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# Canadian Beacon

Kelly Candaele

Peter Dreier

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# The Nation.

## Canadian Beacon

The key to the future of the American labor movement may be found in the coffeehouses of Vancouver, British Columbia. In October, the Canadian Auto Workers union completed a successful organizing drive among workers at Starbucks coffee outlets. These retail employees, whose working conditions during rush hour actually resemble those in an automobile assembly plant, were brought into the C.A.W. without what in the United States is called a "representation election."

Under British Columbia labor law, all the organizers needed were signatures from 55 percent or more of the Starbucks employees stating their desire for C.A.W. representation. A few weeks later the provincial labor board certified the union without requiring a vote of the employees, and the union has moved toward bargaining. By contrast, in this country, elections supervised by the National Labor Relations Board are the rule, unless an employer voluntarily grants union recognition, which rarely happens. Most organizers will tell you that the N.L.R.B. is an impediment to organizing. Any employer with a clever attorney can stall union elections, giving the boss time to scare the living daylight out of potential recruits. And according to one study, one in ten workers involved in an organizing drive is fired. The lucky ones get back pay and reinstatement years after the fact.

Employers in the United States can require workers to attend meetings on work time where company managers and consultants give anti-union speeches, show anti-union films and distribute anti-union literature. Unions have no equivalent rights of access to employees. To reach them, organizers frequently must visit their homes or hold secret meetings. The rules are stacked against workers, making it extremely difficult for even the most committed and talented organizers and workers to win union elections. In Los Angeles, unions like the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees and the Service Employees' Justice for Janitors campaign have become so discouraged by the N.L.R.B. bureaucracy that they have abandoned the election process altogether.

It should be no surprise that the number of Canadian workers who are organized stands at 35 percent, while in the United States it is down to 15 percent. Some of U.S. labor's decline (from its peak in the fifties) is due to the erosion of the nation's manufacturing industry, where unions were strong, and the growth of service-sector employment, where they have so far made few inroads. Another element is the union movement's failure to devote adequate resources to organizing new workers and new types of workplaces. But most of the labor movement's mem-

bership drop is the result of the country's outdated labor relations laws.

Mobilizing a new wave of union organizing won't be easy. As economist Richard Rothstein noted in a recent issue of *The American Prospect*, unions will have to recruit more than a quarter of a million members a year merely to maintain the 15 percent level they now hold. But last year unions won only half of the 3,000 N.L.R.B.-supervised elections, adding fewer than 100,000 new members. The reason behind these dismal numbers is not prejudice against unions. In fact, surveys show that a majority of U.S. employees want union representation. But they won't vote for a union if they feel their jobs are at stake.

In 1978, the last time labor-law reform was seriously considered, the issue was defeated by one vote; Democratic Senator Dale Bumpers of Arkansas was instrumental in the failure to override a Republican filibuster. Today reform will require a struggle within the Democratic Party, which is divided between its corporate benefactors and its poor and working-class constituents. Even if, with unions' help, the Democrats regain a majority in Congress in 1998 or 2000, labor law reform won't be on the agenda until liberals and progressives outside the union movement make it a priority.

For the past hundred years, America's union movement has been at the forefront of the struggle for social justice. It led the fight against child labor, for the eight-hour day and for safer workplaces. It helped create Social Security, pushed for expansion of public schools and lobbied for affordable housing and decent health care. It was the prime funder of the famous march on Washington in 1963 and a major force behind passage of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act. Activists in women's, environmental, civil rights, public health and other progressive causes need to recognize their stake in promoting a stronger labor movement. Liberal Democrats in Congress must see that passing progressive health care reform in 1994 and obstructing regressive welfare reform in 1996 would have been much easier if Congress had passed labor law reform in 1978.

If our labor laws are changed to make it easier for employees to organize, a decade from now the United States will be a more prosperous and egalitarian society. A British Columbia "card check" process would be a good start.

KELLY CANDAELE AND PETER DREIER

*Kelly Candaele teaches labor history and politics at the Labor Center, Los Angeles Trade-Tech College. Peter Dreier is a professor of politics and director of the public policy program at Occidental College.*