

CLASS ACTION: CLASS, POLITICS AND UNION ACTIVISTS

CLASS ACTION:
CLASS, POLITICS, AND UNION ACTIVISTS IN ALBERTA

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Abstract

This study explores the link between class and political activism by examining the union and political participation of union activists in Alberta. Through a survey and selected in-depth interviews, the study finds union activists are more politically active than average Canadians. It arrives at three core conclusions. First, union activists who possess a relational sense of class consciousness are more likely to engage in political activity. This class consciousness is formed and articulated out of lived experience, rather than intellectual understanding, and can be seen as an expression of a “culture of solidarity”. Second, union activists experience a perceptible class divide separating them from middle class institutions of the political system. This divide can inhibit political participation. Union activists who cross the divide into middle class politics can be seen as “bridge-builders”, linking working class activists with middle class political culture. Third, unions can play an important role in fostering political activism among their members. Unions can influence the decision to act politically through concrete local action and framing the nature of union work in a class relational fashion. Recommendations for union strategies are offered, as well as suggestions for revitalizing progressive political organizations.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Most working people in Canada are not politically active. This is not a contentious statement, at least when looking at the past few decades. Why so many are politically inactive is a more perplexing question. Many theories abound, from blaming the prosperous nature of post-war society, to pinpointing the barriers to political participation, to highlighting the lack of class consciousness among Canadian workers.

The lack of participation is pervasive among workers. It has endured both an era of post-war Fordist prosperity and the return of insecurity and unemployment in the 1980s and 1990s. It is endemic among both relatively privileged workers, such as unionized men in traditional manufacturing, and more marginalized groups such as women, and cultural and racial minorities. The inherent struggle between workers and owners seems to have ebbed in Canada, replaced by an ideology of mutual prosperity through advanced capitalism.

There are, of course, exceptions to the rule. Many working men and women actively engage in politics. What makes them different? What leads them to take an active step into politics, when so many other workers remain silent and inactive?

This study will examine the question of how working people become active in politics. By asking why certain workers become active politically, we can increase our understanding of the dynamics that may prevent the bulk of working people from participating. By exploring what distinguishes politically active workers from other workers, we can bring to light the causes for political inactivity among most workers.

In particular, this study will examine two fundamental theories for the lack of political activism among the working class. The first theory suggests workers' political inactivity is due to persistent weakness in class consciousness among Canadian workers. The argument suggests a sense of collectivity, rooted in workers' position in the economic structure, motivates workers to try to change the system, creating a form of class politics. When workers lack an awareness of their objective position in the system, the potential for class politics is stifled.

The second theory holds that the nature of Canadian politics erects barriers to the effective political participation of working people. The middle class nature of political organizations and the majority of their activists makes the equal participation of working people more difficult. This argument offers the possibility that workers can be class conscious, but remain outside the politics of the nation due to external barriers and forces.

These two explanations are not mutually exclusive. Each draws out a different element for understanding the lack of political activism among working people. Examining both allows us to draw a multi-dimensional picture of the political status quo.

Defining "Politics"

We have reached a definitional challenge. What is meant by "politics". The term is nebulous and wrought with multiple nuances. A brief discussion of how politics is framed in this study is necessary.

In this study, politics will be defined as the cluster of political behaviours and structures generally accepted as comprising Canada's "political system" – elections,

parties, issue movements, lobby groups, protest rallies, boycotts, petitions and so on. In this light, politics is seen as a system with socially-constructed rules and institutions.

This study is interested in examining how working people interact with the political system. If we want to understand how class consciousness affects political perspectives and how barriers to political participation are erected, politics is best seen as a system to which workers relate. Workers understand politics by attempting to find their position in relation to the political system.

It is also the definition most widely held by Canadians, allowing this study to connect to the understanding of those it wishes to examine. The consequence is it excludes some forms of politics. The woman standing up to her abusive husband, or fighting against harassment at work, can be seen as political. One could argue that the work of unions is political. Politics of this nature will not be measured. It is being excluded not because it is unimportant, but because it lacks the element of socially relating to an institutionalized system. It is a collective relationship with the system which helps us isolate class consciousness and class-related barriers to politics.

It is also important to distinguish between being “political” and “politically active”. A political person can choose to remain inactive, for a variety of reasons. This study will be examining political activity, rather than political interest or disposition. Political activity is a measure of the relationship between the individual and the political system. In short, this examination will measure how politically active the study subjects are, rather than assess the full extent of their political nature.

Initial Considerations

Working class participation in the Canadian political system is low, in two regards. First, the working class participate at lower levels than other Canadians, both in terms of voting and in participation in various political organizations and activities (Nevitte, 1996). Second, Canadian politics is not a class-based system, instead operating on a brokerage model which accommodates the interests of the middle and upper classes, and tends to exclude the working class (Brodie & Jenson, 1988).

Some argue class is irrelevant in the Canadian context and discussions of the “working class” are meaningless. Yet, the apparent lack of class-for-itself action among Canadian workers should not be mistakenly assumed to mean “we are all middle class now”. Class exists on multiple levels. It is both an objective relationship to the economic system and the lived experiences a group of people share. Both can affect a person’s understanding of their position in society. In very real ways, Canadian workers experience life in a manner that could be described as “working class”. They share an experience of limited control at work, economic insecurity and dependency upon an employer for their livelihood. This commonality draws them together in some fashion. Both in terms of the macro-economic structures of our society and in lived daily experiences in communities, being a member of the working class has meaning, even if the label is poorly affixed or fallen off. The question is not whether the working class in Canada exists, but why it does not develop, and act upon, a sense of political collectivity.

The first step in class consciousness is to see oneself as being part of a class, based upon one’s position in the economic and political system. On that scale, class

identification in Canada is weak. When asked, less than half of Canadians identify themselves as belonging to a class of any kind, and only 36%, when forced to choose from a list of classes, identify themselves as working or lower class (Pammett, 1987). Union members are more likely to identify themselves as belonging to a class, but that class is just as likely to be “middle class”.

Class consciousness is expected to lead to a form of class politics. On this measure, too, Canada rates poorly. Class-based voting in Canada is low, trumped by regional and other cleavages (Pammett, 1987). Even those who identify themselves as part of a class are only marginally more likely to vote along class lines. Class is the 90-pound weakling of Canadian politics.

Unions are often seen as important to organizing working class politics. The capacity of Canadian unions to build class politics is uncertain. Union density in Canada has traditionally been low to moderate, and is slowly dropping. Unions have been unable to rally their members in any great numbers to vote in a class-fashion or to participate actively in politics. Union support for the NDP, while mythologized as strong, has proven to be rather weak in terms of affiliation and mobilizing union votes (Archer, 1990).

Class is not significant in shaping political behaviour or in affecting the nature of the Canadian political system. This highlights the core issue this study wishes to explore. Given that most working class Canadians are not involved in politics, what causes a worker to choose to become involved in what is essentially a middle class system?

The Shape of the Study

As indicated, this study intends to examine the factors shaping the decision to become politically active or inactive. In particular, it hopes to explore the relative importance of class consciousness and class-based barriers in determining the decision.

The study examines union activists in Alberta. These are small numbers of union members who have made a choice to become actively involved in their union, through committees or the local executive or as a shop steward. They reside in a middle layer within a union hierarchy. They are actively engaged in their union, but have not risen to a position of leadership. They spend most of their time working at their day-to-day job and then choose to volunteer additional time to union work.

Choosing to study union activists is intentional. A union activist holds an intriguing place in the working class. Their sense of being a worker has developed enough to motivate them to become involved in their union, yet they remain a part of mainstream culture and connected to work on a daily basis. It is not unreasonable to suggest active union members are more likely to possess some degree of class consciousness. How that consciousness translates into political participation or non-participation can tell us much about both the bridge between awareness and action in class-based politics and the barriers constructed by middle-class politics.

Looking at union activists also allows us to explore an additional dimension of the issue. We can assess the role unions can play in politically mobilizing their activists.

Union activists are a rarely studied population, with most union research occurring among union members or union leadership. As a fortuitous by-product, this

study may also allow us to discover who these men and women are and what motivates them to become active in their union.

The study will attempt to contrast those union activists who are politically active with fellow activists who choose to eschew political activity. Their similarities of class, culture and disposition should allow us to isolate how class consciousness and class barriers to participation affect the decision to become politically active.

The study will take the following structure. The next chapter reviews existing literature on the two theories being explored. First it examines the nature of class consciousness and its role in fostering working class political activism. It then reviews work conducted on the class barriers to working class participation in politics. Chapter Three reports a survey conducted on Alberta union activists. Chapter Four explores results from a series of in-depth interviews with a selection of survey responses. Chapter Five draws the findings into a coherent whole and discusses how they inform a deeper understanding of the roots of working class political activism.

The study ultimately hopes to address three issues, using union activists as a form of natural experiment. First, we can assess if class consciousness leads to a form of class-based political activism. Second, we can test the voracity of the class barriers to political activism. Third, we can measure the potential for unions to foster political participation among their activists and gain insights into which methods are most effective.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Considerations

There are three parts to the theoretical context for this study. First, we need to examine how class consciousness arises and translates into political action. Second, what role do unions and intellectual elites play in fostering action? And finally, what barriers exist in the political system preventing workers from participating in politics?

The debate over class consciousness is long and historic, reaching back to Marx himself. It encompasses most schools of left thought in the late nineteenth, twentieth and now twenty-first centuries. It is a corpus of work much too broad for discussion here, but a few key elements of the debate are crucial for our examination.

Class and Class Consciousness

Class has become a much misused and misunderstood concept. “As a concept, class has soaked up so much meaning that it has become bulky to use. Because it is often employed without a clearly specified definition, debates about class often become conversations in which people talk past each other because they are talking about different dimensions of class.” (Katznelson, 1986: 14) For this reason we must begin by clarifying class and the various ways it is used.

The working class, in an objective sense, is those who do not possess the means of production and must rent their labour power to others. While useful, this conception of class is too static and thus fails to incorporate important elements about class formation. Rather than seeing class as an “it”, we need to see it as a process of human relations. “If we stop history at a given point, then there are no classes, but simply a multitude of

individuals with a multitude of experiences.” (Thompson, 1963: 11) By viewing class as an evolving process, we can understand how it is both constructed - as workers live their lives and share experience - and rooted in objective production relations – a “worker” is defined in relation to capitalism.

The “making” of class occurs by workers as they live their lives and build a sense of what it means to be working class. Its construction happens at the point of production, but also in the pubs and neighbourhoods where workers reside. It is the experience of the daughter who witnesses her construction worker father thrown in and out of work due to strange, distant economic forces. It is also the act of expressing friendship and mutual resentment at the boss over a few pints after the workday. It is the acute sense that the people who reside in the most expensive neighbourhoods live markedly different and privileged lives from the families on the streets nearby.

The creation of class occurs at the intersection of the two levels – the objective and lived experience. At this point, we remain uncertain how this conception of class as lived experience is transformed into potential for collective political action.

“When we speak of a class we are thinking of a very loosely-defined body of people who share the same congeries of interests, social experiences, traditions and value system, who have a *disposition* to *behave* as a class, to define themselves in their actions and in their consciousness in relation to other groups of people in class ways.” (Thompson, 1965: 357; original emphasis)

Thompson refines Marx's articulation of “class-in-itself” and “class-for-itself”. The former reflects a worker's objective relationship to the means of production and how it draws them into a class. The class-for-itself, on the other hand, is fully aware and

awake, acting collectively in its own interests. Workers have translated a sense of who they are into a set of political actions aimed at achieving certain class-defined ends.

Marx's duality does not communicate how the transition from in-itself to for-itself occurs. Class consciousness is not a light switch, where suddenly the worker awakes to their class position and takes up the struggle. The ebb and flow of life and politics form a richer dynamic than suggested by Marx. His duality does not reflect the fluid nature of how people's lives interact with their awareness of the structure of the society around them. Neither does it account for how class identity interacts with other senses of identity, such as gender and race.

Marx also neglects the power of capitalist ideology and the labour process to shape working class consciousness. There is competition for the direction class consciousness takes, particularly in the late-20th century, when the methods of large corporations have become quite sophisticated and expansive. Michael Burawoy highlights the modern version of counter-class consciousness.

“Where competitive capitalism retains an arena of resistance and class struggle, under monopoly capitalism the individual psyche is stripped of its capacity to resist the structures of capitalist domination. ... Consent is produced and reproduced on the shop floor and is not dependent on legitimacy drummed into people's heads in schools or on character formation in the family. Even in the marginal situations where imported consciousness does shape behaviour, its specific impact is determined by the worker's position in the production process.” (Burawoy, 1979: 201)

In other words, Burawoy sees an alternative consciousness constructed at the workplace, one fostering consent and docility. “Workers are sucked into the game as a way of reducing the level of deprivation. But participation has the consequence of generating consent to the rules.” (Burawoy, 1979: 199)

It can be argued Burawoy takes his point too far. Charles Sabel's work demonstrates workers sharing a position in the labour process can retain the capacity to learn from each other and from sources outside the workplace to build resistance to corporate-defined consciousness.

“[A] work group's precise aspirations, its reactions to changes in the division of labour, and even its views about the possibilities of comprehensive social transformations are shaped by its relations to other groups, both inside the blue-collar workforce and beyond. ... Experiences of collaboration and conflict with other groups determine what strategic conclusions a work group ultimately draws from its idea of a career at work.” (Sabel, 1982: 187-188)

The capacity of workers to resist corporate hegemonic efforts within the labour process need not be fully debated here. Suffice it to acknowledge that the creation of class consciousness is neither inevitable nor necessarily anti-capitalist. However, the labour process, even with modern corporate methods, is not so powerful as to eliminate the possibility of worker-constructed class consciousness.

Ira Katznelson offers a conceptualization of class that helps us move beyond the rigidities of the in-itself/for-itself dichotomy. He speaks of four levels of class. The first is the structural level - the objective, macro-economic conditions of capitalist production. The second level is the “social organization of society lived by actual people in real social formations.” (Katznelson, 1986: 16). This is the lived experience of class. Third is the disposition of a group of people to act collectively. This disposition can be articulated in a number of ways, not all necessarily class exclusive. Fourth is the level of collective action, when the disposition is actualized into reality.

Two significant pieces of Katznelson's conceptualization prevent it from being simple typology and separate it from other conceptions of class consciousness.

“Note that I am deliberately avoiding the term 'class consciousness' in order to make clear my rejection of any notion of degrees of consciousness, with the highest corresponding to the 'real' interests of the working class. Further, the scheme of four levels of class does not imply a series of necessary stages or a natural progression (after all, ways of life are not independent of thought or action). It is rather a classification that aims to promote the development of theory free from developmental assumptions.” (Katznelson, 1986: 17-18)

In Katznelson's four levels, we see an acknowledgement of both the complexity of class experience and the contingency of collective action. The four levels co-exist and movement between the levels is neither hierarchical nor linear. It implies one can act collectively without having developed a true Marxian “class consciousness”, and conversely a fully-developed consciousness does not necessarily lead to collective action. These are crucial realizations for this study, and we will return to them again below.

Role of Elites

One consequence of the rigid “class-for-itself” distinction is a corollary rigidity in understanding the role played by elites in translating consciousness into political action. Theorists have had a tendency to see action arising following the development of an intellectual ideology - a fully formulated understanding of capitalism’s objective forces. Such a formulation places intellectual elites and working class leaders (i.e. unions) in the role of leading the working class into their consciousness and political action.

The debate between Lenin and Sidney and Beatrice Webb reflects this approach to elites. The Webbs argue unions are a key vehicle for mobilizing the working class into

action, due to their ability to form an alternative, empowering structure and culture for workers.

“When workmen meet together to discuss their grievances – still more, when they form associations of national extent, raise an independent revenue, elect permanent representative committees, and proceed to bargain and agitate as corporate bodies – they are forming, within the state, a spontaneous democracy of their own.” (Webb & Webb, 1920: 808)

In response, Lenin, although acknowledging their organizing role, rejects the transformative power of unions, and in doing so provides a crucial conceptual distinction in consciousness. He sees unions, left on their own, building only a form of “trade union consciousness”, which is inherently defensive and limited in political capacity.

“The activity you want to stimulate among us workers, by advancing concrete demands that promise palpable results, we are already displaying; and in our everyday, limited trade-union work.... But such activity is not enough for us; we are not children to be fed on the thin gruel of ‘economic’ politics alone; we want to know everything others know. ... You intellectuals can acquire this knowledge and it is your duty to bring it to us in a hundred - and a thousand-fold greater measure than you have done up to now.” (Lenin, 1902/1988: 138)

For Lenin, intellectuals must take a leadership role in building the necessary intellectual links to construct a true working class consciousness capable of working for socialism.

For modern observers of trade unions, Lenin's analysis rings at least partially true. Unions have become highly institutionalized and narrow in their political aims. They have proven effective at establishing economic gains for their members and other workers. However, their capacity for creating an active, political working class has diminished as their institutional success has grown. Union activists are well trained in the business of workplace conflict - strikes, grievances, bargaining - but most do not appear to make broader political links. We touch upon an important question of this study. Is the

lack of political participation among workers explained, in part, by the dominance of trade union consciousness among unionists? Does this form of consciousness sap the potential for broader political action by narrowing class interests to that of the union?

The Webb / Lenin debate offers a stilted version of workers' political potential. Both are dismissive of lived experience as a path toward political action. There is a structured, formalized, almost formulaic sense of class in their conceptions.

Slightly more nuanced is the work of George Rude. He argues an intellectual class awareness – what he terms “derived ideology” – provided by elites is crucial to building class-based collective action, but a healthy popular consciousness – “inherent ideology” – must be present for any action to arise effectively.

“What I am arguing is that there are three factors and not only two to be taken account of: the 'inherent' element which, as we noted before, was the common base; the 'derived', or outside, element, which could only be effectively absorbed if the ground was already prepared; and the circumstances and experience which, in the final analysis, determine the nature of the final mixture.” (Rude, 1980: 29)

Rude recognizes the need to incorporate lived experience into our sense of class action.

However, he continues to place greater emphasis on elite-driven derived ideology.

The balance between intellectual awareness and lived experience needs adjusting, Gordon Marshall argues.

“[We need to escape] the widely held belief among academic observers that it is somehow necessary for men and women to encompass society intellectually before they can attempt to change it. This premise is not confirmed by the history of class action on either a revolutionary or on a more modest scale. ... Consciousness is generated in and changed by social action.” (Marshall, 1983: 272, 288)

Men and women going through their lives pick up moments of revelation, moments of integration and moments of confusion as they try to understand their place in society. Their experience of work, of their connection to co-workers and of societal power structures do not get articulated necessarily in coherent ideologies, but can take many shapes and forms.

This is the other advantage of Katznelson's four-part conception of class. It allows for a broader definition of class action – for collective political action need not necessarily equate with class struggle. It allows workers to act from their myriad experiences – as workers, as women, as aboriginals, etc. – and to integrate them. Forms of politics are legitimized that may not, at first, seem transformative or revolutionary.

Cultures of Solidarity vs. Affluent Worker

Recognizing the fluid nature of class awareness and political action allows us to explore workers' motivation to act differently. Rick Fantasia's work on moments of burgeoning collective action (the wildcat strike, the organizing drive) highlights the non-linear and varied process of class awareness and action. He observes the emergence of "cultures of solidarity", rather than class consciousness, in moments of crisis.

Cultures of solidarity are more or less bounded groupings that may or may not develop a clear organizational identity and structure, but represent the active expression of worker solidarity within an industrial system and a society hostile to it. They are neither ideas of solidarity in the abstract nor bureaucratic trade union activity, but cultural formations that arise in conflict, creating and sustaining solidarity in opposition to the dominant structure. (Fantasia, 1988: 19)

What is important here is these cultures are contextually dependent and arise from real lived experience. Action arising from these cultures are legitimate. They may or may not be political, at least in a narrow sense. Their power arises out of collective action for a class purpose.

These cultures, Fantasia says, are fragile because they are oppositional and unusual. Opposition from dominant forces can be quite effective at breaking down the cultures. Tom Langford adds to this, showing how crisis moments of collective action, such as strikes, do not necessarily lead to lasting changes in political consciousness. Longer term connection to relationships and structures (e.g. unions) are more important in establishing stable political awareness (Langford, 1996).

Fantasia opens the door to a new way of looking at collective action. The lived senses of class – cultures of solidarity – are just as important, if not more important, than an intellectual interpretation of capitalist economic structures. Political action arising from a culture of solidarity is no less significant than action arising from a more intellectual understanding of class. Three consequences become evident. First, we are allowed to search in different places for the sparks leading to political action. Second, we can admit the contingent and uncertain nature of political action. Third, the role of working class leaders and intellectuals may change, as they are no longer necessary intermediaries for the process.

There is a risk to seeing the articulation of lived experience as a route to political action. Goldthorpe et. al. in *The Affluent Worker* postulate how the lived experience of

workers can lead to political quietism. They find the social dimension of class remains as strong as ever despite rising prosperity in the post-war period.

“[O]ur findings show that in the case of the workers we studied there remain important areas of common social experience which are still fairly distinctively working class; that specifically middle-class social norms are not widely followed nor middle-class life-styles consciously emulated... [I]ncreases in earnings, improvements in working conditions, more enlightened and liberal employment policies and so on do not in themselves basically alter the class situation of the industrial worker in present-day society.” (Goldthorpe et. al., 1969: 157)

The cultural and lived experience of being working class has not been reduced through modern developments. This finding mirrors Thompson's contention that classes manifest themselves in cultural ways.

Goldthorpe et. al. go further to argue how workers see themselves as working class changes with greater affluence. They find evidence of a shift from “solidaristic collectivism” to “instrumental collectivism”. Instrumental collectivism is the reduction of class solidarity to nothing more than “the acceptance of trade union action as a means of economic protection and advancement.” (Goldthorpe et. al., 1969: 27). Working class action is reduced to fighting for higher wages and benefits.

This conclusion mirrors the warnings of Lenin's trade union consciousness. It also evokes a form of consciousness manufactured by employers, as lamented by Burawoy. In other words, we see the possible appearance of a class consciousness that eschews political activity and contents itself with playing by the rules of capitalism. This sets out another possibility. The lack of working class participation in politics is rooted in a depoliticised, instrumentalist form of class consciousness.

The juxtaposition of Fantasia and Goldthorpe brings into stark contrast the twin paths for working class political action. Allowing for an enhanced role for lived experience in the construction of class consciousness and collective action, also opens the door to uncertainty. Lived experience can lead to a sense of class that fosters a culture of solidarity, or it can make clear the need to accept the existing system to maximize short-term material reward.

The Class Divide and Barriers to Political Participation

So far we have only addressed one possible explanation for Canadian workers' lack of political activism. The other possibility is that workers possess class consciousness but do not become politically active due to other barriers constructed by the nature of Canadian politics.

The middle-class basis of politics in Canada was briefly discussed in the first chapter. The political system is dominated by middle class activists and its rules, language and institutions reflect a bias toward the middle class. This is not to say that working people, as individuals, cannot be found within political organizations or activities. However, their first experience of the political system may be akin to learning a foreign language. How these barriers manifest themselves have not been extensively studied in Canada, but two U.S. studies offer some insights into the nature of the obstacles.

Fred Rose's examination of political coalitions and David Croteau's contrast of middle class activists and working class non-activists highlight deep cultural and class

cleavages. They have labelled it “the class divide”. They argue, political organizations unwittingly reproduce class society in their structures, language and priorities.

“Working- and middle-class movements, like all political agents, reproduce aspects of class society even as they work to change other aspects. These movements are prone to exacerbating the oppressions against which other movements rebel when they choose strategies of competition, collaboration or solidarity.” (Rose, 2000: 25).

The divide manifests itself through organizing tactics, recruitment methods, language usage, structures and procedures, and priorities selected and even how the issues are framed. Social movements and political parties focus on elevating the nature of their struggle, “promoting ‘education’ efforts aimed at convincing the public of the need for change. Often, the assumption is that ‘if people only knew’ about the problems being raised, then they would be more likely to act.” (Croteau, 1995: 197) This distances issues from the life experience of working people, and denies the legitimacy of their experience.

The experience of working people in North America is that politics does not work for them, leading to inactivity. Croteau found working people’s attitudes toward politics were distant and negative – critical and cynical about politicians, little interest in politics, and fatalistic about prospects for change. However, he finds:

“these characteristics are a response to a political environment that: (1) does not meet the needs of working people and is often perceived as unfair, (2) is full of deceptive rhetoric and does not offer meaningful opportunity for participation; and (3) seems impervious to successful attempts at change.” (Croteau, 1995: 217)

Too often, Croteau believes, efforts to increase feelings of political efficacy among the working class are attempts to make them be more middle class.

Croteau identifies seven attitudes that lead working people to avoid participation in politics: politics is dominated by people who do not understand working people; political actors cannot be trusted; involvement will not change the system; politics is not worth “thinking about”; they are too busy to get involved in politics; politics is for professionals who “know what they are doing”; and political actors are “different” than average people. Each of these attitudes reflects a separation from politics.

The seven attitudes, Croteau argues, distinguish the working class from middle class political activists, whose engagement in the system results in the opposite attitudes – they trust the system, feel a need to be involved in it and believe it can be changed.

Some workers are able, for some reason, to make the leap across the divide. Rose calls these politically active workers “bridge builders”. He sees them acting as informal leaders within the working class, translating the world of middle class politics. “These are people who can interpret the goals and actions of other movements for their colleagues in a way that facilitates understanding. ... Bridge builders inhabit a unique world where they must integrate starkly different experiences.” (Rose, 2000: 184-5)

Bridge builders sound similar to Gramsci’s “organic intellectuals”, although with more of a cross-class focus. For Gramsci, organic intellectuals provide a class with “a homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields.” (Gramsci, 1971: 5) It is an awareness rooted in shared experience as well as in a structural understanding of their position. Their function is to articulate the awareness among peers. It is a role – whether called bridge-builder or organic intellectual – that may apply to union activists. This issue needs to be explored.

Politically active workers may carry themselves into politics not as a working person, but as a woman or a person of colour or homosexual. These other identities are powerful forces in constructing consciousness and may create a pseudo-middle class awareness that reduces the barriers to involvement.

The reality is likely more complex. These other identities mediate and alter the individual's sense of their political self, but they do not, and cannot, erase the person's experience as a worker (Aronowitz, 1992). What we see instead is a complex "intersection" of identities, with each shaping the others. "Intersectionality theory ... argues that there are multiple systems of domination that define one another. Each one is shaped by and shapes the others." (Kurtz, 2002: xvii) There is no class problem not shaped by race and gender (and other core identities), and the reverse is also true.

The purpose of raising this point is not to lose ourselves in the rarefied debate of how identity is created, but to highlight the important and very practical reality that individuals shape their identity from the entirety of their personal experience, not just from relations of production. This has significant political consequences. It also affects how we approach understanding political participation among working people.

Summary

The above considerations develop a theoretical context for the three questions probed in this study. First, we have defined class as existing on four levels, with a fluid and non-linear connection between them. We have also linked class consciousness to the interaction of structural class and daily lived experience. Class consciousness is not a

rigid, easily demarcated concept, but can take many forms, some political and some not. We should study the link between class consciousness and political action in a different manner. We can test the capacity of workers to form cultures of solidarity versus their susceptibility to trade union consciousness, instrumental collectivism or other depoliticised forms of consciousness. We can also search for consciousness in the daily experience of workers, rather than casting across historical landscapes.

Second, we can search for specific class barriers to political participation, as offered by Rose and Croteau. Do union activists hold the attitudes identified by Croteau? Do we see evidence of bridge builders, or organic intellectuals, among union activists?

Third, we can freshly examine the role of unions in fostering political action. We can revisit the debate between Lenin and the Webbs, but more importantly we can see the union's role in a new way – one that facilitates the articulation of lived experience, rather than leads workers toward the light. Do unions play such a role, or is the process an individual one, separate from the union's functions?

Union activists hold a unique place in the class structure, given their heightened awareness and commitment to workers' interests. They are a group who operate in the second and third levels of class, and in many respects the fourth. To state it another way, if we want to find working people who are class conscious and politically active, then this would be one of the first places to look. They also are most likely to exhibit the qualities of bridge builders and organic intellectuals. Finally, their direct link to unions provides a window to explore the union's role in fostering political activism.

Chapter 3: Survey of Union Activists

This chapter reports findings from a survey distributed to union activists in Alberta. The survey offers a baseline of information for understanding who the activists are and how much they participate in politics. Through the survey we can begin to explore the role of union activism in fostering political participation. Are certain forms of union activism more likely to lead to political activism? Is there something in the experience of union activism that leads to, or away from, political participation? The survey also provides an opportunity to probe union activists on Croteau's seven attitudes of political inactivity.

The survey targeted union members who attend labour schools organized by labour centrals in Alberta. This population was selected because students at labour schools are rank-and-file activists in their local union who have not risen to positions of senior leadership within the union. We would expect to find local executive members, committee members and shop stewards at the schools. There is a diversity of experience in this population. Many are new to union activism. Others are more experienced. We can also expect some will be involved in political activities, and others will not.

The survey was distributed in three ways. First, in February 2003 it was mailed to students who had attended the Alberta Federation of Labour/Canadian Labour Congress (AFL/CLC) Annual School in 2001 and 2002. The AFL/CLC school consists of two sessions of week-long classes every November. Second, in March 2003 it was handed out to students during the Edmonton and District Labour Council School. Third, in April 2003 it was distributed at the Calgary and District Labour Council School.

The survey consisted of 15 fixed choice questions and 2 open-ended questions. It took participants approximately 10 minutes to complete. The mailout was sent to approximately 350 individuals, with a response rate of 22%. Surveys distributed at the two schools were completed during class time and all students were given the opportunity to participate. About 80% of students took part. A total of 213 responses were received.

Men represented 55% of the sample. The mean age was 43 years. Public sector workers made up 48.6% of the sample. As no statistics are kept for the demographic composition of Alberta union activists, there is no way to determine if the responses accurately represent Alberta activists. However, we can say with confidence that the survey reflects attendees of labour schools in Alberta.

64.6% of respondents reported an annual income over \$40,000. Only 2.9% had incomes lower than \$20,000. This may suggest a slight income bias in participation. Part-time and lower income workers may be less likely to get involved in their union.

Table 2.1 shows the occupational breakdown of the respondents as well as the proportion of women in each occupation. Traditional blue collar occupations made up the largest proportion of respondents, with service occupations next. The survey results reflected traditional societal gendering of occupation. Women were highly represented in service and less-skilled white collar occupation, which also were the lowest paying in the sample. Women were also disproportionately found in the professional category, due to the high number of nurses responding to the survey. Blue collar and trades work – the highest income occupations in the survey – remained the domain of men.

Table 2.1: Occupation of Survey Responses & Proportion of Women in Occupations

| Occupation | Proportion of Sample (%) | Percent Women |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------|
| Professional | 14.2 | 83.3 |
| Blue Collar | 37.9 | 13.8 |
| Service | 25.1 | 66.0 |
| Less Skilled White Collar | 13.3 | 78.6 |
| Trades | 9.5 | 10.0 |

Union Activity

The first step was to measure the respondents' level of union activity. Respondents were highly involved in their union. Fewer than 3% of respondents failed to report any past or current activities with the union. More than half reported being involved in their local in 3 or more different ways. 61.3% of respondents reported spending more than 6 hours a month on union activities, while almost one in four (22.6%) worked on union activities more than 21 hours a month.

Almost half the sample were a current or past member of the local executive. More than two-thirds reported being a steward in their workplace in the past five years. Four in five attended their General Membership meetings. Other committees, while not as prevalent, showed substantial levels of activity as well.

Table 2.2 shows union activity broken down by sex. There were small differences between sexes for select functions, such as health and safety and (obviously) women's committees. Men were more likely to be on the political action committee, but numbers were small for both sexes, thus caution is urged. Overall there is no significant difference in activity patterns between men and women. This suggests it is unlikely union activity differences are related to any potential sex differences in political activity levels.

Table 2.2: Union Activities, by Sex

| Activity | Total Sample (% involved) | Male | Female |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------|------|--------|
| <i>Current Activities:</i> | | | |
| Attend General Meetings | 79.3 | 76.9 | 82.3 |
| Shop Steward | 68.1 | 69.2 | 66.7 |
| Executive Member | 46.5 | 47.0 | 45.8 |
| Member of Committee | 49.8 | 48.7 | 51.0 |
| <i>Past Five Years:</i> | | | |
| Executive | 47.4 | 49.6 | 44.8 |
| Bargaining Committee | 30.5 | 31.6 | 29.2 |
| Grievance Committee | 20.7 | 21.3 | 19.8 |
| Health and Safety Committee | 28.6 | 34.2 | 21.9 |
| Women's Committee | 8.9 | 0 | 18.8 |
| Political Action Committee | 7.6 | 9.5 | 5.3 |
| Shop Steward | 70.0 | 73.5 | 65.6 |
| Strike Committee | 9.4 | 9.4 | 9.4 |

Most respondents played multiple roles for their union, therefore we need to examine for patterns of participation. A series of correlations were conducted to determine if certain activities occur together. Executive, bargaining and grievance committee membership tended to cluster. Aside from these observations, no significant correlations existed between types of activism¹. In other words, health and safety activists, for example, were no more or less likely to be on the strike committee or the political action committee as women's committee members. The survey appears to contradict conventional wisdom that unionists specialize into particular areas of interest..

Shop stewards stood out a little. They were more likely to engage only in one union activity, and they worked fewer hours than other activists. This finding may be relevant below in our discussion of political activity².

¹ Correlations between executive, grievance and bargaining committees ranged between 0.29 and 0.38 (with 0 reflecting no correlation and 1 perfect correlation). No other correlations were higher than about 0.15, with many scoring close to 0.

² The survey also finds stewards were younger than other activists. The results suggest shop steward may be a common entry point for new activists, with additional functions added as activist experience grows.

Political Activity

The sample population was more politically active than originally hypothesized. We found a continuum of political activity, rather than a dichotomy of active/inactive. This will be detailed below. First, we should examine overall political participation levels.

Political activities are classified into three categories. Partisan activity is activity on behalf of a political party – being a member, attending conventions, or volunteering for a candidate. Formal non-partisan activity is connected to a political organization or group, outside of political parties, such as lobby groups or social movements. Informal non-partisan activities are less structured and not connected to an organization. They require either less commitment over time (e.g. rally) or are more individualized (e.g. boycott). For the purposes of the analysis that follows, voting will be discussed separately. Voting requires little commitment or ongoing consideration and is considered part a citizen's social expectations. As such it is qualitatively different from other political activities.

Among the survey sample, only 3.3% (or 7 respondents) reported no political activity of any kind, including voting. 8.9% vote but do nothing else. At the other end of the spectrum, 36.2% participated in all three types of political activity. 90.6% of respondents voted in one of the last provincial, municipal or federal elections, including 74.6% who voted in all three – significantly above provincial averages.

Table 2.3 shows political participation levels of the sample, broken down by sex. Generally, results indicated a significant level of activity. There was a modest but

consistent gap in political activity levels between men and women. Except for contacting a politician and being a member of a peace or health group, men participated at higher levels than women. This will be discussed in greater detail below.

A majority of the sample engaged in informal political activities, such as boycotts and rallies. Significant minorities of respondents were active in formal political organizations, either parties or lobby groups³. 12.7% of respondents engaged in direct action – defined as occupying buildings, confronting authorities or breaking the law for political reasons – which is a surprisingly high result.

Table 2.3: Selected Political Activities of Survey Sample (Percent Involved)

| Activity | Total Sample | Male | Female |
|----------------------------------|--------------|------|--------|
| <i>Partisan</i> | | | |
| Member | 19.7 | 21.3 | 17.7 |
| Volunteer for candidate | 24.4 | 28.2 | 19.8 |
| Attend convention | 8.9 | 12.0 | 5.2 |
| Vote in provincial election | 88.3 | 91.5 | 84.4 |
| <i>Informal Non-Partisan</i> | | | |
| Signed a petition | 76.5 | 76.9 | 76.0 |
| Contact politician | 48.1 | 47.0 | 49.5 |
| Join boycott | 57.3 | 64.1 | 49.0 |
| Join solidarity picket | 54.0 | 59.8 | 46.9 |
| Attend rally | 52.4 | 53.9 | 50.5 |
| Partake in direct action | 12.7 | 15.4 | 9.4 |
| <i>Formal Non-Partisan</i> | | | |
| Volunteer/member of envir. group | 12.7 | 13.7 | 11.6 |
| Volunteer/member of peace group | 9.9 | 7.7 | 12.5 |
| Volunteer/member of health group | 18.8 | 18.0 | 19.8 |

³ The survey was distributed in the lead up to the U.S. attack on Iraq, and percentages for involvement in peace groups may reflect the acuity of the issue at that time. Also, it is suspected high levels of participation in a health group are related to the activities of Friends of Medicare, an Alberta lobby group for which unions have been encouraging members to campaign. Finally, unionist participation in environmental groups contradicts conventional wisdom that union members are not interested in protecting the environment.

To place these results in perspective, we should note most Canadians are not very active politically. For example, only 7% of Canadians report volunteering for a party or candidate in an election, something reported by 24.4% of the survey respondents. Only 12% of Canadians attend political meetings or rallies, compared to 56.9% of the survey sample (Clarke et al, 1996). In Alberta, 11% of citizens report being members of a political party, below the 19.7% of survey respondents (Young, 2002). More noticeably, the same study found only 4% of Albertans belonged to a political action group, while 32.4% of the survey sample were members of or volunteered for such a group.

A study by Neil Nevitte finds that in 1990, 32.5% of Canadians did at least one of four listed protest behaviours – joining in boycotts, attending demonstrations, joining unofficial strikes and occupying buildings or factories (Nevitte, 1996). Nevitte's list is not fully compatible with the behaviours polled in the present survey, but some comparisons are possible. In the survey, 74.6% engaged in one of four of the survey's parallel activities – joining a boycott, attending a political rally or protest, joining a solidarity picket and partaking in direct action.

The surveyed union activists are two to four times more likely to engage in political activities than the average Canadian. However, many hypothesize that union activists can only be motivated to work on issues directly affecting their workplace, such as WCB or labour law, and are unwilling to participate in political efforts not affecting them. The survey tested this theory. It described two hypothetical issue scenarios – negative changes to the WCB, and cuts to prescription drug benefits for low income Albertans – and provided a list of eight possible activities, from signing a petition to

engaging in direct action. On the WCB issue, the average number of actions respondents were willing to consider was 4.2. For the drug issue, the average was 4.18. Table 2.4 compares the potential activities for each issue. Respondents appear equally willing to engage in action to stop a negative policy where they feel no direct impact.

Table 2.4: Willingness to Engage in Political Activity

| Activity | WCB Issue (% yes) | Prescription Drug Issue (% yes) |
|---|----------------------|------------------------------------|
| Sign a petition | 94.4 | 95.8 |
| Attend a protest rally | 68.1 | 63.8 |
| Contact a politician | 68.1 | 68.5 |
| Volunteer with a group fighting changes | 41.3 | 45.1 |
| Vote for a party | 66.2 | 65.3 |
| Campaign for a party | 29.1 | 30.2 |
| Go on strike to pressure government. | 18.0 | 17.4 |
| Engage in direct action | 32.5 | 32.4 |

Attitudes Toward Political System

Croteau postulates that working class attitudes to politics are distant and cynical, and identifies seven attitudes rationalizing their inactivity (discussed in the previous chapter). The survey tested the seven attitudes and found five are not present among the majority of this population. This group only resembled Croteau’s disengaged worker in the belief that politics is dominated by people who do not understand workers and in the lack of trust in politicians.

Table 2.5 groups a series of responses according to Croteau’s seven attitudes. Of note are the high levels of distrust in the established system and its actors, with 83.6% agreeing politicians can’t be trusted. However, respondents were optimistic about their capacity to make change through politics. Almost 81% disagreed with the statement their involvement will not change anything.

Table 2.5: Croteau’s Seven Attitudes Among Survey Sample

| Attitude | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|---|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
| <i>Political Leaders Do Not Understand Working People</i> Politics is dominated by people who don’t understand working people. | 29.5 | 55.6 | 13.0 | 1.4 |
| <i>Cannot Trust Political Leaders</i> Politicians are only interested in getting re-elected. We can’t trust them. | 31.4 | 52.2 | 15.0 | 0.5 |
| <i>Political Activists Are Not Like Working People</i> Political activists are too radical. | 1.9 | 11.2 | 61.2 | 23.8 |
| <i>Involvement Won’t Change Anything</i> My involvement won’t change anything. The system always remains the same. | 1.9 | 17.2 | 61.7 | 19.1 |
| <i>Too Busy For Politics</i> I don’t have time to get involved in politics. | 7.2 | 30.3 | 51.0 | 10.1 |
| <i>Politics Not Worth Thinking About</i> I don’t think much about politics. | 3.8 | 17.7 | 55.0 | 23.4 |
| <i>Politics Should Be Left to Professionals</i> Politics should be left to professionals who know what they are doing. | 1.0 | 6.7 | 52.6 | 39.2 |

Note: Not all figures total 100% due to some respondents answering “don’t know/unsure”.

Table 2.6 offers some additional measures of political attitudes among the survey sample. In general, these attitudes fell in the same direction as those in Table 2.5. The respondents were not distant from politics, seeing it as affecting them and feeling a need to get involved. Politics was not seen as inappropriate for the workplace. However, activists saw globalization undermining the capacity of government to help working people. This does not necessarily indicate the respondents felt unable to make change politically. The feeling was balanced by strong agreement for the need to elect a different

government. Respondents may harbour misgivings about the impact of globalization on the state, but these concerns do not seem to spill over into their other political attitudes.

Table 2.6: Other Political Attitudes Among Survey Sample

| Attitude | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|--|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
| We need to defeat the government and elect someone who will represent working people | 46.9 | 45.9 | 6.2 | 0.5 |
| In a world of globalization, governments have lost the ability to do things to help working people | 22.8 | 51.0 | 19.4 | 6.8 |
| Politics has no place in the workplace | 1.9 | 11.2 | 61.2 | 23.8 |
| Politics doesn't affect me | 0.0 | 1.0 | 48.6 | 50.5 |
| Active union members like me need to get involved in politics | 31.7 | 62.0 | 5.3 | 0.5 |

Note: Not all figures total 100% due to some respondents answering “don't know/unsure”.

The survey results suggest activists are not the disengaged workers found by Croteau, even though they do share a lack of trust in the current system. Comparing the survey to general population studies shows the respondents do not look like the average member of the public either. While the wording of questions between these studies and the survey is not identical, comparisons are useful. 81% of the public indicate politics is “too complicated” for average people (Clarke et al, 1996), and only 30% report they are “interested in politics” (Kanji, 2002), markedly different from the survey respondents. Other studies find that more than one in three citizens feel powerless in politics (Young, 2002; Kanji, 2002), a number significantly higher than the union activists.

Where the respondents share attitudes with other Canadians is in their distrust of politicians. Four in five Canadians think politicians are only interested in winning elections (Clarke et al, 1996), a number virtually identical to the survey results.

In short, a clear picture is taking shape of a group of engaged, interested and involved activists. While there is a mistrust of politicians and the nature of the political system, there are high feelings of political efficacy and motivation. This motivation translates into high political participation rates, from voting through to higher order activism such as formal involvement in a party, organization or direct action.

But of course, not all activists surveyed were politically active. Summary statistics sometimes hide as much as they reveal. We need to explore the differences between activists to reveal the picture's more vibrant hues.

Defining Political Activity

To distinguish between politically active and politically inactive respondents, we must address two issues. First, we must clarify what a “political” activity is. For the most part this is unproblematic, as the bulk of activities listed in the survey are generally regarded as political – voting, attending a protest, joining a party, etc. There are two activities – consumer boycotts and solidarity pickets (walking a picket line of workers to whose dispute they are not a party) – which are dependent in large part on how the actor perceives the act. They can be perceived as a non-political act of simple solidarity in a labour dispute. Or they can be seen as a politically powerful expression. Without directly asking the person's perspective, which the survey did not do, it is difficult to resolve. For the purposes of this analysis, these two activities are judged individual to individual by assessing how frequently the person engages in them and within the context of other activities in which they participate.

The survey excluded certain political acts (e.g. consciousness-raising, political artistic expression). In part this exclusion was due to the desire to examine activities enclosed within the political system. These other forms of political action are also more difficult to measure, due to their highly subjective nature. However, it is likely that individuals who engage in this type of political act also participate in rallies or political organizations, and so will be classified as politically active, even if a dimension of their activity is not measured.

Second, we need to determine the threshold of activity categorizing a person as “politically active”. It is reasonable to argue a politically active person engages in political activities at a level higher than most citizens. The analysis here distinguishes between political activity which is common among citizens and is relatively easy to engage in, and activity which requires more consciousness, commitment and public admission to perform. Voting, for example, is not deemed sufficient. It is an infrequent task requiring little time or energy commitment. Conversely, joining a political party, engaging in direct action or attending a protest rally require a higher degree of commitment and a willingness to be publicly identified with a certain political stance. This qualitative difference clarifies the motivational difference between political activists and non-activists.

The survey population was divided into active and inactive categories according to the following criteria. A respondent was classified as politically active if they participated in any one of the following: any form of partisan activity, attended a protest rally, attended a political meeting, were a member of or volunteer for a political

organization, or engaged in direct action. Voting, signing a petition and contacting a politician were not considered sufficient for categorization as active. The latter three activities are considered to be low commitment and highly private acts – taking only a few minutes to complete, requiring little self-starting and no ongoing engagement. This is particularly true in union circles, where petitions or form letters are often distributed on the shop floor or at the membership meeting. Few active steps are required to complete such acts. The other actions require a degree of individual momentum, including a pre-meditated decision to act.

There were a few cases of respondents who participated in a boycott and/or joined a solidarity picket, but performed no other “politically active” behaviour. It was not directly determinable if their boycott/picket action should be classified as political. For analytical purposes, these respondents were divided based upon the number of hours in the past year they participated in political activities. Those who engaged in politics for six or more hours were classified as active, while the rest were categorized as inactive. Participation of more than six hours suggests multiple visits to picket lines or a sustained boycott affecting more than one or two purchases. To perform these tasks on a more regular or sustained basis suggests a level of commitment spanning beyond one or two labour disputes, and may be more political in its nature. It is argued here that attending one or two picket lines for striking workers is likely to be perceived by the activist as an act of solidarity. If they make a more regular appearance on such picket lines, then we can argue they see acting in this fashion as a political statement and an effort to increase the political power of those striking workers.

Comparing Politically Active and Inactive

Using the above categorization, 72.8% of the survey sample was classified as “politically active”, with the remaining 27.2% as inactive. There are a number of points for comparison between the two categories, beginning with demographic (Table 2.7).

Across all demographic variables, male union activists tended to be more politically involved than female activists. Respondents under age 30 were less likely to be politically active, while those between 51 and 60 were more active. All other age groups showed no significant deviation from the mean rate. Income showed slight, but not significant differences, with participation increasing as income increases. As for occupation, professional, trades and blue collar workers had similar participation levels. Service and less skilled white-collar workers, however, participated in politics at significantly lower rates.

Differences between demographic categories were particularly pronounced for women. The effects of youth, lower income and occupation played a stronger role in dampening female participation.

We begin to see the most significant differences when we began to look at activists’ relationship to their union. First, we found public sector workers were more likely to engage in politics than private sector workers. Women in the public sector were about as politically active as men in the private sector, while public sector men and private sector women took the highest and lowest position, respectively.

Table 2.7: Proportion Politically Active, by Demographic Characteristic

| | Total Sample (% politically active) | Male | Female |
|------------------------------|--|-------------|---------------|
| Overall | 72.8 | 78.6 | 65.6 |
| Under 30 years | 52.6 | 63.6 | 37.5 |
| 31-40 years | 73.5 | 80.0 | 63.2 |
| 41-50 years | 68.7 | 74.0 | 62.2 |
| 51-60 years | 97.1 | 100 | 94.1 |
| 61+ years | 63.6 | - | - |
| Under \$20,000 | 50.0 | - | - |
| \$21,000-\$40,000 | 69.1 | 80.8 | 61.9 |
| \$41,000-\$60,000 | 72.0 | 73.8 | 68.8 |
| Over \$60,000 | 85.7 | 89.7 | 76.9 |
| Professional | 83.3 | - | 84.0 |
| Blue collar | 78.8 | 82.6 | 54.6 |
| Service | 66.0 | 66.7 | 65.7 |
| Trades | 80.0 | 77.8 | - |
| Less Skilled White Collar | 53.6 | 66.7 | 50.0 |
| Public Sector | 78.2 | 88.9 | 69.6 |
| Private Sector | 67.3 | 71.4 | 59.5 |

Note: Cells with less than 10 cases are not reported.

Interesting results emerged when we compared union activity and political activity levels. The strongest correlations were between political participation and the number of hours a person worked on union business and between political participation and the number of positions undertaken (past and present) for the union. The more hours they spent on union activities and the more positions they held in the union, the more politically active they were in their private lives (Table 2.8).

However, we did not find significant differences in the type of union activity and political participation. All committees and positions had relatively similar levels of political participation. It was the level of union activity, and not the type of activity that appeared to affect political participation.

We start to see a glimpse of a link between union activity and political activity. Higher levels of political participation are associated with higher levels of union participation in some way.

Table 2.8: Correlations of Union Activity with Political Activity Status

| Variable | Correlation |
|---------------------------------------|-------------|
| Union Hours | 0.3573 |
| Number of Activities, Past five years | 0.2951 |
| Number of Activities, Current | 0.3048 |
| Executive Member | 0.1531 |
| Health and Safety Committee | 0.1075 |
| Bargaining Committee | 0.0784 |
| Shop Steward | 0.1467 |

Note: Value of zero indicates no correlation and value of one is perfect correlation.

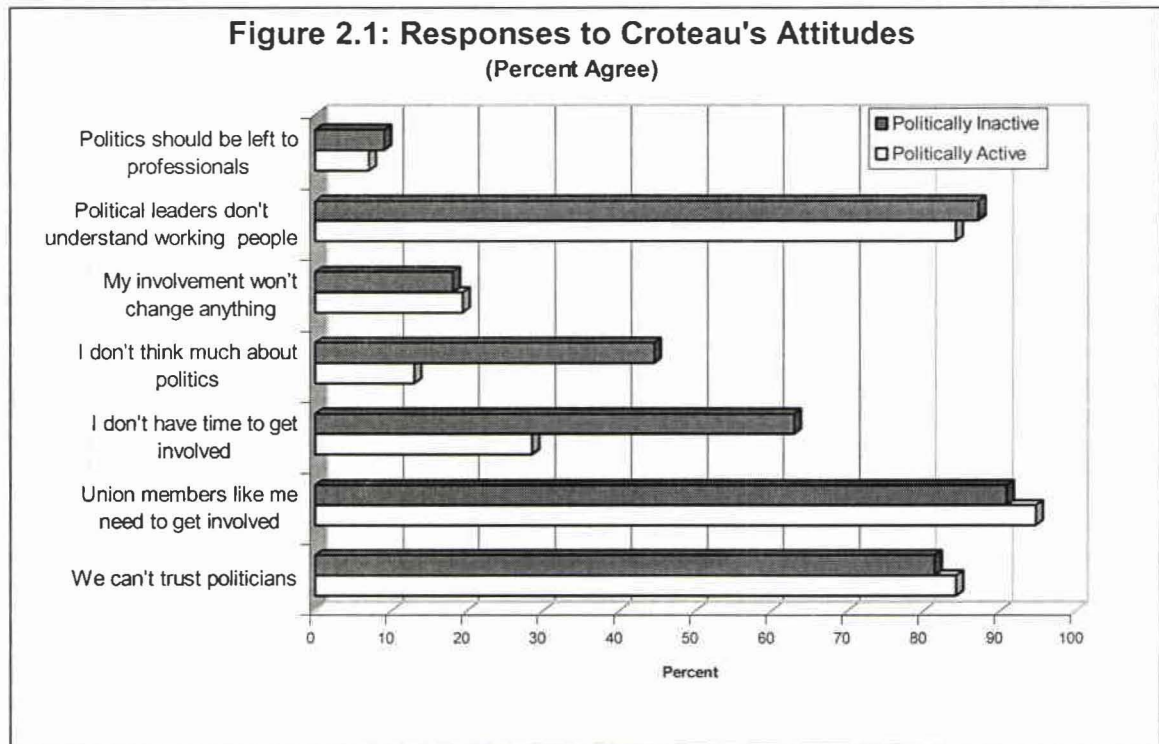
Not surprisingly, politically active unionists showed a greater propensity to consider political action to prevent a negative government change, as shown in Table 2.9. As discussed above, participants were given a list of eight possible political actions, ranging from voting to direct action, in response to government changes to WCB and to low income drug benefits, and asked to indicate what they would consider doing. Politically active respondents marked almost twice as many actions as the inactive respondents. In both cases, there was no difference between the two issues.

Table 2.9: Willingness to Act on Political Issue (Mean Number of Acts)

| | WCB | Prescription Drug Benefits |
|----------------------|-----|----------------------------|
| Politically Active | 4.8 | 4.8 |
| Politically Inactive | 2.6 | 2.6 |

Looking at our two categories with respect to Croteau’s seven attitudes, we found on five of the measures the politically active and inactive respondents held very similar views, with the politically active more likely to express their opinion “strongly”. On two measures – thinking about politics and having time to get involved in politics – the two

categories revealed highly different views (Figure 2.1). This may expose a possible explanation for the differing political participation levels between the two categories.



We also saw slight differences in how the two groups perceived political parties. Table 2.10 indicates attitudes toward the NDP and another, unnamed, party. Politically active respondents saw the NDP more positively and other parties more negatively than politically inactive unionists. Positive views of the NDP can be seen as a partial surrogate for a class-based perception of electoral politics. Union activists did not see their interests perfectly aligning with the NDP, but saw it doing a better job than the others. However, the difference between categories showed a small link between political activity and positive attitudes toward the NDP, although we should be careful not to take this conclusion too far, given the slightness of the shift.

Table 2.10: “How Often Does Party Represent Working People’s Interests” (Percent)

| | All of the time | Most of the time | Some of the time | Once in a while | Never |
|----------------------|-----------------|------------------|------------------|-----------------|-------|
| <i>NDP</i> | | | | | |
| Politically Active | 9.9 | 45.0 | 34.4 | 9.9 | 0.7 |
| Politically Inactive | 5.6 | 33.3 | 40.7 | 18.5 | 1.9 |
| <i>Other Party</i> | | | | | |
| Politically Active | 2.0 | 2.0 | 26.4 | 50.0 | 19.6 |
| Politically Inactive | 0 | 5.6 | 35.9 | 52.8 | 5.6 |

Overall, despite interesting demographic differences, we see a picture of a group of union activists with more in common than not. They are highly active in their union and share most attitudes about the political system. Their interest in and predisposition to politics is very similar, and only differ in the choice to act. As a result, a binary categorization of political activity, while helpful, may not be the most appropriate way to frame the differences between union activists.

Spectrum of Political Activity

Further probing revealed a spectrum of political activism with five sub-categories: Refusers, Interested Inactive, Moderately Active Formal, Moderately Active Informal, Highly Active. Their relative proportions of the total sample are reported in Table 2.11.

Table 2.11: Political Participation Spectrum

| | Percent of Total Sample |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------|
| Refusers | 5.6 |
| Interested Inactive | 21.6 |
| Moderately Active, Informal | 18.8 |
| Moderately Active, Formal | 28.2 |
| Highly Active | 25.8 |

At the inactive end of this spectrum, we witnessed a small group of “Refusers”, who not only did not participate politically, but also indicated an unwillingness to do so.

This group indicated little openness to act politically in any form, and make up 5.6% of the sample. This group scored consistently lower on union participation levels. They were also more likely to state they did not have enough time for politics and they did not think much about politics. However, they were not significantly more alienated from politics. Their feelings of efficacy were on par with more political portions of the sample, and their trust levels no lower.

The Refusers were a little younger than the rest of the sample, although the small size of this group demands caution in reaching conclusions. Men and women were equally likely to be Refusers.

Next we found the “Interested Inactive” group. This group was inactive politically, but had not rejected political activity. When asked, they indicated they would consider becoming involved politically. The survey did not probe the conditions necessary to have them take that step.

The Interested Inactive subset fitted above the Refusers on union involvement and political attitudes, but below the politically active respondents. Their demographic features reflected the politically inactive group described above. Women were more likely to fall into this category.

We therefore see two types of politically inactive unionists – those who are not active but willing to consider participation, and those for whom participation is rejected.

Within the politically active group, we found three types of activism. The “Moderately Active – Informal” group partook only in informal activities, such as rallies, solidarity pickets or one-time meetings. They did not participate more formally in

political parties or organizations. The second group were “Moderately Active – Formal”, who engaged formally in parties and organizations as well as informal activities. More than 83% of the Formal group engaged in informal activities.

Both subsets were found to be politically active at moderate levels. The Informal group had higher proportions of men, private sector and younger workers when compared to the Formal group. Both groups participated in politics for similar numbers of hours and share attitudinal positioning. In terms of union hours and positions, Informal activists were slightly lower on both scales.

The demographic patterns between Informal and Formal activists suggest men and women, younger and older workers may perceive barriers to political participation uniquely and respond with different political choices. Men and younger workers may feel more comfortable at informal events.

At the far end of the spectrum we had the “Highly Active” group whose involvement in politics was more intensive and extensive than other respondents. This group reported more than 21 hours a year in political activities, either partisan, non-partisan or both. These activists were spending more than 3 or 4 hours a month on political activities.

Highly Active unionists were also more active in their union. They were twice as likely to report spending more than 20 hours a month on union activities. They were almost twice as likely to report being involved in four or more union positions or committees.

We found no significant differences based upon sex, sector or age for the Highly Active subgroup. Percentages of these categories reflected the overall politically active classification discussed above.

All the attitudinal tendencies of political activists reported above held true for Highly Active. However, Highly Active respondents were more likely to express their position as “strong” agreement or disagreement.

Analysis of the survey has revealed a spectrum of political participation. Union activists in this sample are cut from similar cloth, and have more in common than they differ. It is a picture of growing intensity. As we move across the spectrum, we find intensified union activity and intensified political activity together. We also find they are more likely to see political activity as important and the system susceptible to change.

We are hesitant to suggest the spectrum presented above represents a hierarchy of political activism. While correlations suggest certain variables intensify consistently as we move along the scale, we should not translate this finding into a conclusion that workers move in a linear fashion from one stage to the next.

Summary

The survey provided a fascinating picture of union activists’ political attitudes and behaviour. Five findings are relevant for the questions under examination.

The first observation is that the survey population – Alberta union activists – are more politically active than hypothesized. The finding lends credence to the hypothesis that union activists act in the role of Rose’s bridge builder or Gramsci’s organic

intellectual. They are a group who are more engaged and active than their co-workers and neighbours. They have taken on a place of semi-leadership in their workplace, and this may be reflected in their behaviour and attitudes toward politics. How far they engage this role, and if they act as translators, is yet to be seen.

We also have reason to speculate that class consciousness may play a role in politically activating workers. The survey was of limited assistance in this regard, but the presence of strong political activity hints a higher degree of class consciousness – at least trade union consciousness – may be linked to greater political mobilization.

The type of political activity engaged by the survey population may not be revolutionary, but evidence suggests it is focussed on anti-establishment goals and tinged with a sense of class. These workers engage in politics to stop policies harmful to workers, appear to hold modest support for the NDP and are dismissive of other parties.

The second finding is that five of Croteau's seven attitudes of political inactivity do not apply to this population. The exceptions are a lack of trust in politicians and a belief that the system is dominated by people who do not understand workers. We should not be surprised such a politically mobilized population would not share the attitudes of the inactive mass of working people. However, the two exceptions are deserving of consideration, for they indicate a sense of unease among union activists about the nature of the political system. In spite of high mobilization and feelings of political efficacy, the respondents interpreted the system as constructed to work against their interests. In these two attitudes we witness a separation from the system, despite high political activity levels. This may reflect a subtle form of class divide. The political system is not seen as a

natural environment for workers, yet many union activists enter it anyway. We need to explore further why they do.

The third finding is that union activists cannot be neatly divided into politically active and inactive categories. There is a spectrum of political activity, where the boundaries between each placement are subtle. It is not a hierarchy of mobilization, but instead a reflection of different choices made by unionists about politics and political activity. The uncovering of a spectrum has two consequences for this study. First, it offers a hopeful signal to unions attempting to politically mobilize their membership. Those who are inactive are not necessarily non-political. Most remained open to the idea of political participation. There is an opening for unions to engage them in politics and persuade them to become more active.

Secondly, and more importantly, we come to postulate that what separates politically active and inactive unionists is not a pre-disposition to politics, but a choice about behaviour. In other words, the barriers to political participation do not rest within the nature of the individual. Instead they reside in a place of intersection between individual and society. How a person interprets their position in the political system and the desirability of action in that system sets the stage for their political participation.

This interpretive process is reflective of Thompson's and Katznelson's descriptions of the intersection between lived experience and structural class position. The survey provided a hint that a worker's interpretation of that intersection plays a key role in the decision to become politically active. The end result is contingent, more fluid and less predictable than Marx's initial conception of the transition to action.

The fourth finding is that the relative levels of political activity among respondents mirror political participation patterns in Canada. Women, youth, and service workers were all less active politically. Union activists in these groups were more active than society as a whole, but continued to lag behind men, older workers and certain occupations. The appearance of disparate participation levels should not surprise us. However, we should also note their significance. The barriers to participation for these groups of Canadian workers appear strong and pervasive. Union activity, and its link to increased political activity, is not enough to overcome these barriers in their entirety.

More importantly, we should note many union activities – picket lines, rallies, boycotts, confrontation – lend themselves more naturally to informal types of political activity, and also more natural for men. The nature of union activities, such as picket lines and confrontational bargaining sessions, may lead to gender biases in political participation, as the skills acquired through union activism fit male tendencies more effectively. This is a question we should return to in the interview phase.

The fifth finding from the survey data is the occurrence of strong correlations between intensity of political activity and intensity of union activity. There is without question a dominant link between the two levels of activism. Highly active union members also tended to be highly active political participants. This raises more questions than answers. Are we examining a group of highly motivated, involved people who have chosen to get involved both in their union and in politics? Or is one form of activism leading to the skills and disposition to allow the other form of participation? This is a

crucial question, for it takes us to the crux of the question of the union's role in building political participation among working class men and women.

A temporal timeline assessing if union activism precedes political activism might assist the matter. Unfortunately, the survey was not designed to answer this question.

The survey set the stage for the next step in the project. It provided a baseline of understanding about union activists and offers some provisional observations on how unions, class consciousness, and the class divide affect political participation. The observations raise additional questions that can be explored more fully in the interview phase, to which we now turn.

Chapter 4: Interviews of Selected Activists

This chapter reports findings from interviews done with a subset of survey respondents. Interviews permit a richer analysis of questions first raised in chapter two, allowing us to explore motivations and perspectives that cannot be tapped by surveys.

To probe the three questions of class consciousness, class divide and the role of unions, the interviews delved into four areas. First, they examined the level and nature of class consciousness among these activists. Second, they asked about the unionists' political activity and perceptions of politics and the political system. Third, they probed motivations for union involvement and what role, if any, unions play in their political mobilization. Fourth, the interviews explored the social and political context facing the activists to bring further insight into the theories of Goldthorpe, Croteau, Rose and Gramsci.

Eight activists from the survey sample were selected for follow-up interviews. They were pulled from those respondents who consented to be contacted about a possible interview (approximately half of the survey responses). Interviewees fit four categories of activists, based upon political activism and sector of employment. Four politically active and four politically inactive respondents were selected. Within each category, two came from public sector unions and two from private sector unions. Gender balance was also maintained, making sure one male and one female from each sector was selected. Candidates were contacted at random, and the first person responding positively was chosen. Three people contacted refused to participate. Interviews were conducted in person and took between 45 minutes and 75 minutes.

The limited number of interviews prohibits exploration of the political activity continuum found in the previous chapter. By necessity, the interviews were grouped by the initial binary classification of politically active/inactive. The discussion that follows will rely on this duality, but the reader should keep in mind the population under examination more accurately reflects a continuum of political behaviour.

The limited number of interviews also makes a full analysis of sex differences impossible. Gender balance was maintained to ensure results were not skewed by a predominance of one sex.

In the following analysis, the primary focus will be to discern differences and similarities between the politically active and inactive unionists. We will also examine possible divergences between private sector and public sector union activists.

The limited number of interviews requires any conclusions remain only provisional, requiring further study for confirmation. That said, there is still much to learn from detailed conversations with Alberta union activists.

Union Involvement

The participation patterns of the interviewees were similar to the results found in the survey. Most were involved in their union in multiple ways, with seven of the eight indicating three or more forms of participation. The politically active participants tended to list more activities and report more hours per month than politically inactive. This suggests the sample of interviewees is representative of the survey population.

Most of those who are politically active had been active in the union longer than non-active participants. However, the exceptions to this pattern should caution us against projecting conclusions. All eight interviewees indicated their first activity for the union was shop steward, a position most still held, and they had taken on additional responsibilities over time⁴.

The addition of other duties appears to occur very quickly, as most reported adding additional tasks within months of first becoming involved in the union. The experience of one politically inactive participant was common:

“I was asked to stand as shop steward – my first experience as shop steward or a union shop for that matter. And very quickly thereafter I was asked to stand, was nominated, and elected as vice-president. And very shortly thereafter was asked to go on the negotiating committee. So I have had quite a trial by fire.” (IPrM)⁵

They also shared similar experiences with how they got started in the union. No one just showed up at a meeting out of curiosity or individual initiative. In each case, some catalyst was necessary to spark initial participation. Interviewees appear to have taken two routes. Some were persuaded by a co-worker or friend to start being active. “I was dragged to a meeting by a friend. I had been with [the employer] for four or five years at the time, and a co-worker was on the board of directors and said you should come out and see what we do ... I went and got interested and put to work.” (IPrF)

⁴ This confirms a point discussed in the survey chapter that shop steward is a starting place for union activists. This choice of beginning is logical, as the job is specific and the duties worksite-related.

⁵ Interview citations are coded according to the three categories of politically active/inactive, sector and sex. Codes are as follows: (I)=politically inactive, (A)=politically active. (P)=public sector, (Pr)=private sector. (M)=male, (F)=female. For example, IPrM is the private sector male interviewee who is politically inactive. Using this system, each interview has a distinct code.

For others, an important event sparked their activism. An impending strike was a common catalyst. “It was the strike of 1997.” (APrF). Sometimes it was an internal conflict, such as a divisive election. “I didn’t like some of the things that were going on, so the only way to make change is to get involved.” (IPM) In these cases, as well, a co-worker was critical in encouraging them to become active.

The last quote leads to another common trait among the interview subjects. When asked why they are active with their union, the respondents demonstrated a “get involved” self-image. This was true for politically active subjects. “I didn’t want to sit by idly and let things happen.” (APrF). But it was equally true for politically inactive respondents. “I am one of those guys who doesn’t like to sit around on the outside and bitch about it. So I want to get involved.” (IPM) For this population being part of the solution was a desirable trait – something they admired in themselves and disparaged in those who do not possess this characteristic.

However, as we explored their motivations for activism more deeply, differences began to appear between politically active and inactive respondents. For politically inactive subjects, satisfaction from their union involvement arose from helping their co-workers. “I feel I am helping people. ... Even a simple phone call from one member to clarify something. I helped that person. It is gratifying.” (IPrF) Gratification came from helping another individual. The sense of connection was an individualistic one.

Politically active respondents, on the other hand, communicated a more collective sense of satisfaction.

“It’s nice to find people who see things similarly, or at least see the opportunity to make change similarly. Not just in my local. Even when

you go out to other locals, you know, the union thing. People believe in unionism. That's it. That's a big common ground. That's what makes unions so strong. It is a family thing." (APM)

Politically active interviewees spoke of broader collective membership. They expressed a sense of sharing in a common group and talked about their responsibility to the group.

The collective versus individual motivations is the first difference between politically active and inactive respondents. Similar catalysts got them started in the union, and they are active in similar ways, but what they find personally rewarding is different.

Attitudes About Union

The interviews proceeded to explore respondents' attitudes about their union and its functions in the workplace and in society. When asked what a union can do for people, the inactive unionists tended to list a series of practical, materialist functions. "A little more job security. Better salary. A little less intimidation from senior management. The union helps keep that in check." (IPM) Identification of wages, benefits and limits on management arbitrariness were universal among politically inactive interviewees. The union was seen as a workplace agent elected to increase the economic situation for its members. "The main job for ours is to get the contract. To get our benefits." (IPF).

We see here shades of Goldthorpe's "instrumental collectivity" – where workers' connection to their union is highly pragmatic and materialist. They see their union fulfilling the function of representing members.

The situation was markedly different among politically active interviewees. While instrumentalist functions arose in the discussion, emphasis rested more on

protecting rights and defending working people generally. At work, unions were credited for strengthening the hand of workers by providing a collective voice. “We [in the union] look after the best interests of ourselves. As a coordinated group, as a group that has some bargaining power ... strength in numbers.” (APF) Unions “unite the little guy. That’s what the union can do. The union can give a very loud voice to one little person.” (APM).

The politically active group also saw the union as a vehicle for all working people. There was even some sense of class representation. “It supports the working class, the people that fit into our group. We are the average Joe worker and they help give us a voice.” (APrM) One activist saw the union playing a central role in building capacity among workers to defend themselves (APF).

The two categories of activists perceived their union and its functions very differently. Politically active unionists appear to hold a more macro-level understanding of the union and its place in society. They saw its role extending beyond the walls of the workplace. Their words suggest they saw a form of kinship not only with their co-workers, but with workers in general. Some politically active interviewees, but no inactive subjects, relayed stories about non-unionized workers and how the union could help them as well. We pick up a hint of class analysis in the words of the politically active group. Is this indicative of some form of articulated class consciousness? It is to this question we now turn.

Class Consciousness

Exploring class consciousness in Canada is not easy. Most Canadians identify themselves as “middle class”. This self-identification reflects a labelling based upon income or consumption patterns, rather than relationship to the means of production. The parable of Canada as a nation of middle class citizens is deeply entrenched. It reflects a generalized lack of class consciousness among the working population. It also creates problems for measuring class, as one must delve deeper than superficial interview responses to reveal a more accurate sense of how workers place themselves in the economic structure.

The interviews attempted to resolve this dilemma by posing two sets of questions. First, they asked the person to self-identify to which class they belong. As expected, seven of the eight began by indicating some version of a middle class identification, such as “lower middle”, “average class”, “middle of the road”, and “working class-middle class”. The eighth identified herself as “the struggling educated lower” class. However, the connection to middle class identification was tenuous. Answers were peppered with “I think”, “I guess”, “probably” and other hesitations. This suggests it is said automatically, before they have a chance to consider the question more fully.

The interviews followed by asking the person to define “working class” and, using their definition, then indicate if they classify themselves in that class. All four politically active subjects put themselves into their definition of working class. Only one of the four politically inactive did so.

On its own, this finding is worthy of discussion as it suggests a link between a working class self-classification and political involvement. However the more interesting, and certainly more important, finding is how the participants define working class. Two ways of defining working class emerged. The first was to equate it to certain occupations and jobs, such as blue-collar work, “heavy work”, etc. “When I hear the term working class, trades people are the first thing that come to mind.” (IPM). Others mingled occupation and income. “I would say more the blue collar workers. Lower paying, perhaps. ... I see working class not having the benefits that unions do.” (IPrF)

This definition uses the nature of the work as the principle demarcation. Class is constructed based upon what one does for a living, and to a lesser extent how much they earn. All four politically inactive interviewees, and one politically active respondent, defined working class in this manner.

The remaining politically active subjects clustered around a second definition, one linked to one’s relationship to work. Working class, one indicated, is:

“A person whose day is governed by the alarm clock. They have to get up each morning, they have to get up and do the work. They have to do this. It is not a choice. You have to go. You don’t necessarily have to be down digging in the dirt with your hands any more than shuffling papers in an office. The fact you have to get up and you have to go. You have to work to survive. That’s what working class means to me.” (APM)

Working class was linked to a lack of control over one’s workday. “I have to sit at a computer for most of my day. My work is more mental stress. ... I work really hard.”

(APF) It was also linked to dependency on an employer for a paycheque (APrF). These subjects classified working class as spanning occupational and income categories, and instead seeing it in relational terms. Common elements in this definition are the structural

nature of their economic position, and their relative powerlessness in the economic sphere. It is a definition rooted in a macro-level reality.

With this definition came an ambivalent attitude toward being working class. The powerlessness and dependency were seen as undesirable, but there was also a certain pride about being crucial to society.

“I have no choice. I’d rather not be [working class]. I have no choice. You have to work, right? With that there is a lot of positive connotations that come too. Like the working class person is by and large what makes up the largest percentage of our population. There is a lot of positive connotations to that. It’s what drives the economy. All those sorts of good stuff like that.” (APM)

The difference between the two definitions was also reflected in the subjects’ sense of other classes. When occupation or income was the core variable, other classes were varied – white collar, upper, unemployed all were considered other types of class. One non-active interviewee talked about those who “sit behind the big fancy desk” (IPrM) and labelled office workers as not working class.

On the other hand, if working class was defined by the person’s relationship to work, the non-working class became exclusively the corporate elite. “The CEO of [employer]? He would be in the corporate giant class. He is out there, he’s beyond everyone else in his eyes.” (APrF)

It could be argued the relational definition of class approximates class consciousness, which makes its link to political activism of interest. Admittedly, no one used language matching a classical, Marxian conception of class. No one discussed their relationship to the means of production, or mentioned “capitalists”. However, the explicit references to power and the person’s structural relationship to work can be seen as

modern manifestations of class awareness. The workers who used the relational definition saw themselves in a place of dependency and powerlessness compared to their employer and this relationship arises not out of individual circumstance, but out of the overall structure of our economic system. It is a class consciousness formed out of lived experience, rather than intellectual theorizing. Its lack of theoretical expression does not dampen its capacity to shape the unionist's outlooks on the world or their likelihood to act individually and collectively. They may only partially articulate their consciousness, but within this articulation lays a significant awareness of their place in society.

We have found a divide between the politically active and inactive unionists in how they define class, and it is one with potential explanatory power for their divergent routes of political activity. How class consciousness is linked to political action requires further consideration, which will occur below. First we need to explore how the interviewees themselves perceive politics and their decision to be or not be politically active so we may understand if self-perceptions play a role in the decision.

Perception of Politics

The survey results suggested union activists, regardless of political participation, are relatively engaged in politics⁶. Politics is considered important and union activists are positive about the capacity to change the system. Most also share a distrust of politicians and sense politics is dominated by those who do not understand working people. So, what

⁶ Interview subjects were asked to define politics. Universally, a mainstream definition of politics was adopted, including parties, politicians, rallies, lobbying, petitions and matters related to public policy. Less agreement existed over whether boycotts and solidarity pickets are political. These observations confirm assumptions made earlier in the study regarding how workers perceive politics and political activity.

distinguishes the politically inactive from the active? The interviews sought answers to that question.

The interview subjects shared common tendencies. All eight vote regularly. Their commitment to voting was unquestioned – it is something a citizen does. They all follow politics in some way. Most volunteered that they read or watch the news regularly to keep up to date on current events. References to contemporary political happenings – ranging from Kyoto to Mad Cow disease to David Orchard to international affairs – arose in all the interviews. We start with this observation, to remind us the population under study is more engaged in politics than the average public. It also serves to highlight that the politically inactive are not necessarily non-political. Their decision to remain inactive may arise from other causes.

Both politically active and inactive interviewees held negative views about the political system, seeing it as run by distant, big interests. The observation that corporations and those with money dominate the system was common in both categories. An inactive subject said: “I really think the whole big machine is being run by big corporations and Wall Street.” (IPrF) An active participant held similar views. “It ties into the money and the big business thing again, right. What’s this little immigrant going to do for me – nothing. Whereas if you are going to some corporate fundraising dinner, perhaps you are going to listen to those people’s issues a little more.” (APM)

Many feel the system was rife with corruption. “It’s corrupt right now.” (APrF) In the subjects’ opinion greed, arrogance, patronage and a disconnection from the lives of average people seemed to plague the political system in Alberta and Canada.

As we probed deeper, differences appeared. Politically active participants tended to see the lack of voice for working people as self-inflicted. “I really think that people have taken far too much of a lackadaisical approach to politics and the people they have elected to represent them have been taking advantage of it, and the people aren’t doing anything to make a change.” (APrF) The politically active category felt working people should be getting more involved in politics, and that if they do, they can make change happen.

“I believe we have a bigger voice than we realize we do. ...100% of big business participates in the political campaign, whereas only about 20% of the general population takes part [in politics], gets involved and lets their voices be heard. If we had 100% of the civic population making themselves known, I guarantee you the governments would be more geared to the little guy.” (APM)

The non-active category was notably more pessimistic. They felt the system is more impermeable to change. Working people’s involvement in politics “[w]ouldn’t make a difference. Because it is the same. Always the same.” (IPF)

The politically active and inactive mostly shared attitudes about politics. All could be identified as politically interested but distrusting of the political system. What separated them is a belief change is possible and a feeling of efficacy about working people’s ability to affect change

Reasons for Political Activity/Inactivity

Both groups of interviewees pay attention to politics, and both have a self-image as the type of person who gets involved. So what drives the decision to be politically

active or inactive? When asked, the interview subjects offered a number of reasons for their activity or inactivity.

The inactive group initially provided expected reasons for their inactivity. A frequent reply was: “I don’t have enough time.” (IPrF, IPM, IPF) When asked how they find time for union work, but not political work, two answers arose. First, some raised a sense of defeatism and inability to change the system. One public sector worker talked about why he was staying inactive in the fight against legislation taking away his union’s right to strike.

I guess when you think about it, they either take away your right to strike, and you can’t strike ... or they don’t take away your right to strike, so you go on strike and they go to court and order you back to work. I don’t believe they should be able to take away our right to strike, but by the same token if they don’t take it away, they would just order us back if we went on strike anyway. So either way, they win.” (IPM)

He defended his inaction on the basis the powers in the system would prevail regardless.

Second, some spoke about their need for a personal, direct impact. “I like the idea that [my work] touches one on one with the person and very definitely has a specific purpose ... I like that rather than some broad general program that doesn’t really address an issue or person individually.” (IPrM) This echoes their reasons for getting involved in their union. Just as they appreciated their union activism because they can help on a very personal level, politics is avoided because, in their opinion, it lacks that personal touch.

Inactive subjects also placed their trust in others to do politics for them. “Every union is involved to a certain extent in lobbying, that’s a big chunk of our business. But I tend to leave that to the national. I sort of feel that my place is dealing with my members in my local.” (IPrF) This is similar to Croteau’s “leave politics to professionals” attitude.

Those involved in politics held a directly opposite view. They were reluctant to leave the task to others. “I have to be part of the process. I can’t depend or trust that my thoughts, feelings, concerns would be addressed if I don’t take some responsibility for them and work strongly to carry that out.” (APF)

The subject of responsibility came up in another way. “[T]he unionized workforce has the opportunity to affect political change. [Union activists] have a responsibility to our membership to be involved.” (APM)

There was a sense among these activists that there is a “need” to get involved, both personally and to fulfil their role as a unionist. In many ways their union work and political work become intertwined. This theme will be explored more below.

The first difference between private and public sector unionists appeared when exploring reasons for political participation. Until this point, there had been little to distinguish workers from the two sectors. However, public sector workers, even those who are not politically active, drew a tighter link between politics and their union work. One politically active municipal worker saw politics as a necessity for their jobs.

“From my particular perspective, being [a public employee] absolutely. Because that’s our employer. So, if we can make the employer directly accountable to us the workforce. ... I don’t think the citizens of Edmonton got anything against us, they like our work, they like what we’re doing. They’re our neighbours and our friends. We have the opportunity to affect the vote.” (APM)

Even politically inactive public sector workers saw the necessity for politics. “You just see on a day-to-day basis at the workplace whether its regular workplace, government type of atmosphere, the staffing is decreasing and the workloads are constantly

increasing. So in that regard that they're involved [in politics] as much as they [the union] should be.” (IPM)

Private sector workers saw much less of a direct link between politics and their job. Some indicated the importance of labour laws, but many, especially the non-active group, saw their workplace untouched by who was in power politically.

The observation that public sector workers make a stronger political link than private sector workers is neither surprising nor unexpected. It is a natural extension of working in the public sector, in having the government as your employer. However, as expected as it may be, it still creates an observable distinction among public sector employees – one that may partially explain why the survey found public sector unionists more politically active than their private sector counterparts.

Barriers to Political Participation

Croteau and Rose postulate one of the barriers to working class participation in politics is a divide between working people and the middle class nature of politics. Results from the interviews support this theory, finding a subtle divide separating union activists from politics.

At first, most subjects indicated they feel political activists are the same as they are. The non-active group felt that political activists on the whole are the same type of person, just with more focus and passion for a cause than they do.

“I think they are people like me. ... I think most people find a cause, something they feel strongly about that they want to make a difference and that's obviously going to vary from person to person. For me it is the

union. For somebody else it might be the environment. For someone else it might be Medicare.” (IPrF)

The politically active group agreed that political activists are the same as union activists.

A sense of discomfort started to appear as the conversation moved toward participation in political organizations. The inactive group expressed unease with the prospect of attending a meeting or joining an organization. It was an act that seemed out of place for them. “I am not going to go out there and do that. That’s not me.” (IPF)

Politically active respondents related stories of feeling uncomfortable when first entering a political organization. When one interviewee was asked if she felt comfortable when she first joined an NDP campaign, she answered: “No. Absolutely not. I just felt like I was, like – the union has sent us a release and we’ve got a body here for the duration of the campaign and we’ll give that person the shit jobs.” (APrF) The process of the campaign, at first, felt alien and degrading. She reported growing more comfortable as time passed and she developed more experience.

Part of interviewees’ experience in politics is an awareness of the class difference between them and other people involved in the political organization. Sometimes this awareness was expressed, like above, as a general discomfort and unease. Sometimes it was more conscious. When asked why he felt less comfortable in political organizations, one subject replied “I see things as the working guy kind of thing ... something happens when we go from the union to government politics.” (APM) Others never lost the sense of being a union member when engaging in politics. “I always see myself as a unionist. It may not be something that comes up at the time. But if people ask questions, how did you get involved? ... I mention it if it comes up.” (APrM) This suggests a sense of working

class perspective carries through their political activity. While the initial discomfort fades over time, the sense of distinctiveness does not seem to ebb with it.

The interviews were not successful in determining how other identities interact with a sense of class. Race is a difficult dimension to probe, as Alberta's labour movement is overwhelmingly white. It was not possible to ascertain the effect of race on political participation (none of the subjects were a visible minority). The two female politically active unionists expressed an unclear sense of gender in political circumstances, and the non-active women did not see their sex as a barrier to politics. However, the discussion in this area was less exhaustive than desirable, leaving the author hesitant to reach conclusions.

Working Class Politics

Subjects sense on some level that the middle class dominates the political system, as seen by their feelings of discomfort and distinctiveness. The interviews also suggest they are looking for a form of working class politics to act as a bulwark against the system. The interviews did not flesh out what this form of politics would look like, but did reveal two observations.

First, the interviewees saw a role for their union offering a working class perspective in politics. Seven of the eight felt their unions should be involved in politics. It was an important piece of union work. A politically inactive respondent put the reason as: "In large part because politics are involved in the union. So they sort of go hand in hand." (IPM). An active respondent saw unions acting as a political defender. "They

should be involved in politics because if they weren't god knows where we would be.”

(APrF)

Many saw some level of union work as inherently political. However, politically active and inactive differed on how they perceive their own union work. As mentioned earlier, the inactive subjects saw the work of the union leadership as political, but not their own work. For example, when asked directly whether her union work was political, one non-active subject responded: “Not at my level.” (IPF) Politically active unionists saw their work as a political act. One subject talked about her responsibility to bring information from union meetings back to her co-workers to provide alternative political facts. “You can take back to those conversations issues, points, clarity, perhaps, to [counter] sources like newspapers and TV which might have very particular slant” (APF).

The second observation is that interviewees held positive views about the NDP because, significantly, it is seen as representing working people and therefore “different” from other parties. Five interviewees volunteered that they vote for the NDP, with three of the politically active group indicating they volunteer for the party. “They really believe and support and promote the rights of working people. They have policies in place that are of benefit to people.” (APrF) Even those who did not indicate their voting preference saw the NDP as different than other parties. In addition, the common union practice of endorsing NDP candidates met with approval from interviewees.⁷

⁷ Six interviewees expressed support for the practice, one abstained due to her union's policy of political neutrality, and one opposed endorsements. Interestingly, the one opponent suggested he may not understand the issues well enough to cast judgement on the union practice.

Support for the NDP is not a firm indication of working class politics. More significant is that the subjects perceive the party as representing working people, and they support it for that reason. Their distrust of other parties suggests they reject more openly bourgeois politics, indicating a desire for more working class politics in some form.

Union Role in Creating Political Activists

Union activists see a role for their union in politics, but does the union influence the activists' decision to participate politically? Observations from the interviews show the union does have a part to play.

Initially, the experience of the politically active subjects was mixed. Two of the four were politically active before their union involvement. The two previously involved suggested they are political persons and union involvement naturally flows from their politics. "I really believe that unionism and political activity go hand in hand. They are one and the same." (APM)

The other two interviewees acknowledged a direct union role in getting them politically involved. It was partly personal contact:

"[I]t was either the president of my local or the business agent, I can't recall, that asked if I would like to work on a campaign. One of the reasons being they wanted me to do that is ... I probably had mentioned I needed to become more active politically to find out what's happening in a hurry." (APrF)

The other factor was that union involvement changed their political self-perceptions. "I have had some really good reps who have encouraged me and pushed me along. Really brought out some confidence in me I didn't used to have." (APrF)

The union also provides opportunities for bridging the class divide. To increase comfort levels, subjects preferred to do political activities with other union members. “I get involved with other people. I don’t go in just by myself, there is usually someone else in there that I know or somebody else is coming with me. ... [I]t is other union activists who are involved in it as well.” (APrM) This is a coping strategy for tackling the class divide, but it also points to a specific way in which unions can encourage political participation, through softening the daunting nature of political participation.

Observations from the non-active group make this point even clearer. Union involvement affected the non-politically active unionist in two ways. First, respected individuals within the union – leadership or fellow activists – can persuade the person into participation. One non-active interview subject, who expressed great reluctance at political activity, was asked if they would attend a rally if their union representative approached them. He answered:

“Yeah, actually I think I would. ... If [our national representative] came to our shop directly and asked for that, yeah I would definitely help him ... I would consider that the least I could do to help him with something if he came to me on that sort of basis. But if the NDP put that in the paper and said they needed a turnout, I am not sure I would feel that strongly about it.” (IPrM)

The same activist also showed the union’s second potential impact.

“I would have to say when they took away the nurses’ right to strike [in the 1980s], I don’t think at that time I would have gone [to a rally]. Now I might go to help the nurses because I have become more involved in the union activity. When that happened, ten years ago or whatever, no I don’t think I would have gone out to support them.” (IPrM)

His union activity increased his awareness of political issues and the need to get involved to help.

All eight subjects said the union should be actively educating their members about political issues. They saw it as a way to increase access to information and help union members make informed political decisions. A politically active subject put it this way:

“I think it is relevant to understand connectedness in other workers and not always feel as though you suffer alone or that certain things are only impacting you and other people don’t understand and so therefore you don’t have any power in the situation. So, as a union I think that it has a great capacity to educate their members.” (APF)

We should be careful to not overstate the union’s impact in political matters. The interviews show the union has some tools to affect their activists’ political choices. But many of those activists remain outside of politics, despite – in some cases – many years of union involvement. The decision to participate in politics is a complex process involving many personal and cultural dimensions. This study cannot attempt to fully explain the complexities of the decision to act politically. Each person takes their own path to politics. However, the union, in particular ways, can be a part of that process.

Summary

In the interviews we found a rich supply of insight into union activists and their political participation decisions. The three issues at the centre of this study are now in clearer focus.

The interviews confirmed the survey findings that we are not looking at union activists with different political dispositions. All the activists interviewed are interested in politics. They differ in their decision to act politically. Again, we find the decision rests at the intersection between the individual and the political system.

We have also learned that the politics of this population is a working class politics, although we could not describe this in detail. They distrust and feel distant from middle class politics and their attitudes toward the NDP and the union's role in politics suggest a desire for a politics more attuned to workers. This provides insight into two issues: a common lived sense of class exists among these activists that has a political relevance, and these unionists experience a form of class divide when engaging with the political system.

The interviews revealed important evidence in our quest to understand how class consciousness, the class divide and unions affect the decision to act politically. They have also exposed a fourth variable not considered previously – a sense of political efficacy. Each factor will be briefly summarized.

Class consciousness plays a crucial role in determining the political choices the activists make. Politically active interviewees were more likely to hold a relational understanding of class, one linked to economic and social power relationships. Meanwhile, inactive subjects were more likely to adopt a more conventional definition, linked to occupation and income. This is closely linked to divergent views about the union and its role, as well as the type of satisfaction the activist gets from their union work. This link is logical. A more structural, relational definition of class will cause an individual to see union work more broadly and collectively – it becomes an agent of power struggle, rather than wages and benefits. A broader union role creates a bridge to politics. The work of union and the work of politics become linked. For those with instrumental views of the union, politics is a less natural extension of their union work.

It may not be a fully articulated, intellectualized form of consciousness, but instead arises from interpretation of lived experience. Despite its partiality, it proves capable of shaping the decision to act. This confirms Marshall's and Fantasia's arguments that one's understanding need not be fully developed to have significance on actions.

This study did not track the subjects over time. Therefore, we cannot know whether class consciousness leads to political activism, or if a decision to become involved in politics alters a person's sense of class. It is clear some form of class consciousness is an anchor for the decision to participate in politics.

In an odd way, when looking at politically active and inactive unionists we find a resurrection of the old debates of trade union consciousness versus full class awareness. However, the politically inactive unionists are not the instrumentalist affluent workers of Goldthorpe, despite their initial similarity. Their concern for politics, and their openness to consider political action suggest more is going on than simple materialist advantage. Their lack of political activity is not due to a de-politicized consciousness, as hypothesized by Goldthorpe and Burawoy. Theirs is a more narrow consciousness, but not a non-political one.

The second, and new, variable is feelings of political efficacy. Politically active interview subjects possessed a stronger sense that if people banded together, they can make change. Politically inactive subjects were more likely to doubt the capacity to change the political system. At first this finding seems like an expected variable out of political psychology – and in part it is. But it can be hypothesized that for this population

feelings of political efficacy are linked to relational conceptions of class consciousness. A broader sense of class, rooted in power relations and incorporating a larger portion of the population, may provide a unionist with greater faith in the power of solidarity. When societal power relations mediate class, the common interests of workers are tied more tightly than when only the power of a single employer or occupation is at hand. The power of collective action grows in significance as the forces aligned against it grow clearer. This is a possible link between feelings of efficacy and class.

The third result is that this population experiences a political class divide. The barriers to working class participation in politics seem quite real to these activists. The structures, rules and culture of formal political organizations are quite alien, at first, for these unionists. They expressed a sense of being out of their element and like second-class citizens. As they persevered, they grew more at home among the middle class activists, but a sense of working class-ness remains.

These are working class political activists. They do not subsume their identity into the values and characteristics of the middle class activists with whom they act. The coping mechanisms employed by union activists when engaging in political activities – going with other unionists, favouring informal forms of participation – may help maintain a sense of class collectivity in the environment of middle class politics.

In this respect they are potentially the bridge-builders discussed by Rose. They have proven able to bridge Croteau's class divide. They have done this in spite of the subtle barriers that exist for working class people entering politics. How their perseverance can impact broader politics will be discussed in the concluding chapter.

Their link to Gramsci's organic intellectuals is less clear. Structurally they are in a position to provide the clarity for the working class, but their self-perceptions, for the most part, do not reflect this position. This is not to say they do not serve the organic intellectual function, but it suggests it exists in potential rather than actual form.

Unions have a clear role in shaping the political decisions made by these activists – the fourth result. While some politically active unionists move into politics on their own, the union appears to assist many others in making the decision, and in mitigating the class divide. Direct personal contact with a political purpose, and education from a working class perspective about political issues are not wasted efforts. Union activists will respond, in some fashion, to appeals from their union. Union involvement has the potential to build the skills and self-awareness allowing workers to bridge the class divide. Public sector unions have the added advantage of being able to tie their workplace issues to broader politics given the nature of their employer. What unions need to do to maximize this potential will be discussed in the final chapter.

The interviews have brought new hues and tints to the portrait began by the survey. Left now is to bring the different results together and return them to their proper place in the historical and theoretical debates engaged in the introductory chapter. It is to this task we now turn.

Chapter 5: Summary and Conclusions

A great deal of information has been gathered on union activists in Alberta in this study. As the data was presented, an effort was made to offer provisional conclusions about their meaning. Below we will attempt to draw the disparate information into a coherent, interconnected conclusion.

The study endeavoured to explain the roots of working class political estrangement by examining how workers become politically active. It tested the link between class consciousness and political action. It also assessed the effects of barriers to working class political participation – the class divide. Finally it probed the nature of a union's role in politically mobilizing workers.

Union activists were used as a vehicle for measuring these variables because of their unique place within the working class. Their shared experience in life and in the union movement makes them an excellent choice for a subject population.

It was found politically active and inactive union activists do not differ greatly in their disposition to politics. Few were disinterested in politics entirely, and most can be described as “political” in some sense. Instead, they exist along a continuum of political activism. Their attitudinal similarity suggests the decision to act politically does not rest in solely individual traits, but instead lies at the intersection between social structures and an individual's understanding of his/her place in them. The difference between politically active and inactive rests on a decision rooted in an interpretation of class and the class divide. This opens the door to an optimistic conclusion about the potential for union activist participation in politics.

Class and Class Consciousness

Using the frameworks constructed by Thompson and Katznelson, we found a rich sense of class among these activists. As they talked about their shared experiences at work, in the union and their interaction with others in society they drew a vibrant picture of working class Albertans. This group demonstrates how class exists objectively, but really comes alive in the daily routines and habits of workers. Their experience is at times only partially articulated, but even this partial articulation evokes a strong sense of how class is constructed culturally.

Katznelson's four levels of class allow us to do two things. First, the lived experience of their class existence is given a place of legitimacy – it is not subsumed by class' objective nature (which still shapes experience). This is central to the realization, discussed in the theory chapter and detailed below, that an articulation of class arising from lived experience, rather than exclusively intellectual comprehension, is a more powerful catalyst into political action. Second, we see how fluid the transitions between the four levels become, and how they interact to create highly individual and diverse outcomes for workers. The rigid conceptualizations of Marx, Lenin, the Webbs and others do not reflect this fluidity. Each study subject translates their common experience uniquely, and each ends up simultaneously in the same place – active in their union – and in a different place – choosing political action or not. Each transforms their class experience into different senses of what it means to act collectively. This is a real life example of what Katznelson means when he says:

“[c]lass formation may be thought of more fully and more variably as concerned with the conditional (but not random) process of connection between the four levels of class. ... The content of each of the four levels of necessity will vary from society to society; no level need be understood or analyzed exclusively in class terms; and the connections between the levels are problematical and conditional.” (Katznelson, 1986: 21-2)

Individual agency is returned to workers, but within a complex inter-relationship of the four levels of class.

This is not an attempt to justify any ideological belief workers happen to adopt. To the contrary, the study findings suggest a worker-positive form of class consciousness is possible, at least among union activists, in spite of corporate media domination, ideological campaigns of employers and the limiting nature of the labour process. These workers can construct a clear sense of what it means to be a worker and from that understanding develop a form of collective action. This contradicts Burawoy’s more pessimistic assessment.

The study uncovered a certain degree of instrumental collectivism. The politically inactive group reflected their union work individualistically and materialistically. However, this was balanced by an acceptance that the union has a broader role to play in politics, even if they individually choose to avoid it. They also wished for a more working class-friendly type of politics, and avoided politics in part due to its inability to operate in the interests of workers. This suggests some solidaristic notions of class are present even among the politically inactive respondents. The individualistic notions of their unionism are best interpreted as an expression of their commitment to the personal and social relationships arising out of the second and third levels of class.

They are certainly not the de-politicized workers of Goldthorpe or Burawoy, despite their political inactivity. Their decision to remain inactive is best understood through the contingency of interpreting lived experience, rather than through a theory of de-politicization.

We should conclude union activists, both politically active and inactive, have successfully constructed cultures of solidarity. These workers have joined in a space where new rules can be constructed about how people should interact. It is not as dramatic as the cultures borne of crisis and described by Fantasia. But their cultures – arising from the small conflicts of everyday working experience – may ultimately be more sustainable. As Langford found in his study of strikes, ongoing connection to alternative relationships – co-workers, unions, etc. – has a more profound capacity to shape class consciousness over the long term. The union activists’ cultures of solidarity are those of smaller, more subtle, but ultimately more sustainable transformations.

Their cultures of solidarity are not revolutionary cultures, and so could be evidence of trade union consciousness. In one respect they are. But Lenin’s rigid classification of consciousness does not reflect the rolling and shifting nature of the culture created by workers. “These emergent cultures may represent trade union consciousness, but of a sort that can break down status hierarchies between workers in favor of wider solidarity ... and that raises the language of worker mutuality and cooperation to a principle.” (Fantasia, 1988: 238)

The expectation that working class political consciousness must be revolutionary to be valuable impoverishes the concept and strips away the legitimate capacity of class

conscious workers to affect change. The decision to act collectively, for these workers, arises from their lived sense of class, and the form of action they take will reflect that lived experience.

The study was not successful in determining how a person's various identities intersect to shape their sense of themselves as an activist. Conceptually, it remains clear identities, including class, shape each other interdependently. Collective action, in turn, is affected by how identities intersect. However, for the moment this issue must wait for further research.

The Determinants of Political Activity

The conversation on the nature of the consciousness found in the study's subjects is a necessary preface to the examination's core conclusions. Class consciousness is linked to political participation among union activists. Real class barriers exist for working class activists wishing to enter politics. The interaction between consciousness and these barriers is what shapes the decision to act politically.

The study found four factors affecting political participation. First, politically active unionists possess a broader, relational, power-based sense of class, but one rooted in lived experience, rather than intellectual learning. Second, feelings of efficacy and that political change is possible separate the politically active from the inactive. Third, workers who enter politics experience a class divide, which they experience as feeling out of place. Fourth, unions can play an active role in fostering political activism, but maybe in unexpected ways.

The interaction of these four factors constructs the dynamic for choosing political participation. The most personal determinant is a feeling of political efficacy. The survey found a population – both politically active and inactive – with higher than normal feelings of efficacy. This results in higher than normal levels of political participation. The interviews drew out the subtle distinctions between active and inactive, highlighting that faith in workers' capacity to change the political system is linked to increased political participation.

It is theorized here that increased feelings of efficacy may be due to the empowering effect of relational class consciousness. Those whose sense of class is rooted in power structures may be more likely to perceive both the working class' potential power and the weaknesses built-into the established system. Differing interpretations of class may cause activists to learn different lessons from their experience as workers and union activists. Success in defending fellow workers – as experienced by union activists – can lead to two different forms of efficacy: one political, the other more personal. Further research is necessary, but we can conclude that feelings of efficacy have a clear effect on the likelihood of political participation.

Class consciousness is also linked directly to political participation. Causal explanations are not possible, but we can postulate the link is due to the impact of understanding power. If one sees one's class experience as linked to societal power structures, then moving activism to the source of power is a natural conclusion. The politically active unionists in this study felt a responsibility to act politically because they

saw it as an essential part of the solution. Less politically active respondents, with their more personal interpretation of class, focussed on individualistic acts of solidarity.

The third conclusion is working people experience a political class divide. The survey suggested most of Croteau's seven attitudes for political inactivity do not apply to this population, but hinted that a form of class divide still exists. Survey respondents expressed that the political system is distant and operating contrary to their interests. This sense of distance has two possible consequences. For some, it is a justification to remain inactive. For others, it shapes the political activities in which they choose to engage.

In the interviews, we found those who have delved into middle class politics experience a culture shock, finding themselves out of place and not valued. This culture shock was described obtusely. Their grievances contained few specifics. Instead we sensed an ether of unease. While the unease fades with time, a continued articulation of difference remains. The politically active unionists in this study have not adopted middle class culture and values. They perceive the divide that exists between their working class experience and the middle class structures, values and language permeating Canadian politics. It is not articulated clearly, but is evident in how they describe their experiences.

The class divide plays a role in determining political activity. For some it is daunting enough to discourage participation. For others, it affects which activities are undertaken. Many, in particular men, chose to pursue informal politics familiar to a unionist – rallies and boycotts. Others shielded themselves by attending events with other unionists, providing a small sphere of commonality in a strange environment. They found

ways to shelter themselves against the divide until they can slowly learn the language and informal rules of middle class politics.

The political actions chosen by union activists – rallies, NDP, coalitions linked to unions – soften their experience of the divide, but they do not eradicate it. Political organizations continue to be dominated by middle class activists and sentiments. Archer and Whitehorn's (1993, 1997) work on the NDP reveal that a party advocating for workers can contain a predominantly middle class activist base. The percentage of working class delegates at NDP conventions has been dropping, and is now less than one in five (Archer & Whitehorn, 1997). They also find a distinct class divide in values and participation levels between working class and middle class delegates. This is not to negate the impact of working class activists on the NDP or other political organizations, but to remind us that the middle class nature of politics is resilient and persistent.

In the politically active unionists, we may have found a Canadian equivalent of Rose's "bridge-builders". Their ability to cross the class divide provides these workers with an ability to translate. They can operate within the world of middle-class politics, but their connection to working class experience is not erased. They can bring their political insights back to the shop floor or office cubicle to educate workers about politics. One interview subject summarized: "You do have the capacity within a union to channel information [about politics], to talk about those situations, those events that are going to be taking place, to inform your members and then in ways mobilize them."

(APF)

What builds this capacity to construct the bridge across the divide? Here we return to class consciousness and efficacy. The feelings of efficacy residing within these political activists and the sense of responsibility they utilize to motivate themselves builds a determination to remain in politics and tough out the discomfort. The confidence that arises from understanding one's place in society – not just at an intellectual level, but at an experiential level – can provide a confidence of perspective, a certainty of space that can act as a buttress against the alienation caused by the class divide.

An interactive triangle takes shape. The three points – class consciousness, political efficacy and subtle but active barriers to working class participation in politics – intermingle and intersect to shape the political decisions of union activists. These decisions are borne of lived experience and mediated by perceptions about politics and the political system. The mediations, in turn, shape the interpretation of one's place both in the union and among other workers. In this way the triangle evolves.

The fourth factor is the role of the union in nudging the political course taken by its activists. The role of the union can be seen as a point inside the triangle, apparently holding no effect on the shape created by the three points, but instead gently affecting the overall orientation of the triangle. At rest it acts as an anchor, and when in motion it can move the entire triangle with it.

We cannot know, due to the study's limited scope, the strength of the union's influence in the construction of class consciousness. We cannot know if the activists in question came to the union with a relational sense of class, or if it grew out of their union

work. However, we can say with greater confidence that the union has a part in politically mobilizing their activists – which gives it a place inside the triangle.

The activists involved in this study had a common story for entry into the union. Personal encouragement from other workers or local leadership combined, in many cases, with a radicalizing event like a build-up to a strike led to their decision to get involved. Without a doubt positive views about the union pre-existed involvement, but a personal or situational catalyst served to push them into acting. Their activism patterns – multi-tasking and rapid acceptance of additional responsibilities – suggest their efforts are rooted in a connection with the union, rather than a specific problem in the workplace. The union, for these workers, is a comfortable, enriching environment, where they can feel effective, useful and part of a bigger project. The union and its leadership have a credibility among its activists that create a form of authority – but one with clear limits.

The politically active unionist saw less of a dividing line between union work and political work. The two perceptions of union and politics likely intersect to reinforce one another.

It can be further suggested the fading line between union and politics leads to the observed tendency toward increased intensity of union involvement among politically active unionists. The work they perform cannot be demarcated between narrow union interests and political interests, possibly resulting in activity inflation on both sides of the theoretical line. We cannot state this with absolute certainty, but present it as a plausible interpretation of the patterns found in the survey and interviews.

Some politically involved unionists delved into politics on their own, from their own motivations and life experience. However, some acknowledged a direct and personal role for others in the union. The nudge was one of encouragement – a senior activist recognizing the potential and helping move it into actuality. The role is one of facilitator, not leader, at least not in a traditional sense (facilitation is arguably an important function of leadership). The process remains in the hands of the individual activist.

Some may argue if the process of political mobilization rests in the individual, this is a repudiation of a role for union or elite leadership. While unions do not play the essential function posited by the Webbs, particularly in constructing class consciousness, a more refined role for unions emerges – one more accurately reflecting the complexities of representing workers in a highly bureaucratized industrial relations system.

The study provides evidence that the nature of a union culture can shape members' perceptions about both their union and politics. We see this most clearly in the differences between public and private sector workers. Public sector unions, with their direct link to government, fostered a culture that connects workplace and political action. This task is made substantially easier given public sector workers' position in the labour process, but it remains a significant finding nonetheless.

We can extend our analysis to propose that a union communicating its role in the working class more broadly and more politically will foster a culture more likely to create unionists possessing broader class awareness and who are more politically active. The source of this influence for nascent unionists is the local-level leaders and senior activists.

For a new unionist, their first link to the union is very direct and personal, and it is at this moment of initial attachment where the roots of political consciousness may be found.

It should be emphasized this union influence is one of action not words. To have an impact on the activist's consciousness the union must reach the level of the worker's lived experience. This requires communicating through deeds, not rhetoric. A union showing its commitment to other workers, regardless of occupation, demonstrates political solidarity. A union framing its workplace actions as worker empowerment and defence of rights, rather than wage increases, shows a commitment to broader consciousness. These actions can influence how the activist interprets both their union and their class, and in turn shifts the territory where the decision to act politically is made. Here we see the point inside the triangle acting not as anchor, but as facilitator, moving the placement of the triangle while still leaving the decision process to the individual activist.

This study can only begin to sketch the interactions of the four factors and how they shape the decision to act politically. There may be other factors not revealed here. But this preliminary study into union activists has demonstrated, if nothing else, that researchers can learn much from this too rarely studied population. Union activists provide a link between workers and leaders, between average citizens and the political system. By exploring how they interpret their place in society and how they choose to act upon it we can learn about the nature of class, politics and the class divide.

Practical Extensions

The results of this study may offer some practical suggestions for those who wish to see greater working class participation in the political system. There are reasons to be optimistic about the capacity of union activists to bring working class perspectives into the political system. What has been learned here can be translated into practical strategies useful for both unions and political organizations.

For the NDP and other political organizations wanting greater support from workers, they must shift their emphasis somewhat.

“[L]eft politics must become a politics of affirmation; a politics that affirms basic values of justice and fairness *in practice* and pursues constructive programs for change that enhance the quality of daily life at work, at home and in the community. ... But if the left is to develop a democratic movement for political and economic justice that reaches beyond the middle class, efforts that support the empowerment of working class people must once again become a priority.” (Croteau, 1995: 219-220; original emphasis)

Left organizations must do two things, at the very least. First, they need to acknowledge the class divide and consciously work to build their half of the bridge. It is unlikely politics in Canada will become more “working class” anytime soon, but the middle class core of politics needs to begin developing its own bridge-builders to help meet the working class bridge builders part way.

Second, progressive politics needs to return to a place of respect for workers’ lived experience. The daily lives of working people can and do form a legitimate and potent basis for building left politics. Contemporary politics, even on the left, has become fixated at telling working people their experience is invalid and how they must change to fit “new global realities”. It is a politics that has sapped the energy of the left. To

revitalize progressive politics, we need to acknowledge the insecurity, powerlessness and vulnerability of being a worker in a globalized, corporatized world and its daily effects on communities. Finding a common language for articulating this experience and searching for alternatives is the work of modern left politics. It is a type of work that cannot be done without the direct involvement of workers⁸.

This study has uncovered a group of activists resembling Rose's bridge-builders. These activists could play a key role in any reformation of left politics. If greater numbers of union activists engage in political action, we can speculate they will have an impact on the political system. In our imagination we can vision a politics more attuned, at least partially, to the interests and concerns of working people. If the middle class structures of political parties and organizations are informed in part by the lived experience of workers they cannot help but be altered. This is not to underestimate the system's resistance to change, for its adeptness in this regard is great. But it is this author's contention that the men and women interviewed here observe politics astutely, and understand the nature of the political system. If they choose to become involved politically, it is with the reasonable assumption that they can have a real impact.

Women, youth, lower income and service sector workers are found in this study, and in Canada generally, to have lower political participation levels. This reality offers two lessons. First, it serves as a reminder that the barriers faced by some groups can compound factors dampening worker political participation, and we must remain vigilant

⁸ This is not a call for a return to old-style, often racist and sexist, class politics. Embracing workers lived experience demands recognizing the multi-dimensional nature of identity and respecting the diversity that can exist within a common experience.

in addressing these inequalities in tandem with efforts to shrink the class divide. Second, the study findings suggest unions do not reduce these inequalities and, in many ways, perpetuate them through their priorities for union and political activity. Unionism is still a older white male domain, and unions must do more to change their cultures accordingly.

For unions, the study offers a path for union leaders and activists who wish to see their membership become more active politically. The four politically inactive interview subjects had never been directly asked by someone they trust in the union to take part in a political act. Their openness to considering it was surprising. Unions should not underestimate the capacity of their membership to entertain the prospects of political action.

Any effort to politicize members must be consistent, grounded in action and directly linked to the personal relationships the union activists possess. Labour leaders, for far too long, have favoured the easy path to politics. Speeches are ineffective, and possibly counter-productive. Candidate endorsements are not frowned upon by activists, but neither are they particularly useful at engaging them to become politically active. Newsletters and pamphlets are forgotten as quickly as they are distributed.

These strategies fail because they lack vivacity. They lack the key ingredient to move a union activist – connection to lived experience. This requires unions act differently in at least two ways. First, they must stop talking and start acting. Unions need to demonstrate in practical ways their commitment to a larger working class and to political change. Their activities should be smaller acts connected to local communities, rather than sweeping national campaigns – which can be just as disconnected as middle class politics. Each union local can find ways to breathe life into this idea through

seeking out solidaristic and political actions in which to engage in the community. The CAW's recent taskforce on politics recognizes the need to re-integrate workers' experience into political campaigns. "[C]ampaigns be regional and local, so that they are linked to CAW members' lives both in and out of the workplace." (CAW, 2002: 14)

Second, political mobilization needs to occur on the personal level, through committed individuals reaching out to other workers in their workplace. Speeches from the national president will not make a unionist more politically active, but the person with whom they have done union work and have socialized for five years may be able, if it is through their own behaviour and encouragement.

A sense of efficacy can be built one experience at a time. Ultimately, it is not the most formidable opponent of political participation among this population. The class divide, combined with a reasonable distrust in politics, are bigger issues. And both can be addressed by unions and by unionists.

A shifting of strategies, rather than abandoning political unionism overall, is required. The labour movement does not have to abandon electoral politics, or subsume itself into middle class coalitions. A broad, working class political movement is possible, over the longer term. But first it must begin with local activists and local actions. It is about making political activism an integral part of union and community work. "As the union builds more membership involvement into its political activism ... members will increasingly see both issue-oriented campaigning and electoral politics as a natural extension of their everyday concerns." (CAW, 2002: 16)

It should be noted this observation pertains to union activists, and is not a panacea for the majority of union members. But two observations are helpful. First, there are tens of thousands of union activists across the country. If a substantial portion of these activists become more political, they would have a noticeable influence on the shape of politics in our country. Second, a more vibrant union activist core linked to their workplace will have a ripple effect among the rest of the membership. It is impossible to know how large the ripple will be, but unionism would change.

These union activists are unquestionably engaged in reformist politics. This may disappoint many left theorists. But in this de-politicized, globalized, corporate world, where the political system reduces alternatives to a homogenized broth, any vibrant upswelling of workers engaging in politics must be a positive development. It could be the beginning of reversing the post-war trend toward docility and passivity.

The stunning but incomplete developments of South American workers refusing to remain passive and silent, in economic and social conditions far more dangerous than Canadian workers experience, should provide an example of how workers, if they politicize and mobilize, can shake politics in their country. Whether such a movement succeeds in the end is not foreseeable and, ultimately, beside the point. What matters is the mobilization of workers – of citizens – who previously were not involved. And that development would be a far sight better than the present situation.

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Appendix “A”: Survey Instrument

MCMASTER UNIVERSITY STUDY ON UNIONS AND POLITICS

Please answer ALL questions. Choose the answer that is closest to your situation or opinion. All responses will be strictly confidential. Please put the completed survey and the signed consent form in the envelope provided. Thank you.

1. Name of Union: _____ Local number: _____

2. In the past five years have you held any of the following positions or been a member of the following committees?

| | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Local Executive | <input type="checkbox"/> Bargaining Committee |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Grievance Committee | <input type="checkbox"/> Health and Safety Committee |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Women’s Committee | <input type="checkbox"/> Political Action Committee |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Shop Steward / Floor Representative | <input type="checkbox"/> Strike Committee |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other (Please Specify): _____ | |

3. In what ways are you currently involved in your local union? (Check any that apply):

| |
|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Attend General Membership Meetings |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Delegate to Provincial/National Conventions/Conferences |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Shop Steward/ Floor Representative |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Member of Local Executive |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Member of Local Committee (e.g. Health and Safety Committee, Bargaining Committee, Grievance Committee). Please indicate which committees: _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other (Please Specify): _____ |

4. In an average month, how many hours do you spend on local union activities?

| | | | | |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|---|------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 0 to 2 hours | <input type="checkbox"/> 3 to 5 hours | <input type="checkbox"/> 6 to 10 hours | <input type="checkbox"/> 11 to 20 hours | <input type="checkbox"/> 21+ hours |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|---|------------------------------------|

5. In the past five years have you participated in any of the following partisan political activities? (check all that apply)

| |
|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Member of political party. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Volunteered for a candidate in an election campaign. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Member of a local constituency association (sit on executive or committee). |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Attend provincial or federal convention of a party. |

6. In the last year how many hours have you spent on the above partisan political activities?

| | | | | | |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 0 hours | <input type="checkbox"/> 1-5 hours | <input type="checkbox"/> 6-10 hours | <input type="checkbox"/> 11-20 hours | <input type="checkbox"/> 21-35 hours | <input type="checkbox"/> 35+ hours |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|

7. In the past five years have you participated in any of the following political activities? (check all that apply)
- Voting in a Federal election.*
 - Voting in a Provincial election.*
 - Voting in a Municipal election.*
 - Signing a petition on a political issue.*
 - Phoning, writing or emailing a politician on a political issue.*
 - Joining a boycott of a product or company.*
 - Joining a picket line for other workers (solidarity picket).*
 - Attending a political rally or protest.*
 - Attending a political meeting.*
 - Be a member of or volunteer for an environmental organization.*
 - Be a member of or volunteer for a peace group.*
 - Be a member of or volunteer for a health care lobby group.*
 - Be a member of or volunteer for another political group. Please specify:*
- Partake in direct action (e.g. occupying buildings, confronting authorities, breaking the law).
8. In the last year, how many hours have you spent on the above political activities?
- 0 hours* *1-5 hours* *6-10 hours* *11-20 hours* *21-35 hours* *35+ hours*
9. To what extent do you think the NDP represents working people's interests?
- All of the time* *Most of the time* *Some of the time* *Once in a while* *Never*
10. To what extent do you think another party represents working people's interests?
- All of the time* *Most of the time* *Some of the time* *Once in a while* *Never*
11. If the provincial government was proposing to change WCB rules to make receiving compensation for workplace accidents more difficult, would you (check all that apply):
- Sign a petition opposing the change.*
 - Attend a protest rally organized on the issue.*
 - Phone / write / email a politician on the issue.*
 - Volunteer with a group fighting the changes.*
 - Vote for a party promising to reverse the changes.*
 - Campaign for a party promising to reverse the changes.*
 - Go on strike to pressure the government.*
 - Engage in direct action to stop the changes.*

12. If the provincial government was proposing to cut prescription drug benefits to low income Albertans, would you (check all that apply):

- Sign a petition opposing the changes.
- Attend a protest rally organized around the issue.
- Phone / write / email a politician on the issue.
- Volunteer with a group fighting the changes.
- Vote for a party promising to reverse the changes.
- Campaign for a party promising to reverse the changes.
- Go on strike to pressure the government.
- Engage in direct action to stop the changes.

13. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements (please circle one):

| | | | | |
|---|-----------------------|--------------|-----------------|--------------------------|
| <i>Politics is dominated by people who don't understand working people.</i> | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| <i>Politicians are only interested in getting re-elected. We can't trust them.</i> | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| <i>My involvement won't change anything. The system always remains the same.</i> | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| <i>We need to defeat the government and elect someone who will represent working people.</i> | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| <i>Active union members like me need to get involved in politics to make sure our voice is heard.</i> | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| <i>I don't have the time to get involved in politics.</i> | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| <i>I don't think much about politics.</i> | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| <i>Politics should be left to professionals who know what they are doing.</i> | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| <i>Political activists are too radical.</i> | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |

(Question continued on next page...)

13.(cont.) Do you agree or disagree with the following statements (please circle one):

| | | | | |
|--|-----------------------|--------------|-----------------|--------------------------|
| <i>Politics has no place in the workplace.</i> | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| <i>Politics doesn't affect me.</i> | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| <i>In a world of globalization, governments have lost the ability to do things to help working people.</i> | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| <i>My union should not be involved in politics in any form.</i> | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| <i>My union should lobby government only on issues that affect my workplace and work conditions.</i> | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| <i>My union should work with other non-partisan groups on specific political issues.</i> | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| <i>My union should support candidates of any party that support labour's priorities.</i> | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| <i>My union should support the New Democrats because they are the party closest to labour's issues.</i> | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| <i>My union should be working to create a new labour-based party.</i> | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |

14. Sex: Male Female

15. Age: _____ years.

16. Yearly Income: Under \$20,000 \$21,000 to \$40,000
 \$41,000 to \$60,000 Over \$60,000

17. Occupation: _____

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. Please put it and the consent form in the envelope provided.

Appendix “B”: Interview Guides

Interview Checklist – Politically Active Subjects

1. Union Activity

- What are their activities in union?
- How long have they been active in union?
- Why are they active? Why is union important to them?
- Do they see themselves getting more involved in future?
- What can the union achieve for them/workers or in society? What can't it?

2. Class Consciousness

- What class do they belong to?
- Define working class?
- Are they member of working class?

3. Political Activity

- What do they think about politics?
- What is politics? Consider self political?
- What activities are they doing they consider political?
- How and when did they get started in politics?
- Why do they get involved in those activities (personal exp/analysis/union link)?
- Did union have any influence in becoming political or types of political activity?
- Is there a link between union activism and politics?
- Why don't they get involved in other activities (why not doing)?
- When first joined political group/activity, did they feel welcomed/part of culture?
- Do they feel different from other political activists (use e.g. of their experience) in some way?
- How do they see themselves when involved in politics?
- What would it take to change politics, make it more responsive to working people?

4. Unions and Politics

- Should unions be involved in politics?
- Opinion of union practice of endorsing NDP?
- What more/less should unions be doing politically?
- Should unions be working to educate members politically?
- What methods would work to make members more political (if desirable)?

Interview Checklist – Politically Inactive Subjects

1. Union Activity

- What are their activities in union?
- How long have they been active in union?
- Why are they active? Why is union important to them?
- Do they see themselves getting more involved in future?
- What can the union achieve for them/workers or in society? What can't it?

2. Class Consciousness

- What class do they belong to?
- Define working class?
- Are they member of working class?

3. Political Activity

- What do they think about politics? Do they consider themselves political?
- What is politics?
- Why aren't they involved in politics?
- Would they be willing to get involved politically (give examples of possible actions)? If not, why not? If so, why aren't they doing it now?
- Could the union play a role in encouraging them to become more politically active?
- Is there a link between union activism and politics?
- Are political activists people like them or different?
- What would it take to change politics, make it more responsive to working people?

4. Unions and Politics

- Should unions be involved in politics?
- Opinion of union practice of endorsing NDP?
- What more/less should unions be doing politically?
- Should unions be working to educate members politically?
- What methods would work to make members more political (if desirable)?