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## **Understanding Union Practices: Business Unionism, Social Unionism and Social Movement Unionism**

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All unions adopt a set of ideas to explain and justify their approach to expressing and acting on their members' interests. All unions share the sense that their members have common interests and that they must be acted on collectively and through a common organization. However, from there, unions can be very diverse in how they define members' interests, problems, the solutions to those problems, the strategies and tactics most effective for achieving those solutions, and the most powerful kind of organization. These ideas about "who we are," "what we need to do," and "how we need to do it" are often seen in combination with each other, and form patterns of union practice. The two most common forms of union practice in Canada today are "business unionism" and "social unionism." Both have histories stretching back to the origins of the labour movement in Canada. A third form of union practice, social movement unionism, has emerged in recent decades and, while it shares characteristics with social unionism, is more explicit in its desire for an alternative economic system. While actual unions in practice are complex combinations of these different "ideal types," some unions tend more to one type of union practice than the others. Making these union types more explicit in our minds can help us clarify if the kind of unionism we are practicing is what actually want, assess the pros and cons of different approaches, and develop a plan for change if that is what union members decide.

### **Business Unionism**

The phrase "business unionism" emerged in the early twentieth century to describe a form of unionism most associated with the craft unionism of Samuel Gompers, the first president of the American Federation of Labor from 1886 to 1924. For Gompers, workers' immediate economic interests were not just important, they were the *central* concern of unionism. Proper union action was to make gradual improvements to workers' lot within the existing political economic system. Thinking about large-scale social transformations was a distraction at best. Union members' identities and interests are defined by their craft, occupation or job rather than their membership in or allegiance to the working class or community as a whole. If and when union members' interests and broader interests conflict, the union's first allegiance is to their membership. The union's role is to protect the immediate economic interests of union members, "delivering the goods" in the form of higher wages, better working conditions and job security. As Gompers put it, the American worker's desire was for "more, more, more, now," not workers' control over industry or social revolution. This is a very pragmatic approach to unionism, and the focus on material improvements to workers' wages and benefits is why this approach to unionism is often called "pure and simple unionism" or "bread and butter unionism." While employers are understood to have conflicting interests with workers, business unionists accept that those employers have power and work to improve workers' lot within a capitalist economy.

Business unionism also involves a particular set of strategies and tactics designed to serve workers' economic interests. Collective bargaining is the business unionist's primary focus, as it is assumed to be the method by which workers can exert the most power over their employers to extract gains. Defence of the collective agreement becomes the union's primary task. Collective bargaining is reinforced by other strategies that increase workers' bargaining power. Such unions pursue the spread of unionization in their occupation or sector or supportive legislation if it increases their members' bargaining power. Business unionists tend to be pragmatic in politics as well, avoiding permanent alliances with a particular political party and instead maintaining the ability to "punish enemies and reward friends" at each election.

Business unionism's internal organizational practices tend to mirror the practices of their employers on the assumption that hierarchical decision-making and discipline is what is needed to deal with corporate or bureaucratic employers. Some argue that this mirroring of employers' structures leads to unions being "run like a business" in which union financial assets and resources (like the security and stability of union staff) are maximized and protected and the preservation of the union organization is prioritized over other goals. Business unionism thus models its internal organizational practices on those of its powerful corporate counterparts, assuming that power flows from expertise and top-down discipline. The concentration of power and expertise in the hands of elected leaders and appointed staff tends to create a passive role for members, in which they see the union like an insurance policy rather than a collective organization in which they must actively participate to make powerful. Some call this situation, in which leaders solve members' problems for them, the "service model of unionism."

### **Social Unionism**

Social unionism begins with a broader understanding of the community of interest it speaks to and for. Social unionists tend to frame issues in terms of the interests of the general community or the working class, and not merely the already unionized working class. While unionism may be a means for advancing workers' economic interests in particular workplaces, it is also the base from which broader social change is made in the interests of the working-class majority. This idea is best summarized by Co-operative Commonwealth Federation pioneer J.S. Woodsworth: "What we desire for ourselves, we wish for all." As such, particular workers' interests are framed as representing those of others, whether symbolically or materially, and others are encouraged to see their own stake in these particular battles. This emphasis on broad shared interests is also used to mobilize the union's members in support of struggles outside their own workplace as well as to frame their own interests as those with which the wider society should identify. In part, this is because social unionism defines members' interests as more than economic. Because union members are more than merely wage earners, and are also community members with a wide range of other identities, they have experiences, problems and therefore interests that extend beyond the workplace. These problems are experienced beyond the labour-management relationship and have solutions that rest outside collective bargaining. Class inequality, racism, sexism and homophobia, for instance, intersect with workplace relationships but are not confined to the workplace. In that sense, social unionists argue that improvements to workers' wages cannot solve all the problems they face in a class-divided and unequal society.

Because of this broader understanding of workers' interests and identities, social unionist strategies and tactics are also more encompassing. Collective bargaining can be used to address broader social justice concerns, but social unionists also tend to use more overtly political strategies to make social change. These include electoral activity to elect labour-friendly governments (sometimes with a partisan commitment to a particular labour-friendly party), nonpartisan lobbying and campaigns for worker-friendly legislative reform, union-community coalitions and organizations to represent workers who are not unionized, demonstrations or political strikes, international solidarity actions, and community volunteerism and charitable fundraising. In all these strategies, social unionism tends to emphasize the *political* nature of workers' problems and therefore the need for political solutions, and to emphasize the connection between the interests of workers and other members of the community.

Social unionism tends to focus on practices that mobilize mass participation of union (and community) members and reject the service model of unionism. The logic here is that the effective exertion of union power on broader social justice questions needs large numbers of people to tip the balance towards workers. This is

both because the forces arrayed against such demands are powerful and because it is the only way to challenge the increasingly common view that unions are acting in their own narrow interests in such struggles.

### Social Movement Unionism

As a sub-type of social unionism, social movement unionism shares the broader framing of workers' interests, commitments and terrains of action, when compared to business unionists. However, this approach is distinct in some important ways. First, social movement unionists tend to be more explicit in the view that workers' problems are rooted in *capitalism* as an economic and political system. Their critique of that system is more radical and more likely to say that workers' interests can never really be met within a capitalist economic framework. Insofar as they advocate for systemic change (rather than improvements within the existing system), social movement unionists tend to mobilize even broader communities of solidarity and tend to advocate for more militant and disruptive strategies and tactics. Second, social movement unionists are committed not only to more membership participation but to greater membership democratic control over their organizations. They are critical of other forms of social unionism, for instance, that tend to keep the big strategic decisions in the hands of leaders and staff, even when they want members to show up and participate in political action. For social movement unionists, deep membership participation is central because it unlocks all the creativity and investment of members in the struggles they are engaged in, and because it develops in workers the abilities to truly lead their communities without the control of economic or political elites.

	Business Unionism	Social Unionism	Social Movement Unionism
<b>Framing</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Who "we" are</li> <li>What are our problems?</li> <li>What are the solutions to our problems?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Workers' problems are primarily economic / workplace based</li> <li>Focus on dues-paying members</li> <li>Tends towards narrow solidarity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Workers' problems are both economic and political</li> <li>Many problems require political solutions</li> <li>Focus on working class / community, not just union members</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Workers' problems are embedded in the structure of capitalism</li> <li>Tends to have a more radical critique of systems of power</li> <li>Tends towards broad solidarity</li> </ul>
<b>Repertoire</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>tactics and strategies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collective bargaining</li> <li>Grievance handling</li> <li>[Political mobilization when it increases union's economic leverage]</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Political mobilization</li> <li>Tactics can be disruptive, but tends to make use of established political processes (elections and lobbying)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Political and economic mobilization</li> <li>Greater emphasis on disruptive movement tactics</li> </ul>
<b>Internal Organizational Practices</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How are decisions made?</li> <li>Who makes what kinds of decisions?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Bureaucratic processes</li> <li>Leaders and staff are the main actors / strategic thinkers</li> <li>"Service model of unionism": solve members' problems for them, on their behalf</li> <li>Success and stability of the organization important</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More membership involvement</li> <li>Can tend towards bureaucratic or participatory forms</li> <li>Can co-exist with service model of unionism in the workplace</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participatory democracy</li> <li>Members are the main actors and source of union strategy and implementation</li> </ul>