage of a young male worker today is more than 20% less than it was for a comparable young worker in the early 80's).

The real issue isn't so much whether the next generation of CAW activists are different than we were, but that all of us - them and us - have been living through conservative times which have negatively impacted on how we all view collective action and what is possible. So thinking about changes which will engage and excite young people - new internal structures, new forums, new directions - is really part of thinking about changes that will make our union more open and relevant to all our members.

Some of the recent initiatives taken before this Convention and continued into this Convention - on education, organizing, and jobs - start us into addressing the needs of young workers alongside addressing the overall needs of our union:

1. Young workers already in our union:

Over the past year we made a unique commitment to expand and redo our educational programs. This is central to developing current leadership-activists and preparing the

next generation of leadership-activists. We have also made a breakthrough in auto bargaining by negotiating funds to develop more substantive orientation courses for all new workers coming into the workplace.

2. **Young workers who might join our union:**

At this convention, we will be asking delegates to approve a restructuring of the dues going to the strike fund. This shift will mean a substantial increase in funds set aside for organizing - which includes workers of all ages but which will, by its very nature, bring a higher proportion of young workers into our union.

Recent polls show that, broken down by age, the group most open to unions is - surprisingly to many - young workers. As a young CAW activist commented in responding to this, "Young people are savvy and cynical, but this should not be automatically mistaken for right-wing or individualistic."

3. **Unemployed Young Workers**

We have, in bargaining, made a special effort to reduce work-time and thereby create new job openings for laid-off CAW members and for young workers. In the Big Three, for example, this has led to over 2000 additional jobs at a time when both governments and business have been preoccupied with downsizing. (Though we still have a long way to go in taking on the issue of excess overtime).

At this Convention we will also present a discussion paper on jobs that reflects on the past failure to provide all Canadians with a chance to work (which inevitably means that those trying to get into the job market are hit especially hard) and then raises the need for us to consider new, more radical directions.

4. **Young Workers and Society**

In addition to the obvious workplace issues, the priorities of young people include the environment, what's happening in the educational system, human rights questions, cultural issues.

We have started to establish forums on such issues - for ourselves and for young people. In Windsor, for example, we have had a number of conferences on the environment with high school students which led to them returning to their schools to establish environmental committees. In Brampton, we held a conference on the educational system which included CAW members, teachers, and students - many of whom were sons and daughters of our members.

Rhetoric vs. Commitment

No week goes by without another editorial, taskforce, politician, or statement by a bank president expressing a new-found concern for the high unemployment amongst young people and the potential "loss of a generation". This born-again sensitivity is superficial and hypocritical. For example, the problem can't be simplified to "more education" when this generation is both the most educated we'd ever had and experiencing uniquely high unemployment or

underemployment. Besides, how can these groups call for more education after they have demanded and led, for years, the support and lobbying for actual cutbacks in social programs including education? Their declarations from on high might be taken a little more seriously and a little less cynically if they confessed to some link between the policies they have so successfully (from their perspective) pushed down our throats for over a decade and the tragedies they now apparently lament.

But while we have been consistent on social and employment issues, we too will face the test of how committed we are to what we say. How far are we ready to go in adapting our structures and priorities at all levels of the union?

We can give a higher priority to speaking out on issues affecting young people, support youth events, add relevant information and "attitude" to local publications and our Internet Home Page, ensure a significant contingent of young workers in who we send to PEL and other educationals. Yet we also have to creatively address internal changes that establish openings, access, and spaces for new members. We could, for example:

- Create local union taskforces to get input from the membership, and especially young members, about how we're addressing this issue and what could be improved on or what new idea introduced;
- Offer observer status with voice but no vote, to young members at local executive meetings;
- Link young members who are community activists to a local union committee or to a labour council committee to encourage the expansion of their activism into the union movement;
- Introduce "shadowing" of elected reps by young members so that they can learn about the work of the union first hand;
- As part of our local education program, provide opportunities for young people to sit in on national CAW meetings and conferences like the Council or the Convention;
- Invite outside guests such as youth leaders and social activists, to membership meetings on a regular basis to increase interest among young workers and increase the base of support for so-called "youth issues" amongst the membership as a whole.

In addition, attitudes to society, how working people see themselves, how young people view unions, possibilities, and change, are shaped before people enter the workforce and the school system is an active part of this. We could therefore:

- Address the absence of the working-class from high school curriculums by:
 - a) working with the teachers unions to develop appropriate curriculum;
 - b) setting up local committees - open to spouses and teenage sons and daughters - to lobby for such changes; and
 - c) developing kits to take into high schools for presentations and training young CAW activists to make those presentations.

A NATIONAL YOUTH CONFERENCE

We can highlight the commitment to this new direction and launch this new project by calling a national conference to debate, discuss, and make recommendations on how to make this direction concrete and real.

The planning and organizing of this conference would begin with a series of regional conferences building to the national conference (the regional conferences could elect representatives to sit on the planning committee for planning the national conference). The conference would be for young CAW members (eg a flexible guideline of under 24) but would include leadership so we can respond and, above all, listen. Young activists outside our union, but who have formed links with us at the local level and are interested in this project, would be welcome.

Conclusion

In many cases, thinking about how to strengthen what makes our union what it is, goes a long way towards also making it more relevant and attractive to young workers: a union that is open and accessible, which reflects the needs of its membership in the workplace and the community, and is ready to take on corporate power and insensitive governments. *A good union fighting for all workers is more likely to be a good union for young people.*

But there are also special steps that need to be taken, geared directly to the participation of young workers. Some of these will challenge former ways of thinking about and doing what we do and so will lead to tensions and risks. But when has our union avoided risks if it meant building for the future?

And that's the issue here, as it is with so many other issues we have addressed of late: building the union. The issue is about planning, at all levels of our union, for changes that are coming. It's about identifying future problems and turning potential threats into new opportunities. Some far-sighted members have long argued that taking on the challenge of youth can be a catalyst for deepening the involvement of all members and addressing broader concerns that affect the political climate "out there". It may not be too much of an exaggeration to say that with this Convention, we can open a new chapter in the history of our union.