CAN HISTORY REPEAT ITSELF AS TRADE UNIONS REVERT TO BEING NASCENT AGAIN? LESSONS FROM THE SOUTH AFRICAN LABOUR EXPERIENCE FOR YOUNG CANADIAN UNION ORGANISERS

Ian Sakinofsky

Ted Rogers School of Management, Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada
What role did trade unions play in the continuing quest for the securing and maintaining of a democratic regime in South Africa?

Further, is there anything in this experience that could serve as a lesson to labour movements in other parts of the world?
More specifically is there anything in the South African experience that is of interest to (young) Canadian organisers in 2015?
Canadian Labour Situation in 2014

- Union density has fallen from a all-time high of 38% in 1981 to 30% in 2014
- Private sector union density in 2014 is 16% (1,935,900 'ees)
- Public sector union density in 2014 is 74.7% (2,651,100 'ees)
- Male union density has declined from 42% to 29% in last twenty years; female union density has remained at 31%
- Decline in unionisation is more pronounced in younger 'ees
- Job quality declining: no. of part-time jobs increasing faster than full time; no. of self employed workers increasing four times faster than paid employees; no. of low paying jobs increasing faster than mid and high paying jobs
Perspectives amongst 10 young Canadian organisers interviewed

- “Labour movement is behind the times”
- “Unions are changing with the system rather than changing the system”
- “Unions do not reflect their membership nor the interests of their current members”
- “The union movement has a lack of progressive thought”
- “There is a need to push back against whatever it is that is oppressing people”
- “Unions should focus more on need than organisational triumph”
The South African Situation

- The Apartheid Regime; White Political Leadership; Black Resistance
- Industrial Legislation and History
- Unions as a Beacon for Democracy
- COSATU, The Triple Alliance and Gear
- The Situation in 2015
Workerism is not Necessarily Business Unionism

Why?

Because workplace change may well lead social change – it did so in South Africa, to a point
Sectionalism:-

Strength or Weakness?
6 Lessons to be Learned

1. The role of tactics in Industrial Relations (workplace committees; centralised bargaining versus decentralised bargaining; closed shop versus multi-union bargaining; registered versus non-registered unions)

2. Workplace focus may ultimately achieve greater political change in the long run than a political focus

3. Union federations are better positioned to support their affiliate unions than the other way around
6 Lessons to be Learned

4. From a union perspective the pursuit of standard employment relationships may be more advantageous than a program of job creation

5. Democratic union culture at the core, fosters democratic civic engagement

6. Have a sense of articulated intent