

# **Union Mergers and International Unionism in Canada**

## **Les fusions syndicales et le syndicalisme international au Canada**

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[See table of contents](#)

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### Article abstract

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the difficulties encountered in using mergers to reduce the number of unions in a country with both national and international organizations. It is seen that the presence of internationals limits the scope of potential mergers and that merger attempts can strain the relations between the Canadian sections of international unions and their parent unions.

# Union Mergers and International Unionism in Canada

Gary N. Chaison

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At the present time, there are two major trends in the governance and structure of the Canadian labour movement. On the one hand, union mergers are being encouraged as a solution to the problems associated with multiunionism, i.e. the presence of many small unions. On the other hand, there has been a move toward greater autonomy for the Canadian sections of international unions. These two trends are rarely viewed in relationship to each other. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the difficulties encountered in using mergers to reduce the number of unions in a country with both national and international organizations. It will be seen that the presence of internationals limits the scope of potential mergers and that merger attempts can strain the relations between the Canadian sections of international unions and their parent unions.

## MULTI-UNIONISM AND MERGERS

In 1977, there were over three million unions members in Canada; more than 97 percent belonged to national or international unions<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Labour Canada, *Labour Organizations in Canada, 1978*, Ottawa, Supply and Services Canada, 1978, p. 12. Since 1951, the annual directory has provided data on unions as of the first day of the year indicated by the volume. Consequently, information for the end of 1977 (the same as the first day of 1978) is found in the 1978 volume and that for 1956 is found in the 1957 volume.

Historically, the majority were found in the internationals, although the proportion has been declining primarily because of the recent and rapid growth of the national public sector unions. By the end of 1977 the Canadian national unions accounted for more than half of the country's union membership. In that year, there were 88 internationals and 121 nationals and the typical national or international union was very small. Only 18 unions (7 nationals and 11 internationals) had over fifty-thousand members and 75 percent of the internationals (66 unions) and 85 percent of the nationals (103 unions) had less than 20,000 members<sup>2</sup>

It has been repeatedly stated that there are too many small, inefficient unions in Canada. Observers believe that the rising costs of union administration can not be met by the smaller organizations and that there are resulting deteriorations in the quality of such functions as organizing, bargaining, research, administration and education<sup>3</sup>. Mergers are generally considered to be the most effective means to reduce the number of unions. In 1968, the Canadian Labour Congress reviewed the recommendations of its Commission on Constitution and Structure and strongly supported a program of mergers among unions with overlapping jurisdictions. Recognizing affiliate autonomy, the CLC noted that mergers could only be urged and not forced<sup>4</sup>.

Individual unions and long-time observers of the labour movement have also advocated widespread mergers. For example, the Canadian Union of Public Employees, in its brief to the CLC Commission, suggested that a long term goal should be the merger of Canadian nationals into ten industrial unions with membership ranging from 25,000 to 300,000<sup>5</sup>. Others have recommended that mergers should be carried out because Canada has five times too many unions and that any union with less than 20,000-25,000 members could not function effectively on a national basis<sup>6</sup>.

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2 *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 14.

3 A discussion of the relationship between the size and efficiency of unions in Canada is found in: Michael J. COADY, "Trade Union Mergers and Their Significance in the Canadian Union Movement", (Unpublished L.L.M. Dissertation, 1976, Toronto, Osgood Hall Law School), pp. 25-36.

4 Canadian Labour Congress, *Convention Proceedings*, 1908, pp. 63-64.

5 "Amalgamation of Unions Proposed by CUPE", *Labour Gazette*, v. 67, n. 8 (August 1967), p. 477.

6 FINN, Ed, "Five Times too Many Unions", *Labour Gazette*, v. 70, n. 70, April 1970, p. 283, W.D. WOOD, *The Current Trade Union Scene; Patterns and Trends*, Kingston, Ont., Queen's University, Industrial Relations Centre, 1976, p. 7. Additional support for the use of mergers to reduce fragmentation is found in: COADY, *op. cit.*, *passim*; C.P. THAKUR, "The Structure of the Labour Movement", in S.M.A. HAMEED (ed.) *Canadian Industrial Relations, A Book of Readings*, Toronto, Butterworth, 1975, p. 136; Arthur M. KRUGER, "The

## INTERNATIONAL UNIONISM AND MERGERS

At the same time that the labour movement was reflecting on the state of its fragmentation and the need for mergers, it was also reconsidering the role of its international component. In 1970, the CLC Convention passed a resolution for minimum standards of self governance for the sections (locals, districts, conferences, etc.) of international unions<sup>7</sup>. While there is some debate as to the efficacy of the standards, there is evidence that the Canadian sections have begun to place a high premium on autonomy in the areas of administration and bargaining.<sup>8</sup>

The movements for autonomy and for mergers run parallel to each other and at times have magnified the problems attached to each. Mergers bring into play the important presence of the internationals, serving as examples of the lack of complete autonomy of the Canadian sections. International unionism has added some important dimensions to merger negotiations.

First, it should be recognized that mergers between international unions are negotiated at U.S. headquarters. The Canadian membership, almost always a minority in the international, may resist the merger because they fear a loss of autonomy within the new union. For this reason, five of the Canadian locals of the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers fought unsuccessfully against their union's absorption in the United Steelworkers of America in 1968<sup>9</sup>. In some instances, Canadian sections would rather disaffiliate than have their status changed through a merger. The Canadian locals of the Brewery Workers disaffiliated from their parent organization when it was absorbed by the Teamsters in 1973. After extensive litigation the Canadian locals and Teamsters reached an agreement. The locals would

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Direction of Unionism in Canada", in Richard U. MILLER and Fraser ISBESTER (eds.) *Canadian Labour in Transition*, Scarborough, Ont., Prentice-Hall, 1971, p. 109; "Increase in Union Mergers Welcome - MacDonald, *Canadian Labour*, v. 14, n. 4, April 1969, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> JAMIESON, Stuart, *Industrial Relations in Canada*, Second Edition, Toronto, MacMillan, 1973, p. 52. There was an unsuccessful attempt at the 1970 CLC convention to add a provision which would demand that Canadian sections of international unions be given a right to merge without the prior merger of their parent unions.

<sup>8</sup> See for example: Roy ADAMS, "Canada - U.S. Labor Link Under Stress", *Industrial Relations*, Berkeley, v. 15, n. 3, October 1976, pp. 304-312.

<sup>9</sup> COADY, *op. cit.*, p. 229. Also see Labour Canada, *Labour Organizations in Canada 1967*, Ottawa, Information Canada, 1967, p. viii-ix. A referendum held on August 3, 1967 showed that a better than two to one majority of Mine-Mills members favored the merger. The five locals opposed to the merger were from the Sudbury area and included Local 598 at Falconbridge Nickel.

refrain from challenging the legality of the merger, the Teamsters would absorb the U.S. locals and a Québec local of the Brewery Workers, and the Teamsters would recognize the remaining Canadian locals as a new Canadian national union, the Brewery Workers Union of Canada<sup>10</sup>.

In direct contrast to the above forms of resistance, there have been Canadian sections of internationals which tried to merge but found their efforts frustrated by one or both parent unions. For example, in 1975 merger discussions were carried out between the International Rubber Workers Union and the International Chemical Workers Union. When these negotiations proved unsuccessful, the Canadian Director of the ICWU attempted to merge the Canadian sections of the two unions. He was discharged from office, but soon founded a new national union from among secessionist locals<sup>11</sup>.

Additional problems may arise when a Canadian national union attempts to merge with an international. In some cases, the membership of the former may feel that they will become a neglected minority within the larger international. Promises of the establishment of an autonomous Canadian section in the new organization may not always reduce this apprehension. In 1969, the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Transport and General Workers called a special convention to consider a merger with an international union, the Brotherhood of Railway, Airline and Steamship Clerks. The CBRT & GW was one of the oldest national unions and, for a number of years, one of the largest. Although the union's leadership assured its members that the merger would create an autonomous Canadian section, the convention delegates soundly defeated motions authorizing merger negotiations<sup>12</sup>.

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10 WOOD, *op. cit.*, p. 8; ADAMS, *op. cit.*, p. 305; "Congress Executive Council Decisions: Council Recognizes Brewery Workers Board", *Canadian Labour Comment*, July 11, 1974, p. 2; "Congress Executive Council Decisions: Brewery Workers Reconstituted", *Canadian Labour Comment*, April 5, 1974, p. 3; "Brewery Workers Unite to Reject Teamsters", *Canadian Labour Comment*, April 19, 1974, p. 1; "UBW Rights Affirmed", *Canadian Labour Comment*, August 9, 1974, p. 1. The new union is the Canadian Union of United Brewery, Flour, Cereal, Soft Drink and Distillery Workers. A CLC affiliate, in 1977 it had 10,000 members in 62 locals. Labour Canada, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

11 ADAMS, *op. cit.*, p. 300. The new organization is called the Canadian Chemical Workers Union. An unaffiliated union, it had 30 locals with 2,825 members in 1977. Labour Canada, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

12 SCHREINER, John, "Canadian Labour Now Talking Up Its Need for Solidarity and Mergers", *Financial Post*, June 21, 1969, p. 20; "CBRT Calls Special Convention on Merger Terms", *Canadian Labour*, April 1969, p. 11; "Merger with BRAC Reject at CBRT Special Convention", *Canadian Labour*, July-August, 1969, p. 13.

In sum, Canadian sections of internationals can neither consummate nor effectively block the mergers of their parent unions. Furthermore, national unions have expressed some reluctance to either merge into or with internationals. As a result it would be expected that mergers in Canada are infrequent and have done little to reduce the extent of multi-unionism.

### UNION MERGERS IN CANADA

Union Mergers occur in two basic forms: amalgamations and absorptions. An amalgamation is the fusion of two or more unions to form a new organization. It generally involves unions of roughly equal size which seek to reduce jurisdictional overlapping and introduce economies of scale in their administration and organizing. On the other hand, an absorption is usually an attempt by large aggrandizing union to take over a much smaller organization which seeks a safe haven from financial difficulties and a declining membership. Absorptions always involve two unions while amalgamations may occasionally be the "composite" type and link more than two organizations.

Table 1 indicates the number of amalgamations and absorptions which have altered the structure of the Canadian labour movement. The figures are for the period since the merger of the rival federations in Canada. During this 22 year span there were 54 union mergers in the United States (14 amalgamations and 40 absorptions)<sup>13</sup>. Nineteen of these were between international unions and had the effect of reducing the number of unions in Canada by twenty-two<sup>14</sup>.

There were thirteen mergers among Canadian nationals, resulting in a net reduction of seventeen unions (one merger involved five unions). Relatively few mergers occurred between international and national unions. Over the twenty-two year period only three nationals were absorbed by internationals<sup>15</sup>. There were no instances of nationals amalgamating with internationals or nationals absorbing internationals.

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13 DEWEY, Lucretia M., "Union Merger Pace Quickens", *Monthly Labor Review*, v. 94, n. 6, June 1971, pp. 79-80; Charles J. JANUS, "Union Mergers in the 1970's: A Look at the Reasons and Results", *Monthly Labor Review*, v. 101, n. 10, October 1978, pp. 18-19.

14 For the purpose of this analysis an international union was defined as a union with headquarters in the United States and listed in *Labour Organizations in Canada* for the year prior to its merger.

15 Mergers involving Canadian national unions were identified by examining the introductory sections of *Labour Organizations in Canada* for the years 1956 to 1977 inclusive.

The Canadian merger trend is apparent: the vast proportion of union mergers result from decisions made either entirely in the United States (internationals with or into internationals) or entirely in Canada (nationals with or into a national).

It has been emphasized that the presence of the internationals and the high value placed on autonomy by both nationals and Canadian sections of internationals would tend to limit the usefulness of the mergers as a means to resolve the problems of multi-unionism. To what degree have mergers reduced the number of unions operating in Canada? Table 2 indicates the change in the number of unions operating in Canada from 1956 to 1977. There has been an overall increase of thirty-eight unions and the disaggregated figures reveal that a substantial increase in the number of nationals has offset a reduction in internationals. Furthermore, mergers appear to have had their main effect in reducing the number of internationals. In contrast, the decline in the number of national unions because of mergers has been more than compensated for by the creation of new organizations. Sixty-one new nationals appeared over the time period while only twenty nationals were disestablished through mergers.

It could be argued that the figures in Table 2 exaggerate the increase in national unions and consequently downgrade the role that mergers have played in reducing multi-unionism. A case might be made that the difference in the 1956 and the 1977 totals is an illusion: many of the organizations listed since 1956 actually existed that year but were not included in the directory because they were public employee associations and were not engaged in collective bargaining at that time<sup>16</sup>. Studies of public sector industrial relations note the early existence of many such associations. Among provincial employees, these staff associations started in the 1920's or earlier in the west and in the 1950's in the eastern provinces<sup>17</sup>. The analyses of union growth by Eaton and by Bain reveal large memberships in associations of government employees, nurses and teachers<sup>18</sup>. Furthermore, forty-

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<sup>16</sup> The main criteria for the inclusion of a union in *Labour Organization in Canada* is either affiliation to a central labour congress or a substantial proportion of the organization's membership in occupations that are covered by labour legislation. J.K. EATON, *Union Growth in Canada During the Sixties*, Ottawa, Information Canada, 1974, pp. 183.

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of the development of the staff associations, see: J.E. HODGETTS and O.D. DWEVIDI, *Provincial Governments as Employers*, Montréal, McGill - Queen's University Press, 1974, pp. 61-84.

<sup>18</sup> EATON, J.K., *op. cit.*, pp. 20-22; G.S. BAIN, *Union Growth and Public Policy in Canada*, Ottawa, Labour Canada, 1978, p. 1. Eaton presents an argument for the inclusion of association membership figures in the union growth analysis while recognizing that these associations are engaged in activities other than collective bargaining. EATON, *op. cit.*, pp. 183-190.

three of the sixty-one new unions listed in the directories since 1956 are within the public sector. While the evidence supporting the above argument may seem quite strong, it is this writer's view that the pre-1956 existence of numerous public employee associations does not disprove a recent proliferation of national unions but rather indicates its principal source. Much of the union growth since the 1960's, as well as the increase in the number of national unions is accounted for by the metamorphosis of government employee associations<sup>19</sup>. Established primarily according to professional or craft specialization and often within provincial jurisdictions, these associations moved rapidly from forms of consultation, through intermediate stages of negotiations in which the government retained the right to make final decisions, to collective bargaining relationships resembling those in the private sector<sup>20</sup>. When reaching this last stage, an association had completed its evolution to a union and was listed in the directories. This movement to the status of bargaining agent produced many unions but few mergers with either national or international unions. The result has been the high degree of multi-unionism among public sector and professional employees. For example, there are presently twenty teachers' unions and ten nurses' unions in Canada.

## CONCLUSIONS

Tables 1 and 2 indicate a rather slow merger pace and an increase in the extent of fragmentation in the Canadian labour movement. Undoubtedly, there will be a continued recognition of the problems of multi-unionism and an emphasis on the need for mergers both between nationals and between internationals. In the national union component amalgamations of public sector unions have produced some of Canada's largest unions: the Canadian Union of Public Employees (1963), the Public Service Alliance of

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<sup>19</sup> BAIN, *op. cit.*, p. 46. This is also recognized by the editors of *Labour Organizations in Canada* as they noted the new listings of public sector unions which had achieved bargaining rights. For example, see: Labour Canada, *Labour Organizations in Canada, 1974-1975*, Ottawa, Information Canada, 1975, p. ix. Sometimes these new listings had a dramatic effect on aggregate union membership. In 1972, half of the recorded increase in union membership resulted from the inclusion in the directory for the first time of the Alberta Association of Registered Nurses, the Registered Nurses Association of British Columbia and the Centrale de l'enseignement du Québec.

<sup>20</sup> HODGETTS and DWEVIDI, *op. cit.*, p. 161. Another view of the evolution from a professional model to a private-sector collective bargaining model is found in H.W. ARTHURS, *Collective Bargaining by Public Employees in Canada*, Ann Arbor, Michigan, Institute of Industrial and Labour Relations, University of Michigan-Wayne State University, 19712.



**TABLE 1**  
**Union Mergers in Canada**  
**1956-1977**

	<i>Number of Mergers</i>	<i>Reduction in the number of Unions</i>
<b>Mergers Among International Unions</b>		
Amalgamations:		
Int'l with Int'l.	7 (a)	10
Absorptions:		
Int'l into Int'l	$\frac{12}{19}$	$\frac{12}{22}$
Sub-total		
<b>Mergers Among Canadian National Unions</b>		
Amalgamations:		
Nat'l with Nat'l	8 (b)	12
Absorptions:		
Nat'l into Nat'l	$\frac{5}{13}$	$\frac{5}{17}$
Sub-total		
<b>Mergers Between Canadian National Unions and International Unions</b>		
Amalgamations:		
Nat'l. with Int'l.	0	0
Absorptions:		
Nat'l. into Int'l.	3	3
Int'l. into Nat'l.	$\frac{0}{3}$	$\frac{0}{3}$
Sub-total		
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>42</b>

Source: See Footnotes 13 and 15

- a) Includes a composite amalgamation of four railway unions in 1969.  
 b) Includes a composite amalgamation of six provincial public sector unions in 1976. The following year one of the partners to the merger disaffiliated, but two other provincial employees unions became components of the new union.

Canada (1966), and the National Union of Provincial Government Employees (1976). However, these mergers have only slowed rather than reversed the increase in the number of national unions.

Merger efforts of internationals, whether successful or unsuccessful, can be met with resistance from Canadian sections. Internationals contemplating such mergers will have to recognize the increased value placed on bargaining and administrative autonomy by their Canadian membership and may have to design structures, perhaps of a federated type, to provide guarantees of continued or expanded autonomy. Moreover, some interna-

tionals may have to revise their constitutions to grant their Canadian sections a right to carry out mergers either with other sections or with national unions.

Union mergers under any conditions can be complex and difficult. In Canada, additional problems arise because of extent of, and recent Canadian reactions to international unionism. Canadian section autonomy and an accelerated union merger pace are frequently identified as desirable objectives. If means are to be devised to simultaneously meet these objectives, the degree of their inter-relationship should be recognized.

**TABLE 2**  
**National and International Unions in Canada**  
**1956, 1977**

	<i>Number of Unions</i>			<i>Change resulting from mergers</i>
	<i>1956</i>	<i>1977</i>	<i>Net Change</i>	
International Unions	111	88	-23	-22
National Unions	<u>60</u>	<u>121</u>	<u>+ 61</u>	<u>-20</u>
<b>TOTAL</b>	171	209	+ 38	-42

Source: *Labour Organizations in Canada*, 1957, p. 11.  
*Labour Organizations in Canada*, 1978, p. 12.

## Les fusions syndicales et le syndicalisme international au Canada

À l'heure actuelle, il y a deux tendances principales dans le gouvernement et dans la structure du mouvement ouvrier au Canada: d'une part, on favorise les fusions syndicales comme solution aux problèmes découlant de la présence de plusieurs petits syndicats et, d'autre part, on constate un mouvement tendant à assurer une plus grande autonomie des sections canadiennes vis-à-vis les syndicats internationaux. Cependant, on ne considère rarement ces tendances l'une par rapport à l'autre.

Il s'agit ici de faire ressortir les difficultés que l'on rencontre en recourant aux fusions pour réduire le nombre des syndicats dans un pays qui regroupe à la fois des syndicats nationaux et internationaux. On y voit que la présence des syndicats internationaux limite les possibilités de fusions et que les tentatives en ce sens peuvent durcir les rapports entre les sections canadiennes des syndicats internationaux et leur organisation centrale.

En 1977, il y avait plus de trois millions de syndiqués au Canada dont 96 pour cent étaient membres de syndicats nationaux ou internationaux. On comptait cette année-là 89 syndicats internationaux et 103 syndicats nationaux. Sur le nombre, il n'y avait que 18 syndicats qui comptaient plus de 50,000 membres, tandis que 165 en avaient moins de 20,000. Conséquence: les syndicats sont trop petits et il s'ensuit une détérioration dans leurs secteurs d'activité.

Depuis plusieurs années déjà, on a préconisé la fusion comme remède à cette situation, mais l'existence des syndicats internationaux entrave les fusions à la fois parce que les fusions entre les syndicats internationaux se négocient au sommet et aussi parce que les sections canadiennes y opposent une certaine résistance de crainte d'y perdre une partie de leur autonomie. Par ailleurs, les sections canadiennes des syndicats internationaux favorables à la fusion voient souvent leurs efforts frustrés par l'un ou l'autre des syndicats internationaux. Quant aux fusions entre syndicats nationaux et syndicats américains, il est normal que les premiers redoutent d'y devenir une minorité négligée par la nouvelle organisation.

Les fusions revêtent deux formes: l'amalgamation et l'absorption. L'amalgamation se produit lorsque deux syndicats s'unissent pour former une nouvelle organisation; l'absorption résulte de l'annexion d'un syndicat faible par un plus fort. Or, entre 1956 et 1977, on a relevé aux États-Unis 52 fusions (14 amalgamations et 38 absorptions) et 22 d'entre elles eurent pour effet de faire baisser le nombre des syndicats au Canada. Par ailleurs, il y eut 11 fusions parmi les syndicats canadiens qui ont résulté dans la disparition de 15 syndicats. Pendant cette période, on ne révèle que 4 absorptions de 4 syndicats nationaux par des syndicats internationaux. Il n'y a aucun exemple de syndicat canadien qui se soit amalgamé avec un syndicat américain non plus qu'il y ait des syndicats canadiens qui aient absorbé des syndicats américains. Il en découle donc que la grande majorité des fusions proviennent de décisions prises aux États-Unis.

La présence des syndicats américains et la recherche de l'autonomie dans le syndicalisme au Canada tendent à limiter l'utilisation des fusions comme moyen de résoudre le problème de la multiplicité des syndicats au Canada, d'où le résultat suivant. En 1956, il y avait 178 syndicats au Canada (113 syndicats internationaux et 65 syndicats nationaux). En 1977, on comptait 192 syndicats (89 syndicats internationaux et 103 syndicats nationaux), soit 14 de plus. Les changements résultant des fusions indiquent qu'il y a eu 41 fusions (soit 22 syndicats internationaux et 19 syndicats nationaux).

Comme on le voit, les fusions ont ralenti l'augmentation du nombre des syndicats, mais ce déclin a été plus que compensé par la création de nouveaux syndicats. La conclusion s'impose d'elle-même: au Canada, les fusions, toujours difficiles, soulèvent des problèmes particuliers provenant des réactions des syndiqués face au syndicalisme américain.