

SEX, RACE & SACRIFICE:  
UNION ORGANIZERS IN THE  
NEW LABOUR MOVEMENT

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UNION ORGANIZERS IN THE NEW LABOUR MOVEMENT

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## ABSTRACT

The rallying cry to 'organize the unorganized' is a key part of the new labour movement's rebirth in Canada and the United States of America. Thus, unions have begun to expand their organizing departments with an eye to hiring organizers that 'match' their target membership. However, an in-depth examination of the experiences of racialized and White women organizers in particular, has not been conducted and taking into consideration that women and racialized workers are key to labour renewal, their experiences as union staff are hugely significant. These experiences serve as an entry point into a larger anti-racist and feminist analysis of new labour.

While the new social movement union principles include diversity, worker empowerment and militancy, and democracy and it takes pains to distinguish itself from the old type of business unionism with its hierarchical structures and focus on services, the new labour movement conflates the differences between it and the old business union model which masks its undermining of these principles. The new labour movement justifies its inconsistent behaviours in a context of crisis that is defined purely in terms of numbers. The crisis mentality intersects with structural inequalities to further marginalize racialized and White women organizers, who have been 'brought' into the new labour movement on a platform of union renewal, and creates an environment in which such women *may* self-censor and sacrifice themselves for a perceived common good. This ultimately undermines the union renewal project as a whole.

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In Solidarity,

Patricia Chong

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The rallying cry to 'organize the unorganized' is a key part of the new labour movement's rebirth in Canada and the United States of America. While mobilizing the working-class has never been an easy endeavor due to state and corporate opposition, today, unions face many, but not all necessarily new, challenges in organizing. To name but a few:

- i) unionizing in sectors with a historically weak labour presence  
(e.g. the private service sector)
- ii) the growing numbers of non-standard work arrangements  
(e.g. part-time, casual)
- iii) working with women, racialized peoples and youth who are overrepresented in the largely non-union sectors and/or job classifications

Thus, unions have begun to expand their organizing departments with an eye to hiring organizers that 'match' their target membership. However, an in-depth examination of the experiences of racialized and White women organizers in particular, has not been conducted and taking



into consideration that women and racialized workers are key to labour renewal, their experiences as union staff are hugely significant. This thesis attempts to fill this research gap by answering the following overarching questions:

1. Do the experiences of racialized and White women union organizers as staff differ from the experiences of others?  
In what ways are they the same and/or different?
2. What are the experiences of racialized and White women organizers in dealing with workers that 'match' their own identity and those who do not?  
How does race and gender affect the experience of organizing?

In answering these questions, the experiences of racialized and White women organizing staff serve as an entry point into a larger race and gender analysis of new labour. This is especially true as

Union organizing ha[s] traditionally been a stepping stone through which rank-and-file workers and union activists could join the union staff, perhaps eventually working their way up into leadership positions within the union.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Foerster, "Labor's Youth Brigade: What Can the Organizing Institute and its Graduates Tell Us About the

In terms of structure, I begin my thesis by establishing the analytical framework it is based upon and providing an anti-racist feminist critique of organized labour. I then provide a context to organizing that includes the challenges posed by labour market and labour force transformations, and the backdrop of labour renewal and crisis in which the organizing agenda has taken precedence. A review of the literature on organizing reveals how much of it is based on individual experiences, which largely precludes any critical analysis. This is followed by my research methodology and an examination of the experiences of racialized and White women organizers. Based on these experiences I provide a broader critique of the new labour movement in my final analysis, and then explore its implications for the labour movement in my conclusion.

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Future of Organized Labor?" *Labor Studies Journal* Vol. 28, No. 3 (2003): 16.

**“Tools to Dismantle the Master’s House”<sup>2</sup>:**  
**An Analytical Framework**

In examining the experiences of racialized and White women union organizers, I anchor my investigation in a framework of anti-essentialism, intersectionality and a power in systems analysis. By using anti-essentialism and intersectionality, there is an explicit recognition of, and challenge to, essentialist beliefs that assume there is an inherent and “clear meaning” to belonging to a group that remains “constant through time, space, and different historical, social, political, and personal contexts.”<sup>3</sup> There remain essentialist ideas in the labour movement such as the reason that women, racialized peoples and youth are underrepresented is because *they* are less likely to support a union, rather than recognizing their historical and on-going marginalization at the hands of organized labour. One must

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<sup>2</sup> The subheading title borrows from Trina Grillo, “Anti-Essentialism and Intersectionality: Tools to Dismantle the Master’s House,” *Berkeley Women’s Law Journal* 10 (1995): 16.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

always be wary of using essentialist logic even when fighting for an equitable agenda. Arguing that identity *does* matter in justifying the need for greater diversity in union staff, especially in organizing workers of the same demographic, can easily become an essentialist argument based on a belief of a shared innate attribute.

Likewise, recognizing the intersection of multiple identities and how this impacts our social reality also challenges essentialism and encourages an acknowledgement that we all move between positions of privilege and subordination:

Each of us in the world sits at the intersection of many categories: She is Latina, woman, short, mother, lesbian, daughter, brown-eyed, long-haired, quick-witted, short-tempered, worker, stubborn. At any one moment in time and in space, some of these categories are central to her being and her ability to act in the world. Others matter not at all. Some categories, such as race, gender, class, and sexual orientation, are important most of the time. Others are rarely important. When something or someone highlights one of her categories and brings it to the fore, she may be a dominant person, an oppressor of others. Other times, even most of the time, she may be oppressed herself. She may take lessons she has

learned while in a subordinated status and apply them for good or ill when her dominant categories are highlighted.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, instead of “bracketing” and separating identities, which results in an “additive model” where for example a woman is oppressed, a racialized woman suffers from “double oppression”, and so on, intersectionality recognizes how identities are “linked.”<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, much of the analysis of race and gender has developed independently of each other, to the detriment of both.<sup>6</sup>

Using analyses of anti-essentialism and intersectionality informs the investigative approach and terminology used in this thesis. Intersectionality implicitly questions the validity of “master” categories in that

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>5</sup> Evelyn Nakano Glenn. “From Servitude to Service Work: Historical Continuities in the Racial Division of Paid Reproductive Labor,” In *Working in the Service Society*, ed. Lynne Macdonald Cameron and Carmen Sirianni (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996): 7, 13.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 115.

they have no foundation in reality: language . . . creates categorical reality rather than the other way round. The methodological consequence is to render suspect both the process of categorization itself and any research that is based on such categorization, because it inevitably leads to demarcation, and demarcation to exclusion, and exclusion to inequality.<sup>7</sup>

Whereas other approaches within the framework of intersectionality “reject” categories, I use the approach known as *intracategorical complexity* because it recognizes the “stable and even durable relationships” that social categories can reflect, while remaining critical of them and thus I avoid issues of essentialism.<sup>8</sup> For example, while race is a social construct, it does have political, economic and cultural impacts, and in this sense, race is very real.

This recognition of the social construction of categories and the power dynamics driving them is reflected in my terminology that borrows heavily from Tina Lopes and Barb Thomas’ *Dancing on Live Embers: Challenging Racism*

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<sup>7</sup> Leslie McCall, “The Complexity of Intersectionality,” *Signs* Vol. 30, No. 3 (2005): 1777.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 1773 - 1774.

*in Organizations*.<sup>9</sup> I use the term *racialized* when referring to people of colour as it makes direct reference to *racialization*: “the active process of categorizing people while at the same time rejecting ‘race’ as a scientific category.”<sup>10</sup> Racialized is preferable over terms such as visible minority as racialized people are the “global majority”, and in cities such as Toronto and Vancouver, so-called visible minorities will be the majority by 2017.<sup>11</sup> This term is also used by the Ontario Human Rights Commission.<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that ‘whiteness’ is also a social construct and that White people also experience discrimination based on class, sexual orientation, etc., but this does not “erase” their “skin privilege.”<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, in recognition of Aboriginal peoples’ status as the “original inhabitants of Canada” and

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<sup>9</sup> Tina Lopes and Barb Thomas, *Dancing on Live Embers: Challenging Racism in Organizations* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 269.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

their “distinct goals of self-government and the recognition of land claims”, my usage of the term *racialized* does *not* include Aboriginal peoples and echoes the approach of Lopes and Thomas.<sup>14</sup> However, the examination of racialized women organizers’ experiences would no doubt have some relevancy for Aboriginal women organizers.

I use the terms *racialized* and *White* in conjunction with *women* because the default is to assume that by women I am only discussing “white, middle-class” women whose experiences serve as the “prototypical experience” for all others.<sup>15</sup> By using the term racialized, my examination of both racialized and White women’s experiences is made explicit. However, there is great diversity in terms of how racialized peoples experience racism as recognized by an approach of intersectionality. While there is a general recognition of overt forms of racism, even *shades* of skin can act as grounds for privilege and subordination within a

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 263, 270.

<sup>15</sup> Grillo, 19.



race.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, different racialized people are found in different jobs. Consider California, where Latinos are concentrated in the service, factory and labour jobs, whereas Asians are more equally distributed in the work hierarchy.<sup>17</sup> This speaks to the higher education levels and more varied class background of Asian immigrants in comparison to Latinos.

The final analytical framework is *power in systems*. This term refers to the “inequitable impact of the apparently neutral systems that drive an organization,” and thus recognizes the role structural issues play.<sup>18</sup> A power in systems analysis recognizes how *systemic racism* “is a product of the normal ways in which work is structured,

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<sup>16</sup> Ronnie Leah. “Black Women Speak Out: Racism and Unions,” in *Women Challenging Unions: Feminism, Democracy and Militancy*, ed. Linda Briskin and Patricia McDermott, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993): 166.

<sup>17</sup> Ruth Milkman. “Introduction,” in *Organizing Immigrants: The Challenge for Unions in Contemporary California*, ed. Ruth Milkman (United States of America: Cornell University Press, 2000), 11-12.

<sup>18</sup> Lopes and Thomas, 18.

monitored, and rewarded” and is a “by-product of seemingly neutral mechanisms for doing business.”<sup>19</sup>

The use of a power in systems analysis also informs my terminology. While I use the term *diversity*, it, along with *multiculturalism*, provides no tools to “examine power and racism or to identify the elements of racial equity.”<sup>20</sup> Such concepts mischaracterize racism as being an issue of cultural misunderstanding and/or a lack of appreciation, rather than recognizing “the more covert forms of control and ways of maintaining power within workplace organizations.”<sup>21</sup> Using a power in systems analysis, while not absolving the role and responsibilities of individuals, draws attention to how personal beliefs work in conjunction with systemic discrimination to create and uphold social inequalities.

Having laid out the analytical framework, I want to briefly explain why I focused on sex and race. While I

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 11

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 266.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 11.

recognize that religion, sexual orientation, language, disability, etc. are important facets of identity, the new labour movement has defined diversity largely in terms of its target membership of women, racialized peoples and youth. I did not include a specific youth category, although an age analysis does occur, because in addition to not wanting to sacrifice depth of analysis for breadth, the category of youth is unique in its transience. Thus, the underrepresentation of youth is different than that of sex and race, and the solution is different. Likewise, discrimination based on sexual orientation is different as the challenge is not to organize more gays, lesbians and bisexuals as they are already present in unionized workplaces, rather it is to fight to ensure such workplaces are safe for members to be “out”.<sup>22</sup> Before I turn to a feminist and anti-racist critique of organized labour, it is important to note that while issues of inequality *are*

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<sup>22</sup> Hunt and Rayside, “Labor Union Response to Diversity in Canada and the United States,” *Industrial Relations* Vol. 39, No. 3 (2000): 431-432.

different, they are all intricately linked as human rights struggles as Trino Grillo explains:

‘But now I understand a little better the anti-essentialist lesson which says I should not permit myself to be pressed, to be made to choose which part of myself is most important to me. The lessons of anti-essentialism and intersectionality are that the oppressions cannot be dismantled separately because they mutually reinforce each other.’<sup>23</sup>

### **Solidarity Forever? : A Feminist and Anti-Racist Critique of Organized Labour<sup>24</sup>**

The ever changing social construction and intersection of gender and race is key to the ideological

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<sup>23</sup> Grillo, 27.

<sup>24</sup> I need to qualify my use of American literature in contextualizing and critiquing the Canadian labour movement because there are unique differences between these countries which raises the issue of applicability. However, I think that much of the American literature and critiques remain relevant despite historical differences, especially at the theoretical level. For a more in-depth examination of such differences please see Gerald Hunt and David Rayside’s “Labor Union Response to Diversity in Canada and the United States,” *Industrial Relations* Vol. 39, No. 3 (2000) which is used in this thesis.

justification of the hierarchy of work.<sup>25</sup> Unions have built much of their power by upholding such inequalities through bestowing privileges upon their members, at the direct expense of others:

What has emerged is a profound identity between the interests of (white) working-class men and the meaning of trade unionism, so that, now it is seemingly impossible to disentangle the ways in which trade unions act to protect the narrow economic interests of a particular group of men and industrial relations' conceptualization of trade unionism as a social force. Union men and scholars together agree that what unions have achieved –seniority rights, the 'family wage,' and 'fair' treatment for the select few – is precisely what unions are for. That these gains have been won by denying an equivalent measure of economic security to women and others who have been, systematically excluded is barely acknowledged, let alone analysed, in the literature.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Please see Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Unequal Freedom: How Race and Gender Shaped American Citizenship and Labor* (United States of America: First Harvard University Press, 2002).

<sup>26</sup> Anne Forrest. "A View from Outside the Whale: The Treatment of Women and Unions in Industrial Relations," in *Women Challenging Unions: Feminism, Democracy, and Militancy*, ed. ed. Linda Briskin and Patricia McDermott, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993): 331 – 332.

While the overt historical examples of marginalization such as the outright denial of union membership to women and/or racialized peoples is recognized, how labour continues to reinforce such inequities via seemingly neutral union policies is not.<sup>27</sup> Consider the union staple of seniority:

Women are often assigned the “low-paying and unskilled entry-level positions” which then become “worklife-long disadvantage by seniority rights that are less than establishment-wide. Fragmented, truncated, and sex-segregated job ladders effectively restrict the range of jobs to which women can aspire without suffering the penalties (loss of seniority and loss of pay) which collective agreements routinely impose on workers who seek to jump from one seniority district to the next.”<sup>28</sup>

A gender and race-blind analysis of organized labour is reinforced by an industrial relations approach that “constructs men *only* as workers and never as men” and fails to recognize gender and race as “power relations” between workers.<sup>29</sup> Thus, while issues such as sexual and racial harassment have received attention from trade unions, it is

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 332.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 332-333.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 334, 331.

usually in the most narrow of terms such as the boss-worker relationship, rather than addressing co-member harassment.

Those who confront these issues often face reprisal:

“Women who complain against a union brother are sometimes seen as scabs, anti-union, or undermining union solidarity.”<sup>30</sup> Carl J. Cuneo provides a horrific, yet telling, example of a warped plea for solidarity when recounting the response a woman at a Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) education course received from the administration about her attempted rape by a fellow ‘union brother’: “This would be very bad publicity for us if this got out. So, you know, in the interest of the labour movement . . .”<sup>31</sup>

Two themes can be drawn from these disturbing accounts. First, the primacy of class-based analysis and politics to the exclusion of all others identities, which runs

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<sup>30</sup> Carl J. Cuneo. “Trade Union Leadership: Sexism and Affirmative Action,” in *Women Challenging Unions: Feminism, Democracy and Militancy*, ed. Linda Briskin and Patricia McDermott, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993): 123.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

counter to an analysis of intersectionality, has become less popular with an analytical shift that recognizes the importance of both:

Most writers operating from more radical approaches now recognize that class relationships do not subsume other inequalities and that the elimination of class inequalities would not do away with marginalization based on gender, race, and sexual orientation. Among writers who adhere to socialist understanding of the depth of class-based oppression, many recognize the importance of different identities and embedded inequalities within the working class. Some are inclined to see fragmentation as bred or reinforced by the interests of capital; others are ready to see inequality and division as partly due to worker prejudice and self-protectiveness. Most agree, however, that unions must respond to diversity in the workforce and that issues of diversity are worthy of careful and sympathetic analysis.<sup>32</sup>

Second, many struggle with wanting to discuss the problems in our unions, but also feeling that we must self-censor for the good of the labour movement as addressed by Jane Stinson and Penni Richmond:

In writing this paper we had to struggle with self-censorship that arose from our loyalty to the

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<sup>32</sup> Hunt and Rayside, 404.



movement and fear of a backlash for speaking out. We are acutely aware of living in a society whose dominant forces are hostile to unions, one in which employers will use any criticism of unions to undermine their credibility with union members of the public, and one in which some male trade unionists make life difficult for women who challenge the status quo. Nevertheless, we believe that the issues and questions raised here are essential for unions to address in order to strengthen all of us for the struggles which lie ahead.<sup>33</sup>

However, without a strong feminist, anti-racist and power in systems analysis of trade unions, there is no recognition of how a “hegemonic definition of the common good makes less powerful members either unaware of their own interests or convinced that they ought to suppress those interests for the common good.”<sup>34</sup> Hence, the very people who are subordinated by a system may self-censor and sacrifice in

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<sup>33</sup> Jane Stinson and Penni Richmond. “Women Working for Unions: Female Staff and the Politics of Transformation,” in *Women Challenging Unions: Feminism, Democracy and Militancy*, ed. Linda Briskin and Patricia McDermott, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993): 138-139.

<sup>34</sup> Jane Mansbridge. “Practice-Thought-Practice,” *Deepening Democracy: Institutional Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance*, ed. Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright, (London: Verso, 2003): 183.

order to maintain the system as it is. Individuals may feel even more pressure to do so during perceived times of crisis. The present union ‘crisis’ is a case in point as will be discussed later.

In summary, the analytical framework and tools of anti-essentialism, intersectionality, power in systems, feminism and anti-racism allow for a critical examination of the labour movement and provides a context to address and situate the experiences of racialized and White women organizers in the new labour movement.

### **Context**

In the next section, I examine the transformations of the labour market and the labour force, and how such changes impact upon unions and organizing.

### **Labour Market Changes**

The impact of neoliberalism and globalization on the Canadian economy is too large and complex an issue to

tackle here. However, in relation to Canadian unions, two key transformations need be noted. First, historically union-strong sectors such as manufacturing and public service have declined, while sectors such as private service, with a historically weak union presence, are growing. Second, standard full-time, permanent work has decreased with an increase in precarious, non-standard work (e.g. temporary, part-time, full-time casual, contract, self-employment, off-site, part-year, subcontracted). Thus, as Ruth Milkman and Kim Voss explain, “Unions are conspicuous mainly by their absence” in the expanding sectors and growing number of non-standard jobs.<sup>35</sup>

What do these changes mean to trade unionists?

Sadly, we must organize just to *maintain* union membership

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<sup>35</sup> Ruth Milkman and Kim Voss. “Introduction,” in *Rebuilding Labour: Organizing and Organizers in the New Union Movement*, ed. Ruth Milkman and Kim Voss (United States of America: Cornell University Press, 2004), 1.

levels.<sup>36</sup> Unions must also organize *beyond* their usual base and target non-standard workers and the booming private service sector, and this means organizing women, racialized groups and youth.

### **Labour Force Changes**

While recognizing that women and racialized peoples have always been part of the formal and informal labour market, and have been marginalized and undermined by organized labour and the state, they were *not* a major part of the workforce until the 1960s. Thus, the Canadian labour force was largely White, male and assumed heterosexual, and this was reflected in the make up of union membership and its leadership.<sup>37</sup> However, the workforce has dramatically changed since then.

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<sup>36</sup> Charlotte Yates, "Staying the Decline in Union Membership." *Relations Industrielles/Industrial Relations* 55 (2000): 660. [database on-line]; available from EBSCOhost Canadian Reference Centre, <http://web.ebscohost.com> (accessed 7 December 2006).

<sup>37</sup> Hunt and Rayside, 403.

First, women have entered into the paid workforce in unprecedented numbers and now make up more than 45% of it.<sup>38</sup> Women have also become increasingly part of unions as in 1967 only 16% of all women workers were organized compared to 41% of men, whereas in 1989 34% of all women workers were organized compared to 41% of men in Canada.<sup>39</sup> It was only in the 1960s and 1970s with the organizing of women in the public sector that they became a “significant sector of the labour movement.”<sup>40</sup>

Second, immigrants to Canada are now largely from *non*-European nations. During the 1960s, when Canada was faced with less migrant demands from Europe but still required workers, the Canadian government began to remove its racist “legal restrictions” against non-

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 418.

<sup>39</sup> Ronnie Joy Leah. “Do You Call Me ‘Sister’? Women of Colour and the Canadian Labour Movement,” in *Scratching the Surface: Canadian, Anti-racist and Feminist Thought*, ed. Enakshi Dua and Angela Robertson (Toronto: Women’s Press, 1999), 100.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

Europeans.<sup>41</sup> Thus, since the 1990s, more than 75% of all new immigrants are from non-European countries. Consider for example that in 2005, Canada accepted 262,236 immigrants with the top three sending countries being China (16.1%), India (12.6%) and the Philippines (6.7%).<sup>42</sup>

Women and racialized peoples are increasingly involved in the formal labour market.<sup>43</sup> However, such groups do *not* participate equally in it. They, along with youth and the disabled, are largely confined to the secondary tier of the labour market that is characterized by undervalued, low-pay, “unskilled” work with few to no benefits and little job security.<sup>44</sup> An examination of how the labour market and

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<sup>41</sup> Grace-Edward Galabuzi, “Racializing the Division of Labour: Neoliberal Restructuring and the Economic Segregation of Canada’s Racialized Groups,” in *Challenging the Market: The Struggle to Regulate Work and Income*, ed. Jim Stanford (Montréal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2004): 176.

<sup>42</sup> Toronto Star Graphic, “Canadian Immigrants,” *The Toronto Star*, 15 June 2007, sec. A, p. 14.

<sup>43</sup> Yates, “Staying,” 659-660.

<sup>44</sup> Jamie Peck, *The Social Regulation of Labor Markets* (London: The Guilford Press, 1996): 54.

labour force changes intersect also requires an analysis of the position of women and racialized peoples within it, which we turn to next.<sup>45</sup>

### **Bringing It Together: The “‘Colour-Coded’ Vertical Mosaic”<sup>46</sup>**

While neoliberal “newspeak” attempts to depoliticize the restructuring of the economy by presenting it as being “inevitable” and “neutral”, the negative impacts are in fact highly gendered and racialized.<sup>47</sup> Grace-Edward Galabuzi’s work on the interaction of race and gender against the backdrop of neoliberal restructuring, and how this benefits capitalist accumulation, is especially illuminating:

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<sup>45</sup> Christina Gabriel. “Restructuring at the Margins: Women of Colour and the Changing Economy,” in *Scratching the Surface: Canadian, Anti-Racist, Feminist Thought*, ed. Enakshi Dua and Angela Robertson (Toronto: Women’s Press, 1999), 127.

<sup>46</sup> Galabuzi, 177.

<sup>47</sup> Janine Brodie. “Restructuring and the Politics of Marginalization,” in *Women and Political Representation in Canada*, ed. M. Tremblay and Caroline Andrew (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1998): 28-29.

Canada's economy and its labour market are increasingly stratifying along racial lines, as indicated by disproportionate representation of racialized group members in low-income sectors and low-end occupations, under-representation in high-income sectors and occupations, and persistent racial inequality in unemployment rates, employment income, and the incidence of low income . . . The growing dominance of flexible work arrangements, facilitated by the state's deregulation and reregulation of the labour market and the reversal of state anti-discriminatory policies and programs, has disproportionately affected racialized groups. Despite higher levels of educational attainment, disproportionate numbers of racialized workers are confined to casualized forms of work in certain sectors of the economy, amplifying racial segmentation in the labour market and racialized income inequality and poverty.<sup>48</sup>

Thus, the Canadian economy is a "'colour-coded' vertical mosaic", and an example of "economic apartheid" in which there exists a "a highly educated and experienced underclass" consisting of racialized peoples.<sup>49</sup> In fact, when considering levels of unemployment, underemployment and low-income, immigrant racialized groups have *more* in common with Canadian-born racialized groups than

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<sup>48</sup> Galabuzi, 175.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 177, 184, 190.



European immigrants, *even* when controlling for their arrival to Canada.<sup>50</sup>

Women are disproportionately negatively affected by neoliberal economic restructuring.<sup>51</sup> The “new citizen” no longer has universal access to state services but is now divided into two camps: the “deserving” and the “undeserving”.<sup>52</sup> The former consists of those who work, while the latter consists of those who do not or cannot.<sup>53</sup> As Janine Brodie points out, “Given that caregiving functions are being downloaded to the home and that there is still no national system of affordable child care, it is clear that women will be well-represented among the ranks of the

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>51</sup> For a more in-depth analysis of the specifically gendered impact of neoliberalism please see Isabella Bakker. “Neo-Liberal Governance and the Reprivatization of Social Reproduction and Shifting Gender Orders,” in *Power, Production and Social Reproduction*, ed. Isabella Bakker and Stephen Gill (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

<sup>52</sup> Brodie, 33.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 31.

undeserving.”<sup>54</sup> Indeed, women already make up the majority of non-standard workers. In 1991, 25.4% of all women worked part-time whereas only 8.8% of men worked part-time.<sup>55</sup> This gendered imbalance is not a reflection of choice on the part of women, as a third of women working part-time who were surveyed in 1994 wanted to work full-time but could find no such employment.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, as Pat Armstrong argues, the feminization of labour has led to an overall increase in job casualization such that “the position of some men has deteriorated, becoming more like that of women,” which leads to increased competition amongst men and women for what few “good jobs” women do have.<sup>57</sup>

*Gendered racism* is also important to address as “racism and sexism interact with class to define the place of

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Gabriel, 148.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>57</sup> Leah Vosko, *Temporary Work: The Gendered Rise of a Precarious Employment Relationship* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000): 39.

racialized women workers in the labour market, even in relation to other women workers.”<sup>58</sup> Thus, “even within a gender-segregated labour market, women of colour may often be further disadvantaged than other women.”<sup>59</sup>

Consider the “‘mistress’ and the ‘maid’” phenomenon in which “professional” women purchase the domestic services of other women so she can herself work.<sup>60</sup> Thus, “On the one side is the ‘mistress’ and on the other stands the ‘maid’, separated by different racial, ethnic, class and national belongings and backgrounds.”<sup>61</sup> The analysis of this phenomenon illustrates the strength and importance of an intersectional framework and the unequal impact of neoliberal restructuring within the master category of *women*.

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<sup>58</sup> Galabuzi, 193.

<sup>59</sup> Gabriel, 141.

<sup>60</sup> Brigitte Young, “‘The Mistress’ and the ‘Maid’ in the Globalised Economy,” in *Socialist Register 2001: Working Classes, Global Realities*, ed. L. Panitch and C. Leys (London: Merlin Press, 2001) 316.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

In tracing the shift from Keynesian to neoliberalism, I do not want to fall prey to “nostalgic welfarism.”<sup>62</sup> The celebrated male breadwinner model that served as the basis of the welfare state and trade unionism itself is deeply flawed. The model was based on a gendered division of labour and a heterosexual family unit that marginalized women, racialized peoples and anyone who was not heterosexual and/or could not work.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, the suitability of the breadwinner model became destabilized for various reasons including women entering the workforce en masse and the growth of non-standard work beginning in the 1960s.<sup>64</sup> Thus, the portrayal of Keynesian as a *golden age* is

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<sup>62</sup> Brodie, 24.

<sup>63</sup> Ann Porter, *Gendered States: Women, Unemployment Insurance, and the Political Economy of the Welfare State in Canada, 1945-1997* (Canada: University of Toronto Press Inc., 2003), 237.

<sup>64</sup> Wendy McKeen and Ann Porter. “Politics and Transformation: Welfare State Restructuring in Canada,” in *Changing Canada: Political Economy as Transformation*, ed. Wallace Clement and Leah F. Vosko (Canada: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003): 15.

inaccurate and blind to the inequalities that were built into, and reinforced by, the system.

In summary, there have been key labour market and labour force changes that have undermined union strength and numbers. Labour market changes include the decline in once union strong sectors, the ascent of sectors with a historically weak union presence and an increase in non-standard work. Labour force changes include an increase in the participation of women and racialized peoples, who have been historically underrepresented in the labour movement, and are overrepresented in the unorganized sectors and job classifications.

Thus, unions are facing multiple challenges and must move beyond their traditional base and organize the private service sector and non-standard workers.<sup>65</sup> However, in recognition of the “colour-coded vertical mosaic”, this

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<sup>65</sup> Yates, “Staying,” 660.

translates into organizing the “key population” of women and racialized peoples.<sup>66</sup>

### **Organizing Takes Centre Stage**

Organizing is considered the silver bullet solution to the problems of the labour movement. After all, no one is using slogans such as ‘negotiate or die’ or ‘service the unserved’ when discussing the future of unions. With so much attention paid to the importance of organizing and its strategies, it is surprising that industrial relations approached union campaigns as being “entirely reactive” to management’s actions. However, research done by Kate Bronfenbrenner and others have show otherwise: “union tactics as a group had a more significant impact on election outcomes than other groups of variables . . . such as election environment, bargaining unit demographics, and employer

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<sup>66</sup> Milkman and Voss, “Introduction,” 1.

characteristics.”<sup>67</sup> By extension, organizers are now considered important in accounting for union victories and losses through their choice and implementation of tactics. More recently, the identity of organizers is also being examined as unions hire women, racialized people and youth to match their targeted demographics.

This new focus on organizers is worth noting since there has been a push for more diversity amongst the labour movement in general, and in organizing staff in particular. However, demands for an increased presence of women, racialized peoples and youth in organizing, are not necessarily about forwarding an agenda of equality as will be discussed later.

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<sup>67</sup> Kate Bronfenbrenner, “Changing to Organize: A National Assessment of Union Strategies,” in *Rebuilding Labour: Organizing and Organizers in the New Union Movement*, ed. Ruth Milkman and Kim Voss (United States of America: Cornell University Press, 2004) 19.

### **“It’s Hip to be Union”<sup>68</sup>: The Labour Movement Reborn**

The “sense of excitement” and possibility for labour that abounded in the mid-1990s was largely a result of a perceived break with the business unionism of the past, and all its flaws, and the birth of a *new* labour movement.<sup>69</sup> As Amy Foerster notes, even the mass media picked up on this as evidenced by a 1996 *Newsweek* magazine article entitled “It’s Hip to be Union.”<sup>70</sup> Whereas the *old* business unionism is “hierarchical, authoritarian and non-inclusive,”<sup>71</sup> service-oriented and filled with “professional staff” who want “stability” because their jobs depend on it;<sup>72</sup> the *new* “social movement unionism” is “an organizing-intensive approach to trade unionism that is strategic, pro-active, and community-

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<sup>68</sup> Foerster, 2.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Stinson and Richmond, 140.

<sup>72</sup> Daisy Rooks, “The Cowboy Mentality: Organizers and Occupational Commitment in the New Labor Movement,” *Labor Studies Journal* Vol. 28, No. 3 (2003): 36.



based,”<sup>73</sup> and uses “militant organizing tactics and rank-and-file intensive campaigns.” Issues of diversity are a key component of this new trade unionism as it “recognizes that increased diversity is necessary in order for unions to be truly representative workers’ institutions”:

Community unionism has a strong potential to address the needs of women of colour and to challenge the inequalities of power within the labour movement. By building an inclusive labour movement with organic links to the wider community, the labour movement is beginning to reconceptualize itself as a community-wide movement; this can strengthen labour’s commitment to justice for all workers, especially the most marginalized and exploited workers.<sup>74</sup>

Thus, the new social unionism is concerned with both *who* is being organized and *how*. Likewise the issue of diversity is intimately tied to democracy:

Greater diversity through increased membership amongst women and racialized minorities is also linked to strengthening the forces of democratization inside unions. Women and people of colour have been at the forefront of demands for greater internal union democracy, effectively pushing unions to offer

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>74</sup> Leah, “Sister,” 120.

special leadership training, enhance the profile and power of feminist, 'rainbow' and human rights committees, and take up new issues at the bargaining table.<sup>75</sup>

The dichotomy between old business unionism and new social movement unionism needs to be critically examined for three reasons. First, arguing that unions using social movement organizing tactics (house visits, job actions, worker committees, etc.)<sup>76</sup> will automatically result in more women and racialized union members, mischaracterizes the problem as a misalignment of tactics rather than recognizing the historical and on-going marginalization of such workers. Thus, Alice Kessler-Harris' response to the question, "Where are the organized women workers?" is applicable to all

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<sup>75</sup> Charlotte Yates, "Missed Opportunities and Forgotten Futures: Why Union Renewal in Canada Has Stalled," in *Trade Union Revitalisation: Trends and Prospects in 30 Nations*, ed. Craig Phelan (Oxford: Peter Lang, to be published in 2007), 8.

<sup>76</sup> Rachel Sherman and Kim Voss, "'Organize or Die': Labor's New Tactics and Immigrant Workers," in *Organizing Immigrants: The Challenge for Unions in Contemporary California*, ed. Ruth Milkman (United States of America: Cornell University Press, 2000), 84.

marginalized groups: “For when we stop asking why women have not organized themselves, we are led to ask how women were, and are, kept out of unions.”<sup>77</sup> These comprehensive organizing strategies based on community-based and grassroots initiative are also *not* new:

Though not all of these tactics are new in absolute terms – many have historical precedents in 1930s labor organizing or in other social movements – they are new relative to most of the union organizing campaigns of the last forty years.<sup>78</sup>

Furthermore, it panders to essentialist logic as

The question remains whether unions organizing primarily in the service sector have developed a ‘different’ style of organizing that is adapted to the workers’ gender, so that it might be effective in organizing women regardless of occupation, or whether the style is shaped primarily by the characteristics of the target work force’s occupation.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Alice Kessler-Harris, “Where are the Organized Women Workers?” *Industrial Relations* Vol. 39, No. 1/2 (1975): 94.

<sup>78</sup> Sherman and Voss, 84.

<sup>79</sup> Marion Crain, “Gender and Union Organizing,” *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (Jan., 1994): 229.

Second, the use of social movement union strategies does not *necessarily* translate into any type of community-building or worker empowerment. Unions have been criticized for being “reluctant to share power” with community groups and for only being in such coalitions when it serves their interests.<sup>80</sup> Perhaps the most damning criticism is that unions are “better at incorporating immigrants, women, and racial and ethnic minorities into membership than into leadership positions,” and this is the case even in the new labour movement’s “legendary Justice for Janitors campaigns.”<sup>81</sup>

Third, the dichotomy hides the ways in which unions who claim to embrace the new labour movement style can be just as guilty as their predecessors, perhaps even more so, when it comes to being anti-democratic, top-down and non-inclusive. Part of the way social movement unions can

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<sup>80</sup> Leah, “Sister,” 121.

<sup>81</sup> Milkman and Voss, “Introduction,” 15.

violate the very principles they claim to uphold is by situating their inconsistent behaviour in a context of 'crisis'.

### **'Organize or Die': The Crisis Discourse**

"If we don't begin to turn this around quickly . . . the drift in the other direction is going to make it virtually impossible to continue to exist as a viable institution."  
<sup>82</sup>

- John Sweeney,  
2001, New York Times

I begin with a quote from AFL-CIO president John Sweeney because the American labour movement has a 'crisis' mentality that is present in its leaders' speeches, echoed in the way many American academics approach the study of the new union movement and, as will be discussed later, how organizers (both American and Canadian) view their work. Clearly, the popularity of the slogan 'organize or die' speaks to the prevalence of a crisis discourse in the new

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<sup>82</sup> Lynn Freekin and Marcus Widenor, "Helping New Organizers Survive and Thrive in the Field: The Essential Role of Training and Mentoring," *Labor Studies Journal*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (2003): 63-64.

labour movement. While not a perfect victory, the gradual slowing of the “downward plunge” of American union density rates did occur in the late 1990s, almost to the point of stabilizing which is significant “given the rapid growth of the workforce . . . and the steady erosion of union membership.”<sup>83</sup>

While Canadian trade unionists look anxiously at the lower American union density rates, to what degree, if any, we have taken up the crisis discourse is debatable. Consider Charlotte Yates observation that “some analysts insist that all the labour movement *needs* is a *crisis* to revive . . .” [my italics]<sup>84</sup> Indeed, the Canadian situation *is* different than the American one:

Compared to union movements across much of the industrialised West, and especially the Anglo-American democracies, Canadian union membership and density have remained remarkably stable, drifting downward only over the last decade.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Milkman and Voss, “Introduction,” 3.

<sup>84</sup> Yates, “Missed,” 16.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., “Missed,” 1-2.

It is reasonable to infer that international unions (i.e. American) who push for an aggressive organizing strategy by situating the need for organizing in a crisis, would do the same in their Canadian operations. Whether the context is that Canada *is* in crisis or *will* be without aggressive organizing, the argument is based on a framework of crisis.

A closer examination of the numbers may explain why service sector international unions operating in Canada are more prone to this crisis discourse as *their* numbers have significantly declined. In 1977, international unions represented 52% of Canadian union membership, down to 29.1% in 2005.<sup>86</sup> National unions enjoyed an increase from 47% of union membership in 1977 to 66.1% in 2005. In terms of a private versus public sector breakdown, the percentage of membership in private sectors went from 26% in 1977, down to 18% in 2005. For the public sector, membership increased marginally from 70% in 1977 to 71%

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 3, Table 1

in 2005. While declining union density rates should be taken seriously, we must be more critical of whether a crisis does in fact exist and to what degree, because of its potential to be used to shut down debate and undermine democratic practices.

The way crisis is defined differs amongst unions. Unions such as the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) articulate the crisis within the looming threat of globalization, as symbolized by Wal-Mart and has used the threat of Wal-Mart to justify bargaining concessions. UNITE (prior to its merger with the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees union) arguably faced its crisis twenty years ago when textile manufacturing moved offshore. Still others, such as the Teamsters, situate crisis in terms of democracy as evidenced by the Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU).

More fundamentally, what is the nature of the labour movement's crisis as a whole? Is it simply an issue of the number of members, an issue of democracy and



representation, or whether unions will become irrelevant institutions in the twenty-first century?

It is important to critically examine the crisis discourse because it is being used to undermine the very principles of democracy and equality espoused by social movement unionism. An *at war* mentality justifies the undermining and direct violation of such principles in the name of the labour movement's survival at any and all cost. This is exemplified in the following passage about Stephen Lerner, one of the founders of the Service Employees International Union's (SEIU) Justice for Janitors campaigns and now part of the Change to Win (CtW) coalition:

Mass organizing, he contends, justifies a ruthless approach to purging any union staffers who refuse to go along with the program. This can involve forcing union mergers to rationalize collective bargaining regimes and ongoing organizing efforts, using trusteeships to bring resistant locals into line, as well as other seemingly undemocratic tactics. While this approach has engendered a stream of criticism from some quarters, no one can deny that the SEIU has by far the best record of recruiting new

members and of advancing the difficult but crucial process of organizational change.<sup>87</sup>

The message is clear that the desired end result is increased union membership which justifies top-down, anti-democratic practices.

In relation to organizing, as will be discussed in more detail in the literature review section, organizers often situate their work in this 'crisis' and it affects how they view their work and the sacrifices they make in the name of it. What is particularly disturbing is the use of the crisis discourse to stifle debate and encourage self-sacrifice. Instead of understanding the issues of a lack of democracy, worker empowerment and representation as partially explaining why labour may be in trouble in the first place, and that in addressing such problems we are moving toward a solution, such conversations are considered luxuries in a time of war. It is as if such debates are external to the problems at hand,

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<sup>87</sup> Milkman and Voss, "Introduction," 7.

and can and will be resolved at a more convenient time.

Rather than committing the new labour movement to the social movement union principles, the crisis discourse has been used to justify the undermining of them.

In summary, in reaction to key changes in the labour market and labour force that undermined union strongholds as discussed in the prior section, social movement union organizing, has become a silver bullet solution to the labour movement's problems. To what degree there exists a 'crisis' is debatable. Either way, we must be vigilant about how a crisis discourse can be used to undercut the very principles we seek to achieve through the rebirth of the union movement. A crisis mentality and a lack of attention to issues of democracy have an enormous negative impact on racialized and White women who are 'brought in' as organizers on the new labour movement's platform of diversity and as a reflection of the changing labour force. However, women organizers are often exploited by being

kept in subordinate positions and ghettoized in the organizing department which has high turnover and burn-out rates. These women may then leave the movement, rather than being nurtured into leaders, and this reproduces exclusion. A critical analysis of the crisis backdrop to organizing and how this interacts with gender and race-based inequalities to marginalize racialized and White women organizers has largely not been undertaken as will be explored in the next section.

### **Literature Review**

Much of the research on organizers has been done in the last twenty years which reflects, as mentioned earlier, the recent shift in industrial relations approach in accounting for union campaign success and failure, and the general interest that was generated by new labour in the mid-1990s. In this section, I briefly review the literature on organizers

and examine the research gaps and weaknesses in these approaches.

Much of the research on organizers examines their individual personality traits and values and how these are seen to contribute or hinder campaign success and their own survival in organizing. This approach is exemplified in the works of Thomas F. Reed and echoed to a lesser degree in the research of Americans Daisy Rooks, Lynn Feekin and Marcus Widenor, and Amy Foerster.<sup>88</sup> Part of this psychological approach is rooted in the intense demands made on organizers and attempting to explain how, and more importantly why, they deal with them. These well-documented job strains include unpredictable and long hours

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<sup>88</sup> Thomas F. Reed, "Do Union Organizers Matter? Individual Differences, Campaign Practices, and Representation Election Outcomes?" *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (1989); Rooks, "Cowboy;" Rooks, "Sticking It Out of Packing It In? Organizer Retention in the New Labor Movement," in *Rebuilding Labour: Organizing and Organizers in the New Union Movement*, ed. Ruth Milkman and Kim Voss (United States of America: Cornell University Press, 2004); Feekin and Widenor, "Survive,;" Foerster, "Brigade,"

of work, extensive travel, relationship breakdown, emotional demands, high levels of stress, etc. that result in a high turn over rate. Research has shown that the majority of organizers do not consider organizing a regular job, but a “justice job”.<sup>89</sup> Like other justice job workers, organizers are interested in “helping others,” the work is “both emotionally draining and stressful” because it involves “disadvantaged clients in crisis situations,” and there is usually little training and few promotion opportunities.

In response to these pressures, a “cowboy mentality” has been observed amongst organizers.<sup>90</sup> This mindset is characterized by the following: viewing organizing as “movement work”,<sup>91</sup> an “organizing superiority”<sup>92</sup> which “denigrates” other types of labour work such as ‘servicing’, and a “boot camp”<sup>93</sup> attitude that encourages toughness,

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<sup>89</sup> Rooks, “Sticking,” 197.

<sup>90</sup> Rooks, “Cowboy,” 46.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 48

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 50.

militancy and “sacrifices” in the name of the movement.<sup>94</sup>

Considering these characteristics, the cowboy mentality should be renamed the ‘soldier’ mentality because it better captures this essence and fits with the at-war crisis backdrop. Thus, the term cowboy/soldier mentality will be used for the remainder of the thesis.

Organizers who are less attached to this mentality and the justice job approach are more critical of the demands and sacrifices asked of them. Added to these job demands is sometimes a sense of disillusionment with the new labour movement as organizers face locals who are often resistant to organizing, and a perceived lack of commitment to diversity and worker empowerment.<sup>95</sup>

Organizers also report being disappointed by fighting for worker rights when their own are violated, especially as they

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<sup>94</sup> Feekin and Widenor, 82.

<sup>95</sup> Rooks, “Sticking,” 198, 205.

look to unions to “model a more equitable and evolved employment relationship.”<sup>96</sup>

While useful, the major weakness in the organizer mentality approach is its focus on the individual and their personal response to the situation. This approach takes the excessively demanding work environment as a given, rather than critically examining the structural factors that contribute to it. This analytical blind spot is evidenced by the inadequacies of the proposed solutions to the problem of organizer burn out and to help organizers “survive and thrive.”<sup>97</sup> These individualistic solutions include more training and better support systems,<sup>98</sup> a “personal compromise” on the part of organizers whose “initial expectations” of unions conflicts with reality and leads to disillusionment,<sup>99</sup> mentoring

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<sup>96</sup> Rooks, “Cowboy,” 52.

<sup>97</sup> Feekin and Widenor, title of article.

<sup>98</sup> Jonathan Eaton, “Don’t Forget the Organizers,” *Our Times Magazine*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (2005): 29.

<sup>99</sup> Rooks, “Sticking,” 215-216.



and a “team-building” approach for new organizers.<sup>100</sup> While these proposed solutions are useful to varying degrees, they are inadequate because they are individual solutions to larger structural problems that remain unaddressed.

Rooks comes closest to observing how the cowboy/soldier mentality marginalizes the very people that new labour is reaching out to:

Although a central tenet of the new labor movement is inclusion and diversity, many critics claim that the cowboy mentality insures that organizing is almost completely inaccessible for women and single parents, as well as rank and file union members who are rooted in communities and unable/unwilling to move. Simultaneously, it justifies that exclusion by asserting that organizing is not a job but a commitment to a movement, that the only worthwhile work in the movement is organizing, and that the only unions worth working for are those that are the most aggressive, militant and demanding.<sup>101</sup>

However, this analysis needs to be taken further by exploring how race and gender based inequalities intersect with a discourse of crisis to justify seemingly neutral policies

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<sup>100</sup> Feekin and Widenor, 80.

<sup>101</sup> Rooks, “Cowboy,” 54.

that in substance marginalize the very people that the new labour movement is reaching out to.

Suzanne Franzway's analysis of how structural demands intersect with issues of inequality in a labour context is illuminating. She argues that unions are "greedy institutions" in their never ending demand of time and energy and this has an unequally negative impact on women trade unionists. While Franzway is not specifically commenting on union organizers and her examination is based on the Australian trade union movement, her observation is relevant nonetheless:

Thus, the issue of women's union participation involves more than the arbitrary demands of the work, but also involves the inequalities caused by male dominance of trade unionism, and the discourses and practices of patriarchal gender relations in both the public and private spheres.<sup>102</sup>

Thus, the apparently gender-neutral demands made by greedy organizations are in fact *more* detrimental to women.

This is echoed by Canadians Stinson and Richmond:

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

Historically, union staff jobs have been held primarily by men who were either single or had a wife who looked after the home and family. In the past, male union staff may not have experienced much conflict between their work demands and home responsibilities if their wives accepted being a 'union widow.' But this conflict is much greater today both for men and women whose spouses are not prepared to be the primary homemaker. Moreover, for women, a double standard still applies: while men receive social encouragement for challenging traditional gender roles, women who do so by committing themselves fully to their union work risk not only loss of relationships, guilt, and isolation, but also social disapproval.<sup>103</sup>

In summary, the largely individualistic approach of much of the American research done on union organizers is problematic because it fails to situate the experiences of organizers in a larger context of structural inequalities which then leads to several analytical blind spots. First, the approach takes the excessively demanding work environment as a given, rather than critically examining the factors that create this environment. Second, this approach fails to recognize how organizers situate their *work* in a

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<sup>103</sup> Stinson & Richmond, 145.

larger discourse of crisis and how this creates an ideological justification for self-sacrifice and self-censorship. Third, it lacks a feminist and anti-racist analyses in examining the experiences of organizers. There is an assumption that organizers largely have the *same* experience, rather than examining how equity-seeking groups are subject to discrimination at work. I attempt to address these research gaps by specifically speaking to racialized and White women organizers about their experiences and by using a feminist, anti-racist and power in system analysis to examine them.

### **Research Methodology**

#### **Union Criteria**

Before turning to the research criteria, I want to note that my research is exploratory and as such, my purpose was to look for general patterns rather than to make a conclusive argument which requires more extensive research. However, even within the small sample group of six organizers and the relevant research done on this topic,

and the gaps within the literature, there are common experiences and themes. This paper examines the experiences of organizers from three international unions operating in Canada. These unions will remain nameless in order to protect the identities of the interview participants. The three unions were part of the CtW coalition that broke away from the AFL-CIO at the July 2005 convention. The CtW coalition consists of the following unions: the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT), Laborers' International Union of North American (LIUNA), Service Employees International Union (SEIU), United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America (UBC), United Farm Workers of America (UFW), United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW) and UNITE HERE. My focus on three CtW unions was not meant to bolster any argument as to whether it is fundamentally different to the AFL-CIO (or not), rather it was to build on an analysis of how CtW situates itself squarely in the 'new' camp of the social

movement versus business unionism debate, especially in terms of the need to aggressively organize. To what degree this is true, and how successful CtW has been in comparison to the AFL-CIO, is debatable. Secondly, I chose unions who organize in the private sector as this is an expanding area as discussed earlier. Thirdly, I looked at unions operating in Ontario, specifically with some of their organizing campaigns taking place in Toronto. This is because Ontario is the largest province in population and has more than 1/3 of the nation's workforce.<sup>104</sup>

I recognize that there are differences between union cultures at the local, national and international union levels. Thus, even within a union the degree to which individual locals have in fact implemented comprehensive organizing strategies can greatly vary. Voss and Sherman identify such variation in labeling locals as “full innovators”, “partial

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<sup>104</sup> Yates, “Staying,” 641.

innovators” or “mandated innovators” in organizing.<sup>105</sup>

However, again, my research is exploratory and an exhaustive examination is not necessary.

### **Organizer Criteria**

I interviewed six women about their experiences as union organizers who were contacted through a combination of ‘snowballing’ and personal contacts. The women had either worked in the past few years, or were currently working as union organizers and had done so ranging from a year to approximately four years. The interviews lasted between an hour and a half to three hours in length and were conducted by myself. The following is a breakdown of their relevant characteristics:

- three are racialized peoples, three are White
- three are under or at the age of thirty, three are above

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<sup>105</sup> Sherman & Voss, 87.

- three were members of the union before they became staff organizers, three were not

I focus on organizers who have been involved with Toronto-based campaigns because Toronto is one of the most multicultural cities in the world. Thus, the experiences of both racialized and White organizers working with a diverse group of workers is more prevalent in a Toronto-based campaign than it would arguably be in more culturally homogeneous regions of Canada.

Obviously, the interview participants will remain nameless in order to protect their confidentiality but in the case of the racialized peoples, their actual race will *not* be revealed. This may seem peculiar, and I should be clear that I do not think that the experiences of all racialized peoples are the same, but the reason for this is that the number of racialized women organizers is small. Thus, revealing the actual race and ethnicity of the interview subjects in conjunction with other identifying characteristics may jeopardize their anonymity. This speaks to the on-going



underrepresentation of women and racialized people, as despite the hype, in the late 1990s, 3/4 of all organizers in Ontario were men, 85% were White and most were over forty years of age.<sup>106</sup>

In summary, I interviewed three racialized and three White women who have worked or are currently working as union organizers, and have been involved with Toronto-based campaigns. All six women work for international unions who organize private sector workers and are part of the CtW coalition.

### **A View From Within**

Again, in interviewing the racialized and White women organizers, I was looking to answer the following broad questions:

1. Do the experiences of racialized and White women union organizers as staff differ from the experiences of others?

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<sup>106</sup> Eaton, 28.

In what ways are they the same and/or different?

2. What are the experiences of racialized and White women organizers in dealing with workers that 'match' their own identity and those who do not? How does race and gender affect the experience of organizing?

Obviously, there will be overlap but the first question is primarily dealing with what the interviewees go through as staff (i.e. where the union is their employer). Since I chose to not interview male organizers, I rely on secondary literature about union organizers which is largely based on men's experiences and asked the women organizers about their perceived differences between the treatment of male and female organizers in order to draw a comparison. The second question deals with their experiences with unorganized workers. I examine the organizers' experiences and responses using an anti-racist, feminist analysis that is situated within a framework of anti-essentialism, intersectionality and power in systems.

A brief preface is needed before turning to this examination. While I am specifically looking at the experiences of racialized and White women in this paper, the intersection of other identities came into play. These include the more obvious ones such as class, sexual orientation and age, as well as less mentioned ones including relationship status, where one was born, rank and file status (or not), linguistic skills, if one is seen as challenging the status quo, etc. While I am unable to explore all these dimensions, it should be noted that in discussing their own experiences, the organizers repeatedly stated that it was difficult to isolate one aspect of their identity, and that their activism and politics likewise, was not isolated to this one aspect. They explained that there are always “other mitigating factors” and that identities are “interconnected”. This caveat should be kept in the reader’s minds as we turn to the experiences of these organizers specifically as racialized or White women.

In addressing the first major question, I use themes from Rooks' *The Cowboy Mentality: Organizers and Occupational Commitment in the New Labor Movement* to arrange and illustrate how racialized and White women's experiences are the same or different from others.<sup>107</sup> These themes are extensive travel and long hours, and under the subheading of emotional demands are social isolation, unpredictability and campaign stress. Within each theme, I include additional but related issues and develop aspects related to gender and race-based inequalities. I then specifically address issues of job security and precarious work, and health and safety which are not reflected in the current literature on organizers.

### ***Extensive Travel***

Similar to Rooks' findings, the majority of the organizers had done extensive traveling as local, national or

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<sup>107</sup> Rooks, "Cowboy".

international staff. While several of the women expressed that travel is a “novelty at first” and a “great experience”, it can also be physically and mentally exhausting. The frequent and long absences can put a strain on friend, family and romantic relationships. As one woman eloquently put it: “My [cousin] is nine and she grew seven inches and she is a whole different person, and I missed every inch that she grew.” This strain is especially acute when children are involved. An added challenge is the perception that life on the road is enjoyable which can make the co-parent who is shouldering the additional responsibilities, understandably resentful.

The use of travel, or its absence, as punishment is not explored in other literature. While traveling *is* part of their job description and within management’s rights to direct it, several of the organizers discussed being sent away to “timbuktu” as retaliation. One organizer recounted how she not only had to deal with long periods away from home but

being assigned to work with staff she had previously complained to her supervisor about “bullying” her. Another woman recalled how she had been told to move to a nearby city to work, only to be reassigned to a different city after a run-in with her supervisor.

None of the organizers object to traveling for work per se. However, extensive traveling, whether it is being used as an informal disciplinary tactic or not, can cause the breakdown of the very support networks that organizers rely on to deal with their demanding workload. This is especially problematic for organizers with family responsibilities such as child and elderly care. This marginalizes primary caregivers, which are traditionally women. Thus, the seemingly gender-neutral standard is not and echoes Franzway’s argument that union work is built on unequal gender dynamics in both the public and private sphere.

### ***Long Hours***

Not surprisingly, all the organizers discussed the long hours of work and what can become long periods of time between days off. However, what has not been explored is how many of the organizers felt that there is an unequal distribution of work for women:

I remember . . . feeling overworked and overwhelmed and working with male co-workers and it seemed that they were always so relaxed. . . [I]t took me a little while to realize that they were so relaxed because they didn't have to work as much as I did or they didn't take on responsibilities or the assignments I gave them to do . . .

Even when these women recognized the unequal workload, some felt that they had to work *harder* to get the same recognition and respect as their male peers. One woman recounted how she acted as a co-lead on a campaign with a male colleague. Interestingly, the male and female organizers were similar as employees in terms of their seniority and the number of workers each had organized. However, despite their shared work on this

campaign as coordinators which led to a victory, at their celebratory party, a high ranking union officer congratulated only the male colleague on his hard work. “And I just stood there in fucking shock. How can you do that? Every step of the way it’s been me and him.” Her male colleague was also taken aback by this behavior.

Some of the racialized women felt that they had to work even more for recognition. As one woman commented: “You do have to work twice as hard as a woman, especially as a woman of colour to prove that you’re capable of doing the work.” Not only did the racialized women feel that their work was not equally valued, but some felt that they were given the ‘grunt’ work. One racialized woman, discussed how when the “hardest” work was being assigned, such as duties to be done in the early morning, late at night, or in bad weather, that: “I get it.” Another racialized woman’s experience speaks to the issue of gendered racism:

I think that if I weren’t a young [racialized] woman, I wouldn’t necessarily be taken from a campaign that I



had started and developed that were sure wins to hand over to a White women who won them. I think that I've been definitely discriminated against in that way.

This example also speaks to the issue of how different aspects of organizing work are valued as union victories are recognized and rewarded, whereas the more invisible type of work such as “building the list” (i.e. obtaining worker contact information), establishing strong worker committees, site probes and corporate research is less valued and praised. There needs to be a recognition that organizing work has multiple dimensions that are valued differently and because of this, there can be discrimination as not every organizer who starts a campaign will be the one to take it to the end.

Again, excessively long work hours and unequal work distribution, in addition to being assigned less-desirable work are even more difficult for women with children. One interviewee went so far as to say that “being a woman organizer and having a baby will end your career.” However, as another interviewee with children pointed out, it is the

*inflexibility*, not necessarily the number hours of work that creates problems. She recalls being told that if you work late, then you can start late, but this does not translate for mothers: “I can’t wake up at one o’clock and start my day at one o’clock. I wake up when my kids wake up.” Thus, even when the union as an employer attempts to be flexible, for working mothers, this is not the case. The working situation makes it incredibly difficult to continue as an organizer without external support such as immediate and extended family, neighbors, paid help, etc. There is also a social stigma attached to mothers who continue to be organizers. An organizer without children commented: “I think that there is gossip of all kinds of women who are organizers who aren’t spending time with their kids and they’re naturally bad mothers . . .” She added that it is also other women who participate in this gossip. This is an example of the “social

disapproval” mentioned earlier that occurs when women transgress gender norms.<sup>108</sup>

## **Emotional Demands**

### ***Social Isolation***

Akin to much of the existing literature, the organizers also spoke of social isolation as some existing social networks of support can breakdown due to extensive traveling, excessive work hours, etc. Two of the organizers spoke about issues of depression. However, organizers also spoke of creating new friendships particularly amongst organizers. One organizer said there was “pressure” to socialize and bond. She disparaging added: “It’s like being in high school.” Another spoke about cementing friendships with other organizers who will be “in my life for the rest of my life.”

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<sup>108</sup> Stinson & Richmond, 145.

### ***Unpredictability***

Similar to the experiences of other organizers, the women also discussed the stresses of the unpredictable nature of their work. Again, this is a particular problem for women organizers with family responsibilities as discussed earlier. However, it also undermines any attempt to plan one's life whether that be scheduling social activities with friends and families, or scheduling a class.

### ***Campaign Stress***

Before dealing with the issue of campaign stress, it should be noted that American labour laws are more anti-union than Canadian labour laws which means that the experience of working on a campaign that goes to a vote is more common in Canada than in the United States. Labour laws also vary from province to province. For example, in the province of Québec, a representative vote does *not* need to happen for union certification, if a certain percentage of the

workers have signed union cards. Having said this, I am dealing with experiences of union organizers who have worked on union drives in Toronto and nearby cities that have gone to a vote. However, their experiences dealing with campaign stress is relevant to anyone who has worked on a union campaign whether it has gone to a vote or not.

While there is stress at all points of a union drive, the pressure becomes all the more intense during the seven calendar day period between the filing of the union certification application to the Ontario Labour Relations Board and the holding of the vote. Naturally, this a stressful time for all involved, however the women organizers felt that gendered stereotypes portrayed women as being less competent to deal with these stresses. One organizer recalled derogatory comments made about “female behavior” and women being “emotional”.

While union campaigns are stressful, the literature has largely taken the excessively demanding environment as

a given. However, several of the women organizers felt that with better planning, timing and resource management, the level of overall stress can be greatly lowered:

Nothing is more annoying to me than men running around going: 'Oh my God! [*at this point, the interviewee is waving her arms around*] I don't have enough people for this!' [You need an] action plan and schedule. What a novel idea!

When asked about combating unpredictable and aggressive anti-union campaigns, the organizers argued that a *preventative* rather than *reactive* approach should be taken.

Some unions call this step 'inoculation' meaning that organizers prepare workers for the anti-union campaign by discussing issues that employers typically bring up in inaccurate ways such as union dues and strikes, and the methods by which they convey these messages such as captive audience meetings, anti-union letters, etc. A

"proactive strategy" includes researching what the employer has done in the past in order to "preempt them".

The organizers recognized that planning also requires adequate staffing, and in particular, the ratio of workers to organizers can *greatly* affect one's level of stress. As the new labour movement claims to be utilizing worker-intensive and militant organizing strategies, this more often than not, requires greater effort on the part of organizers. Although, Bill Fletcher, Jr. and Richard W. Hurd are dealing with union members, their observation about how worker-intensive models are also *more* work-intensive for the union staff is apt:

following the organizing model creates more work than sticking to the servicing model . . . [as] it is easier for staff to handle grievances and arbitrations than continually to recruit and train steward to do this work. It is also easier for staff to plan and run contract campaigns . . . than to recruit, train, and support campaign committees.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Bill Fletcher, Jr. and Richard W. Hurd, "Beyond the Organizing Model: The Transformation Process in Local Unions," in *Organizing to Win: New Research on Union Strategies*, ed. Kate Bronfenbrenner and others (United States of America: Cornell University Press, 1998), 43.

I do not mean to imply that workers are passive and acted on by organizers. Rather that, while it is difficult to make generalizations, more often than not, union campaigns involve *some* support of organizers; even if it is minimal in terms of getting the campaign off the ground and then having the workers taking it over. Speaking from my own experience as paid organizing staff for more than two years, no campaign is like another, and saying that every successful campaign is worker-run (or not) is simply untrue. Some hot shop campaigns require minimal external support. Other times, these hot shops go cold just as quickly go. Likewise, sometimes strategically targeted sites result in amazing worker-run campaigns. Other times the organizer is *heavily* involved and making *all* strategic decisions. Then there are the ups and downs in every campaign. While some may argue that labour's crisis demands we organize as *many* workers as *quickly* as possible, and worker involvement is secondary, we need to be cognizant of the



fact that the number of unionized workers does not necessarily equal union power as will be discussed later.

## **Beyond the Cowboy/Soldier Mentality: Additional Themes**

### ***Job Security and Precarious Work***

In terms of job security, the organizers had a mixed response as exemplified by one woman who described it as a “roller coaster ride”. However, the majority of them referred to the fact that having their own staff union made them feel more secure. Several of the organizers discussed being hired on contract positions. Others discussed obtaining permanent full-time positions but having to deal with unusually long probationary periods. As several of the organizers pointed out, these probationary periods were longer than what the union would put forth during contract negotiations with employers for their members. In addition to this, considering the short career lives of organizers, their

probationary periods can easily be a substantial portion of their time as an employee.

One organizer recounted how she had been working for almost three years and had been a contract employee the entire time, even with a staff union in place. She discussed how there were “line-ups” for permanent jobs and that there was a “hierarchy” in that there were “different levels of contract employees.” She laughingly added: “It’s so ridiculous at the end of the day because contract is contract.”

While all new employees were subject to this at her union, issues of racism and sexism were apparent. The same organizer recalls a staff conference where the contract staff who had just recently become permanent staff were asked to stand up and identify themselves. About six people stood up and they were all White men. She comments that it was “blatant” and “in your face” that there was “no consideration of gender or equity balance.” She believes that while women are more common in becoming permanent

staff, they are still the “minority.” A White organizer from a different union also made a similar comment:

When I see all the White people moving up the ladder . . . I mean if you look at who is in the lead positions as organizers right now? And people who have been there longer than them, that’s a problem.

When asked about if the staff collective agreement dealt with this she answered: “it’s silent.”

### ***Health and Safety***

While organizers brought up issues of overwork and having to drive when exhausted, the issue of working alone came up several times. Under the new social movement unionism there is more emphasis placed on involving workers which includes visiting workers away from work to have more in-depth discussions about the union and to build relationships. However, the concern is what happens on the ‘other side of the door’. As one organizer puts it;

The organizing model is to go visit workers in their homes. Most of the time, if you don't work through a committee . . . we're on cold campaigns . . . and so we'll have a list of workers . . . those are the scariest because you haven't been recommended by another worker and you have no idea what's on the other side of the door, you're going there on the faith . . . that they're going to be a pro-union worker and they're not going to do something to physically hurt you . . . it's scary.

The organizers discussed issues of general abuse in terms of visiting workers who have been “drunk”, using drugs and/or are “angry” at been interrupted. Another organizer discussed how she is sometimes in parking lots from 10pm to 1am by herself in order to speak to workers and that this can be unsettling.

One organizer simply refused to do house visits and believes they are a waste of time because of how spread apart workers are and the hit and miss rates. When she does schedule ‘house calls’ with workers, she meets them at a local coffee shop or such.

However, simply pairing people up can also be problematic when there is an unequal power dynamic. Another organizer recounted how even though she was paired up, the issue of power dynamics played out, especially as it was a male supervisor and she was an intern.

Three caveats need to be made before moving on. One, I do not want to encourage 'stranger danger' paranoia as the vast majority of house visits, even when done alone, are incident free. Second, it remains a disturbing fact that Canadian women are *twice* as likely to experience violence at the hands of men they *know*, and to experience this violence *more than once*, rather than incidents involving strangers.<sup>110</sup> Third, I also do not want to reinforce

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<sup>110</sup> Federal -Provincial -Territorial Ministers Responsible for the Status of Women, *Assessing violence against women [electronic resource] : a statistical profile* (Government of Canada, 2002), 10; available [http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/pubs/0662331664/index\\_e.html](http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/pubs/0662331664/index_e.html) (accessed 1 July 2007).

stereotypes of violence against women only, or primarily, occurring in the lower-income strata of society. However, considering that organizers can easily do hundreds of house visits during their career the odds are that they will encounter situations that put them at risk.

While several of the organizers pointed out that men are not immune to the threat of violence, when women bring up such health and safety concerns, gendered stereotypes come into play:

Again, it comes into that emotional guilt. [The employer says:] ‘Well, you don’t *have* to go alone’ . . . But then you’re looked at like you’re not tough enough . . .

This perceived weakness also intersects with issues of job security and internal competition. An organizer from a different union said she felt that women would go alone to “make names for themselves,” or that if you did not go alone others would “talk poorly about them.” So while in theory you

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could go out in pairs, issues of internal competition and a perceived lack of staff often meant that “in practice”, you went alone.

In summary, racialized and White women union organizers experience the same challenges that other organizers face such extensive travel, long hours of work and workload, and emotional demands that include social isolation, unpredictability and campaign stress. However, the ways in which racialized and White women organizers experience this is different. This is evidenced by seemingly neutral policies and procedures that marginalize women organizers as revealed by a power in systems analysis. Furthermore, while sexism affects the amount and type of work women are given, gendered racism means that even within a segregated workplace, racialized women “may often be further disadvantaged than other women” which is certainly the case.<sup>111</sup> In particular, how White women and

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<sup>111</sup> Gabriel, 141.

racialized male organizers may also benefit from this speaks to the complexities that arise when utilizing the approach of intersectionality. Thus, unions are replicating the gendered and racial hierarchies found in the greater society when it comes to their own staff.

While some researchers such as Rooks examine how the cowboy/soldier mentality acts to marginalize the very people that new labour is attempting to outreach to, there is a fundamental flaw in examining the end product, the cowboy/soldier mentality, rather than examining the environment that encourages it. Furthermore, this individual psychological approach again fails to deal with how the cowboy/soldier mentality has come out of a crisis discourse and reinforces issues of inequity. Returning to a power in systems analysis, it is worthwhile to repeat Mansbridge's quote in which the "common good" makes "less powerful members either unaware of their own interests or convinced



that they ought to suppress those interests for the common good even when others are not doing their just share.”<sup>112</sup>

### **Diversity & Matching**

While the new labour movement pushes a diversity agenda in matching the targeted membership, the experiences of racialized and White women organizers, and their own opinion on the importance of diversity and representation has not been explored in the research literature, and we now turn to this examination.

All the organizers agreed that diversity is important because racialized peoples and women need to see themselves “reflected” in the union in order to “identify” with it. As one organizer pointed out:

If you’re always sending out White organizers to Latino or Black . . . workplaces . . . that’s a reflection of [what] the union is . . . ‘White people are trying to help me and save me’ . . . having people of colour represent your organization sends a message that it is a diverse organization.

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<sup>112</sup> Mansbridge, 183.

However, the ways the diversity discourse is used and how it plays out for organizers both racialized and White is complex.

### ***Race & Organizing***

In terms of race, several of the organizers pointed out that it is also the shared cultural background and/or experience of being immigrants when they “go through the same things” that can serve as a foundation for building a relationship. Matching is especially important when it comes to language. English is the second language for some workers who may feel more comfortable speaking in their native tongue. Organizers discussed how “it’s easier” when there is match, but this of course does not guarantee anything in terms of union support. The ways in which identity, matching and diversity can encourage essentialist thinking needs to be examined. This is evident in the

experience of one racialized organizer who talked about the “different levels of expectations” when she deals with different races. Specifically, she spoke at length about the expectation that she should be able to “get every card” when dealing with workers of the *same* race, whereas if she were dealing with workers of a different race the expectations were lower. Likewise, sometimes *not* matching in terms of culture and identity was found to be advantageous at times.

As one organizer explains:

I just came off a campaign with workers who were French-speaking. They liked me because I tried to speak French and they thought it was adorable . . . had I been a non-speaking French organizer who had been there for aesthetic reasons . . . they would not have liked me at all.

Obviously, issues arise when there is no matching. One racialized organizer discussed how even if she is the head organizer on the campaign and is paired up with a White organizer, workers who are not of the same race will speak directly to the White organizer. In Ontario cards are

important because they are required to trigger a certification vote and can be used as a quantitative measurement of an organizer's success. However, some organizers felt that it was inappropriate to expect the same number of cards when dealing with workers who were *not* the same race. One racialized woman discussed being sent to a small town where the vast majority of residents were White and she felt that being racialized was a significant barrier in terms of getting cards.

While both racialized and White women have dealt with workers discriminating against them based on skin colour, the White women organizers spoke about the uncomfortable position they are in when White workers assume they can say racist things because they are the same race:

I get racist remarks and it's because they look at me and they see this straight White women and it must be okay to say these things.

In this sense, White organizers may be dealing with more racism, although not directed at them. This is not to say that racialized workers are not racist toward other racialized groups, as is explored in other works.<sup>113</sup> A particularly telling account involved a 'false' match when a racialized organizer was mistaken for being White:

I've gone into a house where I've been viewed as a White woman, because you look at [me] and my skin is not dark so I must be a White woman. I don't have an accent when I speak [and so they assume] you're Canadian. I've gotten into homes with workers who have made me very uncomfortable who will discuss the races in their workplaces . . . 'those Jamaicans are lazy' . . . 'those Chinese this' . . . they say very racist, inappropriate things and they think it's okay because I'm not a person of colour . . .

The larger question is how organizers should handle this:

The hardest part for me organizing is sitting down and talking to someone who is racist [and] homophobic. I have experienced sitting in a room talking to White [workers] saying: "all the girls in the kitchen, they'll never get in trouble. You know why? Because they're all Black and then they play the race card." Those kinds of conversations that happen when you're organizing and I've never felt satisfied with my reaction because my reaction usually is to change the

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<sup>113</sup> Rooks, "Sticking," 207.

subject. Because you get torn between ... what's worth more? Winning this campaign or trying to educate someone that may actually turn them against the union because you're challenging their belief structure. And that's probably the hardest thing for me in organizing. I have yet to figure out how to make that okay and balance that and figure out at what point do you challenge someone and at what point don't you. And then if you don't how do you not feel guilty about not doing it? . . . And then a part of me is thinking: do we want to organize these people anyways?

When one White organizer tries to discuss how to best deal with workers who are being racist, sexist, homophobic, etc. she finds little support. The other organizers will say "Oh yeah, I hate it when that happens" and quickly move on. She adds: it is "never dealt with." However, reflecting on some of the existing literature, when *racialized* organizers bring up issues of racism their commitment to the movement is questioned.<sup>114</sup>

Another White organizer agreed that there is simply not enough training to deal with this issue and offers some advice:

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<sup>114</sup> Rooks, "Sticking," 207.

Yes. That is a challenge and it's just like even dealing with co-workers who you hear saying the same thing. There is a way you can say things and it's all about communications and how you relate to people . . . I would read the person . . . so it's still about the relationship building . . . the relationship is important. So then you can come back... you're coming back. You're gonna be able to figure out how you're gonna do this . . . but I think that is the thing where people need training so they can be able to handle those situations. If I'm on the street and someone said something really degrading to me, I would handle it right then and take them on. But I have nothing to lose at that point and I have nothing to gain. In this kind of situation, what you're going to lose, is that you're going to lose this person as to hating unions, you may never be able to come back to there, and they're gonna be out there mouthing, so it's a bigger lost of not just the one person that you're dealing with. So I think more training and more thought has to go into that . . . It's the same thing in your family too. . . your brother-in-law says stuff. And it's like don't take that on because it's . . . better to hold back and figure out how you're gonna do that, because they're gonna get it.

## **Sex & Organizing**

Most of the organizers felt that being a woman organizer and matching and not matching both had advantages and disadvantages. In terms of matching sex, many of the organizers thought that women workers felt

more comfortable discussing issues with them. As one organizer explains:

I think a lot of women are just more comfortable with women. And as a male organizer walking around by yourself knocking on workers' doors that can be intimidating for women to go meet a guy organizer on their own in a coffee shop or let that organizer into their home is very difficult. So it's just safer. But I've also seen the opposite where you see . . . male organizers who almost get beat up by boyfriends because they're like: Who the hell are you knocking on my door looking for my girlfriend! (laugh)

On the other hand, the women organizers acknowledged that male organizers are seen to be “in positions of authority” and workers “trust what a man says more than what a woman says.” However, the women organizers felt that not matching in terms of women organizing men was more helpful than detrimental. Several organizers made the comment that male workers “don't have to worry about being a man in front of another male organizer,” and because they are “not a competitor” this allows them to build trust with women organizers. Again, there are a myriad of other factors that come to play, and not all men behave in one way.



However, when organizing men and working alone, issues of sexual harassment arise: “male workers tend to hit on you which is very awkward . . . You’re totally off the topic of organizing and on to like how do I get this guy without offending him?” This speaks to the issue of emotional labour and how one handles these situations. As one organizer put it: “What’s more important, my integrity or winning the campaign?” Again, there is a lack of training about how to handle such situations and this reflects the assumed male identity of organizers.

Using an approach of intersectionality, the interplay of various identities makes it difficult to pinpoint one specific cause and its effects. As one racialized organizer mentioned, there are always many factors and reasons why a campaign may succeed or fail. She recounted how she was organizing a processing plant and the campaign went “stale”, and though she “can’t say for sure,” she believes it is because she did *not* match the majority of workers based on identity

such as sex, age and race, as well as in experience. It should be noted that these workers were also racialized which speaks to the issue of deepening an analysis of race beyond the usual white-black dichotomy and dealing with racism between racialized groups as well. This example also raises the issue of common work experiences serving as a basis upon which to build a relationship. However, as Charlotte Yates argues, “with few women organizers, the experience upon which unions draw is limited to a narrower range of workplaces, which are more likely to be those where men predominate.”<sup>115</sup>

While diversity and representation is important, the discourse has largely been superficial and based on essentialist logic that has not adequately prepared organizers to deal with issues of racism and sexism. The issue of matching is complicated and we must always be

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<sup>115</sup> Charlotte Yates, “Challenging Misconceptions About Organizing Women Into Unions,” *Gender, Work and Organization* Vol. 13, No. 6, (2006): 579.

wary of essentialist logic and recognize the importance of the intersection of identities.

### **The Limits of Representation: A Final Analysis**

Exploring the experiences of racialized and White women organizers serves as an entry point into a broader anti-racist, feminist, power in systems analysis of the new labour movement. In recognizing that both the labour market and labour force has changed in the post-war period, many North American unions as part of a project of renewal are 'organizing the unorganized', and are in effect organizing women, racialized peoples and youth. These are the very people who have been historically underrepresented in unions, and overrepresented in the sectors and non-standard work arrangements that unions want to establish a presence in. This unequal participation in the labour market speaks to the unequal negative effects of neoliberal economic restructuring and systemic discrimination.

We must be critical of the diversity discourse and how it is *actually* playing out in the new labour movement. First, the hiring of women, racialized peoples and youth as organizers to work with a similar targeted demographic under the banner of diversity appears 'progressive' and in-line with social movement unionism principles; however, organizing is an entry-level position and has a well-known high turnover rate. Some unions lose approximately fifty percent of their organizing staff annually.<sup>116</sup> Thus, the ghettoization of underrepresented groups in organizing is hugely problematic. Second, there is no *inherent* commitment in 'organizing the unorganized' and the diversity discourse to an agenda of equality and worker empowerment. This is not surprising considering that many of the labour movement's accomplishments have often been, and continue to be, at the expense of others. Ironically, the hiring of a diversity of organizers may allow unions to put the

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<sup>116</sup> Feekin and Widenor, 73.

issue of true equality on the backburner by pointing out such staff to allay any concerns about underrepresentation.

Social movement union principles include diversity, worker empowerment and militancy, and democracy and it takes pains to distinguish itself from the old type of business unionism with its hierarchical structures and focus on services. However, the new labour movement conflates the differences between it and the old business union model which masks its undermining of these principles.

This can be seen with how the CtW coalition framed itself in opposition to, and thus justified the split with, the AFL-CIO.

Thus, how CtW unions justify the undermining of social movement unionism principles by referencing a crisis discourse is significant. The way in which this crisis mentality intersects with structural inequalities to marginalize racialized and White women organizers, who have been 'brought' into the new labour movement on a platform of union renewal, and creates an environment in which such

women *may* self-censor and sacrifice themselves for a perceived common good is the main focus of my thesis.

As mentioned earlier, the term *diversity* provides no critical analysis as to how power and control is retained within an organization, rather it mischaracterizes the problem as one of cultural misunderstanding and underappreciation.<sup>117</sup> The diversity discourse can be, and has been, co-opted and translated into a benign, non-critical reading that simply argues for the hiring of women and racialized people, as if simply having women and racialized people in the movement is enough without an equal redistribution of power.<sup>118</sup> Furthermore, as is evident from the interview excerpts, essentialist reasoning sometimes leads to the hiring racialized staff on the mistaken belief that there is some innate characteristic they can tap into to

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<sup>117</sup> Lopes and Thomas, 11

<sup>118</sup> Whether issues of redistribution can be subsumed under recognition is an on-going debate that is explored by Axel Honneth and Nancy Fraser in *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (London: Verso, 2003).

acquire worker support for the union. While identity does matter and common experiences *can* create a foundation to build a relationship, it is not a guarantee. The dynamics of human identity and interactions are obviously more complicated than this.

What is particularly interesting is how the discourse of diversity is articulated in terms of youth, to the exclusion of other identities. As one organizer pointed out that in terms of youth outreach, unions have done a “tremendous job except they haven’t added an anti-racist lens to their work.” The identity of ‘youth’ being linked to diversity is not objectionable in and of itself, especially since several of the union organizers interviewed recognized that they had been hired under the “youth movement” banner, however, isolating this identity from others *is*, especially when utilizing an analysis of intersectionality. Thus, the hiring of White men who are *young* is seen as fulfilling diversity expectations. One organizer compared the youth movement with first and

second wave feminism in how it excludes racialized women. She argues that there is “no conscious effort to draw out people of colour” and there is a noticeable “absence of talk about Aboriginal and workers of colour empowerment.” This is reflected in organization policies that provide no “structured space” built into programs that guarantee spots for racialized people within the youth contingent.

Using a power in systems analysis in conjunction with an anti-racist and feminist reading allows us to see how systematic discrimination within unions serves to uphold social inequalities and in fact, replicate within the labour movement, the labour market inequalities found in the greater society. For as some of the organizers recounted, organizing positions have long probationary periods, are filled by contract employees and job security is somewhat tenuous. Thus, in this sense, organizing *is* precarious work. Or as another organizer put it: “Organizers are workers. We



are the bottom feeders. We are the most precarious employees . . .“

Simply hiring women and racialized people as staff is not enough, especially when they are not in positions of power. While *nearly* all of organizers felt that their organizing department was diverse, *all* of them felt that the organization as a whole was not, particularly when it came to seeing racialized people in leadership positions. As one organizer explains,

We are the people who recruit but the people in the position of power aren't a reflection of the membership . . . If our membership is largely people of colour, then why isn't our leadership? . . . that poses really interesting, strong questions.

Thus, the diversity that workers might see when dealing with organizers is not necessarily reflective of the union as a whole which speaks to the limits of the diversity discourse. Furthermore, the ghettoization of women, particularly racialized women, in organizing that is well-known as a department with high turn over is hugely problematic. This

speaks to how women are ‘brought’ into the new labour movement on a platform of union renewal only to leave rather than be nurtured into leaders.

The cowboy/soldier mentality excludes marginalized groups in practice and also reinforces racism and sexism. When organizers are ‘burning out’, the individual is blamed for being unable to handle the pressures of work:

The belief in organizing superiority can also be used in a negative way, to sanction organizers who decide to leave. This concept is invoked to shame organizers who are contemplating leaving, by questioning the strength of their commitment to the labor movement.<sup>119</sup>

This individualistic explanation is echoed by an organizing director as quoted by Feekin and Widenor who argued that “recruitment screening [is] the most important issue –finding people who are driven to do this work.”<sup>120</sup> Implicit in the statement is that those who ‘burn out’ and/or choose to leave are *not* driven and are *less* committed to the labour

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<sup>119</sup> Rooks, “Cowboy,” 48.

<sup>120</sup> Feekin and Widenor, 76.

movement. This individualistic attitude is further reinforced by research literature that focuses on psychological attributes and profiles rather than addressing the larger structural issues that lead to burn out. An analysis that fails to examine the structural issues is likely to conclude that the women, and in particular, racialized women are inadequate for the task at hand rather than recognizing the inequality built into the structure of organizing itself.

Returning to the theme of limiting diversity to a youth issue, unions can continue to have unrealistic work expectations and meet their diversity requirement by hiring 'young' organizers. Youth, defined as thirty years of age and under by the CLC, are more often than not, without family responsibilities and have the physical ability to do this work. One young woman recounted how organizers who are now higher up in the organization struggle with the setting of a standard they know all too well is excessively demanding:

[We are] setting a standard . . . to such a degree that if a single mother wanted to do that job, based on the

expectations created . . . would never be able to do it .  
. . . Anyone who has any limitations on time . . .  
because of the standards we're setting as organizers .  
. . . we're limiting immediately women and people of  
colour from being able to do these kinds of jobs.

However, when using a power in system analysis, the  
standard that some may argue is too high but still 'fair'  
because everyone is held to the same bar, is anything but.  
Thus, whereas the pattern would seem to indicate that those  
leave organizing cannot 'cut it', and are less committed to  
the movement, the standard is itself exclusionary.

Returning to a feminist and anti-racist approach, the  
standard is based on a norm that sees workers and trade  
unionists as White men. As such, it assumes that those  
involved have "no competing responsibilities" or demands on  
one's time which is certainly not the case for many women  
who are dealing with the double or triple day.<sup>121</sup> Thus,

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<sup>121</sup> Paavo, "Union Workload: A Barrier to Women Surviving  
Labour-Movement Leadership," *Just Labour* Vol. 8 (Spring  
2006); [journal on-line]; available from  
[http://www.justlabour.yorku.ca/volume8/pdfs/01%20Paavo%  
20Press.pdf](http://www.justlabour.yorku.ca/volume8/pdfs/01%20Paavo%20Press.pdf) (accessed 2 August 2007) 1.

sometimes being treated the *same* is not being treated  
*equally* as argued by Linda Briskin:

This position assumed it was possible to produce equality through the same treatment despite differential access to power, privilege, and resources. 'Equal' and the 'same' have often been conflated in women's struggles to make change, thus obscuring not only the gendered character of experience but also the specificity of women's oppression.<sup>122</sup>

Some may argue that the high standard of organizing has always been like this. Even if this *were* true, the standard was still set largely based on a White male worker model and in this sense, was never attainable for a majority of workers, and is therefore, discriminatory. Furthermore, whether it is new or not is irrelevant, as unions are currently facing a "scarcity of lead organizers" to work on campaigns and are losing talented staff who they have invested time and resources into.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Linda Briskin, "Union Women and Separate Organizing," *Women Challenging Unions: Feminism, Democracy and Militancy*, ed. Linda Briskin and Patricia McDermott, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993): 104.

<sup>123</sup> Feekin and Widenor, 65.

However, framing the problems as being 'age-old' leaves one unable to recognize recent developments and takes the excessively demanding situation as a given, which then largely precludes a feminist, anti-racist and power in systems examination. For example, an organizing director interviewed by Feekin and Widenor argued that the long standing issue of a work-life balance was an "aspect of the job [that] is unchangeable."<sup>124</sup> However, as some organizers interviewed pointed out, adequate resources, better planning and time management could alleviate some, but not all, campaign stress. It is easy to see how a lower ratio of workers to organizers would reduce stress for example.

While it is difficult to gauge to what degree there have been changes in terms of organizing programs across unions and between differing levels, one organizer who was partially responsible for implementing the international organizing program in Canada thinks there has been major

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 76.

changes. She describes the new organizing model as being more “streamlined, planned and focused.” She explained that in the earlier hot shop model there was “not a lot of aggression to go out there and push to get a workplace,” and “you’d wait until the phone rings and that’s how it used to be. It was one organizer going around, working on a campaign. Campaigns in Ontario used to take a year . . . ” She then contrasted this with the model used today in which organizers are schooled in “being aggressive” in the targeting of certain workplaces. She added that there is a definite pressure for numbers in terms of cards and union victories, which again speak to the crisis discourse and how the crisis is being defined as merely a numbers issue.

### **The Crisis Discourse**

While the definition of crisis varies from union to union, it is largely defined as a numbers issue which affects how one deals with it. If the ‘crisis’ is merely an issue of

union density, social movement unionism principles are not necessarily included in, nor excluded from, this program.

Having said that, the crisis discourse is being used to undermine the very principles of democracy, worker militancy and equality espoused by social movement unionism by portraying organized labour at a precipice where there is no alternative (TINA). Against this backdrop where only increased union density can pull us back from this brink of irrelevancy, issues of diversity may be relevant only in terms of gaining access to underrepresented groups and nothing more, and issues of equality are sidelined.

The crisis discourse also affects how organizers situate their work. While all organizers may sacrifice and feel less inclined to discuss internal problems for the good of the movement, such demands take on more gravity when situated in a time of crisis. However, as recounted by the women organizers, many women feel that they are doing *more* work to receive the same level of recognition as men,



and in particularly racialized women are found to be doing the 'grunt' work in relationship to both White men and women, and are thus dealing with gendered racism within the workplace. There is thus an unequal level of sacrifice being demanded of organizers and it is when the crisis discourse intersects with such inequalities that it can lead to an environment where those most marginalized, such as women, and in particular racialized women, *may* self-censor and sacrifice for a perceived common good. Thus, as mentioned earlier, there is both external and internal pressure to self-censor for the good of the labour movement lest one be accused of undermining union solidarity. As one organizer put it, the labour movement's "cardinal principle" is "loyalty" and this means that "you never air out dirty laundry." However, what if your 'dirty laundry' is a valid concern about race and gender-based inequalities in the workplace? Whether women actually internalize this marginalization and

to what degree, if any is difficult to assess, but self-censoring is a symptom of this cowboy/soldier mentality.

Even those who see the discriminatory effects in practice of the seemingly neutral union policies maybe resigned to it because they believe TINA in times of crisis. However, in refusing to deal with these inequalities, the crisis discourse is undermining the union renewal project itself. This is not to say that all labour's problems are internal or that all problems will be solved with more representation, however, issues of equality are tied to issues of worker empowerment that act as the foundation for a working-class movement. Yet we cannot deal with such issues when we fail to recognize the problem. Thus, an analysis that grapples with how structural inequalities interact with race- and gender-based discrimination within a context of crisis is required.

### **Conclusion: Building a Working-Class Movement**

A woman goes to see a doctor about still being a virgin after many years. The doctor asks whether she had ever been in a relationship. She replies she had been in three but never had sex. The doctor asks her to explain.

'I first dated a hairdresser who loved my hair. So every night before we went to bed he would comb and comb my hair until I fell asleep. So we never had sex.'

The doctor nods understandingly and asks her about her second relationship.

'I then dated a bodybuilder who encouraged me to work out with him. We would go to the gym all the time and work out. By the time we got home and showered, we were so exhausted that we just fell asleep and never had sex.'

The doctor nods understandingly again and asks her about her third and final relationship.

'I then dated a union organizer. But instead of having sex, he just sat on the bed every night and told me how good the sex was *going* to be'<sup>125</sup>

The purpose of including this joke is that the humor comes from the perception that organizers focus on how things *will*

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<sup>125</sup> A joke I have heard. No specific reference.

be once workers unionize. All joking aside, much of union renewal research also focuses on organizing and more attention should be paid to “what happens *after* organizing drives succeed.”<sup>126</sup> While this limited analysis is somewhat understandable considering the more recent switch in the industrial relations approach in accounting for union success and failure rates, this research gap indicates how the crisis is largely defined in terms of numbers, which is then reinforced by literature that only focuses on organizing.

If the crisis is defined as simply an issue of numbers, than the social movement union principles of diversity, democracy and worker militancy are *not* necessary, as increased union density can be arguably achieved through cooperating with capital. Here, lies the limits of the current CtW versus AFL-CIO debate, as *both* operate “within the realm of business, or ‘partnership,’ unionism.”<sup>127</sup> Thus,

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<sup>126</sup> Milkman and Voss, 15.

<sup>127</sup> Jerry Tucker, “A New Labor Federation Claims Its Space: If Enthusiasm on Display Were Substance, CtW Could Claim

another pernicious aspect of the crisis discourse is that we have largely been convinced that TINA to this partnership model:

. . . there is no influential center, or 'third voice,' to provide an alternative space for discussion of class-struggle strategies and creation of a new paradigm to replace the failed 'partnership unionism' of the past.

Picking up on the theme of the "failed" partnership model, how we understand the post-World War II period is crucial. Some characterize this era as a time of a *labour-management accord*, and want to *return* to this 'cooperative' relationship. This viewpoint is illustrated by John Sweeney who is seen as calling "for the restoration of the 'unwritten social compact' between capital and labor" as the solution to our present day problems.<sup>128</sup> Others, such as Nelson Lichtenstein, convincingly argue that there *never* was peace

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a Good Start," *Monthly Review Magazine* (October 2005) [journal on-line]; available from <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/tucker041005.html> (accessed 1 July 2005).

<sup>128</sup> "A Labor-Management Accord?" in Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003) p 98.

between labour and capital, and characterizes such an “accord” as a “product of defeat, not victory,” in which American labour entered into a largely depoliticized collective bargaining model.<sup>129</sup> This was a “trap” as

‘The very state policies which guarantee unions collective bargaining rights also provide a means of controlling unions. The complex laws and regulations governing labour-management relations have pushed unions towards a legalistic and bureaucratic role, away from mass mobilization of workers, which was the historical bases of workers’ collective action.’<sup>130</sup>

Thus, an increase in union density does *not* in and of itself translate into union power, rather it is the ability of workers to mobilize which cannot be quantitatively measured. However, this very ability is undermined when we only focus on increasing our numbers at any costs, which includes cooperating with capital and pushing issues of equality and democracy to the sidelines. The implications of this go far beyond the organizing department and the new labour

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<sup>129</sup> Lichtenstein, 99 - 100.

<sup>130</sup> Leah, “Sister,” 101.

movement will be forced to deal with these issues as more women and racialized workers join unions and refuse to be used as pawns.

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