In Defence of Unions:
A Critique of
the Third Way

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In years to come, the spring of 2001 may be seen as a watershed in Canadian politics. Right-wing political forces seem to be losing their stranglehold on Canadian politics. Internal upheaval and declining popular support for the Alliance Party, and renewed concern for rebuilding public institutions in the face of revelations about the impact of attacks on the public sector for water safety, public health and education, are evidence of this trend. Political space for new political initiatives is therefore opening up. As right-wing political parties seem to implode, Left and other progressive political forces are regrouping and reasserting their presence. Anti-globalization protests in Quebec, massive job action by nurses in several provinces, the formation of a New Political Initiative and last, and perhaps least, an internal review process launched by the New Democratic Party (NDP) aimed at renewing social democracy in Canada offer evidence of this.

The rethinking of social democratic and socialist politics comes after years of crisis, not just in Canada but in most English-speaking countries. The Australian and New Zealand labour parties were perhaps the first of the English-speaking democracies to refashion social democracy, combining old-style labourism with state-led neoliberal economic restructuring. But it is the British Labour Party’s electorally successful pursuit of Third Way politics that has captured the imagination of so many social democratic and liberal political supporters in Canada. As the NDP heads into its November 2001 national convention ready to debate the party’s future, there is little doubt that this debate will pit Third Way proponents against those urging a left turn in the party and the proponents of a New Political Initiative. Regardless of the
outcome of this debate, NDP governments in Saskatchewan and Manitoba are advancing their own versions of Third Way politics.

The Third Way makes a critical break from classical social democracy by abandoning the organized working class as a central agent of support and institution for mediating social democratic reforms. Criticized as “clinging to a materialist, redistributive policy agenda,” organized labour is seen by Third Wayers as representing the old economy and a class politics that can no longer make sense of the new economy and social conditions in which we live. This essay takes issue with this position. It begins with a critique of Anthony Giddens’ articulation and defence of Third Way politics, arguing that Giddens’ abandonment of unions, the working class, and ultimately class politics rests on misconceived notions of civil society and the workings of contemporary labour markets. Following this, an argument is made in defence of unions, arguing that they must play a role in any new politics of the Left, albeit in alliance with other social movement and community groups.

Civil Society and the Individual: A Critique of Giddens

Like social democrats before him, Giddens is concerned with securing the future of capitalism on a bedrock of social-political consensus or “social cohesion.” The Third Way, or New Labour or New Progressivism as it is alternatively called, is therefore about building a political alternative around the “radical” middle in a “state with no enemies” where individuals take personal responsibility and the “Left has to get comfortable with markets.” There is little new here for social democrats. Social Democrats have always sought the radical middle ground. And while old-style social democrats advocated constraining market forces to ensure greater social and economic equality, they nonetheless always accepted capitalist markets as a means for the distribution of goods and services. But Giddens departs from classical social democracy in the importance he attaches to civil society, rather than the state or issues of wealth distribution and economic control, for reviving a new Left political project. For Giddens, changes in civil society explain both why old Left political positions (whether social democratic or socialist) no longer
secure popular support as well as why various socio-economic problems have come to the fore, including rising alienation and detachment from society and social values, moral hazard among the poor and welfare dependents, increased crime and growing inequality. Giddens argues:

Hence it is to civil society more generally, rather than to “the community,” that we should turn as an essential element of third way politics. Civil society is fundamental to constraining the power of both markets and government. Neither a market economy nor a democratic state can function effectively without the civilizing influence of civic association.5

The problem with this conception lies less in the restoration of civil society to a pivotal role in the revival of a Left politics, but rather in Giddens particular conception of civil society.

There is nothing civil, nor social in Giddens’ conception of civil society. Civil society is constituted of self-actualizing individuals, whose concern with individual freedom and choice, and lifestyle concerns “filter...economic concerns”6 and make class based identities meaningless. There are no women, no men, no people of colour, and no workers—in effect nothing social—in Giddens conception of society, only individuals moving seamlessly across his pages in their pursuit of self-actualization and “a stable sense of self.”7 The problems they face are not unemployment, poverty, insecurity or growing racism and sexism. Rather the problems for individuals in contemporary society are rooted in the absence of “ethical values,” an inability or unwillingness to unleash their entrepreneurial spirit and dependence on old ways and institutions. Social democracy and the welfare state with its emphasis on equality of outcome are in part implicated in these developments; “social democracy became associated with a dull conformity, rather than with creativity, diversity and achievement...Social benefits too often subdued enterprise as well as community spirit.”8 The task for third way politics, is therefore to abandon collectivism, in favour of a politics of individual rights with responsibilities9 and to replace equality of outcome with equality of opportunity. The state’s role becomes one of the “redistribution of possibilities,”10 rather
than redistribution of wealth. What Giddens calls the social investment state is a redesigned welfare state that encourages entrepreneurialism and individual responsibility. This involves the restructuring of social welfare policies—such as welfare to work programs—that use both consent and coercion to ensure that individuals take responsibility for their life chances, in large part through attachment to the labour market.\footnote{11}

Giddens emphasis on ethical values and the individual elides any understanding of social relations. Individuals, whether women, workers or people of colour, appear to enter into social relations by choice and opportunity, not structure or relations of power and domination. The role for the state, civil society and the market is to create the conditions whereby such opportunities and choices are more likely. Problems of inequality and poverty arise from lack of individual responsibility or capabilities, not the workings of the market or its unequal distribution of rewards to different social groupings, whether these be social classes, women and men, or whites and people of colour. Giddens insists that economic concerns, markets and social classes have declining importance in explaining contemporary society, identities and politics. Yet he insists that self-actualization, and ultimately citizenship, are achieved through attachment to and participation in the labour market.

For Giddens, the labour market takes on both moral and material importance. Like the OECD, Democrats in the US and social conservatives, attachment to and participation in the labour market are not only the primary means through which people achieve their daily sustenance and material objectives, but offer solutions to problems of social exclusion and moral hazard. The responsibilities individuals must shoulder to acquire their rights, in an age of “no rights without responsibilities,”\footnote{12} are in large part responsibilities of continual attachment to and participation in the labour market. Work acquires a moral value in encouraging individual initiative and responsibility necessary for the building of renewed social cohesion. To ensure this attachment to the labour market, social welfare policies, and the role of the social investment state in general, are to be restructured in ways that end dependence and necessitate labour market participation.
Giddens embraces the development of flexible labour markets. While flexibility is in part borne out of necessity in the face of growing competition associated with globalization, labour market flexibility also enhances the capacity of individuals to make lifestyle choices through their work. Flexibility and responsiveness encourage initiative and entrepreneurialism. In a particularly striking comment, Giddens argues that “Life-style acts as a ‘filter’ for economic concerns. Security of employment, for instance, is seen as less important than it was; how much a particular type of job fits with wider aspirations counts for more than it did.” And while Giddens acknowledges that these lifestyle concerns are more prevalent amongst the “better-off,” he also argues that they have growing importance for poorer groups. In their Third Way manifesto, Tony Blair and Gerhard Schroeder reveal how insidious such a position can be when they state “Part-time work and low-paid work are better than no work because they ease the transition from unemployment to jobs.”

Giddens uncritical acceptance of current developments in the labour market are coupled with recommendations to increase commodification of social relations. Giddens recommends a commodification of the voluntary sector and volunteer work. His suggestions for legal contractual commitments by parents to their children threaten to commodify parenting as well. If Esping-Andersen was right in arguing that classic social democracy aimed to decommodify labour, then Giddens position is an abrupt reversal of this. Giddens favours a deepening of commodification presumably with the effect that the responsibilities associated with the achievement of rights will be enforced through market pressures.

**Bringing Social Class and Unions Back In** The absence of structural analysis combined with Giddens emphasis on post-modern life-style values and individual choice occlude any analysis of class relations and class politics or interests. Yet, the priority attached by Giddens to labour market participation and commodification subjects people to the very economic forces that through unequal distribution of wealth and control over the means of production are at the root of class formation. The fact that more and more people are tied inextricably
to the labour market, whether as workers or in search of work, means that paid labour is at least as important, if not more important, to the living of people’s lives and their expectations and capacities to participate in society. Although Giddens may be right in arguing that class politics and solidarity as we have known them since World War II may be finished, it is a huge leap of faith to suggest that this means the end of classes themselves, or the impossibility of new forms of class politics emerging. It is therefore premature to abandon unions as agents of change in any new Left political movement. Let us briefly examine three reasons why unions remain critical in any new Left political initiative.

One of the legacies of years of neoliberal governance across Canada, and elsewhere, is a retreat of the state from the provision of welfare and economic regulation and a resulting dismantling of public institutions designed to fulfill these roles. These developments force individuals to become more dependent on selling their labour power to survive. Weakening of state regulation of the labour market combined with the freer hand of corporations to determine the terms and conditions under which people work has resulted in ever-increasing numbers of bad jobs, characterized by poor pay, hazardous working conditions and little or no future. The only remaining private, market-based institutions capable of and interested in regulating the labour market in workers’ interests are unions. Unions have had particularly dramatic effects on the wages, benefits and job security of women and people of colour, reducing inequalities between women and men and whites and people of colour, and offering them more effective avenues for redress of workplace problems. As unions branch out to represent workers in new, previously non-union sectors of the economy, especially the private service sector, these benefits are being extended to an increasingly diverse population. Notwithstanding employer claims to the contrary, unions remain the only institutions that offer workers an independent voice in and some degree of control over their wages and working conditions. If democracy and reduced economic inequality are some of the goals of a new social democratic or socialist project, unions continue to have an important role in such a political project.
A second more prosaic reason why unions are important allies in any new political initiative stems from the resources they have at their command. Despite years of decline, unions continue to have at their disposal considerable resources, including money, infrastructure, organizational resources and power or influence over employers. These resources outstrip or augment those available to most social movements or community organizations. Further, unions have entry points into many communities that are inaccessible to other groups. This makes unions important potential allies and supports for any new political initiative. The support given by unions to a range of political initiatives, from the operation of the Ontario Workers’ Arts and Heritage Centre to support for a national day care campaign and anti-poverty groups, bespeak to the importance of unions in sustaining a critique of capitalism and alternative non-private spaces.

A third, and perhaps the most enduring reason why unions remain critical to any new Left project lies in their structural position in the economy. Unions have the capacity to mobilize pressure on capital and the state through withdrawal of their labour power. This has always been a critical source of union power and remains no less so today. The key questions become ones of how, if and under what conditions unions can and do use this power in support of broader social and political change, in addition to the benefit of their members. In contrast to critics of the labour movement who readily forget or ignore the ways in which unions have used their capacity for collective workplace action in support of broader claims for social and political change, the last ten years in Canada have been witness to growing incidences of this use of workplace action. Recent strikes by nurses in New Brunswick and Alberta in defense of the public health care system, the one-day city strikes and mass demonstrations to protest Ontario Conservative government actions and the illegal two week strike by elementary teachers in Ontario to draw attention to reduced funding and deleterious government changes to public education are but a handful of examples of the capacity of unions to use withdrawal of their labour power in support of broad political, social change. The fact that growing numbers of unions are taking collective action in support of employment growth rather than material gains for existing members...
underscores the importance of union power for forcing alternatives to present capitalist economic practices.  

For these three reasons, the labour movement continues to have a significant role to play in new Left political initiatives. Yet, unions cannot do this on their own. Unions occupy a contradictory position in capitalist economies, acting both as agents of change as well as defendants of capitalist markets. Forged out of capitalist labour markets, unions have always been structurally limited in their capacity to transform capitalist economies and societies. They curtail the excesses of market forces through pressure on profits, redistribution of wealth and limitations on the hiring, firing and deployment of labour. They mediate technological change and often transform the nature of work and the workplace, albeit through negotiations and struggle with employers. At the same time, unions are structurally tied to labour markets. Their raison d’etre is to represent workers dispossessed of the means of production and in so being, are inextricably tied to the commodification of labour. This structural position often limits unions capacity to understand the world through anything other than the lens of paid labour.

The lens of paid labour, combined with the fact that unions continue to be dominated by white males in full-time jobs who, wittingly or unwittingly, perpetuate hierarchical and patriarchal culture and practices, limits unions’ capacity to imagine political alternatives that can make sense of and potentially transform the experiences of a range of dispossessed groups in society. For this reason, it becomes critical for unions to join with social movements, community organizations and other groups in the political economy to forge any new political initiative. But, just as unions are limited in their capacity to change the world on their own, so too are new political and social movements.

Third Way politics threatens to mistake the decline of post-war working class politics with the death of the working class itself. Paid labour continues to be central to our lives, as does social class. And, Canadian politics has long demonstrated that the existence of classes rarely translates simply or directly into a politics of class. There is no doubt that the politics of the Left, whether socialist or social democratic, is in desperate need of reform. The mistake would be if this
new Left politics ignored the importance of class and unions as agents of change.

Notes

5. Giddens, Critics, p. 64.
6. Ibid., p. 42.
7. Ibid., p. 63.
8. Ibid., p. 6.
11. Ibid., pp. 111-128.
12. Ibid., p. 65.