

INTRODUCING “NEW VOICES IN LABOUR STUDIES IN CANADA”

Mark Thomas
Assistant Professor,
Department of Sociology,
York University,
Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Steven Tufts
Assistant Professor,
Department of Geography,
York University,
Toronto, Ontario, Canada

We live in a very interesting time to be studying the social organization of work. Whether it is the emergence of transnational production chains, the re-regulation of labour markets through neoliberal policies, the normalization of forms of precarious employment, or efforts to re-organize labour movements at local and transnational levels, the changing dynamics of workplaces and labour markets in today’s global economy raise pressing issues for those working in the field of labour studies. The globalization of production, economic restructuring, and new forms of governance and labour regulation challenge us to chart new terrains in the study of labour. How do we understand the economic and political institutions that are emerging in the current context? What are their implications for the social relationships within the workplace, the labour market, and in the intersection between work and home? In what ways are these economic transformations connected to the emergence of new forms of collective resistance? Fortunately, a number of new labour studies scholars who have entered advanced graduate studies, recently completed dissertations, and/or taken new positions in Canadian universities, are tackling these questions. As part of this group, we have, however, found limited opportunities for people at earlier stages of their careers to meet and discuss their research in focused forums.

In October 2006, *Just Labour* and several sponsors at Trent University¹ hosted the *New Voices in Labour Studies in Canada* workshop for junior scholars in Peterborough, Ontario. This workshop emerged out of our perceived need for an opportunity for ‘new scholars’ in labour studies in Canada to discuss research and teaching with both one another and more senior colleagues. While there are many conferences, both large and small, where we are able to present our work, these tend to be oriented towards the presentation of specialized research papers in formal academic settings. We felt it important to construct an opportunity where we are able not only to discuss our particular research projects, but also to

reflect on the field of labour studies itself, considering how it has developed and where it might be going.

OVERVIEW OF THE WORKSHOP

While bringing together ‘new voices’ in the field, the workshop was also designed to provide a venue for interaction with senior scholars. The workshop involved thematic panels where participants were able to present findings from ongoing research projects, seminars where new and senior scholars could discuss teaching and research issues (e.g. labour in the classroom, funding labour research, working with labour and community partners), and a roundtable of senior scholars reflected on the last quarter century of research in the field of labour studies and change in the labour movement.

Two of the participants, Dale Clark (past President CUPW) and Winnie Ng (CLC), are both experienced labour activists and new scholars. They provided a unique perspective as both have recently chosen to pursue advanced graduate degrees. Clark, upon returning to academic pursuits, found significant integration between researchers and trade unionists, but cautions that the “characterization of academics by some unionists as inhabitants of ivory towers who criticize decisions of the union movement without having to deal with the practical realities of collective bargaining and membership mobilization and of trade union leaders by some academics as sell outs and barriers to grass roots democracy and militancy is unfortunately still prevalent.” There is still, Clark argues, more bridge building to be done. Winnie Ng has also recently returned to studies and made the call for further work on exclusion in both *unions* and the *academy*. Of particular interest to Ng are the expanding relationships among unions and communities and the necessity for unions to confront issues of racism and exclusion in their organizations before these new links can be forged. The future of the labour movement is dependent upon its ability to reach diverse groups and establish links through issues that extend beyond the workplace.

Two senior scholars, Bryan Palmer (Trent University) and Charlotte Yates (McMaster University) discussed developments in labour studies. Palmer, a member of the cohort of historians who ushered in a new-era of Canadian working-class history in the 1970s, reflected on over 30 years of labour history in Canada. His comments covered the professional struggles Marxist historians faced in this early period (some never did land full-time jobs) and traced the evolution of labour history in Canada through venues such as *Labour/Le Travail*. While *L/LT* began as a journal of Marxist working-class formation, it has evolved to an enriched pluralist working class history reflective of “new waves of critique and constructive revisionism [which] rolled over Canadian labour history’s shores in the 1980s and 1990s, the most decisively transformative being the significance of gender and a broadly conceived appreciation of ‘race’ and

‘racialization’.” Palmer cautions, however, that there is “a danger in the current pluralism, in which working-class history as a field does not construct itself with the coherence and self-conception of its past but, rather, considers itself a part of a larger ensemble of meanings. For if working-class history willingly concedes that it is but one component of a complex, discursive past that has no determinative core, then there is always the danger that the unique aspects of class will slip from view.” Charlotte Yates traced the development of Labour Studies in Canada through an examination of her own personal and professional life as an activist and scholar. She described the beginnings of her own professional academic career and her early involvement with unions and coupled the changes affecting Labour Studies with her own experiences. Here, Yates described both her own personal engagement with feminism and the transformative effect it has had on the discipline. She concluded with a strong recommendation for junior scholars to always remain open to new ways of thinking

In plenary discussions, workshop participants engaged with questions related to doing labour studies (teaching and research). Participants discussed teaching-related matters, such as how to incorporate activist experiences into labour studies teaching, teaching in non-university classrooms, and how to support labour actions by campus unions when teaching. There was wide agreement among the group that keeping labour issues and perspectives in the classroom and lecture halls will remain a struggle in the contemporary environment of university corporatization. Workshop participants also discussed networking and collaboration with research partners, research involving non-unionized work and workers, and challenges faced when seeking research funding. Of particular concern were the issues around making workers truly collaborative partners in research. Questions ranged from how to involve workers and unions in the formation of the research questions we pose to dealing with interpretations and findings that some unionists may not welcome.

OVERVIEW OF THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

The “New Voices in Labour Studies” workshop included four thematic panels, which focused on themes of ‘working class education’, ‘labour and social movements’, ‘regulating labour’, and ‘labour and working class history’. This issue of *Just Labour* includes a selection of the papers that were presented in these four panels.

The theme of working class education was explored from several angles, ranging from the role of labour education programs in providing union-relevant education to the variety of ways in which workers produce and utilize knowledge on the job. In “Give Me the Room to Learn”, Johanna Weststar challenges an often heard call that workers lack the skills and knowledge needed

to enhance the productivity of Canadian workplaces. Weststar's study of work-related learning suggests that employers can do a great deal to facilitate work-related learning, not only by ensuring access to learning opportunities, but also through job redesign oriented towards maximizing worker knowledge and agency. From Weststar's paper, the conclusion may be drawn that there is a pressing need for workers to have meaningful opportunities for greater input into both the design of their work tasks as well as broader organizational decision-making processes.

The theme of developing new strategies of union organizing and union representation (and rediscovering old ones) ran through several of the papers presented. Stephanie Ross undertakes the task of critically examining "Varieties of Social Unionism", suggesting that while the term 'social unionism' is used widely these days, there is a clear need to specify what the term may mean, in both academic theory and activist practice. Ross undertakes the process of developing a more complex and nuanced framework for assessing what social unionism might mean, while, at the same time, challenging labour movement leaders and activists to critically examine the connection between policy and practice in efforts of both union renewal and union struggle. In "Raising Questions about International Unionism in the Americas", Thomas Collombat calls for a rediscovery of International Labour Movement Organizations in a post-cold war era when the US AFL-CIO is displaced as a powerful coercive force. Collombat argues that researchers must re-establish an International Political Economy of Labour as a means of analyzing new ways workers in the Americas can build transnational organizations. The rediscovery or "Raising the Bar of Solidarity" is also the focus of David Camfield's examination of the 2005 sympathy strikes with teachers in British Columbia. In what has controversial implications for unions, Camfield argues that such militancy must be supported if unions are to build a strong democratic social unionism.

Expanding the imagination of what unions can be is necessary to reach workers who have been thus far underrepresented by organized labour. While organizing a working class that includes new immigrants is increasingly recognized as a union priority today, this was not always the case. In "Standing by our Principles", Dave Goutor explores the ways in which the Trades and Labour Congress continued, though in a softer form, its longstanding principles of opposition to immigration in the 1930s, even in a time when the federal government shut down entry to Canada. Goutor's paper reminds us of the struggle that has happened and that must continue to take place within the labour movement in order to develop an inclusive, anti-racist politic. The themes of inclusion and exclusion are taken up in a different historical and cultural context in "Interrogating Anti-Union Sentiment", where Suzanne Mills examines Aboriginal women's feelings toward unions in a resource community. Mills argues that anti-union sentiment is expressed in complex ways beyond a mere

'individualism' to include a collective sense of dissatisfaction with their union's ability to address the needs of Aboriginal women in the workplace and non-union marginalized workers in the community. It is by identifying these 'fissures' that Mills seeks to identify new points of connection with underrepresented groups. Recalling the forceful words of Winnie Ng in the opening roundtable, where many racialized communities, are often the most marginalized in the labour market, advancing an anti-racist politics of inclusion is imperative for unions as they confront the forces of capital in the 'new economy'.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The 'New Voices in Labour Studies in Canada' workshop was, in our view, a very successful event insofar as it accomplished its primary goal of providing a forum for interaction, dialogue, and debate, a process continued through this special issue of *Just Labour*. Just as important, a successful second (and slightly larger) 'New Voices' workshop was hosted by the Labour Studies Programme at McMaster University in October this year, which we both attended. After this highly successful sequel, we are encouraged that the tradition will continue on an annual basis and are pleased to report that next year's event is already being planned.

We thank all the participants of the inaugural, recently past and future workshops. We are optimistic that new voices will continue to emerge in the field of Labour Studies. For the field to flourish and grow, emerging new voices must continue to take up the challenges of labour studies research through critical scholarly engagement with the countless issues that face workers, from the impacts of globalization and neoliberalism to new forms of global, transnational and local labour movement organizing. Most importantly, this involves developing and expanding the connections between scholarship and activism by forging links with labour and community-based organizations engaged in the advancement of workers' rights in all parts of the world, in order to understand and also to challenge forms of inequality created by capitalism.