

Chris Selley: The labour movement needs to justify its existence

Posted: June 24, 2009, 7:02 PM by Chris Selley

[Full Comment](#), [Full Pundit](#), [Chris Selley](#)

The term “alternate reality” is being thrown around a lot this week in Ontario, vis-à-vis two public sector strikes—one ongoing, among Toronto’s outside workers, and one threatened, among LCBO employees. You hear variations on the question asked all the time: How can unionized workers possibly be demanding to ameliorate their already comfortable compensation packages at a time when those who pay their salaries are holding on for dear life?

It’s an understandable sentiment, but I’ve never found it particularly resonant. First, there’s nothing wrong with people fighting for their own best interests. Ideally those interests won’t be ludicrous on their face, as 18 sick days annually are even before they’re banked indefinitely and cashed out at retirement. But still, as awkward as it might sound to say so, one is entitled to one’s entitlements. Second, the fact that workers are treated unequally is not an argument to treat any one group of workers worse. Indeed, many who curse this week’s picket lines will also yearn for an era when a reasonably competent, educated and loyal person didn’t have to be in a union to expect job security, benefits, a pension, a company picnic—you know, all that good stuff my generation rarely gets. I’m sure the labour movement would be happy, and probably correct, to take a good amount of credit for that era.

Today, however, I’m not clear whether union leaders give a damn about public opinion—or indeed, the public. Whenever there’s a public sector strike, you’ll hear people say ruefully that Tactic X—say, blocking taxpayers’ access to municipal buildings, parking garages and the hell-on-earth waste transfer stations they’ve been forced to drive to precisely because of the strike—won’t win them any support. But surely even union leaders can’t be deluded enough to think it will. When OPSEU, which represents LCBO employees, complains that its members’ livelihoods are threatened by part-time and casual workers making between \$10 and \$17 an hour, they must realize how Ontarians will react. These are cashiers and shelf-stockers, for heaven’s sake, plus the odd person who actually knows a bit about wine. I’m not saying it’s right, but the idea that that sort of work might constitute a stable lifelong career went out with leaded gasoline. Forget the realities of the recession—for some time now, the LCBO has embodied what is in every sense an alternate retail reality, at the taxpayers’ expense.

If one could claim that the labour movement was on an upward trajectory without bursting into either tears or laughter, then this might all be explained away rather easily. The movement has workers’ rights in general at heart, its leaders could argue. A Toronto garbage man’s victory is your victory; it’s everyone’s! But clearly the labour movement is not on an upward trajectory. It’s in a corkscrew dive. Its automaking brothers and sisters are giving up salary, benefits and old age security like candy on Halloween. People urging CUPE members to surrender their obscene sick leave entitlements are citing precedent in cities all over the country and continent. The picketers I saw this week chanting “fee-fi-fo-fum, we won’t give up what we’ve already won” under the crack of an organizer’s whip looked dispirited and embarrassed, and rightfully so. It’s difficult to see how any of this is helping The Worker, writ large. And yet these unions still have the time to operate as a sort of leftist pamphlet made flesh: Palestine this, abortion that, free sex changes for everyone! To people of my generation and younger, they might as well be alien life forms speaking in extraterrestrial riddles. We literally have no idea what the hell these people are on about.

In short, I think it’s incumbent upon the labour movement and its component unions to justify their continued existence to Canadians—to explain how they’re not, perversely, a force for inequality in society. If they’re around solely to protect their members’ entitlements (or, at least, their senior members’) no matter how ridiculous those entitlements are—if they’re just the last, scrappy vestiges of a cause that’s already admitted defeat, or perhaps even victory—then there’s not much reason for Canadians to support them. There’s sure as bloody hell no reason to support them if they actually turn against those Canadians, whose taxes, after all, underwrite the entitlements.