

Union members don't need saving

Wed, Jan 22, 2003

By Paul Moist

THE recent editorial, [Let labour be free to choose](#), purports to defend union members from their union leadership by way of calling for greater opportunities for workers to switch unions. In advancing this view, it is argued that governments must enact legislation to enable such movement.

In terms of alternate views on this subject matter, it is important to emphasize a few points. First and foremost, the article does not talk about non-union workers deciding to unionize, nor does it reference union members' legal right to decertify a union. Both of these scenarios are enabled by labour legislation throughout Canada.

With respect, I argue this is not a matter for governments to legislate. The Canadian labour movement has its own governing structures, and individual unions are free to join, or not join, bodies such as the Canadian Labour Congress.

Governance within the CLC is by convention decisions, made by thousands of rank and file workers, elected to represent their respective members. Bodies such as the CLC exist to provide unions with a political voice to pursue much needed labour legislation. Most importantly, the CLC allows labour to speak as one on important national and international debates.

Part and parcel of CLC governance are rules THAT prohibit raiding one another's membership. There is not a CLC affiliate that does not work hard, day in and day out, on behalf of its members. It is also true that each and every affiliate has, from time to time, groups that are not happy over a particular situation. Like any other structure in society, that union has a job to do to repair internal relationships and to forge unity within its ranks. If Canada's unions spent their scarce resources poaching one another's disenchanted members, it would sap resources from our real organizing goals, to organize the almost 70 per cent of Canada's workforce that does not have union protection.

Such internal raiding would also destroy the CLC, and I argue both the labour movement and Canadians as a whole would be worse off were this to happen. The CLC fought long and hard to establish medicare. To establish health-and-safety laws. To establish fair levels of minimum wage. Our congress also provides important leadership to developing labour movements throughout the world.

Canada's trade union movement has freely chosen not to emulate the corporate community, where the bottom line (in our case, I guess, membership numbers) governs above all else. We have chosen to attempt to forge unity within our ranks, and to speak as one on important local, national and global issues.

What avenues then exist for workers caught in a situation where they truly believe their interests are not being best represented by their union? Within CUPE, we take such matters very

seriously. We urge new members to get involved, to run for union office, to become part of the solution. If we don't encourage such involvement, we will die as a union.

Here in Manitoba, I am proud to be part of a united labour movement. We have our differences within and among unions from time to time, but we work these out and we are all committed to maintaining a strong Manitoba Federation of Labour.

We have indeed been involved in many inter-union votes brought about by events such as the regionalization of health care, and our members have had to choose between two and sometimes three unions. Internally we have agreed to protocols for such run-off votes, and these have been respected by all unions. Manitoba's union members do not need to be saved from their union leadership. Nor do we require legislation in this area.

We take very seriously the lessons taught to us by previous generations of labour leaders about the importance of unity and solidarity. I argue strongly that Manitoba workers, both organized and unorganized, are better off for the efforts of the province's labour movement. And this is testimony to the many women and men who built the movement and have entrusted it to the care of today's leadership.

Paul Moist is president of CUPE Manitoba and an executive vice-president of the Manitoba Federation of Labour.