



Share some 21st Century Insights
with Joe Mulhall

Continuing the Journey - Building the Path

The Canadian Union of Skilled Workers was founded in 1999 for the purpose of protecting the rights of the members that were being impacted by the changes in the Economy including the structure of the Energy and Information Technology Sectors and more specifically the changes that were impacting our workplaces.

The nature of the founding “bargaining units” of CUSW defined a start point for the new union that was set in the context of a business union model.

The American style union that we displaced had regressed to the role of a **business** supplying people to employers in exchange for employment opportunities and the funds to pay for the operation of the employment agency.

This model of business unionism had failed in the US and workers had lost confidence in the concept of “unions” as a means to provide a voice in the future of their workplace. CUSW was designed as an alternative to a failing union model that was moving very quickly into the Canadian environment.

That was 1999. It is important at this point to note that this trend has continued. An article on the de-

cline of unions in January 2013 noted: “Last week came news that the share of America’s workforce that’s unionized hit a 97-year low. A mere 11.3% of workers now belong to a union, and a great chunk of those are in the shrinking public sector. In the private sector, unionization fell to an abysmal 6.6%, down from a peak of 35% during the 1950s.” (Time: January 2013).

The article went on to report that this decline has resulted in a state where “Inequality and wealth concentration are at levels not seen since just before the Great Depression.” There had to be another way and we had set out to find it.

The challenge for the members of CUSW in dealing with this shift to a non-union environment was to understand the changes taking place in their environment and then to find ways to take control of the change.

CUSW members are not the only 21st Century workers looking for an alternative solution. The Times article went on to observe, “It’s significant that innovative forms of worker organizing are now emerging, and that these bypass traditional union structures altogether.” This is no surprise to those

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that have been involved in CUSW since the beginning. Workers will not support an organization that is focused on the survival of the institution and not on how the members can participate.

There is much literature on the purpose of unions and the structure that has been put in place to ensure that members can participate in the workplace. The **Wagner Act** in the US and the sister labour legislation that emerged to provide similar rights for workers in Canada clearly provide the legal framework for worker voice in the workplace. The difficulty is that Legal rights do not translate into action unless the workers join unions. Workers do not want to belong to unions unless they see themselves represented in the union. In the absence of member support for unions the legally recognized rights that we have won lay barren. As members retreat from unions, the rights they might otherwise have are left dormant. There is no one to blame for the inequity we see in our society other than to look at ourselves as the workers.

Because of the “business” mentality associated with **Unions** there is a tendency for members to look at unions as third party service providers. To undermine the Union, employers simply need to convince their employees that the union is not providing any positive benefit to them. Once members start to say “we do not need the union, the employer will look after us” we have defeated ourselves.

To be successful as workers we need to take this power out of the hands of the employers. Only when members understand that their interests are served by working together with employers as a recognized body of workers with a voice, will we be able to see ourselves as having any say in the future of work.



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To get to this place requires the members to be engaged in CUSW. We need to see ourselves in the very fabric of the organization. It requires us to look beyond short term gain and self-gratification. It requires us to look beyond both the personal and the institutional “status quo”. We can build a union that responds to our needs and we know how to do it.

According to Regina Bailey (Biology Expert) the Lymbic system of the human brain controls our **unconscious** emotions and motivations related to survival. By connecting ideas to outcomes our unconscious mind will find solutions that lead to positive feelings that stimulate innovation. Through engagement we also activate our passion, creativity and initiative. Participation in CUSW provides the mental connectors that allow our brain to see opportunities and a way forward. Overcoming “status quo bias” requires the **conscious mind** and only you can turn your mind to that.

– Joe Mulhall