

Labour Community Services and the state of community unionism in Toronto

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**Abstract**

Community unionism is still contested in the literature, and its presence across various industries and union formations is often not concretely described. This thesis engages in an examination of community unionism within the literature and assesses its potential presence in Toronto's Labour Community Services, an organization which provides administrative and organizational support to labour unions and community groups in the Greater Toronto Area. Interviews with LCS organizers and staff members and other Toronto labour activists are assessed against common depictions of community unionism within the literature to determine if LCS is engaged in community unionism, or perhaps some other organizational strategies or philosophies. Interviews demonstrated a clear commitment to community building and deepened ties between the labour movement and various formations of community across Toronto and surrounding regions. Interviews also reveal the state of union-community resources, the barriers commonly experienced in this form of organizing, and how organizers and staff members perceive their role in the broader labour movement. Interviews with key informants reveal a series of strategies and choices which shape how Labour Community Services operates. Ultimately, Labour Community Services does not engage in community unionism as a whole practice, but rather utilizes several strategies and operative choices that share common ground with community unionism. A by-product of these strategic choices is the creation of forms of community unionism between both the labour unions and community groups that LCS frequently works with.

## **Introduction**

Over the course of several decades, the civil and political structures that support the process of unionization in Canada have been eroded. A series of strategies designed to make unionizing more difficult have been deployed by anti-union businesses and governments both here and abroad. These strategies have been delivered in two key thrusts. First, governments have enacted a series of anti-union policies that make it harder for unions to form and, where they are successful, make them less effective as a representative of a body of workers (Walchuk, 2010; Ross and Savage 2018). Second, globalization has given capital a relative freedom of movement that remains unavailable to workers. Employers are thus capable of detaching business operations from union- and labour-friendly geographic locations (Tufts, 1998; Herod, McGrath-Champ & Rainnie, 2010). Through this tumultuous period, the number of Canadian workers who are registered members of a labour union – often referred to as *union density* – has remained mostly stable at around 30 per cent. While union density has remained consistent, the demographics of unionized workers has shifted dramatically within the same several decades. In Canada, union members are now much more likely to be women working in a public sector job like healthcare than they are to be a man working in a private sector occupation like factory work (Statistics Canada, 2022).

The combination of anti-union governments and businesses and rapidly shifting union demographics has created both internal and external pressures that challenge the very existence of unions. In response, Canadian unions have turned to a series strategies intended to reinvigorate their membership and expand union density (Kumar and Schenk, 2006). Unions might attempt to rebuild internal power structures, expand support from the public, work with

other unions to advance shared goals, or lobby political structures in favour of union activity. Each of these strategies fall under the umbrella of what Kumar and Schenk (2006) call *union renewal*. One such strategy shall be the focus of this thesis, namely *community unionism*.

While interpretations of community unionism vary within the literature, common characterizations include cooperative links between labour unions and various communities and shared goals and identities between partnering organizations (Cranford & Ladd, 2003; Fine, 2005; Tattersall, 2011). ‘Community’, as it were, also evokes various understandings. Communities first exist as geographic spaces – places where people live, work, and interact with one another. In some ways, these fixed geographies can act as a barrier to successful organizing, but a strong sense of physical community can also bolster a union drive. Labour history is also closely tied to and shaped by geography, with no two countries sharing identical pathways to labour unionism, labour politics, or working-class culture and consciousness (Herod, 1998). The interactions between labour unions and various forms of community are deeply shaped by physical space, but also relationships built across boundaries of physical space and place.

Communities also exist in less physical ways, with social relationships and shared identities or goals forming communities both within geographic spaces and beyond them (Stewart et al., 2009). In this second sense, communities are often formed along lines of race, religion, sex and gender, but also around shared activity like sport, volunteering, or community events. While these kinds of community often emerge within a shared geographic context, physical space is not necessarily central to their formation. Indeed, these communities can and do expand far beyond the strictures of physical space, across town lines and state borders into the hearts and minds of people around the globe (Brookes, 2013).

A third depiction of community emerges from industrial relations discourse and acts as a shorthand for ‘community organization’ (Stewart et al., 2009). These organizations work and struggle within and on behalf of physical and social communities to advance political and economic goals. One such organization is United Way Centraide of Canada, a charitable organization that plays a critical role in the potential forms of community unionism investigated in this research. Referred to as United Way from here, the organization is a federation of multiple chapters across the country, currently maintaining 71 offices across Canada and providing service to over 5000 communities (United Way, 2023). The organization’s ambit is that of social welfare, and they place emphasis on the role of community building through their strategic choices.

Community unionism involves at least one of these three depictions of community – though combinations of these forms of community are certainly possible – in cooperation with the efforts of a labour union (Tattersall, 2009; Black, 2012). Given the variability of ‘community’ itself, community unionism presents in several unique forms, all with varying structures and objectives within the broader context of labour organizing and union renewal. In the Canadian context, community unionism is said to be more widely practiced than ever (Black, 2012), though is studied only sparingly, particularly where the efforts of concrete organizations are concerned.

The objectives of this research project are therefore twofold: first, to define and contextualize the scope of community unionism within the parameters of the Canadian labour movement, and second, to examine the concrete ways that community unionism as a strategy is deployed in labour and community organizing in Toronto, Ontario. This examination focuses on Labour Community Services (LCS), a Toronto organization that “connects unions ... and 280

community agencies” (Labour Community Services, 2022). LCS took shape as a result of a 1998 agreement between the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) and United Way. This agreement sees CLC-affiliated labour unions across Canada working in tandem with United Way to “advocate for those in need in their communities” and “offer programs like cooperative housing, childcare, and other services” (United Way, 2016). Labour’s most significant role in this relationship is as a core fundraiser for United Way initiatives. In 2016, then-president of CLC Hassan Yussuff noted in a letter of support for United Way that union locals across Canada had contributed over 50 per cent of United Way’s national fundraising efforts in 2014 (Yussuf, 2016).

LCS emphasizes the importance of community solidarity while working with unions and communities to “address and seek solutions to current and emerging social issues” (LCS, 2022). LCS boasts about their choice to intertwine the capacities of unions and community groups behind shared goals. However, do the choices and strategies LCS deploys in service of this objective constitute a form of *community unionism*, and if so, which form? Interviews with LCS staff and allied labour unionists helpfully document LCS’ organizational philosophies and strategies and allow us to explore their relationship with organized labour in Ontario. This research suggests that LCS is not engaged in community unionism per se despite the presence of many aspects of community unionism practice in their strategic repertoire, and instead points to their role in facilitating the development of community unionism between labour unions and community groups or organizations.

In the thesis that follows, I begin in Chapter 1 with a review of the literature, which reveals that community unionism lacks a unified definition, though scholarship has identified critical aspects of how community unionism has developed, how definitions have shifted over time, and which key identifiers have remained consistent over time. In this section, I identify



some key indicators of community unionism to frame my analysis of LCS's practice. Next, in Chapter 2, I discuss my methodological approach to the interviews with key informants, which highlight how LCS operates internally, the organizational philosophies of staff and organizers in Toronto, and the functional relationship between LCS and United Way. After presenting the findings from the interviews in Chapter 3, I highlight in Chapter 4 how the relevant concepts identified in the literature review are observed by LCS staff and union-allied organizers who routinely work with labour unions and community groups to either advance LCS' stated objectives or to organize in other capacities. I conclude by proposing the potential for future expansion of this line of inquiry into new original research.

## **Chapter 1: Literature Review: Theories and Practices of Community Unionism**

Before zeroing in on Labour Community Services and assessing whether it is an expression of community unionism, a review of the various approaches to the concept within the labour studies and industrial relations literature is needed. In this chapter, I review the most substantial ideas about community unionism, social unionism and union renewal found within the labour studies literature. Literature that focusses on community unionism in the Canadian context is still relatively sparse, though much has been written about the phenomenon in Australia, the United States, Japan, and parts of Europe. First, I outline the relationship between community unionism and labour organizing, and how community unionism as a philosophy informs certain strategic repertoires for unions and labour organizers. Then, I examine the contexts from which community unionism has developed and how these contexts shape available strategies for the deployment of community unionism. Next, I identify key framings of community unionism from the literature, and how these frames both overlap and deviate from one another on a structural level. From here, communities and how they ally with unions through these formations are discussed before moving to how communities and unions can and have realized power through the application of community unionism. Lastly, I outline key barriers to successful community unionism.

Perhaps the earliest description of community unionism comes from James O'Connor (1964), who anticipated a sort of post-union future wherein working-class organizing would take place in the community rather than in the workplace. Broadly speaking, community unionism begins where either labour unions or community groups (or both) see potential advantages to cooperating directly with one another. Community unionism presents in the literature both as a physical manifestation of the relationship (say, in the form of a workers' centre) or as a set of

strategies that unions and communities might engage with to deepen their relationships and pursue shared goals. Community unionism also appears as a relatively progressive form of unionism, particularly when compared to traditional forms of unionism found in the Canadian context, often referred to as business unionism or the service model of unionism (Ross, 2021).

The community unionism literature is thorough when describing the conditions in which community unionism has become a viable strategy for labour unions and community groups. Downward pressures from the increasing creep of neoliberal policies have forced an increasing number of individuals to be “peripheralized by the same processes of economic restructuring” (Tufts, 1998, p. 228). The margins of society have grown as neoliberal economic policies continue to extract wealth. This marginalization creates an increasingly important external characteristic which unions, and particularly those concerned with community unionism, must engage with. An increasing number of non-union workers are subject to job precarity, a weakened social safety net, and increasingly predatory forms of work, and the likelihood that they remain attached to the same workplace for long is significantly reduced. For a labour union concerned with community unionism, the financial hardships of this disadvantaged class create a broad pool – a community – of people experiencing similar economic and political conditions. These communities can scale up and down based on location, economic conditions, and experiences of the unorganized class of workers and community members.

Geographies also play a significant role in shaping the available strategies for labour unions and therefore the form that community unionism takes in a given context. One key reason for the potential deployment of a community union is the possibility of organizing many workers across the context of a larger community, such as a town or city. Organizing capacities and resources could be scaled up to expand the operating capacity of such a project to include

workers from various forms of employment and economic backgrounds. Black (2012) contends that this form of community-wide organizing is not a new strategy for labour, but rather a reintegration of earlier practices. Black writes that “the labour movement’s (re)discovery of community is thus *partly about rediscovering past values, visions, practices, and modes of organizing* that were central to its [the labour movement’s] success prior to the development of modern systems of industrial relations” (2012, p. 151, emphasis added). The modern systems of industrial relations that Black refers to are notable, as labour unions and organizers tamped down the aggressive, militant edges of their factions and received certain political and economic guarantees as a result. From Black’s (2012) point of view, an attempt at community unionism might constitute a re-activation of some aspects of union militancy – the same militancy he says is required for the “social construction of a community’s common interests” (p. 148-9).

Significant changes in how and where capital operates have also shifted the landscape on which labour must organize. Lambert and Gillan (2010) describe the ability of capital to escape conditions that are unfavourable to capital accumulation and move their various forms of production to new spaces where, perhaps, their ability to exploit workers and the environment is improved. The authors further explain that labour unions and the labour movement do not enjoy this same privilege. They note that workers and their unions occupy material spaces that are more difficult to escape as workers often lack the economic or social capital required to uproot their lives in search of work or workplaces (Lambert & Gillan, 2010). This spatial fix for capital lends labour unions and the labour movement the opportunity, and perhaps the necessity, to organize based on the geographies they occupy. Space itself becomes “a medium for solidarity relations and organizing” (Lambert and Gillan, 2010, p. 406). Labour organizers might pivot to organizing these broader fixed spaces and, according to the authors, effectively renovate the

space in their own image. In turn, these fixed spaces become large, self-sustaining bases of community solidarity, cooperation, and improved quality of life.

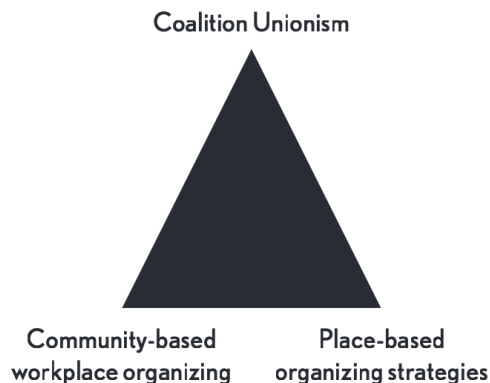
Japanese labour unions have felt many of the aforementioned pressures, though the literature is somewhat skeptical about the scalability of something like community unionism in the Japanese context. Socioeconomic conditions in Japan follow the neoliberal trends experienced here in Canada and elsewhere, and Suzuki (2008) carefully notes that, in Japan, “the neoliberal restructuring of economies has put labour movements on the defensive, and some labour unions have come to realize the limit of workplace-based organizing” (p. 495). As a result, Japanese labour unions have experienced severe declines in both union density and political power. In Suzuki’s (2008) view, Japan lacks the strong civil society required for deep community organizing (and community unionism) to take place, and existing labour unions are largely not interested in building coalitions with community groups or organizations (with some exceptions). Suzuki (2008) does explain that, as of 1999, some 30,000 Japanese workers were members of a community union, though he adds that this accounts for only about 1 per cent of all union members in Japan.

Similar effects are felt in the United Kingdom. Wills and Simms (2004) concur with the need for labour unions to expand their scope of effort beyond the constraints of any given workplace given the effects of neoliberal restructuring in the 1980s and 90s. The labour movement in Thatcher’s United Kingdom experienced a rapid decline in union density, given that “the heartlands of the labour movement were being very quickly transformed, and experienced trade unionists were being put out of work” (p. 65). The Labour Party’s shift toward a neoliberal agenda has also left UK unions without a key political partner. Further, the Labour Party altered their internal democratic structures, reducing the ability of labour unions to

influence the political direction of the party (O'Hara, 2018). Left without their usual partners in parliament, some labour unions in the UK disabused themselves of the notion that political allies was satisfactory for expanding the influence of organized labour in the country. Wills and Simms (2004) point back to the historical context in which labour unions operated, noting that, historically, "trade unions were grounded in local communities", and adding that "when people lived and worked together, without intervention from the state to protect their welfare, collective organisation was an obvious means of self-defence: (p. 62-63).

Although the broad conditions encouraging the emergence of community unionism may be similar cross-nationally, its concrete forms vary in important ways. The literature has thus generated several attempts to create typologies to categorize the expressions of community unionism. Janice Fine (2005) outlines four main types of community unions: community organizations with no union partner, labour unions with no community partner, community-labour partnerships where community organizing is the core objective, and community-labour partnerships where labour organizing is the core objective. While the power dynamics in each type may vary, all dedicate at least some capacity to community organizing in some form. Community unionism in its many forms has gained prominence in the United States since the 1990s where, as Fine (2005) describes, formerly successful workplace-based labour organizing strategies are failing to gain traction.

Amanda Tattersall, a prominent Australian community unionism scholar, articulates community unionism through three key directions: coalition unionism, community-based workplace organizing, and place-based organizing strategies.



**Figure 1.2** Defining community unionism

Tattersall, A. (2011), p. 20.

Coalition Unionism describes a more traditional form of unionism where coalitions with external stakeholders, like community groups, are a key strategy for expanding labour organizing.

Tattersall argues that coalition unionism usually involves three key elements: organizational relationships and structure, a common concern that unites those organizations, and an attempt to make change in a particular place (2011, p. 21). Tattersall further explains how successful coalition unionist projects build “internal capacities” for growth by training new leaders and fostering what can often amount to radical rethinking of unionist strategies. In effect, unions that engage with coalition unionism require strong, democratic internal structures before expanding their efforts beyond the workplace. Indeed, strength in this context does not necessarily mean that unions must double down on the traditional internal hierarchies of labour unions. Instead, unions must internally rethink how power is distributed within their organizational structures, and exactly who within the union has a voice. The scope of a union’s objectives is also critical here. Indeed, as a participant in this research study will outline below, some labour unions are simply not interested in engaging with strategies that take their activism and organizing capacities outside the workplace, or even beyond basic workplace issues such as benefits and

pay. Tattersall (2009) notes that the internal characteristics of a labour union are not the only driving factor behind a desire for change, however.

Tattersall's other two types are also useful for characterizing the various forms of community unionism and union-community integrations. Community-based workplace organizing emphasizes the importance of organizing workplaces, though it does so through the framework of community identity and common bonds between workers and workplaces, as well as those who do not work (Tattersall, 2011). While the central objective here remains the organization of workers, this type of community unionism sees deeper integration of community power into new or existing labour movement structures. On a larger scale, place-based organizing sees the targeted organizing space grow beyond a single workplace or industry (Tattersall, 2011). Instead, place-based strategies perceive geographical spaces as organizing venues and organizers who adopt these strategies aim to organize a variety of workers and those who do not work. Place-based strategies require widely and deeply felt issues, ranging from something that affects a small community, or perhaps a larger city, or hypothetically even a country.

While Tattersall (2011) and Fine (2005) each point to the formation of coalitions between labour unions and community groups as a type of community unionism, Fine's other categories focus on concrete groups – whether they be labour or community – and the various ways they interact. Tattersall, on the other hand, makes room for how some forms of community unionism might be applied as a set of strategies rather than a material or organizational relationship (which is central to the coalition form of community unionism). While these strategies would tend to develop these material relationships, the strategies themselves can exist without the formation of concrete organizations. What Tattersall and Fine provide is both a theoretical understanding of



what community unionism might be, and what the real implementations of community unionism have looked like and how power is orchestrated in these relationships.

Black's (2005) depictions of community unionism overlap considerably with those of Fine and Tattersall. Black perceives two key tentpoles under the broader umbrella of community unionism. First, and similar to Tattersall's later explanation, he sees community unionism as a specific set of organizing strategies that labour unions can use to expand their organizational capacities (Black, 2005). Black's (2005) second expression of community unionism is as an institution designed for community organization and engagement, which aligns more closely with Fine's (2005) explanation of community-union partnerships where community organizing is the focus. Black (2012) later contributes a more disentangled union-community approach to community unionism that sees labour unions as ultimately less important in community union formation – a position aligned with Fine's (2005) community-based conceptions. This is not to say that labour unions are irrelevant in community union formation. Indeed, Black (2005; 2012) is consistent in identifying the critical value labour union resources and capacities provide to communities and community unions.

Steven Tufts, an associate professor in York University's Faculty of Environmental and Urban Change, helped introduce the concept of community unionism in the Canadian context in 1998. At the time, Tufts described community unionism in Canada as still transiting the "embryonic stage of development" (p. 228). For him, community unionism entailed "the formation of coalitions between unions and non-labor groups in order to achieve common goals" (p.228). To this day, Tufts still perceives community unionism as an ever-evolving set of strategies, and he credits these developments to how the nature of labour and community organizing has shifted in the ensuing period as well. While the literature points to a variety of

combinations of labour-community power as possible forms of community unionism, Tufts points specifically to Amanda Tattersall's (2011) typologies of community unionism as foundational to his own understanding and presents it as a sort of spectrum that might be used to assess the presence of community unionism in a given organizing context (Tufts, 2022). Tufts is ultimately careful to explain that, while labour unions might incidentally engage with at least some behaviours associated with community unionism, this sort of engagement does not equate to community unionism in practice and some level of conscious intention is necessary.

Unsurprisingly, given the different definitions of community unionism in the literature, concrete case studies of what has been called community unionism also vary. Royle and Urano (2012) assess the Japanese 'McUnion', a community union formed out of the discontent of store-level McDonald's management who felt they had little recourse against their mistreatment by corporate. In a sense, the 'McUnion' formed as a sort of community hub for McDonald's workers. While not a certified union, this community union worked to organize on behalf of members, help dispute grievances with McDonald's, and ultimately make a resource pool available to members. The 'McUnion' found administrative and economic support from the Japanese Trade Union Confederation, commonly known as RENGO. While membership was slow to grow, Royle and Urano (2012) report that 'McUnion' was modestly successful in continuing to attract new members across Japan as it successfully made small but important gains for McDonald's workers in the country.

In Canada, the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) attempted to connect to workers through their communities rather than through their work. Tufts (1998) explains that ILGWU emphasized the need to tear down spatial barriers between garment workers, who were increasingly sewing in their homes rather than in a shared workplace. By

doing so, ILGWU overcame the wide geographic scope of the Greater Toronto Area to unite underserved workers. Tufts (1998) points to the organization's choice to organize homeworkers, and to help homeworkers themselves become labour organizers. Once ILGWU felt they had organized enough workers, they began to work with external partners to expand their scope and "[form] a coalition that would successfully help its members in several areas of their everyday lives" (Tufts, 1998, p. 242). While Tufts is not clear on whether ILGWU was successful in the end, he does note that the Toronto Workers' Action Centre, a non-labour organization that advocates for and provides resources to workers in Toronto, is a direct spinoff of the ILGWU's efforts (Tufts, 2022).

Another theme in the literature concerns why and in what ways community unionist efforts are powerful in ways that overcome the weaknesses of workplace-based organizing strategies. Greer, Byrd and Fleron (2007) point to a "spillover" effect that comes from coalition work. In their assessment of union coalition campaigns in Buffalo, NY., and Seattle, WA., the authors demonstrate that social movements, union drives, and successful campaigns often have knock-on effects, where success in one arena can provoke success in others. In this case, a union and community group forming a successful coalition against housing disparity might cause other unions and community groups to work together in the future. In Seattle, the King County Labor Council (KCLC) integrated with a local worker centre. This integration helped draw in a wider swath of community members and groups, and over the next several years, the KCLC successfully deployed a series of organizing campaigns in tandem with community groups. Effectively, the successful organization of a form of community union – where organized labour and community groups were combining their efforts – permitted local organizers from labour and community groups alike to pool resources and expand the scope of their organizing projects.

In Canada, unions like the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) have reintegrated community-based approaches into their strategic repertoires. The CAW resisted the tendency for labour unions to adopt business-forward, contract-based behaviours through the 1970s and 1980s and established itself as a leader in deploying social union tactics, integrating increasing levels of community support and solidarity in their campaigns, and committing to a staunch, anti-concessions attitude in bargaining (Ross, 2011). The CAW further played a guiding role in Ontario's Days of Action against neoliberal austerity measures being deployed by Mike Harris' Tory government. The union readily adopted community-based organizing strategies into their repertoire, and meaningfully engaged with both community groups and the New Democratic Party in this era (Ross, 2011). The CAW's willingness to work both with community groups and with a formalized political party demonstrates that community unionism can act as a set of strategies or actions within a broader approach to organizing. The presence of community engagement or coalitional support for community groups does not negate the ability for unions to engage in other strategic choices.

Reintegration of other historical forms of labour organizing have also resulted in new formations of community unionism. Churches and other religious centres present labour unions with existing social infrastructures available for use in organizing. Pyles (2020) notes that the institutional hierarchies and social control channels of churches already resemble those of unions, and further argues that utilizing these available resources through some informal or formal coalition between labour and religion creates larger capacities for growth and organizing. While Pyles (2020) is careful to note that working with religious establishments does not necessarily make the labour movement a religious one, the labour movement does have a significant history with the Christian faith. Indeed, Saul Alinsky, a famed labour organizer from

Chicago, rooted his community-based organizing philosophy in the cooperation between labour and the church (Holgate, 2019). Alinsky perceived the church as a collection point of people from a broad range of geographic and socioeconomic backgrounds. The church provides anchoring points for labour organizing not related to a workplace and allows labour and community to meet in the middle. Warren (2001) adds that “Alinsky understood the importance of community institutions like churches as mobilizing vehicles for popular participation and power” (para. 3).

Community unions as institutions share common ground with the 19<sup>th</sup> century organizing model of The Knights of Labor. Banks (1991) explains that community unions are designed to canvas broad geographical spaces and generally do not limit themselves to specific workplaces. Community unions integrate what Banks calls ‘nonlabor’ groups and grant some degree of organizational ownership to these ‘external’ stakeholders. The result is a diversification of the labour movement and its supporters or participants, something Banks (1991) suggests is not possible through conventional workplace-based forms of labour organizing in the US. Another historical reintegration involves viewing the household as a point of organizing. Pocock (2011) notes that, historically, labour unions viewed households as a site of community on the micro-scale and considered them as a launching point from which labour unions could advance the work-related (and often economic) goals of union members. Taking this further, unions engaged in community unionism could take advantage of the dual and overlapping roles of households, which are linked to unions through employment and to various other communities through the nonwork lives of the household’s members, whether that be through consumption to reproduce the family and its labour or through social and cultural life in working-class neighbourhoods.

Black (2005) highlights the potential efficacy of community unionism in deindustrialized urban centres where workplace-based unions mostly withdrew or withered as deindustrialization moved jobs out of cities and into suburban spaces. Informal and unorganized labourers in deindustrialized New York thus turned to a form of community unionism in the late 1990s and early 2000s when The National Mobilization Against Sweatshops (NMASS) began a broad campaign for workers' rights in the city's Chinatown district. According to Black (2005), NMASS worked to eliminate sweated and exploitative labour in New York's underground and informal economies. Their efforts included contacting and working with workers from various industries who were traditionally left behind by labour unions. Black (2005) explains that NMASS engaged with political structures, existing community groups, and operated with a multi-pronged approach that saw NMASS continuing to expand the scope of their representative body while simultaneously lobbying relevant government bodies with actionable objectives. NMASS also provided services to workers, including a medical screening clinic designed to document common illnesses and injuries found in informal and unorganized sectors of New York's economy. While NMASS did work with union locals, labour unions were not of structural importance to this manifestation of community unionism (Black, 2005).

What kind of power can a community union possibly build? Brookes (2013) theorizes a form of power developed when workers engage their social networks and available social capital in service of expanding the reach of the labour movement. Brookes helpfully refers to this as coalitional power. Coalitional power is theorized to be a potential avenue through which a global labour movement can be built – connections between multiple workers, social groups, and communities can be forged through existing social relationships. For Brookes, coalitional power is a method of controlling space. In theory, a community union attempts to control space and

generate coalitional power with community members, groups, existing social movements, and possible new allies in various spaces and places. This spatial control allows labour union organizers to expand the political and economic scope of their respective labour unions beyond the constraints of any individual workplace or profession. Reflecting on Tattersall (2011), Brookes insists that labour unions must commit to deep relationships with community groups to affect substantial and long-term change. Tattersall respectively notes that “[they] saw unions win social change and enhance their organizational strength by working in coalitions that were long-term and remarkably mutual in the way in which they planned and executed their goals,” (2011, p. 161).

In Brookes’ view, these localized spaces of community organization and solidarity act as the foundation of a broader labour movement – one that capitalizes on ever-increasing globalization to expand the labour movement’s scope across borders and into new territories in meaningful ways. For success to be possible, however, Brookes (2019) later notes that deep-seated cooperation and coordination both within labour unions and across larger spaces is a necessity, noting that careful coordination is required to enable “workers to act collectively, both within individual unions and across international borders,” (p. 162). For community unionism to be successful, both workers and community members must be fulsomely willing and able to work collectively, both in much smaller geographical spaces and across larger cities, regions, or perhaps countries. Maintaining deep, integrated relationships between communities and unions on all the scales Brookes points to might prove difficult.

Although community unionism has significant potential to generate power where traditional workplace-based organization cannot, the literature also explores the significant obstacles such strategies face in reaching their potential. Generating deep relationships and new

power is not the default outcome of a labour-community coalition. As Frege and Kelly (2004) point out, some union-community coalitions are based on relatively superficial relationships that don't build power over the long-term. Often, labour organizing campaigns are extremely resource-intensive, and successful organizing campaigns can leave little in the way of financial or political resources for community groups who work with unions (Doussard & Fulton, 2020). While labour unions have demonstrated a willingness to share resources with community groups in the past (Doussard & Lesniewski, 2017), the societal circumstances in which labour unions must organize causes deep strain on resource pools of any size. Structural concerns such as the diffusion of labour's base across wider geographical planes, as well as the need for labour unions to hold ground against ever-encroaching anti-labour legislation and corporate behaviour, has created more and more obstacles for unions searching for community ties.

Clawson (2003) insists that a series of structural barriers have acted to impede the formation of deep, community-based relationships between labour and various community stakeholders. Reduction in working-class residential spaces within cities, and broad movements toward suburbanization saw workers being extracted from their communities and relocated to external spaces with little-to-no direct attachment to their workplaces and spaces where communities form and exist (Clawson, 2003). A key effect of this is a widening of a labour union's base, but a narrowing of their purview as a representative of workers. Rather than representing a close-knit group of workers with deep relationships and shared issues both at work and in the community, labour unions began to represent workers with a wide geographical presence. This geographical diffusion of union members diluted their shared concerns in favour of broad-strokes labour organizing which, according to Clawson (2003), causes unions to have



less information about core community needs and, in turn, less reason to act towards those same needs.

Ross (2007; 2008) and Clawson (2003) both discuss another key barrier to community unionism: the entrenchment of business unionism or contract-based union organizing in most labour unions. Business unionism or contract-based unionism see labour unions narrow their scopes both in terms of what strategies they adopt, and what goals they pursue. According to Ross (2007), business unions administer themselves with technocratic, administrative arms of professionals rather than through internal democracy and membership participation. These same unions largely focus on collective bargaining as their main structural tool, and generally only bargain on issues strictly related to the workplace or pay and benefits of employees. Ross (2007) further adds that business unions fulsomely integrate into existing labour relations frameworks and do little to challenge obstacles to future labour organizing. Much of the decision to utilize these contract-based behaviours by labour unions stems from the implementation of the Wagner Act in 1935, which, according to Clawson (2003), “channeled worker militance and union activity, encouraging some sorts of behaviours and penalizing or prohibiting others” (p. 96). In Canada’s version of Wagner model labour legislation, strikes that were not explicitly linked to the renegotiation of a new collective agreement were expressly made illegal, thus creating a disincentive to use labour’s structural power in solidarity with struggles by other workers, whether in other workplaces or in the community. Further, Clawson explains that this curbing of labour militancy is “probably also the greatest force limiting community unionism” (p. 96).

Tufts (2022) casts some doubt on the ability to easily classify community unionism efforts today, noting that other labour organizing strategies, methods, or philosophies have acted to ‘eat up’ community unionism. By way of example, Tufts explains that the concept of social

unionism often includes at least some aspects of community unionism within its broader umbrella of strategies and perspectives. Notably, he points to Ross' depiction of social unionism as a key culprit. Ross (2008) describes social unions as “[engaging] in forms of collective action that are both economic and political in nature and include union members as well as members of the broader community,” (p. 130). However, this depiction is rooted in earlier work by Pradeep Kumar and Gregor Murray (2006), who themselves note that social unionism in Canada has ‘historically’ included at least some understanding of the intersections of employment and community where unions are concerned (p. 82). Thus, Ross' culpability in ‘eating up’ community unionism is not clear.

Tufts (2022) is also concerned by labour unions who engage in community unionism “in name only.” Tufts alleges that some labour unions only engage with community partners as a sort of branding exercise. Some labour unions have “less than sterling” reputations in the organizing community and working with community groups may help paper over their reputational issues (Tufts, 2022). Overall, Tufts considers this practice as injurious to the potential usefulness of more appropriate forms of labour union-community engagement.

The literature reveals some contention on the precise nature of community unionism, and perhaps suggests that community unionism captures so many forms of organizing and cooperation that are simply similar enough to warrant such a centralized description. I point to Tattersall's (2009; 2011) conception of coalition unionism as the most potentially applicable to Labour Community Services. For Tattersall, coalition unionism occurs where formalized cooperation between labour unions and community groups occurs. Formalized cooperation can occur through the formation of new organizations or campaigns or the mutual engagement in existing structures. Tattersall veers slightly away from community unionism here as her typology

is of a more formal nature, though she concludes that these formal relationships are helpful but not strictly necessary. Tufts (1998) and Black (2005) add the extra consideration of space and spatial control in their conceptualizations, and these additions are particularly relevant to LCS, which operates not only across the entire Greater Toronto Area but also across Canada. From here, while I do refer to it as community unionism throughout this thesis, I am referring to the deep and engaged relationships Tattersall (2011) highlights between unions and communities in her theories of coalitional unionism, as well as the sorts of spatial organizing practices both Tufts (1998) and Black (2005) envision in their earlier depictions of community unionism.

The power dynamics inside these cooperative initiatives vary, and we know that labour unions are not strictly required for community unionism to occur (though they are frequently involved in initiatives described as community unionism). We further understand that community unionism manifests in real-world organizing in several ways. Key manifestations include the formation of workers' centres, combined campaigns between communities and labour groups, or community-driven campaigns that focus on labour-related issues without formal involvement from a labour union. The purpose of this thesis is to determine which categorizations of community unionism apply to LCS and its work, and to what extent LCS might be considered an act of community unionism based on key understandings drawn from the literature.

I draw the following characteristics from the literature and will assess their presence (or lack thereof) in LCS's actions, strategic choices, or operational capacities. First, is there some coalition or cooperative element where the efforts of a form of community and a labour union are involved? Second, where LCS is concerned, how do these coalitions or cooperative initiatives manifest in their campaigns? Third, given the nature of LCS' mandate via the CLC and United

Way, what sort of power do labour unions and community groups have when working with LCS?

## Chapter 2: Methodology

To assess whether Labour and Community Services practices community unionism, it was necessary to gather original data. While literature on community unionism in Canada is sparse, literature that assesses LCS is non-existent. I identified LCS as a prominent labour-adjacent group that has not been studied from a labour studies perspective and, in particular, from the perspective of community unionism. To that end, I completed three interviews with key stakeholders within Labour Community Services and the labour organizing community in Toronto. Key informant interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format. Semi-structured interviews allowed me to maintain a semi-consistent question-and-answer approach, but also provided some flexibility needed when participants wished to expand beyond the parameters of a given question or provide unprompted information related to their job or personal experience with labour organizing.

Questions were designed primarily to investigate the various roles of LCS staff and how external labour organizers interact with LCS and their initiatives.<sup>1</sup> These questions centred on labour organizing, and how various stakeholders perceived their own relationships with labour organizing both within and outside of their job role. I asked participants to outline the strategies they used in their careers, to what extent they worked with labour unions or as organizers, how they personally approached the core objectives of both labour and community organizing, and which campaigns they have worked on that they feel are at least somewhat representative of community unionism. I began interviews by providing a brief introduction to community unionism drawn from Fine's (2005), Black's (2005; 2012), and Tattersall's (2011) typologies.

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A for the interview guide.

Interviews were conducted via the online video conference software platform Zoom. Two participants agreed to provide their name and job role to this research study, while one participant elected to have their name, organization, and job role anonymized. I attempted to contact staff members of both LCS and the Toronto and York District Labour Council using the online roster for each organization and received responses from three. Potential candidates were contacted via email with a recruitment script authorized by the McMaster University Research Ethics Board. Prospective participants were not offered financial or material compensation for their contribution to this study.

Participant interviews were recorded using Zoom's in-built encrypted recording software, which allowed me to record the session directly to my computer without exposing participant interview contents to Zoom's cloud software. I utilized the live transcription feature on calls to generate a basic transcript and ensured transcript accuracy by reviewing recordings manually. I then pasted the transcripts into Microsoft Word and used simple highlight features to identify themes and key information provided by participants.<sup>2</sup>

The interview guide was organized into three sections: Introductory and Background, Defining Scope of Actions, and Closing and Conclusions. In the first section, I asked the participant to describe their personal experiences with the labour movement. I hoped participants might discuss their work role, but also their family and individual experiences with labour unions

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<sup>2</sup> Recruitment for this project faced several obstacles. First, my research began while the COVID-19 pandemic was ongoing, so there were still significant disruptions across the workforce that made it challenging to communicate directly with potential subjects. Second, an organization such as LCS is small in stature but large in scope, so staff members spend a significant amount of time and energy performing their jobs, making it difficult for them to find time to participate in research like this. Third, while many labour unions and community groups maintain online forms or email addresses as their primary point of contact for inquiries, many of these emails and forms returned inactive addresses or form responses. Over the course of recruitment, I attempted to contact approximately 25 union members across nearly as many union locals and industries who had taken part in LCS activities and received only one single response. The realities of being a union member working during COVID-19 might explain this lack of successful contact, and a more thorough collection of participants would likely be possible without the combination of these constraints.

or the broader labour movement. After this, I asked participants to expand in detail on their role within their current organization, and to what extent they believed they interacted with labour unions and the labour movement daily. In the second section, I asked participants to describe the strategies they use in their job roles or organizing capacities. Where relevant, I asked the participant to describe how they build relationships with labour unions; whether they approach unions or if unions approach them in a professional capacity. If the participant was willing or able, I also asked them to describe some of the campaigns they'd worked on as a staff member or organizer. In the closing section, I asked the participant to describe what concrete accomplishments they or their organization have achieved recently, and which projects they hoped to work toward in the future. Lastly, I asked for their opinion on how they perceived the labour movement in Toronto, and what next steps might look like.

### **Chapter 3: Findings: Labour Community Services and Labour Organizing in Toronto.**

Labour Community Services Toronto is part of a broader nationwide network of organizations created out of a partnership between the Canadian Labour Congress and the United Way that provide similar services to regions across the country. Staff members at LCS attend to a variety of tasks and frequently associate with labour unions and community groups in their work. LCS is funded entirely by United Way, and exists as the result of the Canadian Labour Congress, the Toronto and York District Labour Council, and United Way. Labour unions have an extensive history of charitable contributions to a variety of organizations. They were centrally involved in the creation of Community Chests in various cities from the 1930s on, which provided social welfare based on community-raised funds and which later became the United Way (Tillotson 2008). In Canada, United Way has long been a primary recipient of funds and resources from Canadian unions. According to Zullo (2011), labour unions contribute to organizations like United Way through financial contributions, but also through food donations, clothing and cleaning supplies, and other necessities. These contributions occur through two main avenues. First, Zullo (2011) notes that unions might engage in formal contributions through an employer via a collective agreement, deducted from each paycheque and send to the United Way. He notes that many American unions contribute to United Way in this manner. Second, Zullo (2011) also explains the informal avenues unions might deploy to contribute to charities. These include member mobilization, informal collections of money or goods for distribution, or external campaigns such as a blood drive or a walk-a-thon.

United Way is a significant player in the charitable space in Canada. They boast their long-term relationships with labour unions across the country and frequently work with massive labour organizations such as the Canadian Labour Congress. While Tillotson (2008) explains the



importance of individual or small donations to United Way or similar charities, these massive charitable organizations – which are ultimately corporate in structure and in nature – rely on more substantial investments in their operational vision. As a result, labour unions across the country who wish to raise money or contribute their time and energy toward some form of community project make natural partners for United Way. In the case of LCS, United Way's presence is deeply felt within the organization, and LCS' reliance on United Way contributions for its continued operation is made clear by LCS staff.

The growth of United Way and the 'private welfare' offered by it and other organizations or community chests were happily endorsed by labour unions throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Tillotson (2008) notes that both the need and desire of such private services was so great that competing organizations formed over time. While today's United Way is not the only operating charity of its kind in Canada, it is fair to suggest that it has at least some monopoly on the charitable space, and in particular on charitable spaces where labour unions may wish to operate. The by-product of this dominance is United Way working via an organization like LCS to expand the scope of the labour movement and, perhaps in turn, establish an even larger donor base for future United Way objectives.

While Tillotson's (2008) examination of the formations of charity in Canada demonstrates the clear importance of such organizations in the post-industrial era, Smith's (2020) critique of non-profits presents a more cynical view of their development. The growth of organizations like United Way can be linked to the growth of wealthy elites in tandem with the withdrawal of the state from the provision of public services and supports. Charitable operations grew dramatically in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as wealthy elites funnelled their riches through a variety of charitable organizations – often founded by themselves – in an attempt to both launder their

reputations and to help protect some of their profits from taxation (Smith, 2020). Increasingly, charitable services began to replace the typical social services and protections offered by the state (Tillotson, 2008). While countries like the United States and Canada were ceding ground to labour unions to appease them, they were simultaneously engaging with a decades-long plan to withdraw the state from social service provision as much as possible. This transitional era gave rise to what Smith calls the ‘non-profit industrial complex’ wherein large, corporatized charities and foundations control significant sums of financial assets and, in some cases, wield this financial firepower to advance certain ideological perspectives (particularly in the case of right-wing foundations and charities). In contrast to this strong critique, Farnia (2008) concedes that some while non-profit charities and foundations have adopted both reductive and destructive positions in society, other non-profits have laid the groundwork necessary for deep social development and organizing, noting that “non-profit organizations have historically played a critical role in the formation of social movements in the United States” (p. 277).

As a formal realization of the decades-long relationship between the labour movement and United Way, LCS has adopted the mandate of cooperation between labour and community and shared work toward the goal of “tackling poverty and injustice” as highlighted on LCS Toronto’s webpage. Sharon Simpson, the Special Projects coordinator at LCS Toronto, notes that LCS’ mandate is contractual in nature and would not exist without the cooperation of the local labour council and United Way. The operational capacities, objectives, and long-term goals of LCS are shaped by their obligations to the labour movement as well as to United Way. Simpson further adds that much of what LCS does is help labour unions and the communities they interact with find common ground and shared responsibility.

In this chapter, I present key information from participant interviews in three categories: perceptions of community unionism, community unionism in everyday practice, and barriers to community unionism.

### **Perceptions of Community Unionism**

At the beginning of each interview, each participant was asked whether they had any familiarity of community unionism and whether they felt they had engaged with at least some of the basic strategies of community unionism, such as working with labour unions and communities on joint projects or forming long-lasting coalitions between these two groups.

Sharon Simpson coordinates Special Projects at Toronto's chapter of LCS. While not overly familiar with the concept of community unionism as presented in the literature, Simpson reports being quite familiar with the overlapping objectives of labour and communities, explaining that "when labour says it is interested in raising the minimum wage, community groups and organizations are also interested in the same thing because it helps to provide a better social standard; a better economic opportunity" (Simpson, 2023). In her role managing Special Projects, Simpson works to identify these common goals between labour and community and helps each side tap into what she calls their "shared capacities."

Najib Soufian administers LCS' Labour Community Advocate Training (LCAT) programme. This programme is a two-stage, twenty-week programme operated jointly by LCS and the Toronto & York Region Labour Council. With curriculum designed by the Canadian Labour Congress, the training is exclusively available for members of labour unions or community organizations. On their website, LCS explains the programme "is designed to train union members to become referral agents in their workplaces" (2023), connecting union

members with a wide variety of community supports for dealing with personal, social, and financial challenges. Soufian describes LCAT as a way to expand the scope of labour activity and “show [union members] beyond the collective agreement” (Soufian, 2022). While labour unions regularly train their members on collective bargaining, grievance procedures and workplace rights, Soufian says “there are matters which bring ... communities together” that exist beyond the scope of simple labour unionism.

Mikayla Hearst<sup>3</sup> has been a labour organizer in Toronto for several years and has worked on a series of cross-city labour-community campaigns in that time. While I withhold Hearst’s employer and job title, she explains that her career has often involved working on campaigns that include LCS involvement. Hearst has centred their organizing vision on “building worker consciousness” (Hearst, 2022). She describes working in tandem with labour and community groups and earnestly notes that “some union members see themselves both as a union member and a community member.” In her role, Hearst frequently works with labour unions and members who are eager for “collaboration with community members” and excited to grow their solidarity and consciousness beyond “their union card.” Hearst was not familiar with the term community unionism but does feel that their role involves many of its aspects, including community-building and forming deep relationships between unions and communities.

### **Community Unionism in Everyday Practice**

Interview participants were asked to discuss everyday aspects of their practice that may exemplify elements of community unionism. Simpson points to LCS’ Refugee Next Door campaign as a key example of achieving labour buy-in on a community-based project. She

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<sup>3</sup> Not the participant’s real name.

frequently hears the suggestion that “labour is only interested in achieving its [own] goals” (Simpson, 2023). However, the Refugee Next Door campaign has demonstrated to Simpson that labour is ultimately a willing partner when it comes to community organizing. The Refugee Next Door campaign addresses anti-migrant, anti-refugee, racist rhetoric that Simpson notes has risen again in recent years. While assessing how she works with unions and community groups on a campaign such as this, Simpson explains she is always

looking at how to best do that from that broad perspective, but both within labour and within community. It’s an issue that has been with us for centuries; it is not one anybody can reasonably expect to disappear overnight. Therefore, while progress may be slow, sustaining the activity must continue. (Simpson, 2023)

When asked how easy it was to get communities and labour unions to work together on a campaign such as Refugee Next Door, Simpson explains that it is not that difficult:

On the one side of the coin, getting labour people interested in the campaign, it is not difficult to get the yes because, in the past, labour unions or ... central labour bodies ... have gotten together and have sponsored refugees who are fleeing a country for whatever reason. On the community side, it’s not hard to get the yes because community folks have gotten together in groups and sponsored people who are refugees. (Simpson, 2023)

According to Simpson, participation from unions sometimes comes in the form of financial assistance, but their most valuable assistance to the campaigns she works on are in the form of volunteers and resources. At a Refugee Next Door campaign event, the Canadian Labour Congress helped provide what Simpson describes as an “immersive tent” where participants could wear a set of 3D goggles that showed images and video clips depicting a refugee escaping a war-torn country. At the same event, community groups also provided resources such as speakers and educators who could help explain key details to participants and guests. In this sense, unions and community were contributing from their distinct yet complementary capacities.

Simpson further explains why she thinks labour unions get so invested in community issues that do not necessarily affect the workers they represent. For example, she remembers significant labour participation when Toronto activists campaigned for an increase to the minimum wage:

When labour agitated in Toronto for an increase in the minimum wage of ten dollars, it did not increase the minimum wage for any unionized person who was, at that time, not earning \$10 already ... but, when the minimum wage was set at ten dollars an hour, everybody got it. Not just people in unionized workplaces, but the community in general. (Simpson 2023).

Simpson feels that some unions have a rich history of fighting hard for things that benefit many or even all workers, and points specifically to the Canadian Union of Postal Workers' push for paid parental leave.

When asked to describe how LCS chooses which organizations and unions to work with or which causes to support, Simpson explains that while LCS exists because of a cooperative funding relationship between United Way and the Toronto & York District Labour Council, LCS still largely sets its own agenda in terms of the types of campaigns it runs, who it works with, and how it operates as an organizer. "We are certainly one of the only organizations to which United Way contributes 100 per cent of its funding, so [the work we do] will take place more in a complementary way in that it is certainly not going to be putting out any work that is in disagreement with [United Way]" (Simpson, 2023). Simpson also adds that LCS frequently works to complement the campaigns that United Way or the Labour Council initiate, though they rarely work in direct cooperation with those organizations and instead focus on campaigns developed by LCS staff and stakeholders. Ultimately, Simpson explains that the goals and campaigns of organizations like LCS or the Labour Council overlap in some spots given the

importance of their work, though this is representative of the specific causes LCS chooses to pursue rather than those of their funding partners.

Soufian explains that his day-to-day job includes pointing labour unions and their members to the various valuable community resources available to them both as workers and as members of those communities. This information is largely delivered through the LCAT programme, where Soufian helps labour unions and members learn more about where they might access addiction services, financial literacy assistance, mental health services, equity, violence services, and more.

Soufian, and by extension the LCAT programme, approaches labour unions from the perspective that workers are not just workers. They are instead both workers and members of various communities:

They don't know the domino effect of what something like domestic violence might have. That person might have a family, might have children, might have parents who are struggling with this kind of situation. So, it's better to know a person holistically and understand it, to help them with community services. (Soufian, 2022)

Here, Soufian is describing how a worker has many relationships outside of the workplace that are also impacted by something like addiction or violence, and that it is critical to intervene and assist with these issues both at work and in the community. Ultimately, Soufian is hoping to train union members to return to their own unions as advocates for their peers, their workplaces, and their communities. In another example, he points to Toronto's ongoing housing crisis, noting that even some workers who benefit from unionization are struggling to afford housing. The LCAT programme helps workers understand their rights as tenants or renters, how to find affordable housing, how to access help from community legal clinics if they are in a dispute with a landlord, and how to push for systemic change at the government level.

A secondary goal of the LCAT programme is to establish deeper connections between United Way and labour unions across the GTA. As Soufian puts it, “United Way values the relationship they have with unionized workplaces because they do a lot of campaigns, and they do a lot of fundraising” (Soufian, 2022). Soufian adds that unions are eager to work with United Way because United Way often funds initiatives unions are interested in. “[Unions and United Way] have a common goal of trying to bring a strong community across the city, and across other communities” (Soufian, 2022). However, LCAT aims to deepen that relationship beyond one of fundraising and into the realm of union members’ day-to-day advocacy work.

Hearst has helped organize a variety of campaigns in their time in Toronto and explains that each day provides a new challenge as they continue to balance multiple campaigns and relationships with unions and community groups. A normal day might see Hearst phoning labour unions and community organizations about their commitments, how they might help ongoing campaigns, and what resources they might contribute. Meetings outside of work hours are very common, as most community or labour organizers engage with campaigns outside their regularly scheduled worktime.

When asked about community unionism, Hearst suggests that many community groups lack the resources necessary for full-scale organizing, and that labour unions often have the resources required to make the campaign happen. This reality has caused some community groups to “seek unions for help” (Hearst, 2022). In this relationship, as Hearst has described, community groups actively seek out these relationships to access resources beyond their scope:

I think labour unions often might see communities differently, and they may see that for communities their partnership is so crucial to the campaign they are working on, and communities might see that [they] need labour unions because [they] need X dollars for something else [they’re] trying to do. So, it’s like a chicken and egg thing, like who needs who more? (Hearst, 2022).



Hearst is convinced their line of work constitutes community unionism, though they do note that they certainly had not referred to it as such before. Hearst explains that they feel community unionism means helping people from labour and from communities recognize their role: “So I do think there is that type of community unionism being built where we want to see, you know, people empowered, people having the right ... to express themselves to be, you know, to be recognized as a whole individual not just as a small piece” (Hearst, 2022).

### **Barriers to Community Unionism**

Simpson reiterates the ease with which LCS can get labour unions and community groups on board with campaigns or initiatives, but explains what she sees as the biggest barrier to successful union-community organizing in 2023:

The challenge really on both sides of those coins is that while everybody knows what needs to be done, having the bandwidth these days to do it, the capacity, the finances required, the ability to move the political levers that [are] required to make these things move more smoothly becomes a challenge. And so, in that capacity, the work is really uphill. (Simpson, 2023)

She points to the recent exit of United States and Canadian military personnel from Afghanistan and the ensuing refugee crisis as an example of the challenges to capacity that unions and community face when dealing with rapid change or extreme circumstances. LCS and community groups have worked constantly to help Afghan refugees come to Canada, but community groups struggled to navigate ever-changing government expectations for forms and sponsorships:

But there was a change to how many [refugees] the government was willing to take, and that door was being closed ... and on the community side, too, there’s people saying “we’ve started a sponsorship process, and the government changed a couple of lines in the sponsorship application, and now we have to do it all over again.” (Simpson, 2023)

Simpson’s biggest concern when organizing special projects is therefore what she calls “institutional blockage.” Like the government changing sponsorship expectations for refugees in

times of crisis, Simpson frequently comes across obstacles that require a great deal of thought and concerted effort to overcome:

I might say I want to clean the house, and I say, 'yeah, that's a good idea.' But actually taking the steps towards doing that, where are the challenges in that? How is it that you're not moving forward? What is needed [to move forward]? And so those analyses about what is needed to move it forward, the 'yesses' come easy. Nobody's saying 'no, this is a bad idea, don't do it, we don't need any more refugees,' or 'no, racism is fine the way it is. We don't need to address that anymore'. No, everybody is saying yeah. The challenge is in the doing, and the doing is hindered by many, many factors. (Simpson, 2023)

Institutions like labour unions are generally ready and willing to engage with new challenges, though they sometimes are unable to commit the resources required for meaningful participation. Simpson notes that this is sometimes a result of unwillingness to contribute, though it is usually a result of a lack of available resources.

Although organizations may present barriers to shifting resources to match their stated values and priorities, individuals are perhaps easier to move into action. While working as a community educator for LCS, Soufian has learned that people often need only a small push to become stronger advocates for their own communities and themselves, explaining that "we have the strength within ourselves, and most of the time we just put ourselves down" (Soufian, 2022). Because the LCAT programme aims to turn existing union members into more educated, well-rounded members of their communities, Soufian says one of its most important aspects is self-affirmation:

You need someone kind of saying to you, 'I can do this. Hope is always better.' And then I'm trying to say 'I can do this. If anybody can do this, why not me?'" Solidarity, always, and never try to do everything yourself. Try to have alliances and try to stand in solidarity and stand with people. (Soufian, 2023)

For Soufian, community starts at an extremely small scale, as he explains how even the iterative process of finding just one more person who can support you (and who you can support)

starts to build the sorts of bonds LCS is looking to foster through its LCAT programme. At the same time, these small leaps up are a significant barrier that Soufian sees regularly while teaching his LCAT courses. Soufian frequently hears from labour unionists who feel that they alone cannot make a significant contribution to social causes and are thus hesitant to contribute at all. A significant aspect of LCAT is helping unionists recognize their value within their institutions, but also their value as individuals who wish to expand their solidarity beyond the workplace. Soufian suggests that the only requisite for becoming a better community advocate is the willingness to listen and learn from peers, and a willingness to have faith in one's ability to help.

Hearst returns to the theme of organizational barriers to community unionism. She has seen power struggles play out when coalitions are formed and is concerned about how organizers balance the needs and wants of both labour and communities: "Some coalitions I've worked with, unions have more power, and some other coalitions I've worked with, community has more power, and they might veto something, so it's really hard. Coalition work is really fraught" (Hearst, 2022). Hearst also adds that, paradoxically, union democracy has been a significant obstacle in her time as an organizer, simply because unions are prone to make significant alignment shifts as new elected leaders take office. "So, some unions might elect a slate that only cares about bread and butter.<sup>4</sup> Other times those leaders are thrown out and they go through a revival, and I think the type of unionism that Stephanie Ross envisions is those unions who actually care to lift the floor for everybody" (Hearst, 2022). However, the reality of leadership competition and turnover can destabilize unions' commitment to ongoing relationship- and campaign-building with community partners.

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<sup>4</sup> Hearst is referring to labour unions that typically concern themselves only with collective bargaining over workplace-related issues like pay and working conditions for their own members.

Hearst adds that the fragmented structure of most unions, which normally includes local, provincial, and national bodies, is another barrier, as these levels might not align philosophically with each other or with community-oriented efforts. While unions mostly stay on track regarding the various campaigns Hearst has worked on, she explains that constant institutional changes in unions on a year-to-year basis does mean she must regularly check in to ensure unions are still interested in helping.

Conversely, Hearst explains that while community organizations or groups are generally more stable in terms of leadership, the nature of community organizing in this era leads to other critical barriers to success:

I would say that in the community there is less likelihood of leadership change. I mean, unless somebody really wants to step down and move on, the only snag you run into with community groups is that they're managing their community responsibility on the side. They have a full-time job, they have a family, then they have this community participation. (Hearst, 2022)

While the unionists she works with are often released officers whose full-time job is playing a role in the union, community members often must integrate their role into a variety of other obligations:

There is more allowance for union participation because they are either partially or fully released officers. But in the community, it's sort of wherever they can fit some time in to send me back an email or a phone call. It's very difficult I think because they're managing full-time work or their family and this is only a side interest, and so when things happen in their lives like they lose a job or a family member has a crisis, you lose them, you don't hear from them at all. (Hearst, 2022)

Quick to suggest that this observation does not indicate a lack of seriousness in community organizing, Hearst notes instead that community organizers often have less time to spend building and navigating the new social relationships required for union-community coalitions.

Both as staff and as organizers, each participant engages with organizing and labour education from a point of view that shapes how they conceptualize the labour movement,

community groups, and how they tie together. In particular, LCS staff like Soufian and Simpson are deeply hopeful about the power of community organizing and cooperation with labour unions while still maintaining an even-keeled perspective on how difficult it ultimately is to engage in organizing work. Hearst is plain when discussing how difficult organizing is, both from her side as a professional organizer and from the side of people getting organized who must carefully balance their personal and professional lives and capacities while also sacrificing important time and energy to sometimes slow-moving objectives.

Their depictions of their jobs and objectives as employees and as organizers do reveal specific and, in places, considerable overlap with community unionism, though the precise degree of which these participants are doing community unionism requires a deeper assessment of how deeply integrated both labour unions and community groups are in the day-to-day objectives of LCS.

## Chapter 4: Analysis

My review of the labour studies literature did not reveal a clear or centralized understanding of community unionism, but it did reveal key aspects of CU that can be used as measuring posts to determine to what extent LCS is engaging in CU, if at all. Typically, community unionism involves some degree of cooperation between labour unions or the labour movement and some form of community. This cooperation, when successful, leads to the creation of some form of either short- or long-term power. While simplified, community unionism usually results in either a short-term agreement between unions and communities that ends after one campaign or when a key goal has been achieved, or in a long-term formation of power where labour and community share resources, approach new objectives together, and sometimes even continue to grow their structural power. Lastly, community unionism involves specific power dynamics between labour and community partners, where unions and communities have varying levels of structural power within the initiative.

Where LCS is concerned, how exactly are unions and communities working together? What mechanisms are utilized to bring these two groups together, and what approaches are used to help align the goals of these distinct groups and organizations? Further, what is the nature of LCS's role in this relationship once the relationship has been formed? Does LCS maintain a presence in these relationships and campaigns over long periods of time, or is their involvement of a facilitative nature? Lastly, given LCS's function as a cooperative initiative between T&YDLC and United Way, what sort of power do unions or community groups have when working with LCS on campaigns or initiatives?

Depictions from staff at LCS and in the broader organizing community in Toronto paint organizing itself as an economy. There are resources to be shared, human impact to be felt by

those organizing (and those being organized), and a transactional dynamic that presents itself in the relationships organizers and various communities sometimes share. The structural goals of labour unions and community groups often overlap but are not always aligned. Historically, labour unions have needed to overcome this barrier when engaging with communities by “[demonstrating] their commitment to working with local organizations by repeatedly attending their meetings and waiting patiently for an opportunity to bring up labour issues” (Marvin, 2015, p. 302). LCS’ approach to organizing highlights both labour and community issues and specifically identifies them as deeply intertwined. LCS works to identify likeminded and resourced organizations willing to work toward common objectives which benefit both labour and community.

Simpson explains that issue selection is critical to bringing labour and communities together. Issues identified by LCS must be both widely and deeply felt in communities and in the labour movement. Put plainly, these issues must be palatable to both sides to ensure their willingness to engage with them in the first place. As there are no singular issues that are widely agreed upon and actionable, Simpson identifies the need to find broad objectives and common goals that appeal to unions and communities alike. A benefit of having such broad objectives is that the outcomes of such campaigns often affect many people.

Simpson discussed the physical ways communities and labour unions work together and share resources under the umbrella of larger campaigns. This cooperation is an important aspect of community unionism, and what LCS is doing is foundational to the formation of deep ties between unions and communities. However, it is not clear that these deep ties are actually being formed. Hearst explained in detail how difficult it is to have both unions and communities stay engaged with campaigns over long periods of time, and LCS’ actions have certainly not led to

for formation of new organizations or community groups, and LCS is not actively engaged with organizing new labour unions.

As far as the construction of power is concerned, both Hearst and Simpson point to the nature of union democracy as a significant roadblock. Hearst has seen unions drift through various social and strategic choices as the people running these organization come and go. In these cases, community groups might successfully leverage a union's resources for a campaign but later find the resources are no longer available or reduced. Unions might also engage in more radical strategic shifts, opting to eliminate any extra-workplace organizing from their strategic portfolio. The tenuous nature of union-community relationships as described by Hearst thus makes it difficult to categorize said relationships as community unionism. Certainly, there is at least some temporary structuring of mutual assistance between unions and communities, though these structures can be eliminated as soon as the union's next leadership election. Of course, unions by their very nature should follow the will and desire of their members in deciding how to operate and which strategies to deploy. However, the ability for unions to change directions rather suddenly does leave organizers like Hearst unable to fully count on the stability of union participation in community organizing efforts.

What's more, unions are sometimes entirely disinterested in engaging with something like community unionism and are unwilling to cede any sort of power to external groups like a community organization. A significant reason for the difficulties in union-community organizing, according to Hearst, is how many Canadian labour unions are strictly focussed on collective bargaining and workplace concerns. Both Hearst and the literature describe this sort of unionism as 'Bread and Butter' unionism, where labour unions largely ignore concerns that are not strictly related to work and the workplace. Sometimes referred to as business unionism,



Bread and Butter unions only activate their organizing capacities in service of changes that can be made through the collective agreement workers make with an employer (Ross, 2008).

Community groups seeking union resources might be met with union staffers who, by their endorsement of certain collective action frames or sets of strategic choices (Ross, 2012) have constrained themselves to base economic and political concerns, and only engage with community when those concerns have overlap with the business of bargaining for a collective agreement. For Hearst, even unions which have dedicated themselves to at least some sort of labour-community organizing are not guaranteed to remain so willing in the long term. Frequent union elections lead to frequent changes to union staff and representatives – a concern for organizers like Hearst who are trying to establish serious, long-term relationships between various stakeholders.

Just as Tattersall (2011) does, Hearst believes that long-term and meaningful relationships between unions and communities are essential. Hearst identifies the value in helping workers and community members recognize the ways their existing communities interact and overlap with one another. A significant aspect of community unionism is the tearing down of what amount to siloed organizations, unions, and organizing strategies that do not fulsomely account for one another in their choices and activities. Hearst and Simpson both point to the need to help workers recognize their multiple lived existences as workers, as community members, and as people who are deeply intertwined in the lives and existences of others whether they are conscious of this or not.

Where then does LCS land within the given typologies of community unionism? Interviews with participants reveal that the organization has deep ties to both labour unions and to community organizations, something that Janice Fine (2005) identified as critical to

formations of community unionism. These deep ties are also highlighted by other scholars like Tattersall (2009; 2011), Black (2012) and Wills and Simms (2004), who each observed the importance of labour unions working closely with community groups while engaging in community unionism. In our case study, the organization in question is neither a labour union nor a community organization. Instead, LCS is an organization that works with unions and concerns itself with labour and labour-adjacent issues and works with communities and community groups on community-adjacent issues. While interviews with subjects did highlight LCS's deep relationships with both community organizations and labour unions, it did not identify new organization. This is to say, LCS works with unions and community groups with established footprints rather than engaging in new forms of organizing.

In that sense, LCS facilitates the relationships between existing unions and communities. Their role and central objectives have them bringing together the resources and desires of unions and communities in service of specific campaigns. However, the depictions from staff paint these relationships as temporary. While LCS might work frequently with the same unions or community groups, this work is often done across multiple campaigns, with varying combinations of stakeholders, and over different time periods. While permanent or semi-permanent relationships between unions and communities are not critical to community unionism, Tattersall (2011) would suggest that they are critical to *successful* community unionism. On the other hand, I do not feel it is fair to classify any form of community unionism that *does not* result in permanent or semi-permanent relationship structures as unsuccessful. The definitions of community unionism are varied enough to suggest that even prominent scholars cannot agree on a concise classification. I thus find it prudent to be as generous as possible when assessing whether LCS is indeed engaged in CU.

While some typologies of community unionism do not require the participation of a formal labour union, community unionism is largely painted in the literature as a cooperative venture between a labour union and some form of community. LCS is not a labour union, and it is not an organization that directly represents workers like a workers' centre. Perhaps LCS' actions are better described as *enabling* community unionism rather than the performance of it. In his interview, Tufts (2022) suggested that it was critical to remember that the inclusion of some aspects of community unionism does not mean community unionism is occurring, and there is too much overlap with certain aspects of community unionism and other forms of unionism to have only some factors be enough for classification.

If we cannot classify LCS as a community union, or even an organization doing community unionism, what can we begin to classify them as? Soufian speaks at length to how critical it is for LCS to help labour unions and their members recognize the value of community organizations and services that they might not typically access or work with. Das Gupta (1986) might consider LCS to be engaging in community development rather than community unionism. Community development describes forms of community work which “[enable] people from oppressed groups to bring about change in their lives” (quoted in Cranford and Ladd, 2003). Cranford and Ladd describe the objective of community development as building community power through the long-term relationships built, rather than behind any single specific objective. This depiction is familiar when considering the behaviours and activities of LCS. LCS engages with both unions and community groups to enable these respective parties to engage in power-building, resource sharing, and contribution to broader social good.

Might community unionism be a potential by-product of community development? If we consider community members and community power as resources, then community development

could be considered both an objective for organizers, but also a philosophical guidebook for a specific kind of organizing – a kind of organizing that shares several degrees of overlap with community unionism as presented in the literature. Development of power and relationships, of course, is a central aspect to most of the prominent forms of traditional labour organizing, and Brookes (2013) explains that power and relationships are mutually supporting – one requires the other to exist beyond simple microbursts of activism or solidarity. Further, Black (2005) noted that community unionism can only occur where this mutually supportive combination of power and relationships exist. For Labour Community Services, relationships with several key stakeholders in the labour movement and across Toronto’s community and charity organizations are deepened through cooperation, and power is built from the sharing of resources both financial and immaterial.

Community development also involves helping members of communities become advocates for themselves and their respective geographic and socioeconomic locations. Labour Community Services certainly engages in this specific behaviour through their advocate training programme. Because of LCS’ relationship with United Way and the local labour council, their contribution to community development is formal and contractual in nature and is delivered in the form of both an economic and community mandate funded by both external partners. LCS has worked on such a wide variety of campaigns that they have worked with thousands of community members over the years, and they have done so in an effort to expand community consciousness, to make union members better advocates for themselves and their communities, and to form long-term links between groups struggling for their futures.

The sweeping nature of community unionism in the literature does make it difficult to be conclusive in determining whether LCS is doing CU. However, I find it less important to nail

down a specific classification for LCS than it is to know what they are doing as an organization. What LCS is doing is deploying certain aspects of community unionism within their organizational approach. LCS does not fit every characteristic of community unionism, but their engagement with both labour and communities on shared campaigns and goals points to the presence of at least some aspects of community unionism.

## Conclusion and Future Research

This research project is based on interviews with a very small sample of what amounts to an exceedingly large number of concerned community members, organizers, and labour union members in Toronto and surrounding areas. However, the interviews discussed above have demonstrated that organizers both in community settings and within the labour movement are actively invested in building ties between labour and communities in a variety of ways. Each participant pointed to the ways they work with various communities in their day-to-day roles, and how their broader organizing philosophies centre the roles of communities in advancing the labour movement *and* the social good.

As noted above, the absence of community unionism by strict definition does not indicate that LCS or its affiliates are not engaging in at least some aspects of community unionism. In future, there is perhaps room to continue this investigation by assessing whether there is room within the literature to account for third-party organizations intervening in union-community relationships and helping to initiate community unionism. In the case of LCS, it is clear that the organization plays an interventionist role in the relationships between unions and communities, and it does engage to some extent in a process of building coalitional power between these respective parties. However, as they are not a labour union and are not organizing new labour unions per se, LCS is not directly engaging with the strategies and political choices of community unionism.

Over time, the study of community unionism will (hopefully) arrive at a more concise set of definitions for both the application of community unionism and the theories behind choices made when deploying strategies. At present, it is clear the field is advancing toward a unified perspective, but key differences within the scholarship and real-world practices of community

unionism beg for additional clarity. Community unionism is still relatively new. While some aspects of community unionism have been present in labour organizing for decades, even centuries in some places, future study of community unionism must continue to move toward narrowing down to a more specific and approachable definition.

Labour Community Services' place within the labour movement in Toronto and across Canada is also worth additional study. In future research, I may approach LCS from the perspective of students who have graduated from the organization's labour advocacy programme. It would be useful to gain a deeper understanding of precisely what union members are learning, which skills and ideas they are taking back to their labour unions, and whether the LCAT course inspired any additional or new forms of advocacy that were not previously present in their respective unions. In that sense, a project to assess whether LCAT is successfully enabling the spread and development of community unionism in the Toronto's unions via their participants would further test the conclusions of this analysis.

While LCS is perhaps not engaging in community unionism by definition, it is engaging with communities and unions in many ways. While deeply tied to United Way, LCS is not acting simply as an extension of the charity and is instead engaging with the labour movement and communities in a variety of ways. Operationally, LCS is reliant on United Way, though the staff and affiliated organizers make it clear that continuing to strengthen communities and the labour movement is at the forefront of their decisions. This sort of engagement is important, whether or not it fits squarely within any of the key definitions of community unionism. Organizing does not need to fit squarely within the scope of one form or another to be good organizing. Assessing the efficacy of organizing strategies, whether deployed organizationally or individually, requires assessment of results. How has LCS improved the conditions of workers or communities, if at

all? Have they helped unions grow their membership and help unionize new workplaces? Have they delivered valuable resources to in-need communities? The logical next step to this research project is to engage directly with those outcomes, measure them, and conclude not simply what sort of organizing LCS is doing, but whether their strategies and practices work.

While these questions arising from the research are important, this research has also pointed to several key functions of LCS. LCS' staff members demonstrated their clear passion for the labour movement and community organizations, and a desire to see radical improvements in the lives of unionists and community members alike. Their work on anti-racism and refugee campaigns helps mainstream issues that even labour unions have historically responded poorly to. The LCAT programme helps union members discover key community resources and return to their unions as advocates for both themselves, but also their fellow union members. Ultimately, the existence of an organization like LCS indicates that people like those interviewed in this research are committed to social justice, advocacy, organizing, and charity work both with labour unions and beyond. This is work I am deeply respectful of.



## **Appendix A: LCS or Union Staff/Organizer Interview Guide**

The purpose of this study is to investigate the role of Labour Community Services (LCS) in Toronto's labour movement. Key to this investigation is how LCS relates and strategizes with various labour unions and community activists.

### **Introductory and Background:**

1. What is your full name and your job title?
2. What personal experiences or interactions with the labour movement shape your present work?
3. What is your organizational role in relation to LCS/x union's organizing projects?
4. How might you describe your level of engagement with members of a labour union? With community members or local activists?

### **Defining scope of actions:**

1. Which strategies does your organization employ to advance the labour movement?
2. Which partners/unions/activists do you work with most frequently?
  - a. Can you describe how these relationships started? How they have been maintained?
  - b. Do unions or community activists generally approach LCS with objectives, or does LCS reach out to relevant organizations to engage in organization?
3. What is your level of familiarity with community unionism?
  - a. Is LCS/x union engaging in community unionism by cooperating with x unions/LCS?
4. Which campaigns have you worked on that you felt were very effective or important?
5. Does LCS/x union have a guiding role in shaping new organizing strategies or tactics?
  - a. Are these decisions made cooperatively? Who has the ultimate decision-making power?
6. How critical is the United Way's relationship with LCS/x union?
  - a. How does your organization integrate charitable works within broader strategies of labour organizing?

### **Closing and conclusions:**

1. What concrete objectives has your organization completed?
2. What ongoing projects are you excited about? What are the objectives of these projects?
3. What do you think the next steps for expanding the labour movement might look like in Toronto?
4. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me that was not covered during this interview?

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