

Unions Matter

-a reader-

Volume One / March 2014

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THE
FIRST

34

VERY
GOOD
REASONS



WHY UNIONS MATTER IS STUNNINGLY OBVIOUS.
So stunning and so obvious that we can easily
lose sight of their greatest value to us.

The aim of this little booklet is to remind us
not to do that.

Far beyond the obvious

It is a great and resounding truth that unions make life better for millions upon millions of people in very concrete ways every day. But this is too narrow a truth. Unions give us more. Something less tangible but more enduring. They give us an idea: the idea that our lives matter, that the things that we value matter and that all of it, all of life, should always matter. It is an idea that changes everything.

It is an idea that drives out darkness. It gives us hope and courage, welcomes difference, prizes dignity, fosters friendship, brings us joy. It is an idea that liberates us to pursue happiness, however we may choose to define it. It is an idea that can, and has, changed the world.

Unions are one of the best ways we have to keep that idea alive.

It's why they matter so much—and always will.



James Clancy

President

National Union of Public and General Employees



My dad sang to me

My dad sang union songs to me when I was a child, and I always found them riveting. Their marching tunes and fighting words contained promises of faraway lands, perfect dreams worth giving your life for. And when my dad sang them, a secret side of him came bursting forth. He would become animated, lean toward me, and in a soft voice, enunciate every word. It was as though he was seized with the realization that he had a legacy to pass on. And with the power of this legacy, he was larger than himself. My father, the holder of beautiful ideals, knew the meaning of fighting for one's beliefs. My father, who sometimes seemed lost and shrunken by life, came alive when he sang, "There once was a union maid, who never was afraid." I listened as though these were the most righteous words in the world.

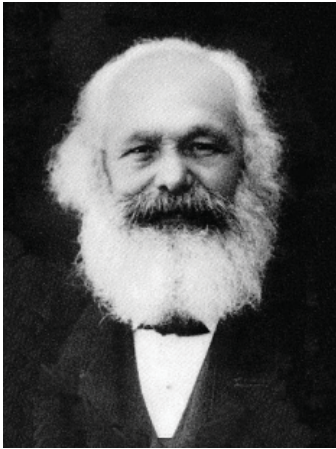
• **Sarah Lazare**
US Journalist

Maybe Adil has a point

Maybe Adil has a point about the machinery of capitalism being oiled with the blood of the workers.

- **Homer Simpson**





Before Marx

Surely my right to having more than enough is cancelled if I don't use that more to help those who have less. This sense of humanity's interdependence antedates Karl Marx.

- **Orson Welles**



A calling

Most of us are looking for a calling, not a job. Most people have jobs too small for their spirit.

- **Studs Terkel**

A small group

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.

- **Margaret Mead**



FIGHTING THE NEW FEUDALISM

By Silver Donald Cameron

WE ARE THE WEALTHIEST people in the history of the world. So how can it be that at the feet of the cold glass and steel towers of the financial district, a ragged man – having eaten at a soup kitchen or a food bank – curls up to sleep under a blanket of newspapers over a warm exhaust grill?

Let me tell you a story about a country I once knew.

In that country, sixty years ago, food banks and soup kitchens were just an unhappy memory from the Dirty Thirties, when the police protected the rich, the factories lay idle, and dust storms drove the farmers off the land. Starving men clung to boxcars, willing to trade a day's work just for a day's food. But the Dirty Thirties led into a war, and the bums and vagrants were suddenly transformed into brave soldiers and sailors. The factories re-opened, spewing out tanks and guns and planes, while a torrent of innovation yielded radar and reactors, plastics and jet engines, electronic navigation, antibiotics and computers.

The hoboes and drifters who had become infantrymen and airmen went out and won the war. And when they came home, they remembered the hunger and hopelessness of the Dirty Thirties, and they said, Never again. We did not fight and die to sustain a society that starves and scorns us. The war showed us how a focussed and determined government, supported by its people, could marshall the whole creative power of the country for a common purpose. If we can do that in order to kill other people, we can do it to nourish our own people.

The veterans dreamed of a society with jobs for everyone, a home for everyone, a democracy that would hold the plutocrats in check. They dreamed of innovations like "unemployment insurance" and "family allowances." They imagined a Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation that would help working families to buy their own homes. They wanted universal old age pensions, a strong and accessible system of higher education, assistance to the blind and the disabled. They dreamed of universal medical care.

And they got those things, all of them. That's what created the country I grew up in. Its name was Canada.

The institutions that protected and nourished Canadians didn't come without a fight, but the veterans were never afraid of a fight. They had learned from the Dirty Thirties that industrial capitalism is like fire: a good servant, but a nasty master. They knew that

IN 1970, FOR NINE DAYS
OF MID-WINTER FISHING,
FISHERMEN WERE
LEGALLY PAID AS LITTLE
AS \$2.01.



the future is shaped by politics, and that politics is about power. The rich had the power of position and wealth, while the working people and the poor and the disabled had only the power of their passion and their numbers.

But a passionate crowd achieves power only when it's organized. So the people of postwar Canada organized. They organized political movements and labour unions. They understood that a "working person" is anyone who trades labour for income, and can lose that income if they lose their job. So they didn't just organize the tradesmen and the labourers in the mines and the mills and the railways. They also organized unions of school teachers and university professors, nurses and civil servants, actors and airline pilots, screenwriters and policemen. They negotiated livable wages, safe workplaces, pensions, vacations, job security.

The labour movement, one commentator recently noted, provides "the muscle behind progressive politics." The political home of labour was a young political party called the Canadian Commonwealth Federation, which stood for a fair deal for all working Canadians. To keep the CCF from power, the parties of the rich vilified the party

and then stole its ideas, and found themselves bringing in the very programs that their organized population was demanding.

And so, in that distant country, a society arose in which Canadians cared for one another, provided opportunity to their children, supported the sick and the weak and the aged. Because they knew all about war, they demanded a foreign policy rooted in peace-keeping and foreign aid, in protecting and caring for other people all over the world.

And the country flourished. Working people don't hoard their money; they spend it. Because everyone had incomes – even the unemployed, the disabled, the elderly – business boomed.

Yet corporate greed still bared its teeth. In 1970, deep-sea fishermen in Nova Scotia had no job security, no pensions, no vacations. For nine days of mid-winter fishing, fishermen were legally paid as little as \$2.01. You read that correctly: two dollars and one cent. The fishermen did not even have the right to organize. To gain that right, they took on the government, the churches, the courts, the media. After a long and bitter strike, they won.

The fishermen were employed not by local entrepreneurs, but by corporations based in Illinois and England. A transnational corporation is a strange creature. It exists only in our collective imagination. In law it is a person, but it scarcely resembles a person. It has no body and no mind, no feelings, no family, no loyalties, no conscience. It cares for nothing. It neither feels the wind nor smells the blossoms. It is stateless and immortal. It has plenty of legal rights, but only one legal obligation: it is required to make money for its shareholders. Its ethic is endless growth – the same ethic as a cancer cell.

If flesh persons behaved as these fictional persons do, we would call them psychopaths, and we would lock them up.

In recent years, corporations have again assaulted communities and working families. They bought up the media, endowed business schools at universities, created right-wing think-tanks to construct and spread junk science. They debauched democracy by pouring money into the pockets of lobbyists and legislatures, which dutifully freed them from regulations. They did everything they could to break the unions and to eliminate union jobs.

At the same time, the corporations pushed for trade pacts and “globalization,” for the integration of the world's national economies into a single, borderless

global economy where corporations could operate without any restrictions at all. So the jobs went offshore, where there are no unions, no child labour laws, no environmental regulations. With predictable results. Asian children work in a toxic soup as they dismantle scrapped electronics. In Uzbekistan, workers are beaten to death for leaving the fields where they harvest cotton to make sneakers for the First World. (Bradfield) In Bangladesh a factory collapses, killing 1100 workers. The corporate commentators

WE KNOW WHAT A
BETTER WORLD WOULD
LOOK LIKE. NOW IT'S
TIME TO BUILD IT.



shrug. That's just the way the global market works. That's how the economy grows.

Call it what it is: a new feudalism. Globalization is not good for you – your community will not be sustained by jobs in Cambodia or Mauritius – and the fact that “the economy” is doing well doesn't mean that you are doing well. The Canadian economy has doubled in size in just 35 years, but the income of ordinary Canadian families is stagnant. Between 1998 and 2007, Canada's economy saw the fastest growth in this generation, but 33% of the additional wealth went to the wealthiest 1% of taxpayers. (Conference Board)

“I want my fair share,” says Charles Koch, one of the wealthiest men in the world, “and that's all of it.” (Palast)

All social programs are under attack – old age pensions, progressive income taxes, environmental protections, medicare. Unions are pressed to freeze wages, out-source jobs, reduce benefits. Private-sector union membership slowly drifts downward from 21.3% in 1997 to 17.4% in 2011. Nevertheless,

a unionized worker, over a lifetime, will earn \$600,000 more than a non-unionized one, which makes union membership almost as good an investment as higher education. (Globe)

The industrialized West is the richest society that has ever existed – probably the richest that ever will exist, given the likelihood of ecological collapse – and we cannot provide for our children the things that my generation took for granted: an education without a crushing debt, a satisfying job with a full range of benefits, an affordable home, safe food and water, clean air. In a country bloated with McMansions, malls and SUVs, our children beg at intersections and squeegee windshields to gain a few scraps of income. In a world in which a billion people are obese, another billion people are skeletal with hunger.

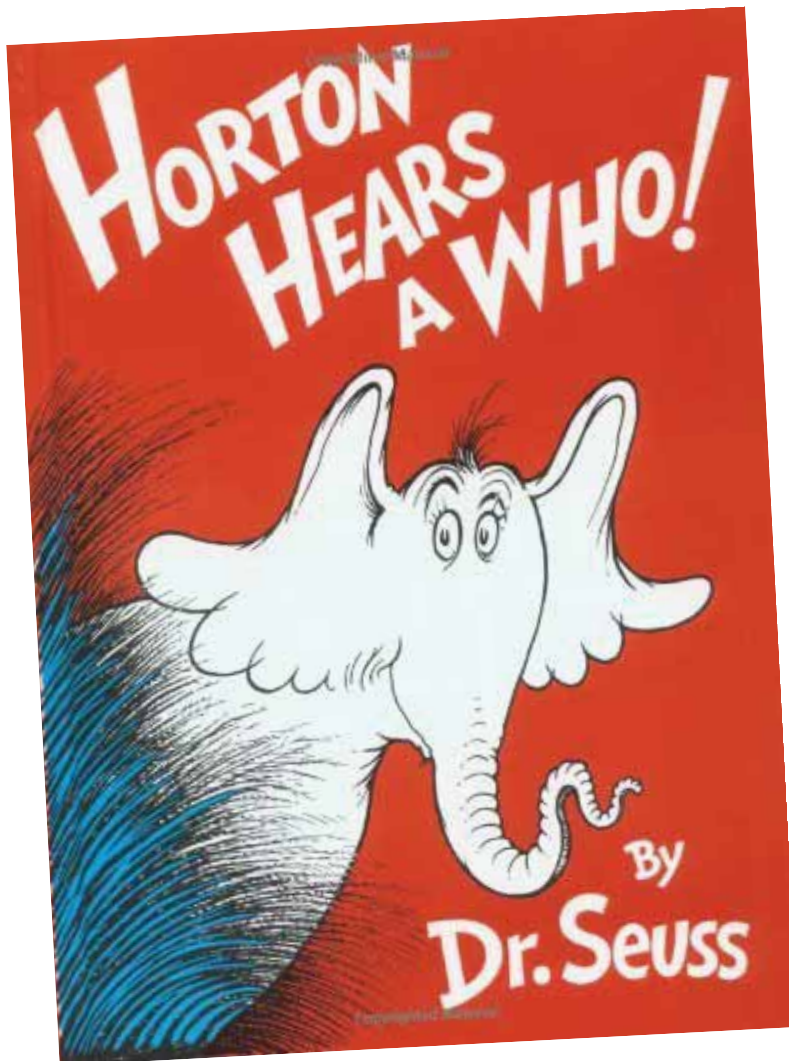
It is still true that politics shapes the future, and that politics is about power. It is still true that a passionate crowd can achieve power through organization. And it is still true that nobody can organize for power better than the labour movement.

We need the labour movement not only to regain what we have lost, but to complete what the postwar generation began. They got us medicare, but we also need pharmacare and daycare. They got us a patchwork of social programs, but we need a guaranteed annual income. Today we need the unions to lead in assembling an unstoppable coalition of disenfranchised youth, seniors, marginalized workers, greens, co-op members, health and safety activists, the LGBT community, and above all – and with great sensitivity – the First Nations.

Occupy and Idle No More demonstrated that Canadians detest the new feudalism. It is our duty to defeat it – for our children, for our fellow citizens, for all the forms of life that inhabit our planet. We know what a better world would look like. Now it's time to build it.

• [Bradfield](http://laborrights.org/releases/teachers-students-labor-rights-watchdogs-religious-leaders-call-uzbekistan-end-forced-child): <http://laborrights.org/releases/teachers-students-labor-rights-watchdogs-religious-leaders-call-uzbekistan-end-forced-child> • [Conference Board](http://www.conferenceboard.ca/hcp/hot-topics/caninequality.aspx): <http://www.conferenceboard.ca/hcp/hot-topics/caninequality.aspx> • [Palast](http://www.gregpalast.com/i-want-my-fair-share-and-thats-all-of-it-the-kochs-the-xl-pipeline/): <http://www.gregpalast.com/i-want-my-fair-share-and-thats-all-of-it-the-kochs-the-xl-pipeline/> • [Globe](http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/the-weakening-state-of-canadian-labour-unions/article4515873/?page=all): <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/the-weakening-state-of-canadian-labour-unions/article4515873/?page=all>

AUTHOR NOTE: Silver Donald Cameron is a member of the Canadian Freelance Union, a local of Unifor. He is the outgoing treasurer of the Writers Union of Canada, and a Life Member of the Writers Guild of Canada, through which he enjoys a pension and a range of health and insurance benefits provided by the ACTRA Fraternal Benefit Society.



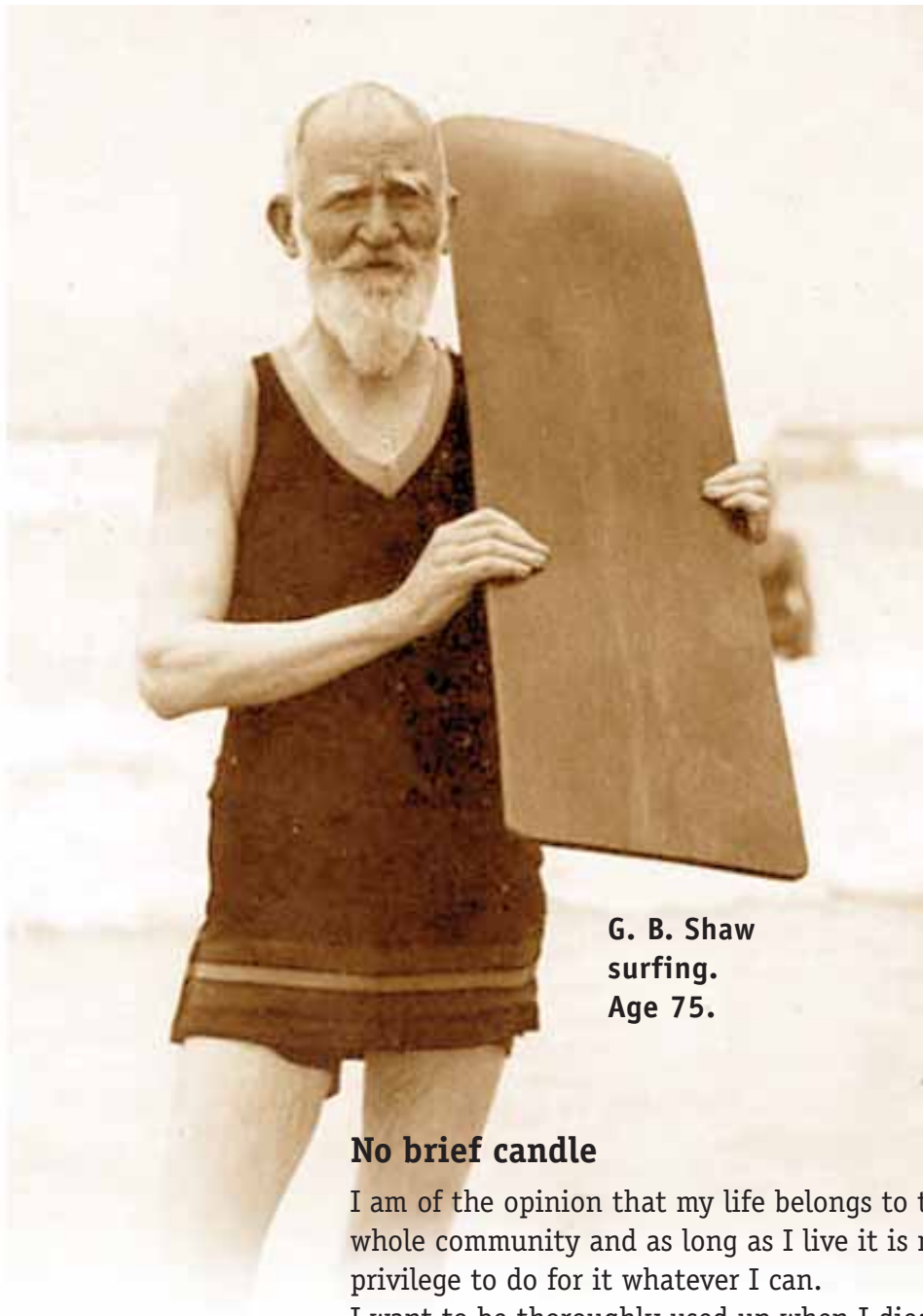
No matter how small

Horton fought back with great vigor and vim
But the Wickersham gang was too many for him.
They beat him! They mauled him! They started to
haul

Him into his cage! But he managed to call
To the Mayor: "Don't give up! I believe in you all
A person's a person, no matter how small!
And you very small persons will not have to die
If you make yourselves heard! So come on, now,
and TRY!"

- **Dr. Seuss**

Horton Hears a Who!



**G. B. Shaw
surfing.
Age 75.**

No brief candle

I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community and as long as I live it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can.

I want to be thoroughly used up when I die; for the harder I work the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no brief candle to me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.

• **George Bernard Shaw**

1907





I am from

I am from those Wednesday nights when my dad comes home and announces he made a difference in someone's life by helping them get a raise or protect their pension plan.

I am from the time, two years ago, when the BC Teachers Federation all stood up to the Liberal government and said "we want fairness."

- **Ezra Barrett**
Grade 8, Vancouver

We are the reason for hope

Movements turn individual problems into collective problems. They provide comradeship and support. And they show people not only that there is hope but that they themselves are the reason for hope.

Men work together

"Men work together," I told him from the heart,
"Whether they work together or apart."

- **Robert Frost**
A Tuft of Flowers



I hate a song

I hate a song that makes you think that you are not any good.

I hate a song that makes you think that you are just born to lose, bound to lose; no good to nobody; no good for nothing because you are too old or too young or too fat or too slim, too ugly or too this or too that. Songs that run you down or poke fun at you on account of your bad luck or hard travelling.

I am out to fight those songs to my very last breath of air and my last drop of blood.

I am out to sing songs that will prove to you that this is your world and that if it has hit you pretty hard and knocked you for a dozen loops, no matter what colour you are, what size you are, how you are built, I am out to sing the songs that make you take pride in yourself and in your work.

• **Woody Guthrie**



A war on unions

You know, I think there's been a war on unions in general over this last decade. You see this play out in all these different industries. It feels like they've been going after teachers for about 10 years now, with these punitive policies that are punishing teachers and blaming teachers, without ever talking about poverty, without ever talking about any other possible contributing factor to children's education. Despite what you hear, even union teachers are underpaid. They're working in really, really tough conditions—often providing supplies for their own classrooms out of their own pockets. So, to break up the union and pay workers less and give them less rights is definitely no kind of answer.

- **Matt Damon**

Music and the miner's letter

The light laughter rings through the corridor as I write. I am not a misanthrope, but I cannot keep out of my mind pictures of plain homes, in some of which there is a desperate struggle for mere existence. What is Ottawa to them? In some way, the government has been too far removed from the people, or was it ever thus?

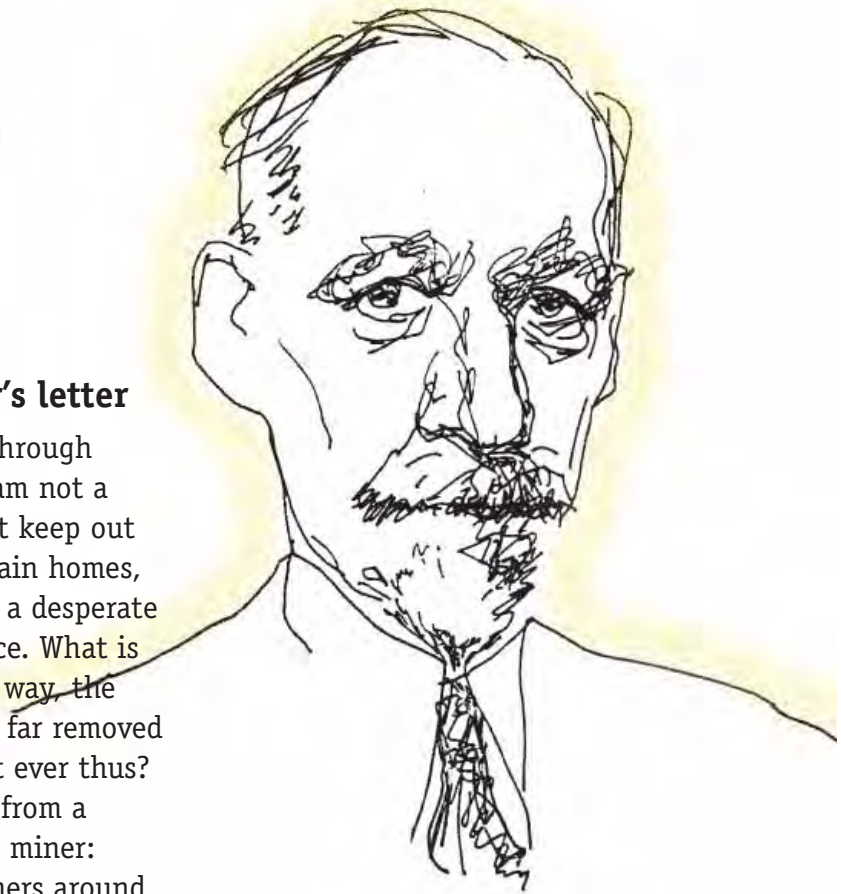
... Before me lies a letter from a disheartened Cape Breton miner:

"There are some 2000 miners around Glace Bay who are getting work from 1 to 2 days a week, and I suppose you know what that means—and that, after five months' strike." (Music floats up from the Senate chamber)

... Somehow the music and the miner's letter clash. I like music, but I wish the music would stop. Even my comfortable office is getting on my nerves! Hang it! I don't believe I was meant to be a politician!

- **J. S. Woodsworth**

Reflections on the festivities at the opening of Parliament 1929



What we desire for ourselves we wish for all. To this end, may we take our share in the world's work and the world's struggles.

J.S. Woodsworth
1874-1942
First CCF leader

Of profits and poverty

In 1998, the United Nations calculated that \$40 billion, spent carefully, could provide clean water, sanitation, and other basic needs for all the poorest people on earth. Exxon, the richest corporation in human history, reported a record clear profit in 2005 of \$40 billion. The company did not say whether it would use any of its profit to lessen, or all of it to eliminate, world poverty.

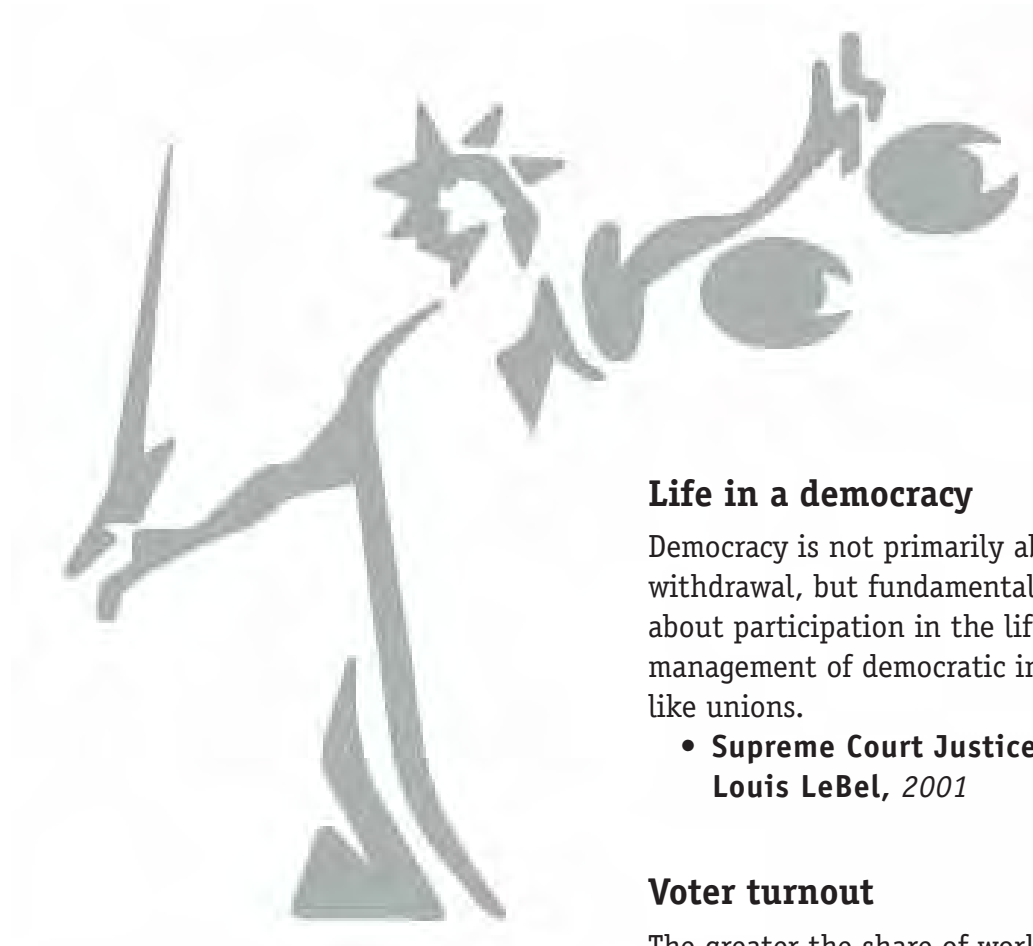
- **Adbusters magazine**
Fall 2013



\$17 an hour at least

If the minimum wage had kept pace over time with the average growth in productivity, it would be about \$17 an hour. The problem is that the benefits of that growth have flowed increasingly to profits, shareholders and executives, not workers.

- **NY Times editorial**
Nov. 11, 2013



Life in a democracy

Democracy is not primarily about withdrawal, but fundamentally about participation in the life and management of democratic institutions like unions.

- **Supreme Court Justice Louis LeBel, 2001**

Voter turnout

The greater the share of workers represented by unions, the greater is the (voter) turnout.

- **American Journal of Political Science**
Jan. 2000

Such an economy kills

Just as the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say “thou shalt not” to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills.

- **Pope Francis**
Nov. 24, 2013

For anyone

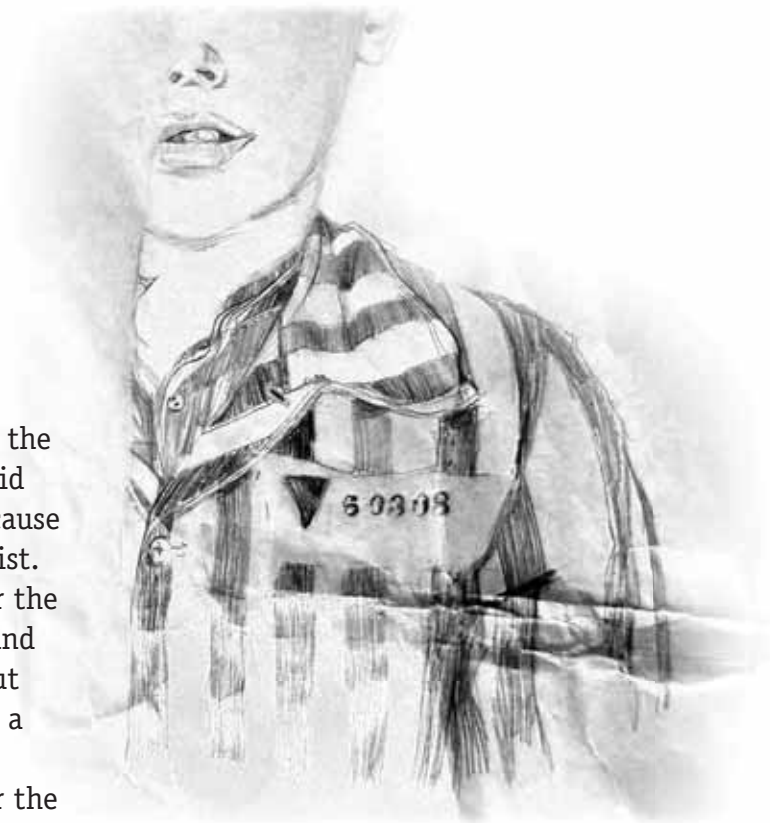
First they came for the
Socialists, and I did
not speak out because
I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the
Trade Unionists, and
I did not speak out
because I was not a
Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the
Jews, and I did not
speak out because I
was not a Jew.

Then they came for me
and there was no one
left to speak
for anyone.

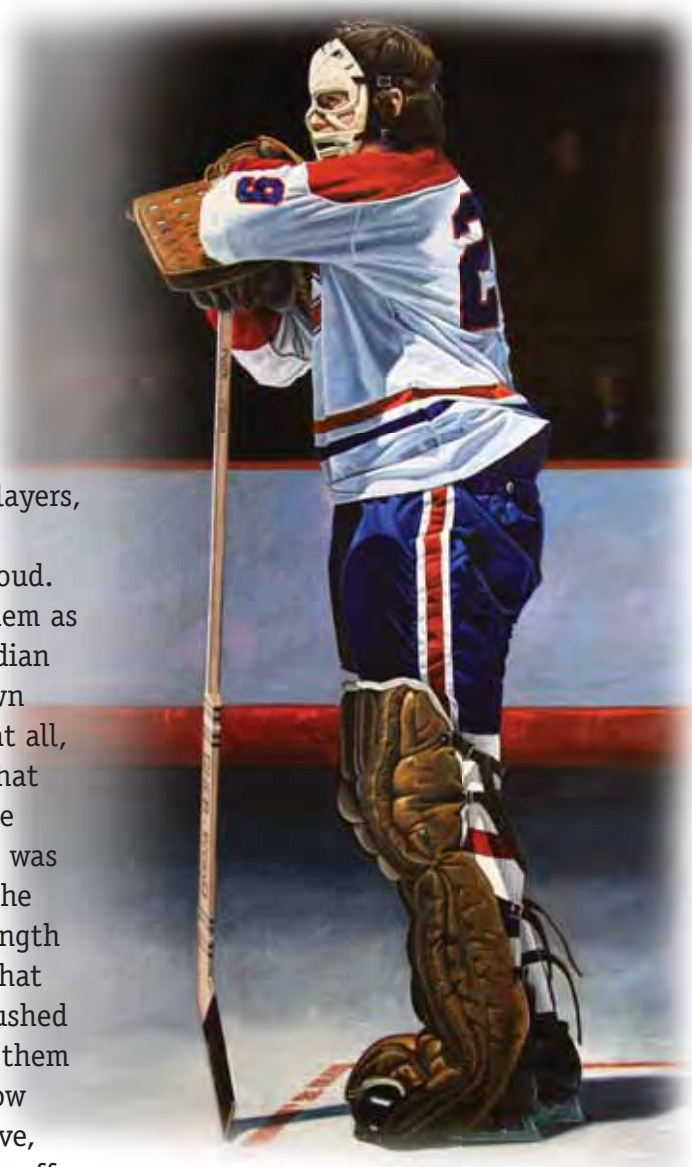
- **Martin Niemöller**
*German Protestant
pastor*



Playing to their strength

The owners treated their players, on the ice, as courageous, competitive, smart, and proud. Off the ice, they treated them as uneducated, ill-bred, Canadian farm-boys with broken-down faces, lucky to have a job at all, whatever they got paid. What the National Hockey League Players Association needed was someone who understood the personal and collective strength of the players, who knew that if he worked with them, pushed them, coached them, gave them confidence, they would show how courageous, competitive, smart, and proud they were off the ice as well. Then the NHLPA would be a force.

- **Ken Dryden**
*in his book *The Game**



The root of Tory policy

My Canada is the kind of country where trade unions and free collective bargaining makes our economy stronger and Canada a better place. ... the right of working men and women to unionize was at the root of Tory policy less than five years after Confederation ... it is part of who we are as Canadians from our very beginning.

- **Senator Hugh Segal**

Dec. 7, 2013

The better we work the less we get

A stagnation of workers' real average wages despite their rising productivity is a powerful indictment of the promise that a growing economy and increased productivity will produce benefits widely shared by the majority of Canadian workers. It simply isn't happening.

- **Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives**



No middle class

Before there were unions, there was no middle class.

- **Michael Moore**, *filmmaker*



While there is a lower class

While there is a lower class I am in it; while there is a criminal element, I am of it; while there is a soul in jail, I am not free.

- **Eugene V. Debs**, 1918

A culture of workers' rights

The kind of democracy that we all seek to build demands that we deepen and broaden the rights of all citizens. This includes a culture of workers' rights.

- **Nelson Mandela**

Inequality increases as unions decline

Statistical evidence supports the view that in countries in which inequality increased, this was primarily the result of the decline in the importance and bargaining power of organized labour.

- **UN Report**, 2005



Where did the masons go

Who built the seven towers of
Thebes?

The books are filled with the
names of kings.

Was it kings who hauled the
craggy blocks of stone?

In the evening, when the
Chinese Wall was finished

Where did the masons go?

- **Bertolt Brecht**

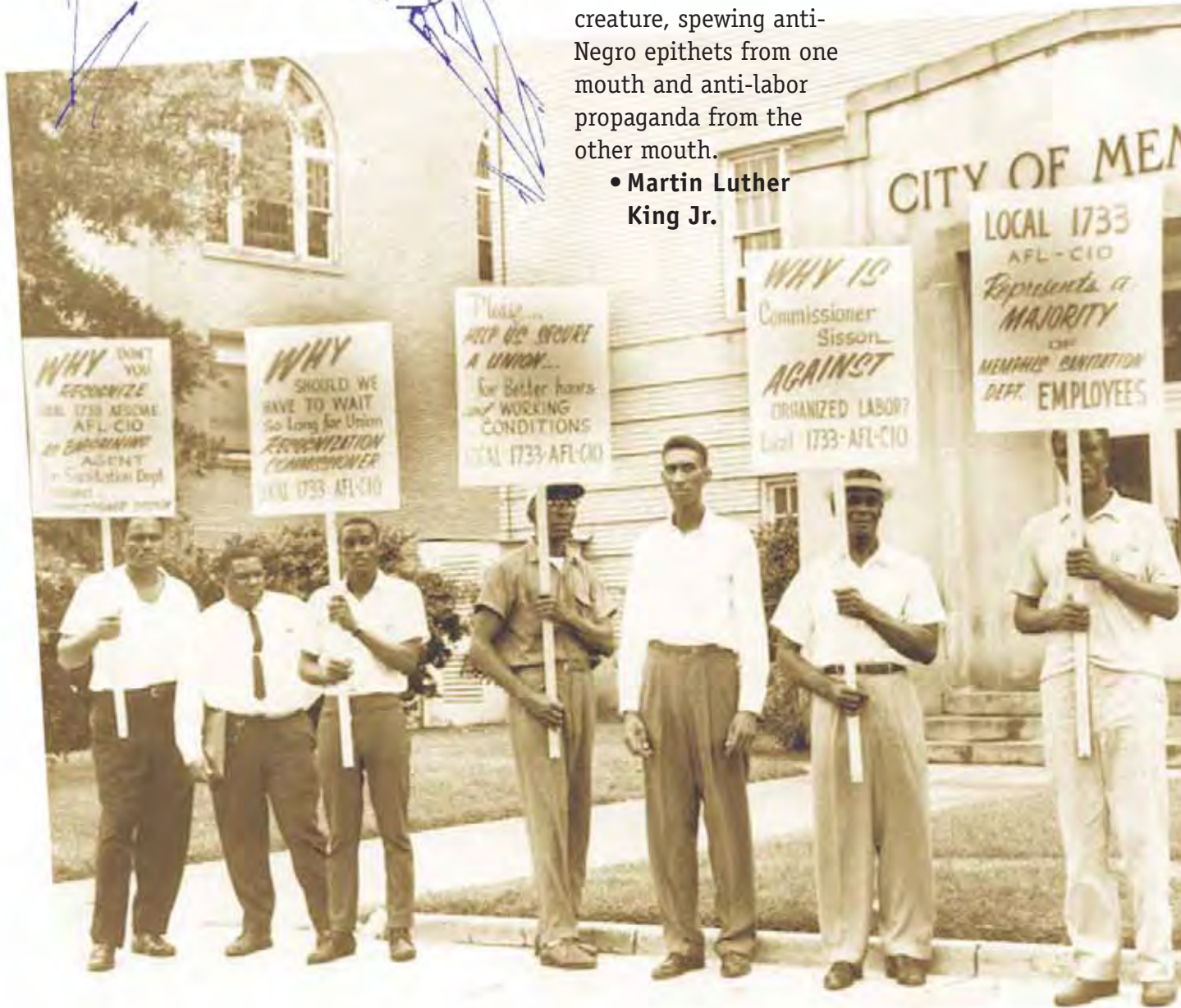
*German poet and
playwright*

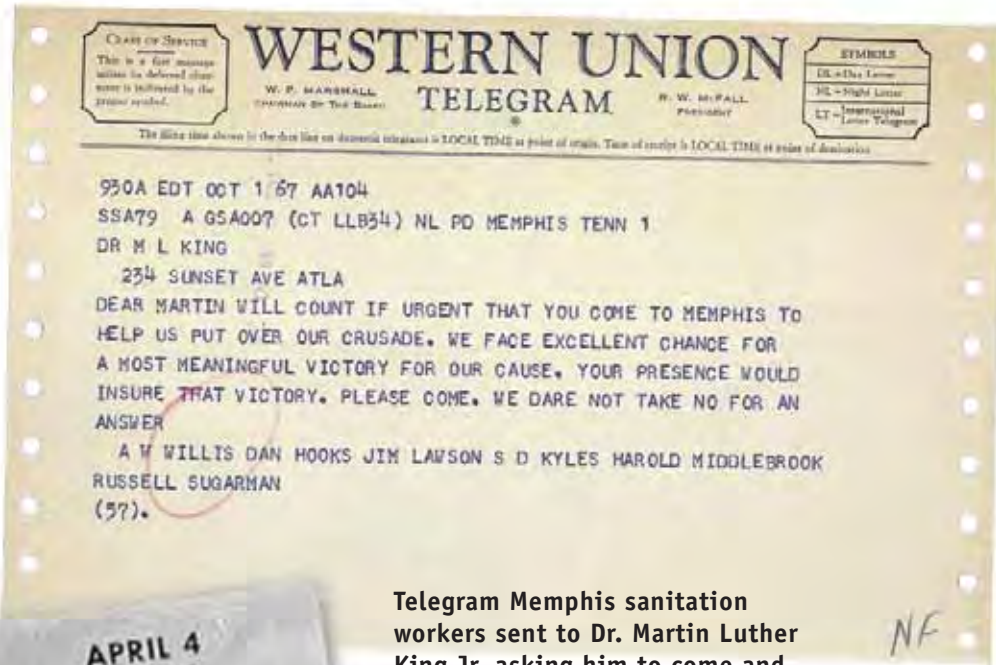


Twin-headed monster

... the labor-hater and labor-baiter is virtually always a twin-headed creature, spewing anti-Negro epithets from one mouth and anti-labor propaganda from the other mouth.

• Martin Luther King Jr.





Telegram Memphis sanitation workers sent to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. asking him to come and help them "put over our crusade."



What's at stake

A fair minimum wage is the defining issue of our time. At stake is whether this will be a country where working people can earn enough to raise a family, build a modest savings, own a home, and secure their retirement.

- **Barack Obama**
US President
Dec. 6, 2011



If I can't dance

If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution.

- **Emma Goldman**

Two aristocracies

I have recognized only two aristocracies, that of labour and that of the intelligence, and I know now that it is mad and criminal to try to make one dominate the other. I know that the two of them constitute but a single nobility, that their truth and, above all, their effectiveness lie in union; I know that if they are separated they will allow themselves to be overcome gradually by the forces of tyranny and barbarousness, but that united, on the other hand, they will govern the world. This is why any undertaking that aims to loosen their ties and separate them is directed against man and his loftiest hopes. The first concern of any dictatorship is, consequently, to subjugate both labour and culture. In fact, both must be gagged or else, as tyrants are well aware, sooner or later one will speak up for the other.

- **Albert Camus**

Bread and Freedom

*Speech given at the Labour Exchange of Saint-Étienne, France
on May 10, 1953*



Can't save up labour

Labour is always carried to market by those who have nothing else to keep or to sell, and who, therefore, must part with it immediately. ... The labour which I might perform this week, if I, in imitation of the capitalist, refuse to part with it because an inadequate price is offered me for it, can I bottle it? Can I lay it up in salt? ... These two distinctions between the nature of labour and capital (that labour is always sold by the poor, and always bought by the rich; and that labour cannot by any possibility be stored, but must be every instant sold or every instant lost) are sufficient to convince me that labour and capital can never with justice be subjected to the same laws.

- **Extract from Hand-Loom Weavers Petitions, 1834**

As quoted in The Making of the English Working Class by E.P. Thompson



**'Chicken thieves'
of the world unite!**

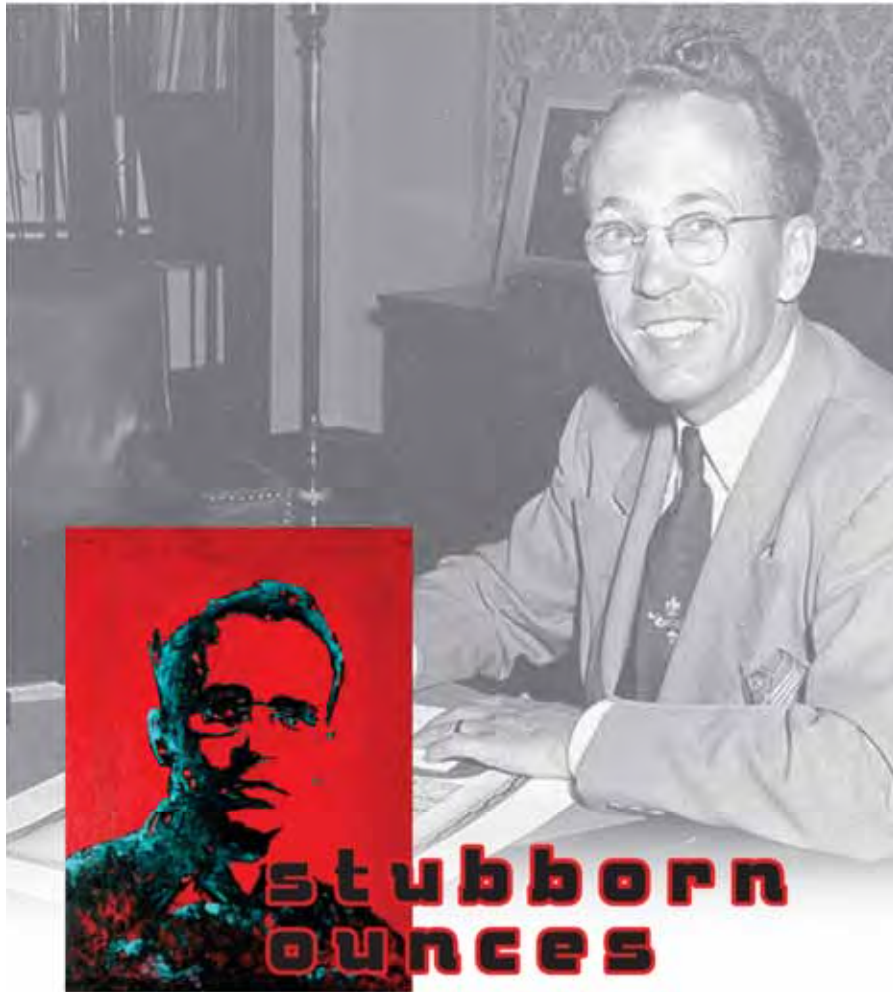
You will notice we are not respectable in these days of the reign of property. All the names you are being called, we have been called. And when graft and greed get up and begin to call names, honest men, brave men, patriotic men and martyrs can expect nothing else than to be called chicken thieves and outlaws. So be it.

But I for one wish that there were more chicken thieves and outlaws of the sort that formed the gallant band that took Mexicali, of the sort that is heroically enduring the prison holes of Diaz, of the sort that is fighting and dying and sacrificing in Mexico today.

I subscribe myself a chicken thief and a revolutionist.

- **Jack London**

In an open letter of support to the Mexican people opposing the military dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz, 1911



You say the little efforts that I make
Will do no good; they never will prevail
To tip the hovering scale
Where justice hangs in balance.
I don't think I ever thought they would.
But I am prejudiced beyond debate
In favour of my right to choose which side
Shall feel the stubborn ounces of my weight.

- **Tommy Douglas**

*Taken from his "Speak That
They Go Forward" speech in 1960*



Hooray
for all
of us!

Send us your favourite items for the next
volume of our *Unions Matter* Reader.

alltogethernow.nupge.ca

