

# The Canadian Labor Movement's Big Youth Turn

*In 1996, the Canadian Labour Congress adopted a resolution that called for youth to become a central outreach and organizing priority for all union affiliates. This article explores what led up to the CLC resolution, what has happened in the six years since, and what lessons the Canadian labor movement's youth project has for the labor movement here in the United States.*

By  
Stuart Tannock  
&  
Sara Flocks

**SUMMER 2002**

For Andrea Mears, it was the WTO protests in Seattle that put her on the path to organizing the first ever youth conference in her union, the BCGEU (British Columbia Government Employees Union). Brash and out-spoken, with a caustic sense of humor, Mears went down to Seattle in the fall of 1999 to join in the anti-WTO demonstrations with a group of fellow University of Victoria student activists. While there, she was surprised to see the BCGEU banner being carried along with the tide of marchers. "What the hell are you guys doing here?" Mears recalls demanding. And more to the point, "How come I didn't hear about this in my workplace?" Three years of working as a part-time medical insurance clerk in the provincial Ministry of Health to help put herself through school, and Mears had heard not a word from her union. Until Seattle, she didn't have a clue that BCGEU was involved in any form of political mobilization whatsoever.

Inspired by the prospect of linking student and labor activism, and yet frustrated by the lack of information and education she had received as a young BCGEU member, Mears returned to Canada determined to take on an active union role. She became a shop steward, and took pride in coming up with creative ways of using the union contract to pressure supervisors into ending petty and local workplace injustices. But a steward's work of servicing an endless series of individual grievances felt far removed from the larger political framing issues that occupied Mears as a student activist, and did little to address the broad lack of engagement and contact between the union and the mass of other young, part-time, casual and student government worker-members. So Mears took it upon herself to convince BCGEU to sponsor a youth conference.

The conference that Mears organized was divided into two streams, with an introductory stream for young union members who had no idea as to what unions were all about, and another stream for youth who, like Mears, knew the basics, but now wanted to start taking action to transform their unions: How do you pass resolutions? How do you get on a bargaining committee? How do you get elected to an executive board? Workshops were run on knowing the union contract, on communication, political education and direct action strategies. For Mears, the goal was to engage young participants not just as workers, but as students, community members and citizens. After all, she argues, whether you're

running a picket line or protesting the G8, police use similar tactics, and you need to know what will happen and how to respond.

Nicole Staebell, a catering attendant who works on the ferries that connect Vancouver Island with the British Columbia Lower Mainland, was one of over 40 young union members who attended Mears' youth conference. "I almost didn't go," says Staebell. "I was too embarrassed, I didn't know anything about unions. I didn't even know who my local president was." Staebell found the conference, however, to be what she now calls an "epiphany" that ignited an insatiable thirst for learning all she can about her union, Canadian labor history, and power and politics in a globalized economy. "I got so riled up," Staebell recalls. "I went to my local president and said, 'Thank you so much for sending me, that was the coolest thing ever!'" When the president commented – only half-jokingly – that he had actually forgotten that there were any young people working in his local, Staebell did not miss a beat. "I was like, 'That's ok. There'll be more of us. I won't be the only one. This is too amazing to keep to myself.'"

Indeed, just six months after her own introduction to union activism, Staebell talked the leadership of the ferry union into convening a three-day meeting of about thirty young ferry workers from across the province. In large part, Staebell's goal was to continue Mears' general project of educating young union members about the labor movement and getting them involved in union actions and leadership positions. However, Staebell also had her eyes on a more specific prize: fixing the ferry union's "casual problem."

As is the case with public sector employment across Canada, while older, adult workers on the BC ferries hold regular jobs, with full union rights, benefits and protections, the overwhelming majority of young ferry workers have been hired on as casuals – a supposedly temporary and provisional classification that in reality functions as a permanent second-class job tier. For Staebell, the issue hits close to home: "I have been a casual for seven years. I'm 55 away from a regular job. That means that 55 people have to get regular jobs before I do." Seven years of working in a union job, and Staebell, like many of her peers, still lacks job and scheduling security and benefits such as vacation pay and sick leave. In a union dominated by its older membership, the casual problem that afflicts young workers has been allowed to fester and grow over time. "Young workers on a regular basis are being demeaned," Staebell says. "Even within our union. Even our own brothers and sisters were doing this to young workers, talking down to them, making them feel they didn't have a voice. That their voice was louder just because they had been around longer. I just found that was not right. I wanted to get youth educated so they could stand up to that and fight for their rights."

Andrea Mears and Nicole Staebell are on the cutting edge of what has all the appearances of being a new youth movement within Canadian labor. Whereas in previous decades, Canadian youth who tried to get union leaders to pay attention to their concerns more often than not found themselves to be banging their heads against a brick wall, over the last five to ten years, there has been a sea change across the country. Virtually all of the big unions in Canada have by now formally committed themselves, on paper and in rhetoric at least, to reach out to, educate, organize and advocate on behalf of working youth. These days, when young activists such as Mears and Staebell come knocking, top leadership is more likely to listen than they have been since perhaps the dawn of the modern union era.

The “youth turn” within the Canadian labor movement is still in its infancy. Depth of real commitment and significance of outcome are as yet unclear. As exciting and hopeful as the possibilities may be for mobilizing new generations of workers, young activists who have been centrally involved with the shift all insist on the need for sober reflection and self-critique among union leaders – alongside the easier public relations of celebration and self-congratulation – if initial gains are to be solidified into meaningful movement building. We met with Mears and Staebell in a downtown Vancouver hotel where this year’s BCGEU convention was being held. Just prior to our conversation, Mears had been told by an obviously self-pleased BCGEU president that he had managed to increase the number of youth delegates (delegates under the age of 30) from the last convention from two to six people. “Six young people out of 374 delegates?” Mears groans. “Whoo-hoo! We’re really going places now!” Nevertheless, despite the continuing prevalence of such tokenism of effort and achievement, Canadian labor’s youth project is well worth paying close attention to. Indeed, the limitations and stumbling blocks of this project may be as important to recognize and understand as are its initial successes.

## **The Turn To Youth**

Canadian youth labor activists pinpoint the shift in official labor attitude toward working youth in Canada to the 1996 Canadian Labour Congress convention in Vancouver. It was there that the CLC adopted a resolution calling for youth to become a central outreach and organizing priority for all union affiliates. Though this resolution was not the first initiative within the Canadian labor movement to focus on working youth, it served to give formal and centralized recognition to the scattering of previous youth labor projects, and in hindsight, can now be seen to have been a critical catalyst in accelerating the pace at which unions across the country turned their sights to the task of addressing the youth question.

Why did unions in Canada rediscover youth at the moment they did? It so happened that during the early 1990s, an internal sense of crisis within the labor movement emerged at the same time as did a very public sense of crisis about the overall state of youth in Canada. Unlike the U.S. labor movement, which has seen its membership and density levels decline for decades, union membership in Canada grew steadily throughout the post-war period, while union density remained steady at about 31-33 per cent of the workforce.<sup>1</sup> It was only during the 1990s that Canadian union membership levels began to drop – in large part because of decline and stagnation in the highly unionized manufacturing and public employment sectors, brought about by attacks of the political right in Canada on public spending and progressive labor legislation, by increased international competition, and by the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement. By 1999, union density in Canada had slipped below the psychologically important 30 per cent level for the first time in over fifty years.<sup>2</sup>

Concurrent with a growing sense of concern within labor circles about union decline was a widespread perception of an impending crisis facing youth in Canada – aroused, in particular,

---

<sup>1</sup> Carla Lipsig-Mummé and Kate Laxer (1998) “Organizing and Union Membership: A Canadian Profile in 1997.” *Centre for Research on Work and Society Working Paper No. 18*, York University.

<sup>2</sup> Charlotte Yates (2002) “Expanding Labour’s Horizons: Union Organizing and Strategic Change in Canada.” *Just Labour* vol.1: 31-40.

by the twin issues of high youth unemployment and increasing inaccessibility of post-secondary education. As a 1997 Canadian Auto Worker (CAW) Discussion Paper on youth took note, “No week goes by without another editorial, taskforce, politician, or statement by a bank president expressing a new-found concern for the high unemployment amongst young people and the potential ‘loss of a generation’.” Nadine Rehnby and Stephen McBride, writing in a state of the youth report for the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives that same year, presented a grim array of statistics:

The participation of young people in the labour market has dropped by over 10 per cent in the 1990s alone. The gap between the youth and overall employment rates continues to grow. Officially, youth unemployment now stands at 17 per cent, with estimates of real unemployment at more than 25 per cent. Young people are also more likely to find only part-time jobs, with an increasing number falling into low-paying jobs in the service sector. Over the period of 1984 to 1994, the real median income of young people fell by 23 per cent. These trends show no sign of turning around.<sup>3</sup>

In the meantime, public cutbacks to post-secondary education were leading to rising tuitions and sky-rocketing levels of student debt across the country. More and more college and university students were forced to combine part-time studies with employment, just to make ends meet. Some youth were compelled to delay attendance at institutions of higher education indefinitely due to cost – and because of the rising uncertainty of being able to find a well-paying job upon graduation that could support paying off one’s student loans. In 1996, full-time university enrolment in Canada dropped for the first time since the 1970s, and it continued to decline through the end of the decade.<sup>4</sup>

Union decline and youth crisis in the 1990s were, of course, closely related. But the shared timing of raised consciousness about both youth and labor in Canada made it that much easier for union leadership to connect the dots and recognize the importance of focusing on the plight of youth as they attempted to understand and address their own misfortunes. The picture that emerged was alarming. Young workers were unionized at a rate of less than a third of that of older workers: a study by York University’s Centre for Research on Work and Society in 1997 found that “only 10.7 per cent of workers in Canada between the ages of 15 and 24 are union members, compared with 34.9 per cent of those 25 years and older.”<sup>5</sup> Young workers tended to work in the kinds of jobs, worksites and industries that were least likely to be unionized and that were proliferating at the fastest rates in the country – in part-time, casual and contingent jobs in small workplaces in the low-wage service and retail sectors. Moreover, when young workers in such worksites had tried to unionize during the early 1990s, they had frequently been met with rejection and indifference on the part of organized labor. In 1993 – to take one celebrated example – Sarah Inglis, a seventeen-year-old who came very close to successfully organizing the Orangeville, Ontario McDonald’s in which she worked, had to contact four different unions before finding one that would take on her case.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Nadine Rehnby and Stephen McBride (1997) *Help Wanted: Economic Security for Youth*. Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

<sup>4</sup> Kate Laxer (1999) “Youth Roll-Call.” *Our Times* vol .18.1: 34-37.

<sup>5</sup> Kate Laxer (1999) “Youth Roll-Call.” *Our Times* vol .18.1: 34-37.

<sup>6</sup> John Lorinc (1994) “Fast Food, Slow Bargaining.” *This Magazine* (June): 25-30.

Those few young workers who were already in unionized worksites, meanwhile, all too often toiled in second-class working conditions (as in the example of the young BC ferry workers above), had little to no engagement with their unions, and had little understanding of their legal and contractual rights in the workplace, or of the nature, history and significance of the nation's labor movement. A survey by the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) of its young grocery store members in Ontario found that over 30 per cent didn't know who their union was and an even large number didn't even know they were in a union. "Recently I went to the Beer Store with my union shirt on," sighs UFCW staff organizer Roland Lapins. "The guy [serving me] says, 'Oh, you guys are the United Fighting Championship guys?'" When Lapins explained what UFCW actually stood for, the young server recalled that the name indeed sounded familiar. "Yeah," says Lapins, "that's because that's your union!"

As they deepened their focus on their relationships with youth, many union leaders across Canada became concerned not just about their rapidly ageing (and declining) memberships, but also about the graying of core member activists, officers and union staffers. Delegates to union conventions tended overwhelmingly to be middle, and even retirement, aged. The Youth Caucus, for example, that put forward the youth resolution at the 1996 CLC Convention was largely made up of unionists in their forties: since few young members held leadership positions in their union locals, they consequently lacked the delegate status needed to attend conventions. Lack of engaged and empowered youth members posed a threat to union solidarity at the bargaining table and in collective labor actions, and furthermore, led to an impending void of leadership just as union officers and staff were expected to retire en masse over the first decade of the twenty-first century. The current situation at the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) is typical for many unions in Canada: two hundred out of six hundred full-time CUPE staff representatives plan to take retirement within the next two to three years. As CUPE's 1999 Policy Statement on Youth puts the matter bluntly, "It doesn't take a crystal ball to know that a union without young, active members is a union without a future."

### **Building Bridges Between Youth and Labor**

Communication, education and involvement quickly became the watchwords of Canadian labor's youth turn. Looking inward to their own memberships, unionists realized that they needed to create new and special spaces within traditional union structures in order to pull young members fully into the labor movement, hear from young workers about their ideas, concerns and experiences, and teach youth about union structures, practices, histories and agendas. During the late 1990s, youth committees sprouted up throughout the country, at all levels of the labor movement. The Canadian Labor Congress created a youth committee, as did the provincial labor federations in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, Quebec, Newfoundland and Labrador. Virtually all of the major unions in the country - CAW, UFCW, CUPE, BCGEU, the Ontario Public Sector Employees Union (OPSEU), the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), and the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP), among others - launched youth committees as well, whether at the national, regional and/or local level. These youth committees each tended to be made up of a small handful of young unionists, most in their mid-20s, many of whom were also activists in student, youth and community movements, and some of whom had already begun to take on workplace and union activist roles through their

own initiative. Overlapping memberships between the different youth committees has been common.

At their best, Canada's youth labor committees have served to formally institutionalize youth as an essential and legitimate constituency of the labor movement, and have provided a bully pulpit for young labor activists to bend the ears of top union leadership. "It's a domino effect," says Monica Urrutia, a member of both the BC Federation of Labour Youth Committee and the Filipino Youth Alliance, as she reflects on the first five years of the labor committee's work. "The main focus for us has been creating bridges between the youth and the labor movements. The gains that have been made are that we no longer have to really work to prove that we're worth doing something for – or with." The existence of youth committees has helped young union members and activists bypass traditional lines of seniority and succession that typically govern access to union committee, convention delegate, and other leadership positions. "One of the best things this committee has done," says Nikki Hill, another member of the BC Fed Youth Committee, "is enable us to attend and run our own trainings and workshops, probably at levels that we would never have got to in 250 years in our individual union locals. Being a young person, and being identified as someone who can run a workshop, and being given a chance to do it, has actually been really positive."

Just as important, Hill argues, Canada's national and provincial youth labor committees have helped to create a loose network of young labor activists with strong ties to one another, as well as to community organizations and youth and student groups beyond the union movement. Ideas, information and calls for support and turnout are constantly circulated on an informal basis among Canada's micro-web of youth labor committee members. We met with Hill and Urrutia at The Railway Club, a union bar in downtown Vancouver and regular meeting spot for members of both the BC Fed Youth Committee and the youth wing of the New Democratic Party (NDP), Canada's leftist political party. As we talked, other young activists and union members dropped in and out of our conversation, sharing concerns and trading stories, filling each other in on the latest news from their individual unions, worksites and political campaigns. Across the country, from Victoria to Regina, Calgary to Toronto, it is interactions such as these that strengthen and push forward official union commitments to the concerns that matter most to youth – tuition deregulation battles; anti-globalization, anti-oppression and anti-racism struggles; the fights to save Canada's few remaining old-growth forests, and so on.

Institutionalization and legitimation, bully pulpits, and social and informational networking have all helped Canada's youth labor committees perform their official task of working with union staff and leadership to create a comprehensive set of resources, programs and agendas that can be taken up and used by youth and unionists in local worksites, union halls, schools and community centers. Across Canada, education has been, by far and away, the number one priority for the youth committees. "The first stage is always education," insists Justin Schmid, a former lifeguard and CUPE activist in Victoria, who, in his late 20s, recently became one of Canada's youngest union local presidents. "Internal organizing is critical, of course. And we need to focus more on external organizing. But in both cases, education is key and fundamental. It's where you need to start. Young workers often don't know the political ways of how to get things done within unions."

Whether through conferences – such as those organized by Andrea Mears and Nicole Staebell – or summer camps or internships, extended workshops or single-topic, one-hour trainings, Canadian unions have sought, first, to train a core of young union members who can take on activist and leadership positions in their unions and worksites, and second, to develop “Know Your Rights” and “Union 101” type curriculum packages that these young activists (and others) can then use to train their peers at work and beyond. “We have to get into using young people to organize young people,” argues Alberta Federation of Labor Youth Representative and UFCW member Chris O’Halloran. “You’re more comfortable talking to somebody your own age; they’ll have the same experiences and the same ideas as you. It’s why we use Spanish-speaking people to organize Spanish-speaking people. It’s somebody they can understand and relate to; someone who has faced the same discrimination.”<sup>7</sup>

One of the most ambitious examples of the many educational initiatives launched by the youth labor committees is, perhaps, the four-week Youth Internship Program run by the UFCW in Ontario and Quebec for young grocery workers. Spread over the course of a year – a week each in the winter and spring, two weeks in the summer – the program pulls about ten to twelve young UFCW members at a time out of their supermarket jobs on fully paid work leave. As described by the UFCW’s National Youth Representative, Deborah De Angelis:

The program starts off with labor structure and labor history, economics, politics, and stewards’ training – that’s all in the first week. They do public speaking, health and safety, all the skills training you need to be an organizer in the second week. The third week, they do job shadowing with organizers and business reps. The fourth week, we build on these skills and tools and look at globalization, privatization and more of the global picture.

The UFCW internship program aims to impress interns with a strong sense of the critical link between union and political activism by having them observe not just UFCW staffers at work, but also NDP Members of Parliament in caucus in the House of Commons in Ottawa. Interns who have been through the program have since become youth shop stewards, set up youth committees in their union locals, and run “Know Your Rights” trainings both for fellow UFCW youth members and for students in regional high school social studies classes.

According to staff organizer Roland Lapins, the UFCW became convinced of the need to invest increased resources in their youth when they realized that a large and growing proportion of their grocery membership was under the age of 25. “We recognized,” says Lapins, “that this large group could easily be disenfranchised, and that could cause a problem with solidarity” internally within the union. Deborah De Angelis emphasizes that, while many young grocery workers don’t stay in their supermarket jobs for very long, the UFCW hopes their new educational programs will increase the likelihood that “when youth do move on, they may be able to organize their workplaces” and become strong unionists elsewhere. Given that the UFCW operates in an industry sector (retail) almost entirely dominated by non-union, high turnover, poorly paid, and often young workers, activists such as De Angelis reason that their

---

<sup>7</sup> Chris O’Halloran and Debora De Angelis (2001) “Young People & Unions: Making the Connection.” *Our Times* vol. 20.5: 19-23.

union can only stand to benefit from sowing the seeds of pro-union, labor-movement sensibilities beyond their own bargaining unit borders.

Central to the youth labor committees' numerous education and involvement initiatives across Canada has been a sustained effort to transform traditional union forms of communication and ways of doing business into styles and practices more immediately accessible and interesting to youth. "It's hard to attract young activists," complains twenty-something Leah Squance, a staff representative with the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC):

Because old labor has a way of doing things that's been the way of doing things for a hundred years. Robert's Rules, talking heads, panel discussions, conferences – it's NOT FUN! It's fun for a few of us because we're hacks, we've grown into the labor style of doing things, we eventually become those people ourselves. But for most people in their teens and early twenties, if you say, 'Want to come to a union meeting?,' they say, 'Huh?' 'There will be BEER!!!' 'Beer is not enough to bribe me anymore, there needs to be more.'

Conventional union literature is a frequent target for youth censure. "If you try reading the collective agreement," says Nicole Staebell, shaking her head, "it's like reading another language. You need an interpreter to understand it!" As for union meetings, Staebell chides union staff and older union members for ignoring and excluding youth: "You need to welcome your new members! If you've never seen them before, those are the people you gotta talk to. The other people who come every month to bitch and complain, you've already got them, they're hooked! You gotta get the new workers!"

Youth committee members and union staffers have invested considerable time into developing new union materials – posters, pamphlets, buttons, videos, young workers' bills of rights, and so forth – that will effectively engage and communicate with youth, that young workers will actually read and find useful. Labor activists have taken steps to, as Monica Urrutia puts it, "jazzify" the movement – seeking to move beyond the nostalgic, died-in-the-wool, folksy repertoire of songs and slogans that have traditionally constituted "labor culture" by embracing cutting-edge elements of youth culture, and, literally, by hosting youth and labor music festivals across the country. Hip hop has generally been given pride of place as the language and culture of Canadian youth, and hip hop music, images and vernacular are sprinkled liberally through many of the labor movement's youth outreach campaigns. In designing conferences, workshops and curriculum packages, union educators and youth activists have sought to move away from traditional and didactic pedagogies in order to embrace interactive approaches to education that are at once engaging and transformative, relevant and practical. Justin Schmid, for example, describes one of the most popular workshops at a "Youth Empowerment in the Service Sector" gathering organized by the BC Federation of Labour Youth Committee for non-unionized working youth in Victoria in the spring of 2000. Entitled "Developing the Discourse or How to Tell Off Your Manager and Not Get Fired," the workshop asked participants to role-play situations in which their rights in the workplace had been violated and to act out how they would react. According to Schmid, "reactions ranged from quiet acceptance to aggressive confrontations, representing very real reactions." The workshop closed

with a discussion of which tactics were most effective, noting, as Schmid diplomatically reports, “the likely repercussions of the more aggressive reactions.”<sup>8</sup>

## **Second Thoughts and Bigger Goals**

While acknowledging the real achievements and shifts that have come about through their own work and that of others, many of Canada’s youth labor activists are nonetheless candid in their criticism of what they see as the limitations of the Canadian labor movement’s romance of youth thus far. As the PSAC’s Leah Squance reflects:

My experience is that there has been a lot of tokenism with youth. They [union leaders] want to talk about youth, what a resource we are, how important we are, how they want to get youth involved. Yet when it comes down to it, electing young people to local executives, delegate positions to conventions, or hiring staff, their attitude is: ‘Well, you don’t have experience, you haven’t paid your dues. You have to earn the right to get to this place. When you’re eighty like we are, we’ll listen. Until then, you’re a young punk, keep your mouth shut.’ Sometimes it’s the same people talking out of both sides of their mouth. It gets really frustrating.

Squance’s frustrations are echoed across the country. “We’ve created so many action plans over the last five years,” says BC Fed Youth Committee member Nikki Hill, “and yet they’ve never been implemented.” Natasha Goudar, a Saskatchewan native who, in June 2002, became the first person to be elected to the newly created Vice President for Youth slot in the Canadian Labour Congress, complains that many unionists “feel threatened by young organizers such as myself, and as a response, they just shut down and shut out.” “There are structures within the labor movement,” Goudar says bluntly, “that are hierarchical, patriarchal and white supremacist. When we say, ‘Let’s start working outside of these structures, let’s start challenging ourselves,’ a lot of leaders within the labor movement get threatened by that and just want to see you gone.”

Many youth activists raise concerns about the institutional structures that have been created to provide – ostensibly – a space for youth voices within the Canadian labor movement. Youth labor committees have all too often been top-down rather than bottom-up creations, with members being selected by union staffers and not by working youth. As a consequence, some young committee members, though chosen to represent youth in their union, have not necessarily had close ties with or enjoyed the respect of their workplace peers. Despite rhetoric to the contrary, union leaders have sometimes contented themselves with identifying a single individual from within their ranks to whom they can then point forever after as being “their youth person” – as opposed to making the more concerted (and challenging) effort of mobilizing youth throughout their membership. “Wow, can you imagine actually finding ANOTHER young person?,” Squance asks sarcastically, as she mimics her union heads. One result of this self-circumscribed practice has been high levels of burnout among the small cadre of young activists who end up serving on multiple youth committees in their locals, national unions and provincial labor federations – as well as taking on responsibility for organizing and running numerous

---

<sup>8</sup> Justin Schmid (2000) “Young Workers Meet to Talk Youth Empowerment in the Service Sector.” *British Columbia Federation of Labour Youth Committee Webpage*: <http://bcfed.com/youth/youserve.html>.

conferences, workshops, trainings and speak-outs. “It’s always the same six or seven faces,” sighs Nikki Hill. “We need new blood.” Ironically, many of Canada’s youth labor committees currently face their own miniature version of the retirement problem that the Canadian labor movement faces as a whole, as their original members begin to age out of the “youth” category.

The creation of youth committees within union locals, some youth labor activists fear, can in some settings serve to marginalize rather than privilege youth issues and concerns. The “youth” label itself can lead to diminished respect from other unionists for individuals who may have years of work and activism experience. “It’s frustrating to be almost 26 years old and still be treated like a child in the workplace,” complains Danielle Burlock, a UFCW Youth Committee member from Ontario. “It’s important to young people to have this youth program going, but sometimes they get brushed off.” Youth committees, at the end of the day, are little more than advisory bodies with no real power or control over union resources and priorities. Once youth committees have been established, moreover, union leaders can feel released from the responsibility of ensuring youth participation on other, more pivotal union bodies. Six years into the Canadian labor movement’s youth turn, many youth activists now argue that youth committees are insufficient, and are consequently pushing through resolutions at union conventions that demand youth representation on local, regional and national executive boards, as well as on other union committees that have real influence and power within the movement. As CUPE youth activist and local union president Justin Schmid puts it, “In any union, there is actually an inner circle that is doing the work, that makes the call at the last minute. If you don’t have a voice on the inner circle, your issues are going to get lost.”

The broader question that youth activists are raising, of course, is whether Canadian labor is genuinely interested in empowering youth to shift union agendas in directions that will substantively and materially address the needs of youth (as well as adult) workers – or whether labor leaders are hoping only to secure youth support for and involvement in agendas and actions that they themselves continue to fully control and direct. In local settings, increased youth participation has started to have small and scattered impact on union priorities at the bargaining table. Andrea Mears, for example, successfully pushed her BCGEU local to include, for the first time ever, birth control in its health care benefits package. With the average age in Mears’ unit being forty-five, other bargaining committee members initially suggested that birth control was not an issue worth fighting for. “Hey!,” yelled the twenty-six-year-old Mears, “Some of us need birth control pills! What’s going on here?” In the fall of 2000, graduate teaching assistants represented by CUPE went on a successful eleven week strike at York University in Toronto in order to preserve “tuition indexing” in their contract, a system whereby all tuition increases must be fully reimbursed to unit members.<sup>9</sup> In an era of rapidly rising tuition costs, such a benefit is clearly of critical importance to working students. Other model educational benefits have been negotiated by the CAW at worksites such as the Cheese Cake Café in Victoria. There a bargaining committee, drawn from a workstaff of about eighty that is heavily dominated by youth and students, won rights to educational leave – in which any worker can take up to four months’ leave per year to enroll in any kind of formal education program – as well as developing innovative scheduling language that allows working students to establish stable hours and shifts

---

<sup>9</sup> Janice Paskey (2001) “Strike Ends at Toronto’s York U.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. January 26: 54.

that they can adjust over the course of the year for time periods corresponding to local school and university semesters and holidays.<sup>10</sup>

Mobilizing union resources and power to address youth workplace issues on a broad scale, however, remains a daunting challenge. Justin Schmid, for example, lists the hurdles that youth activists – such as Nicole Staebell with the BC Ferries – can face when they seek to push their unions to support the rights and interests of casual workers. For starters, Schmid points out, democracy in many unions is, in practice, quite limited. It’s one thing to encourage working youth to become active in their union and stand up for their workplace rights, but, Schmid says, “if you don’t have democracy where you can vote to change things, it’s like butting your head against a wall.” In more democratic union locals, activists face the problem that young, casual workers tend not to be very active in their unions – due in part to a lack of knowledge about unions, in part to being focused on schooling and other non-work priorities, and in part to a sense that unions don’t do anything for casual workers. While casuals make up a sizeable portion of the local that Schmid heads, they are invisible at union meetings. “I’m advocating for a silent group,” says Schmid. “It’s difficult for me to do so without backing, since the regular full-timers say, ‘Why the hell should we be fighting for them?’” Even if activists succeed in mobilizing a core of young casual workers, they then face the political reality that in a bargaining world of limited resources, pushing for casual worker benefits often means decreased gains for regular workers. “Do I promote vacation for permanents or fight for more pay for casuals?,” Schmid asks. While Schmid firmly believes that casual workers are more exploited than any other group of workers in his local, he also recognizes that ignoring the demands of the active, permanent membership would be tantamount to political suicide. Schmid’s strategy is to “chip away” at the inequities between casual and permanent workers, while hoping that, through the Canadian labor movement’s new youth education programs, eventually a mass-based casual worker rights movement will be born.

Monica Urrutia and the Public Service Alliance of Canada recently launched a “Solidarity Campaign for Young Workers” that could prove to be a model for the kind of groundwork that will be necessary to build a broad-based casual (and youth) workers movement in the country. PSAC represents the workforce at Canada Customs – Canada’s immigration and border control agency – where permanent workers often blame youth and student casuals for taking away their jobs and undercutting their wages and working conditions. Rather than focus solely on educating young members about their union, PSAC is seeking to foster dialogue and solidarity between its youth and adult, casual and permanent members by teaching them to see the casualization of work as being an issue that negatively affects everyone in Canada, and that is caused not by the insolence of youth but by the policies and practices of government and corporate employers. Urrutia reports initial success in forging connections with adult members who have children. “Why be so negative towards youth in your workplace?,” is the message PSAC now puts forward. “These could be YOUR kids. They’re going to benefit from being involved in the union. When you’re a parent, wouldn’t you hope that your kid is in an environment where they have their rights represented, where they have better pay, where they’re not just slinging burgers?”

---

<sup>10</sup> Gavin McGarrigle (1999) “Hope in Hospitality: Winning a First Contract at the Cheesecake Café.” *Our Times* vol 18.4: 31-35.

Making the great leap forward from an initial communication, education and involvement strategy to a sustained focus on transforming and stepping up collective bargaining and public policy demands will be critical if the Canadian labor movement hopes to make significant changes in the lives of youth – and indeed, of all – workers in Canada. A handful of unions are pointing the way forward. Youth activists with the Confédération des Syndicats Nationaux in Quebec pushed the provincial government to outlaw two tier wage scales in collective bargaining agreements. Nationally, the Canadian Labour Congress is urging all of its affiliates to ban tiered wage scales, while in British Columbia, the provincial labor federation has mobilized unionists and high school students in a “Six Bucks Sucks” campaign to oppose a newly introduced youth training wage set at two dollars below the standard wage minimum in the province. CUPE has started to frame its opposition to public sector downsizing, privatization and contracting out as being fundamentally about young worker issues. Youth don’t suffer in the labor market because of a lack of education and training, CUPE argues. They suffer because, unlike their parents’ generation, they enjoy diminished access to good, stable, well-paying jobs in the public sector.

Nevertheless, as the Canadian labor movement continues to find itself on the defensive, with right-wing governments in power across the country, from British Columbia to Alberta to Ontario, many youth labor activists wonder, as Monica Urrutia puts it, “where the threshold will be.” “If it comes down to real crisis in the labor movement,” Urrutia and others want to know, “will there be more or less resources for youth? Either labor will decide they want to organize other people. Or they will decide to protect the people they have, this is it.” Youth activists have reason to worry. With government cut-backs sweeping the country, young workers are the first to lose their jobs. At the Ministry of Health in British Columbia, Andrea Mears has just been laid off, along with every other worker in her unit with less than eighteen years’ seniority. “A whole generation,” worries Nikki Hill, “has just been lost from the labor movement.”

## **The Lost Frontier**

“We had two years,” Nikki Hill remembers, “where the IWA [Industrial, Wood and Allied Workers of Canada] was organizing anyone they could get their hands on. It felt like we’d go out to a party and someone would say, ‘I hate my job.’ And we’d say, ‘Here’s a union and here’s a card.’ There was really good momentum. It felt like young people were really contributing to the labor movement. It wasn’t just about committee work then. It was about going out and organizing and getting people to sign up.” For a brief period at the end of the 1990s, two unions in British Columbia – the IWA and the Canadian Auto Workers – stepped up to the challenge of organizing the mass of young workers who toiled in the province’s low-end (and almost entirely non-union) service and retail sector. Although unions traditionally based in the lumber and automobile industries may not seem like the obvious candidates to try to organize barristas, burger flippers and busboys, both unions, as Hill explains, were among the first in Canada to realize “that they were in trouble and that their traditional base was eroding.” Both unions, consequently, decided to commit significant resources, in the form of staff and money, towards organizing youth service workers.

The IWA invested in a mass advertising campaign in Vancouver, running ads on city buses that encouraged young workers who were unhappy with their working conditions to call

the IWA and organize. The union also launched a training program to create a cadre of youth organizers who could be sent out to respond to the flood of calls that were coming in. Through such efforts, the IWA managed to organize a group of security guards, a moving company, a chain of video stores called Video Update. The CAW – which had represented restaurant workers at the KFC and White Spot chains in British Columbia since the 1960s – organized twelve Starbucks outlets in the Vancouver area in 1997, and later went on to successful organizing drives at a Chapters Bookstore, a number of locally owned restaurants such as the Cheese Cake Café in Victoria, as well as a McDonald’s outlet in Squamish. Like the IWA, the CAW adopted a strategy of using youth to organize youth, training workers who had successfully organized their own shops and restaurants to become organizers and coordinate union campaigns at other worksites in the industry. Elsewhere, across the country, other unions echoed the efforts of the IWA and CAW in BC. In Ontario and Quebec, unions from the Teamsters to the UFCW to the Steelworkers ran organizing drives in fastfood restaurants (McDonald’s, Harvey’s, KFC), movie theaters (Cineplex Odeon, Famous Players), retail outlets (Chapters Books, HMV Records, Blockbuster Video, Walmart), museums and call centers – all of which had heavily youth-centered workforces.<sup>11</sup>

Today, however, in the year 2002, serious and sustained organizing in the youth sector of the Canadian economy has virtually disappeared. Not a single union in the country has a global organizing campaign for strategically targeting youth industries. The goal of organizing the unorganized, when it comes to youth workers, seems, temporarily at least, to have been abandoned on any significant scale. The CAW’s service sector expansion has effectively retreated to the relative security of the hotel industry, where larger worksites and an older and more stable workforce make organizing something of a safer bet. The IWA, meanwhile, laid off its entire staff of youth organizers, after a particularly sharp downturn in the lumber industry led to mass layoffs among its core membership and steep cuts in its dues revenues. Of all the young worker organizing drives in Canada in the late 1990s, there are few lasting victories to point to – only a handful of shops remain unionized, while the remainder have fallen victim to decertification votes, store closings and stalled-out contract negotiations. As Cheese Cake Café organizer and University of Victoria student Gavin McGarrigle summarizes, “Getting organized is one thing. Getting a contract and staying organized is another.” With the reality of the challenges and difficulties of organizing young workers in the service sector sinking in, excitement and interest among union leaders has dissipated. “It’s completely died,” says Nikki Hill. “They’re not doing anything anymore.”

What happened to make the young worker organizing drives of the late 1990s such a disappointment? In part, organizing momentum faltered because of shifts in the economy and in the political playing field. Youth workplace organizing was only just getting going in Ontario when the right-wing government of Mike Harris started gutting the provincial labor code with a run of anti-union legislation, beginning with Bill 31 in 1998; in the spring of 2001, Gordon Campbell’s Liberals were swept to power in British Columbia with a parallel anti-union labor law reform agenda modelled closely on the Harris program in Ontario. Organizing drives were further stymied by the structure of the low-end service and retail sector itself. The combination of a majority part-time workforce, high turnover rates, low wages and small worksites often proved to be lethal for traditional union campaigns. “The problem,” explains the CAW’s Gavin

---

<sup>11</sup> Wayne Hiltz (1998) “Cheap Labour No Longer: Quebec Youth Get Organized.” *Our Times* vol.17.4:

McGarrigle, “is that restaurants often have small staffs. So if even two or three people leave, it can skew the whole union percentage and result in a decert.” Union organizers found that organizing young workers required large infusions of money and staff time that were almost impossible to recoup from members’ dues – even assuming that the union would eventually be successful in winning employer recognition. “It’s one thing to organize a big factory where workers make \$21 an hour,” says Nikki Hill, “but it’s another thing to organize Starbucks with seven or eight people working there at minimum wage.”

Extreme employer resistance was perhaps the most significant factor in withering away the spirit of the youth service sector organizing drives. Extended and costly strikes, legal battles and contract disputes for what were typically tiny groups of workers became de rigueur across the nation. The ultimately unsuccessful year-long struggle waged by the CAW to negotiate a first contract at a McDonald’s restaurant in Squamish, BC, had a particularly chilling effect on the movement. The CAW had organized the Squamish McDonald’s in 1998 with the lead of two young workers at the outlet – seventeen-year-old Jennifer Wiebe and sixteen-year-old Tessa Lowinger – who had rebelled against unsafe, disrespectful and exploitative working conditions. McDonald’s, however, in response, threw everything in the book against the Auto Workers: hiring expensive lawyers to tie the union up in the courts, bringing in loads of unnecessary new hires to dilute union strength in the unit, delaying negotiations, and even claiming under British Columbia’s Infant Act that working minors couldn’t join a union without their parents’ permission. In the summer of 1999, the Squamish McDonald’s decertified.<sup>12</sup> “If you suffer a few black eyes, like in Squamish,” McGarrigle says, “It’s a serious setback to what other people in town are going to do. The CAW put everything into that campaign, and when it all came down the tubes, that scared the crap out of every other McDonald’s worker. You’ve got to be really careful and be sure you can accomplish something.”

Youth service sector organizing in Canada also faltered because of a lack of any overall, systematic plan. Unionization drives, such as they were, never amounted to anything more than a random and chaotic series of hot shop campaigns. No Canadian union ever conducted strategic research on what would be needed to organize young workers on an industry-wide or regional scale. Union leaders and organizers talked frequently of the need for a different set of labor laws more appropriate to the realities of the service sector workplace, and for new and alternative forms of union campaigning and structure. But no union ever put together a comprehensive and detailed vision of what such changes might need to look like – let alone a proposal for how to build political momentum to make such a package see the light of day. No union has made any serious attempt, either, to collaborate with other unions in tackling the enormous challenges posed by organizing youth workers in the service sector. Indeed, seemingly interminable jurisdictional boundary squabbles between Canada’s largest unions have seriously hobbled the labor movement as a whole and provided an immense source of frustration for youth labor activists. “Why won’t unions work together?,” is one of the biggest questions youth activists repeatedly demand of the country’s labor leadership.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Liza Featherstone (1998) “The Burger International.” *Left Business Observer* no.86, and Featherstone (1999) “The Burger International Revisited.” *Left Business Observer* no.91.

<sup>13</sup> *Our Times* Editorial Staff (1999) “A Special Report from the Next Working Class Conference.” *Our Times* vol.18.1: 15.

One of the few examples of a serious attempt to develop an alternative approach to youth service sector organizing is the model of campus-based “working student centers” proposed by Carla Lipsig-Mummé and her colleagues at York University in Toronto. While service sector workplaces may be fragmented and dispersed, Lipsig-Mummé pointed out that campuses (universities and colleges, but also high schools) are sites where young workers come together on a regular basis en masse:

Universities, in fact, are the largest gathering place of student workers that our society has created. They are places where people can discuss issues freely and set them in their most provocative historical and social context. They are places where student workers have the freedom to discuss their jobs without their bosses looking over their shoulders. As well, universities are highly organized communities. They include student unions, ethnic and linguistic student organizations, faculty and support-staff unions. They are therefore potentially powerful sites to launch mass campaigns for student workers to learn about their workplace rights, discuss the value of unions, and make contacts for becoming unionized.<sup>14</sup>

Lipsig-Mummé and others proposed creating working student centers on university campuses that could work with an alliance of unions to organize students working both on and off campus, perhaps as associate members of conventional unions. Working student centers have already been created at three universities in Toronto (York, Ryerson and the University of Toronto), and have attracted interest elsewhere. To date, however, these centers have functioned as hubs of education and communication, and not actual hands-on organizing.

The youth organizing drives of the late 1990s were not entirely without success. The CAW managed to group the string of Starbucks outlets it organized under a single master contract, and is currently conducting an “unstrike” – in which baristas refuse to wear their regular uniforms – as it tries to negotiate a third such contract with the company. Units such as the Cheese Cake Café have remained strongly union, largely through the ongoing efforts of store-based stewards to educate the steady stream of new hires coming into the restaurant. Workers at the Cheese Cake negotiated into their contract one half hour of paid time where they could sit down with each new hire to talk to them one-on-one about their union. As part of their “new members educational package,” they include a scrapbook of the newspaper articles that covered their original organizing drive and six week contract strike so as to teach new workers about why the union really matters.

Meanwhile, a trickle of new organizing victories continues to dribble in from across the country. An HERE (Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union) local in Regina, Saskatchewan just negotiated a first master contract for six KFC restaurants in town; while the Teamsters finally won a first contract at a McDonald’s outlet in the province of Quebec after a string of costly failures. Perhaps organizing momentum will rebuild once more. However, without a broader mobilization towards fundamentally transforming the terrain of organizing in the youth sector, it is not clear whether any of these new shops will manage to avoid the fates of prior drives from the end of the 1990s. The question of how to organize unorganized youth – who constitute

---

<sup>14</sup> Carla Lipsig-Mummé (1999) “Students By Day, Workers By Night: Organizing on Campus.” *Our Times* vol.18.1: 39-42.

almost 90 per cent of the youth workforce in Canada – remains the big missing piece from the Canadian labor movement’s contemporary youth turn.

## **Lessons for Americans**

Just as the Canadian Labour Congress was passing its youth resolution, the American labor movement took a “youth turn” of its own – but one that assumed a form and direction quite different to that in Canada. Nineteen ninety-six was the year that John Sweeney and the newly elected “New Voice” leadership of the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) launched Union Summer, an annual internship program that recruits students on college campuses around the country to work on union organizing campaigns. Union Summer was created to help support the AFL-CIO’s Organizing Institute (OI) in its work of recruiting and training a new generation of highly mobile and committed union organizers. On a more general level, the program was also intended to “inject a large dose of class consciousness into the politics of the next generation.”<sup>15</sup>

Union Summer, in conjunction with the OI, has had some success as a recruitment vehicle for new union organizers. There are signs, moreover, that this new generation of organizers are beginning to ask critical questions and push for transformations in internal union structures as well as conventional organizing strategies and practices. These organizers, some suggest, are becoming an important source of change within the U.S. labor movement as a whole.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps the greatest and most visible impact of Union Summer to date, however, has been to foster student activism around campus labor issues, especially around the question of sweatshop-produced university apparel. Many of the early activists in the nationwide student anti-sweatshop movement that emerged in the late 1990s were former Union Summer interns; and United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS), a network of over 150 campus groups, itself receives direct financial assistance from the AFL-CIO.<sup>17</sup> Alliances between student activism and labor organizing in the U.S. have flourished in recent years. Unions are becoming ever more savvy about the importance and possibilities for mobilizing campus and student support for their organizing efforts. In 1999, Jobs With Justice and the United States Student Association collaboratively formed the Student Labor Action Project (SLAP), as an institutional framework for supporting worker organizing locally.

Despite these and other accomplishments, however, the American labor movement, at the turn of the twenty-first century, has been notable for its failure to address, in any significant way, the concerns of youth as workers. Unlike in Canada, there has been no sustained attempt to address the needs and issues facing youth who are already members of labor unions; nor has there been any concerted effort, or indeed, even serious talk about organizing those millions of youth who toil in the non-union sector. The conditions and issues facing working youth in the

---

<sup>15</sup> David Moberg (1996) “The Young and the Restless.” *In These Times*, November 25.

<sup>16</sup> Daisy Rooks (2002) “Sticking It In or Packing It Out: Union Organizers and the Transformation of the Contemporary American Labor Movement.” *University of California Institute of Labor and Employment Graduate Student Conference Paper*. Santa Cruz, CA.

<sup>17</sup> Jeremy Blasi (2000) *Threads of Protest: Commodity Defetishism and the Student Anti-Sweatshop Movement*. Undergraduate Thesis, Department of Sociology, University of California, Berkeley.

U.S. run closely parallel to those in Canada. Adult workers in this country are almost three times as likely to be unionized as are young workers: only 5.2 per cent of workers aged 16-24 in the United States are union members, as compared to 15.1 per cent of workers aged 25 years and older.<sup>18</sup> Yet Union Summer – the AFL-CIO’s flagship program for building bridges to the next generation – approaches youth not as workers but as students. These students – who, due to Union Summer’s recruitment practices, pay structure, and time and travel demands, tend to come disproportionately from middle class backgrounds – are not asked by the labor movement to help organize youth in the U.S., but instead, are typically parachuted in for short-term periods to unfamiliar settings to help organize groups of workers who are often very different to them in age and life experience.<sup>19</sup> The ironies and shortcomings of the labor movement’s “youth turn” in America become painfully apparent in situations where a union such as the United Food and Commercial Workers spends money and staff time, as part of its “support for youth,” to parade around a group of Union Summer interns – most of whom have no personal connection to the grocery industry – while ignoring the thousands of young supermarket workers who make up a sizeable minority of its own membership.

Why has the U.S. labor movement – in contrast to our neighbors to the north – failed to focus substantively on the issue of working youth? Although many factors are involved, it is worthwhile to highlight a few of the most likely causes of such difference. First, youth unemployment – and unemployment generally – was lower in the U.S. than in Canada during the 1990s, and consequently, was not as high on the public agenda (the U.S., of course, was being buoyed at the time by its so-called “economic miracle”, a miracle in reality based largely on the creation of millions of low-wage, part-time jobs in what was effectively an almost entirely unregulated labor market). Second, with a few notable exceptions such as the CUNY (City University of New York) Wars during the mid-1990s, tuition deregulation and mass student protest over rising student debt and decreasing accessibility of higher education have not occupied the national stage in the United States in the way they have in Canada in recent years. Thus, while the declining social and economic fortunes of young Americans and Canadians over the past decades have been virtually identical, the absence of unemployment crisis in the U.S, along with student quiescence, has meant that the plight of youth was less likely to plague the country’s national imaginary than were the struggles of the down-sized and middle-aged, or the immigrant and undocumented.

A third and organizational-level factor leading to difference between the United States and Canada is that Union Summer itself has probably had a displacement effect within the labor movement, shifting union leaders’ attention away from working youth and towards young student staff recruits. Since the program began, talk of reaching out to youth in the U.S. labor movement has all too often been seen as being identical to and constituted by the work of training and supporting Union Summer interns. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the American labor movement, through organizational structures such as the AFL-CIO’s Working for America Institute, and through participation in policy initiatives such as the School to Work

---

<sup>18</sup> United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2001) *Union Affiliation of Employed Wage and Salary Workers By Selected Characteristics*.

<sup>19</sup> Leslie Bunnage (2002) “Identity, Social Location and the Formation of Political Agendas: Examining Experience, Privilege and Commitment Among Youth Labor Activists.” *University of California Institute of Labor and Employment Graduate Student Conference Paper*. Santa Cruz, CA.

Opportunities Act, has tended to embrace fully the hegemonic neoliberal discourse that promotes more education and training as the primary solution to youth workplace and labor market difficulties – despite considerable evidence to the contrary that what the country desperately needs is not better educated youth, but rather better jobs for youth who are already more well educated than any other generation in history.<sup>20</sup> The Canadian labor movement has been much more critical than its American counterpart of what is sometimes referred to as the “high skill, high wage” or “high performance” jobs and education policy model.<sup>21</sup>

Since the election of John Sweeney and the New Voice slate to the leadership of the AFL-CIO in 1995, there has been at least paper interest within the American labor movement in reaching out to youth. Sporadic and disconnected organizing efforts have sprung up among working youth across the country – perhaps most notably along the west coast, from Powell’s Bookstore in Portland, to the Bike Messengers Association in San Francisco, to the organizing of airport concession workers in Los Angeles.<sup>22</sup> Aside from Union Summer, a handful of AFL-CIO affiliates, from the teachers’ union to SEIU, have sponsored occasional and local-level workshops to focus on the issues of working youth.<sup>23</sup> The AFL-CIO sponsored a survey of the state of working youth in America in 1999; and the American Federation of Teachers, along with others, have worked on developing an array of “Labor in the Schools” curriculum materials. Concern resurfaced over the past year about rising youth unemployment – a widely reported study from Northeastern University’s Center for Labor Market Studies found that youth have disproportionately borne the brunt of the nation’s post-9/11 economic downturn.<sup>24</sup> Across the country, there are individuals who argue that mobilizing working youth is a necessity rather than a luxury, demanded not just by social justice concerns but by strategic imperatives for rebuilding the U.S. labor movement.

For those who are working to push U.S. labor to embrace head-on the issue of working youth, the six-year-old youth turn in the Canadian labor movement holds important lessons about some of the key issues that will need to be addressed:

**(1) Legitimation:** Unions need to make a clear and universal commitment towards recognizing working youth as an essential, legitimate and immediately recognizable constituency of the labor movement. Establishing youth committees and building networks of youth labor activists can play a pivotal role in foregrounding the needs and issues of working youth – and in keeping union leadership honest in their commitment to youth. Top union leadership need

---

<sup>20</sup> Gordon Lafer (2002) *The Job Training Charade*. Ithaca: ILR Press; and David Livingstone (1999) *The Education-Jobs Gap: Underemployment or Economic Democracy*. Toronto: Garamond Press.

<sup>21</sup> This critical stance is strongly evident in the policy statements on youth of the major Canadian unions, and also in writings produced by researchers and educators based in or affiliated with Canadian unions. See, for example, Dunk, McBride & Nelsen, eds. (1996) *The Training Trap: Ideology, Training and the Labour Market*. Socialist Studies Bulletin, no.43; and Nancy Jackson, ed. (1992) *Training for What? Labour Perspectives on Job Training*. Our Schools/Our Selves, vol.4.

<sup>22</sup> Marcy Rein & Peter Olney (2001) “Bike Messengers Organize.” *Social Policy*, Fall issue; Marc Cooper (1999) “Boyz in the Union: Some Onetime Gangbangers Pump Up Local Labor.” *LA Weekly*, October 8-14.

<sup>23</sup> Laureen Lazarovici (2002) “Reaching Out to the Future: Unions Develop Key Leadership Skills Among Young Workers.” *America@Work*, August issue.

<sup>24</sup> Andrew Sum & Robert Taggart (2001) *The National Economic Downturn and Deteriorating Youth Employment Prospects: The Case for a Young Adult Jobs Stimulus Program*. Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern University.

to be vocal and consistent in their support for youth issues, particularly since, given the lack of youth strength within most local memberships, it is all too easy for youth concerns to be pushed aside in times of crisis and need.

- (2) Empowerment and Participation:** Involving young members in the union needs to mean more than just mobilizing them to be supportive of pre-set union agendas. It should mean that young people become part of union agenda setting, with access to decision making structures and union leadership. Youth committees can provide an important space within the union for youth to voice their issues and develop their skills; however, youth committees can also end up marginalizing youth. Youth positions with full voting and decision making power on executive boards and other key union bodies are important. Union youth outreach needs to be mass-based, avoiding top-down tokenism in which a hand-picked select few of youth representatives are dutifully trotted out at public events.
- (3) Education and Communication:** Education and communication are both critical components of union youth outreach. However, it is not just youth who need to be educated about unionism, but older workers and union staff who need to be educated about youth. Cross-generational communication and solidarity programs are critical vehicles for bringing older and younger members together in the union, and building a unified membership that understands and is willing to fight for each other's issues. While transforming conventional forms of union communication that are deeply alienating to youth is paramount, youth outreach must be conceived as involving more than simply putting up a website or writing a labor themed rap song.
- (4) Relevance:** Unions must work hard at making the labor movement relevant to youth. This entails making changes at the bargaining table: addressing issues that matter most to working youth, such as educational leave, tuition benefits and flexible but reliable scheduling for students; and eliminating workplace structures that marginalize young people in part-time, contingent, casual and second-tier jobs. This also entails making alliances with other social justice, student and youth movements, supporting issues and causes that move youth to action, and building on young people's prior experiences of collective and political mobilization. This entails, finally, organizing the worksites where most youth work: in the low-wage, low-end service and retail sector.
- (5) Global Vision and Strategy:** Organizing and mobilizing youth, whether internally or externally, is not easy – and will not be accomplished by random hot-shop organizing or one-time-only youth conferences and workshops put on by unions operating independently of one another. Reaching out to youth and rebuilding the labor movement in the next generation will require a global, strategic and collaborative approach. Unions need to work together to develop policy and political campaigns that directly address the needs of youth – from outlawing subminimum training wages and two-tiered wage scales, to pushing for more job creation within the public sector. Unions also need to develop comprehensive, strategic, large-scale organizing strategies for tackling the mammoth non-union youth service sector ghetto. Flexible, creative and alternative organizing and bargaining strategies will be a central part of any campaign making significant headway into the industries in which most young people now work.

Tackling the “youth issue,” the labor movement needs to recognize, is not simply about catering to the particularities of a special interest group, but is about building the future of labor. The issue at stake, as the Canadian Auto Workers have argued, is about union building in its essence:

The issue is about planning, at all levels of our union, for changes that are coming. It’s about identifying future problems and turning potential threats into new opportunities.... Taking on the challenge of youth can be a catalyst for deepening the involvement of all members and addressing the broader concerns that affect the political climate ‘out there.’<sup>25</sup>

The Canadian labor movement, with its six-year-old youth turn, has pointed some of the way forward. It is our hope that labor in America can take its cue from the north, and build its own nationwide youth mobilizing campaign that will have the power to fundamentally transform the working fates and futures of an entire generation.

## **Acknowledgements**

Research for this article was made possible by a travel grant from the Center for Labor Research and Education at the University of California, Berkeley. Our analysis draws primarily on interviews we conducted in the Spring of 2002 with Robert Aegerter, Morna Ballantyne, Kevin Bell, Danielle Burlock, Denise Campbell, Sandra Clifford, Matt Davenport, Debora De Angelis, Natasha Goudar, Gwen Groening, Mike Hales, Leila Harding, Nikki Hill, Sarah Inglis, Denise Kellahan, Roland Lapins, Kate Laxer, Gavin McGarrigle, Andrea Mears, Irma Mohammed, Nrinder Nindy Kaur Nann, Dave Noonan, Kelly Provo, Justin Schmid, Tanya Speight, Leah Squance, Nicole Staebell, Monica Urrutia and David Vervaeke. We would like to thank all of these young (and not so young) labor activists for their time and insight – and for the inspirational work they do. We would also like to thank Jeremy Blasi for comments on an earlier draft of this article.

## **For More Information**

This article is a product of the Young Worker Research Group at the University of California, Berkeley. The mission of the Young Worker Research Group is to conduct research, provide training and education, and support the efforts of students, youth, educators, and labor and community organizers who are concerned with improving youth work conditions in the San Francisco Bay Area and beyond. For more information about the Young Worker Research Group or about this article, please contact Sara Flocks at [flocks@uclink.berkeley.edu](mailto:flocks@uclink.berkeley.edu) or Stuart Tannock at [tannock@jps.net](mailto:tannock@jps.net).

---

<sup>25</sup> Canadian Auto Workers (1997) *Discussion Paper on Planning for Generational Change: Youth and the CAW*.