



# **On the Job:**

## **Why Unions Matter in Alberta**





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## On the Job: Why Unions Matter in Alberta

David Campanella, Bob Barnetson, and Angella MacEwen  
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## About the Parkland Institute

Parkland Institute is an Alberta research network that examines public policy issues. Based in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Alberta, it includes members from most of Alberta's academic institutions as well as other organizations involved in public policy research. Parkland Institute was founded in 1996 and its mandate is to:

- conduct research on economic, social, cultural, and political issues facing Albertans and Canadians.
- publish research and provide informed comment on current policy issues to the media and the public.
- sponsor conferences and public forums on issues facing Albertans.
- bring together academic and non-academic communities.

All Parkland Institute reports are academically peer reviewed to ensure the integrity and accuracy of the research.

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## **Abbreviations**

- ALRB:** Alberta Labour Relations Board
- ATA:** Alberta Teachers' Association
- AUPE:** Alberta Union of Provincial Employees
- AWHC:** Alberta Workers' Health Centre
- CBA:** collective bargaining agreement
- CLAC:** Christian Labour Association of Canada
- CUPE:** Canadian Union of Public Employees
- GDP:** gross domestic product
- HSAA:** Health Sciences Association of Alberta
- IBEW:** International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers
- IBT:** International Brotherhood of Teamsters
- IRS:** internal responsibility system
- IUOE:** International Union of Operating Engineers
- JHSC:** joint health and safety committee
- OECD:** Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
- OHS:** occupational health and safety
- RTW legislation or laws:** right-to-work legislation or laws
- UBC:** United Brotherhood of Carpenters
- UFCW:** United Food and Commercial Workers
- UNA:** United Nurses of Alberta
- WCB:** Workers' Compensation Board

## Executive summary

For decades, organized labour in Alberta (as across Canada and other Western economies) has sought to cope with the restructuring of labour markets in ways unfavourable to workers. The resulting pressure upon unions in Alberta has intensified in recent years, with threats of so-called right-to-work legislation, the deepening of regressive labour laws, reductions in public sector pensions, an impending drain on union finances (through Bill C-377), and the use of aggressive bargaining tactics by the provincial government. Further, Albertans are often audience to a chorus of conservative forces demonizing the labour movement and advocating to further circumscribe union strength.

This report examines the current state and impact of unions in Alberta. Recent trends in union membership and organizing indicate that organized labour in Alberta is in a precarious position. Especially worryingly, unionization in Alberta continues to be the lowest among Canadian provinces. Workers have a particularly difficult time becoming unionized in Alberta; applications to unionize are on the decline; and union members make up a shrinking percentage of the private sector workforce, leaving unionization in the province increasingly restricted to the public sector.

This report finds that, in spite of such challenges, unions provide substantial economic and social benefits to workers in the province. The report focuses on the influence of unions in three key areas:

### 1. Wages

- When measured in terms of economic performance, wage growth in Alberta has been far lower than in any other province;
- Union wages in Alberta are on average \$4.75 per hour (18%) higher than non-union wages, with the difference being most notable for women and young workers;
- In the construction industry, building trade union members earn benefits worth \$3.92 per hour (56%) more than members of CLAC, an employer-friendly union; and
- Evidence from the US shows unions also put upward pressure on wages for non-union members.

## **2. Worker Safety**

- Alberta workplaces are dangerous, with official records indicating 145 occupational fatalities and 27,745 serious workplace injuries in 2012;
- Employers demonstrate widespread non-compliance with provincial occupational health and safety regulations, due in part to ineffective enforcement by the provincial government; and
- Unions are the central force protecting worker safety, doing so through worker education, worker empowerment, and government lobbying.

## **3. Income Equality**

- The gap between the rich and the poor has increased dramatically in Alberta and is now the highest in Canada;
- Income gains over the last three decades have gone almost exclusively to the wealthiest Albertans;
- Rising income inequality is closely related to falling unionization rates in the province; and
- Unions are critical to achieving a more equitable distribution of income.

Any future attempts to further restrict collective bargaining in Alberta need to be assessed against these demonstrated economic and social benefits that unions deliver to workers. Albertans wanting higher wages, safer workplaces, and a more equitable distribution of income should consider the extent to which their goals align with the objectives of the labour movement.



# I. Introduction

The current plight of labour unions is a topic of extensive debate. Unions formed in the 19th century as a vehicle of workplace democracy and economic justice for millions of people around the world. Today, the presence of unions in the global economy is a fraction of the level seen in the “golden” decades following the Second World War. Since peaking in 1978, unionization in the wealthy countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has fallen precipitously. Across the core global economies, such as those of the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Australia, the percentage of workers who belong to a union is now half of what it was three decades earlier. Indeed, in the US, union membership in the private sector has fallen from 16.8% of non-agricultural employees to a mere 6.7% in 2013.<sup>1</sup> While unionization in Canada has not reached the depths seen in countries such as the US, it has stagnated for the last decade after falling dramatically during the 1990s.<sup>2</sup>

Unions now find themselves in a precarious situation where their diminished presence has contributed to a growing sense of their irrelevancy. Free-market idealists, for instance, view unions as anachronisms incompatible with the current economic framework characterized by increasingly powerful information technology and ever tightening global markets. Falling unionization rates have exposed unions to characterization as elitist organizations serving only a minority of privileged workers.<sup>3</sup> Today, there are also fewer people whose lived experiences contradict the anti-union rhetoric of business lobbies and conservative pundits.<sup>4</sup>

In Alberta as across Canada, the predicament facing unions is in part a product of federal and provincial governments’ decisions during the 1980s and 1990s to embrace state retrenchment (i.e. privatizing, deregulating, and contracting out what had previously been government functions), market liberalization (i.e. loosening restrictions on trade, investment and capital), prioritizing financial stringency over full employment, and restructuring taxes to be more favourable to capital.<sup>5</sup> These changes, often shorthanded to “neoliberalism” in the academic literature, created enormous pressures on the labour movement.<sup>6</sup> Governments restructured Canadian labour markets to be more business-friendly, or “flexible.”<sup>7</sup> To this end, unemployment benefits were restricted, minimum wages were weakened, basic employment standards were lowered, and tax credits for low-income workers were reduced.<sup>8</sup> Employers were provided additional capacity to stifle union organizing.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, governments began regularly imposing back-to-work legislation, public sector wage freezes, and mass layoffs. They also restricted labour militancy through the introduction of “essential service” legislation that removed the right to strike from a large swath of the workforce and the imposition of substantial penalties for union activities

**“The weakening of organized labour was not a side-effect of neoliberalism, but rather a central objective.”**

deemed illegal, such as wildcat strikes. Indeed, the weakening of organized labour was not a side-effect of this neoliberal turn, but rather a central objective.<sup>11</sup>

The political pressure on unions has only intensified in recent years. So-called “right-to-work” (RTW) legislation, long a rallying point for anti-union advocates because of its crippling effects on union finances, has achieved renewed legitimacy.<sup>12</sup> After being adopted in the northern US states of Indiana and Michigan, RTW legislation has been proposed by politicians in Saskatchewan, Ontario, and Alberta.<sup>13</sup> Federally, the Conservative government has recently sought to pass two anti-union bills: Bill C-525, which would make unions in federally-regulated industries harder to form and easier to dissolve; and Bill C-377, which would impose major new costs on unions in the form of stringent financial reporting requirements, effectively limiting the resources available for activities such as supporting political opponents of the Conservatives.

In Alberta, after broadening its ban on public sector strikes and restricting union organizing tactics in the construction sector, the provincial government has stated its intention to further revise provincial labour laws, as was requested by a consortium of anti-union companies.<sup>14</sup> The provincial government has also recently taken extraordinary measures in an attempt to freeze the wages of its employees. In negotiations with the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE), which represents the bulk of civil servants in the province, the government moved to effectively override the collective bargaining rights of its employees by threatening to impose a contract through legislation (Bill 46).<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the government also sought to suppress potential backlash to this legislation by dramatically increasing the financial penalties faced by those who advocate for or undertake illegal strike activity. The Alberta government has also announced major restrictions to the retirement benefits of public sector employees.<sup>16</sup>

**“An examination of unions in Alberta shows they are providing real economic and social benefits to working people in the province.”**

Clearly, the potential for Alberta’s labour movement to suffer further setbacks is very real. Working Albertans should take this threat seriously. Contrary to those who view unions as unnecessary obstructions or ultimately ineffective, an examination of unions in contemporary Alberta shows that they are providing real economic and social benefits to working people in the province. In addition to the readily quantified compensation gains that unions offer to tens of thousands of unionized workers in the province, there is also substantial evidence that union activity results in improved compensation to non-union members. Unions are also found to be critical to creating safer workplaces in the province, an important role given Alberta’s dangerous economy. Moreover, expanding collective bargaining in the province is a key means to a more equitable distribution of income in Alberta. Such a change is crucial to the well-being of working people in light of Alberta’s extreme income inequality.

This report shows that working Albertans would benefit from the removal of barriers to union organizing and collective bargaining. At the same time, unions will be required to adapt to the enormous challenges they face in order to become more relevant and influential in contemporary society.

## 2. The State of Unions in Alberta

**In 2013, there were about 420,000 unionized Albertans, and just over half of these workers were women.**

The history of unions in Alberta is somewhat distinctive within a Canadian context. While some of the overarching trends of unionization have applied to the province, it has been markedly different in other respects. This section details the current state of unions in the province, and places it in historical context. It explores three areas: union membership, union organizing, and union density. By doing so, it provides a sense of who unions are, how successful they are, and what their future prospects might be.

### **a) Union Members<sup>17</sup>**

As of 2013, there were roughly 420,000 employees in Alberta covered by a collective bargaining agreement (CBA). Just over half (52%) of these unionized individuals are female. This equal representation of women in unions is a major change from 1976, when women made up only 30% of union members, despite being 40% of the provincial workforce.<sup>18</sup>

The majority of Alberta union members work in the public sector. As seen in Table 1 below, workers covered by a CBA in education, health care and social assistance, and public administration – the three major components of the public sector – account for more than half of all unionized workers. There are also a significant number of union members in industries where labour unions originally formed in the province: construction, manufacturing, and transportation. Although workers in the resource industries, particularly the coal mines, were also central to the early labour movement in the province, the industry does not currently have a large number of union members. There are very few union covered workers in private services (i.e. financial, professional, and business services). While there are a significant number of unionized workers in the trade industry, the large size of the industry means that these workers comprise a small share of the industry's total employees (11%).

**Table 1 Union Coverage by Industry in Alberta, 2013<sup>19</sup>**

Industry	Union Covered	Union Covered as % of Employees
Resource Industries	14,900	10%
Utilities	9,100	50%
Construction	34,800	20%
Manufacturing	26,300	20%
Trade	31,700	11%
Transportation and Warehousing	28,400	30%
Financial Services	5,000	6%
Professional Services	4,600	4%
Business Services	5,300	9%
Educational Services	80,300	67%
Health Care and Social Assistance	102,600	49%
Information, Culture and Recreation	13,200	20%
Accommodation and Food Services	4,600	4%
Other Services	4,500	5%
Public Administration	55,100	62%

The vast majority of union members work in large organizations. Eighty-one percent of union members work in organizations with more than 500 employees versus 44% of non-union employees.<sup>20</sup> The reason for this is two-fold: union members are concentrated in industries where large workplaces dominate, such as public services, manufacturing and construction; and unions in Canada, where collective bargaining occurs directly between employees and the employer (rather than sector-wide, as is the norm in much of Europe), have historically focused their resources on organizing large workplaces.

Provincial union members are, on average, older and better educated than the rest of the workforce. Almost half of all union members are over the age of 45, yet only a third of provincial employees are in that same age category.<sup>21</sup> The main reason for the age discrepancy between union members and the general workforce, however, is that very few youth belong to a union. Employees between the ages of 15 and 24 make up only 7% of Alberta’s union members, despite constituting a sixth of all provincial employees. This is not altogether surprising, as most young workers hold precarious, high-turnover, service-sector jobs that unions have historically struggled to organize. Union members are also well educated. Seventy percent of provincial union members have completed some form of post-secondary education, compared to only 55% of non-unionized workers.<sup>22</sup>

“ Alberta’s union members are, on average, older and better educated than the rest of the workforce.

Thus, the bulk of union members in Alberta are well-educated, middle-aged women working in the public sector. This has been the case since at least 1997,<sup>23</sup> and mirrors the broader, national shift away from a labour movement primarily composed of male, blue-collar workers.

### b) Union Organizing

Union members in Alberta are represented by 103 distinct unions and labour associations. The vast majority of unionized workers belong to only a small percentage of these unions. Thirty unions represent 93% of union members, and ten unions represent 72% of union members. The ten unions in the province representing the largest number of workers are listed below in Table 2. These include the five major public sector labour organizations [Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE), Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA), United Nurses of Alberta (UNA), Health Sciences Association of Alberta (HSAA)]; the two major private sector unions [United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), and Unifor]; two building trades unions [Plumbers and Pipefitters, and International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW)]; as well as the Christian Labour Association of Canada (CLAC).

**Table 2 Largest 10 Unions in Alberta by Membership, 2013<sup>24</sup>**

Union	# of Employees Represented	% of Unionized Employees
AUPE*	87,157	21%
CUPE*	35,067	9%
ATA*	33,159	8%
UFCW	30,010	7%
CLAC	27,255	7%
UNA*	26,508	6%
HSAA*	20,849	5%
Unifor	13,452	3%
Plumbers & Pipefitters	13,069	3%
IBEW	10,273	2%
TOTAL	296,799	72%

\*public sector unions

### **CLAC: The Employer-Friendly “Union”**

The Christian Labour Association of Canada (CLAC) is the fifth largest union in Alberta. CLAC has been heavily criticized by labour leaders and activists for being overly accommodating to the desires of employers and undermining labour solidarity. From its perspective, CLAC views other labour unions as “adversarial” and espouses a conciliatory approach to labour relations. Studies of CLAC’s history,<sup>25</sup> however, have uncovered a long list of questionable organizing tactics, including:

- accepting invitations by employers for voluntary recognition (VR) to thwart the organizing efforts of other unions;
- entering into a VR with an employer before any, or the bulk of, employees had been hired;
- entering into inferior CBAs compared to those of other unions that represent the majority of workers in the same industry or with the same employer;
- enticing employees with interest-free payday loan advances if they signed up with CLAC when other unions were attempting to organize them;
- proposing wage rates in a first CBA that were \$1.25 per hour less than any employee in the bargaining unit was currently earning;
- having no constitutional requirement that a membership ratification vote be held to approve negotiated CBAs;
- agreeing to CBAs with provisions below those contained in provincial employment standards;
- avoiding open periods, which is when employees are able to vote on leaving or changing their union.<sup>26</sup>

Also, CLAC has not been involved in a work stoppage for at least the past 18 years in Alberta;<sup>27</sup> lobbied the Federal government to oppose a bill that would restrict the use of replacement workers; advocated young workers receive a lower minimum wage than other workers;<sup>28</sup> and collaborated with anti-union organizations, such as partnering with Merit Contractors to lobby the Alberta government to amend provincial labour laws in order to undermine trade unions.<sup>29</sup>

As one study concluded, “CLAC is a union that many employers clearly prefer to deal with because it promotes itself as a ‘flexible’ organization that is attentive to employer interests.”<sup>30</sup>

An important indicator of union strength is the extent to which non-unionized workplaces are being organized into unions. The Alberta Labour Relations Board (ALRB) collects data on union activity in the province. However, unlike other provincial labour boards in Canada, it does not record critical pieces of information, such as the size of newly certified bargaining units, whether these units were previously unionized or not, or

the industry to which these units belong. The absence of this information severely limits the conclusions that can be drawn from the ALRB data about union organizing activity in the province.

Despite these significant omissions, the ALRB does collect some important information. For instance, the data from 2000 through to December 15, 2013 reveals that by far the most successful union in organizing new bargaining units is CLAC. As shown in Table 3, CLAC has added more than four times the number of bargaining units as compared to the second most successful union. Critical to CLAC's growth has been a very high success rate, measured as the percentage of certifications processed by the ALRB that result in certification, and a large number of certification attempts. As outlined above, CLAC's success in organizing new units is likely due to the fact that their organizing attempts are often uncontested, if not welcomed, by employers (see "CLAC: The Employer-Friendly 'Union'").

**Table 3 Certifications Attempted and Achieved by Major Union, 2000-2013<sup>31</sup>**

Union	Certifications Processed	Certifications Granted	Success Rate	Decertifications	Net Bargaining Units
CLAC	503	415	83%	35	380
AUPE	208	103	50%	7	96
HSAA	79	58	73%	2	56
CUPE	137	91	66%	36	55
UBC	168	51	30%	21	30
IBT	81	43	53%	23	20
Unifor	56	32	57%	15	17
UFCW	66	35	53%	19	16
IOUE	55	20	36%	6	14
UNA	16	14	88%	3	11

Overall, workers in Alberta have an exceptionally difficult time joining unions. Of the non-CLAC certification applications that were processed by the ALRB between 2000 and 2013, only 52% were successful. In comparison, the Canada-wide success rate (including Alberta) fluctuated between 74% and 63% from 1980 to 1998, while Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and British Columbia had success rates between 65% and 90% between 2001 and 2004.<sup>33</sup>

Figure 1 depicts non-CLAC processed certification applications and their success rate from 2000 to 2013. Applications filed by CLAC have been excluded to better reflect the activities of the labour movement. While



the success rate has fluctuated sharply over recent years, it has essentially been flat since 2000. There is, however, a clear decline in the number of applications being processed by the ALRB. This suggests that unions are limiting filing for certification to only those situations with the greatest likelihood of success. But clearly, a relatively flat success rate, combined with a sharply falling number of applications, has meant a decline in the number of successful certifications.

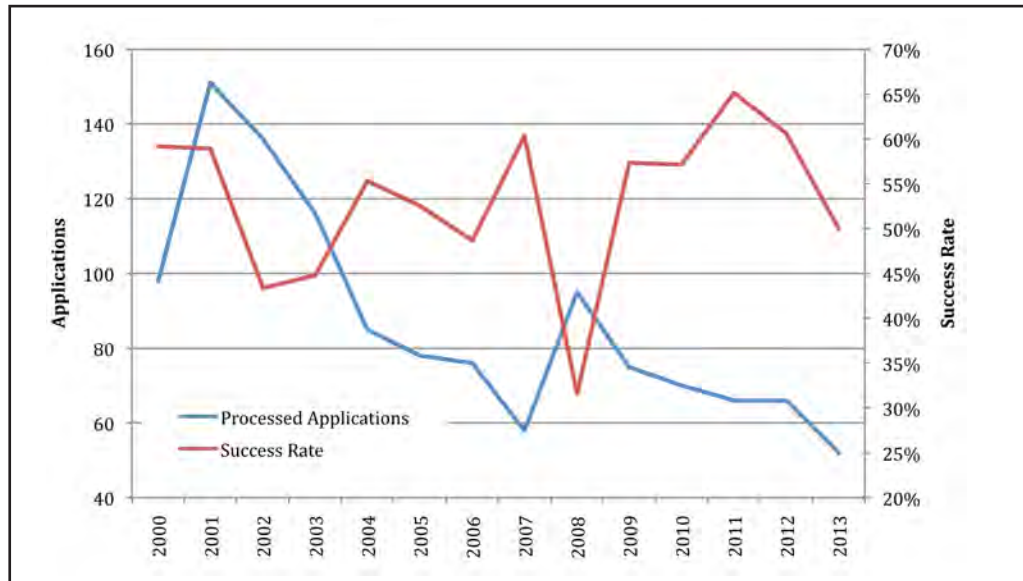


Figure 1 Union Certifications Attempted and Achieved, CLAC Excluded, 2000-2013

Low levels of union organizing in Alberta are largely due to the province’s regressive labour laws.

There is also an important difference between the ability of workers in the public sector to successfully join a union, and workers in the private sector. Taken together, the five major public sector unions had a success rate over that time span of 61%, markedly higher than the overall non-CLAC average. Private sector unions, on the other hand, had a success rate of just 43%. The building trade unions struggled in particular, with a success rate of only 35%.<sup>35</sup>

The low level of union organizing uncovered in the ALRB data is due in large part to Alberta’s regressive labour laws. Alberta’s labour laws are such that it is exceptionally difficult for workers in the private sector to organize a union. In 1988, Alberta deviated from the traditional “card-check” labour relations model in Canada. Unlike in most other jurisdictions, workers in Alberta can no longer unionize a workplace by showing the support of a majority of workers to do so (e.g. by signing union cards). Instead, after demonstrating the desire of 40% of the workforce to unionize, and filing an application with the labour relations board, workers must then hold a secret ballot vote.<sup>36</sup> Of course, the time between the application being

filed (which is when many employers learn of the organizing drive) and the vote provides anti-union employers ample opportunity to intervene in the organizing process. While harassing, intimidating, or firing union activists during a union drive is a violation of the Alberta Labour Relations Code, Alberta employers face no real punishment to dissuade them from committing such acts.<sup>37</sup> Regardless, Alberta labour law allows for employers to campaign against unionization prior to the vote, including “captive audience meetings,” while barring union representatives from entering the property to state their case. As one law expert has concluded, “Canadian employers have proven to be extremely adept at using the relative short period between certification application and the ballot to get their message across to employees.”<sup>38</sup> Indeed, studies have shown that switching from a card-check certification process to a mandatory vote is associated with a significant decline in the success rate of union organizing attempts.<sup>39</sup> If workers in Alberta manage to succeed in certifying, the union must still negotiate a first collective agreement with the employer. Alberta is one of the few jurisdictions in Canada where the labour board does not have the recourse to impose a first CBA in the instance negotiations reach an impasse. Employers are thus provided a further route to avoid unionization, as the union’s certification will expire if the employer stalls the negotiations for long enough.<sup>40</sup> With all of these barriers to union organizing in Alberta, it is understandable that workers would be dissuaded from attempting to form unions, and that the ability of workers to successfully complete the certification process would be low.

### **c) Union Density**

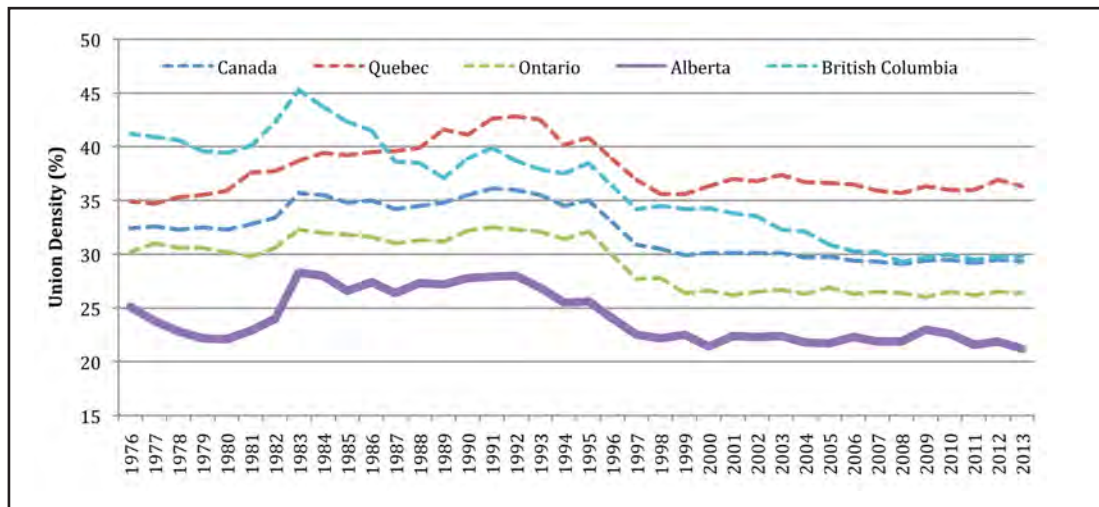
Union density is another important gauge of the influence unions have in a given jurisdiction, sector, or industry. Union density is the percentage of employees who are union members. Increasing the unionization rate expands the economic benefits of membership to more workers, while also boosting the power of the labour movement to determine outcomes of the labour market. For instance, if a large proportion of workers in a given industry are unionized, the unions are more likely to establish effective minimum standards in the industry, and thereby limit the ability of competition between employers to drive down wages, benefits, and working conditions. Low union density risks confining the benefits of unionization to a small, privileged minority, and alienating the majority of working people.<sup>41</sup>

The long-term trend of union density in Alberta, select provinces, and Canada-wide are displayed below in Figure 2. Overall, union density in Canada appears to have gone through four phases: an increase during the early 1980s, a flat-lining over the following decade, a decline beginning in the mid-1990s, followed by another decade of stagnation. There are important deviations from this pattern, though: British Columbia saw its

**“ In 2013, Alberta’s union density was the lowest in Canada.**

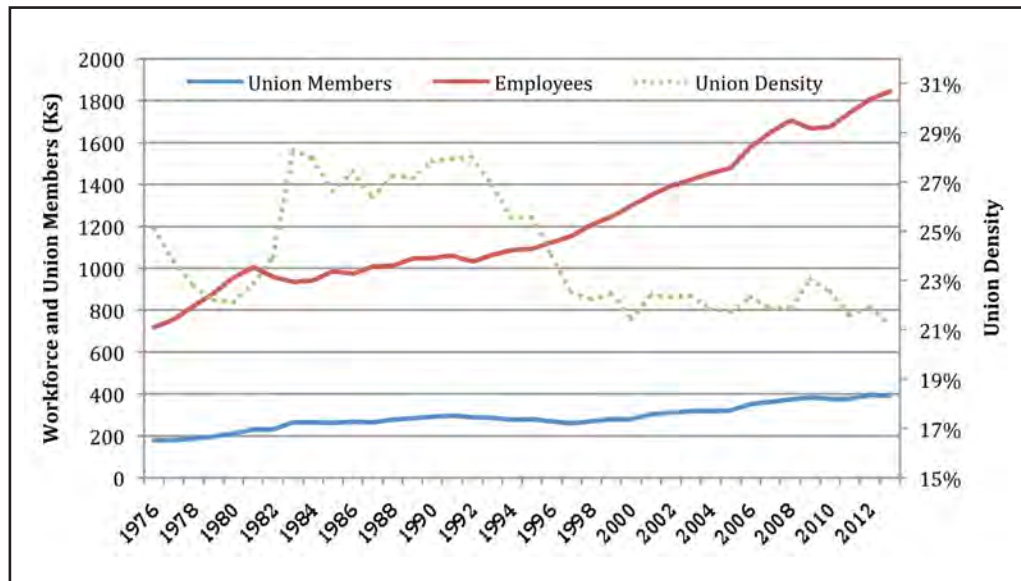
union density fall steadily since having the most unionized workforce in the country three decades ago; and union density in Quebec increased continually until the early 1990s, rather than flattening throughout the 1980s like it did in the rest of the country, and today remains far above the national average.

In Alberta, union density has generally followed the national pattern, while consistently being about five percentage points below the national trend. The decline in union density that occurred in most other provinces in the mid-1990s began somewhat earlier in Alberta. And in 2013, Alberta’s union density of 21% was the lowest in Canada. Indeed, Alberta has had the lowest union density in the country every year since 1977.



**Figure 2 Union Density in Canada and Selected Provinces, 1976-2013<sup>42</sup>**

Looking at the trends in employee and union growth underlying union density helps explain its fluctuation. Despite lower union density, union membership has actually more than doubled in Alberta since 1976. Because the unionization rate is a proportional measurement, it can decline while union membership increases. As is evident from Figure 3 below, when union density spiked in the early 1980s, it was because union membership was able to increase despite a fall in overall employment, and for several years union growth roughly matched the growth in employment. When union density collapsed during the early 1990s, it was because union membership decreased despite a spike in overall employment. Over the last decade and a half, the growth in union membership has lagged far behind the growth in employment. Union density has remained low as a result.



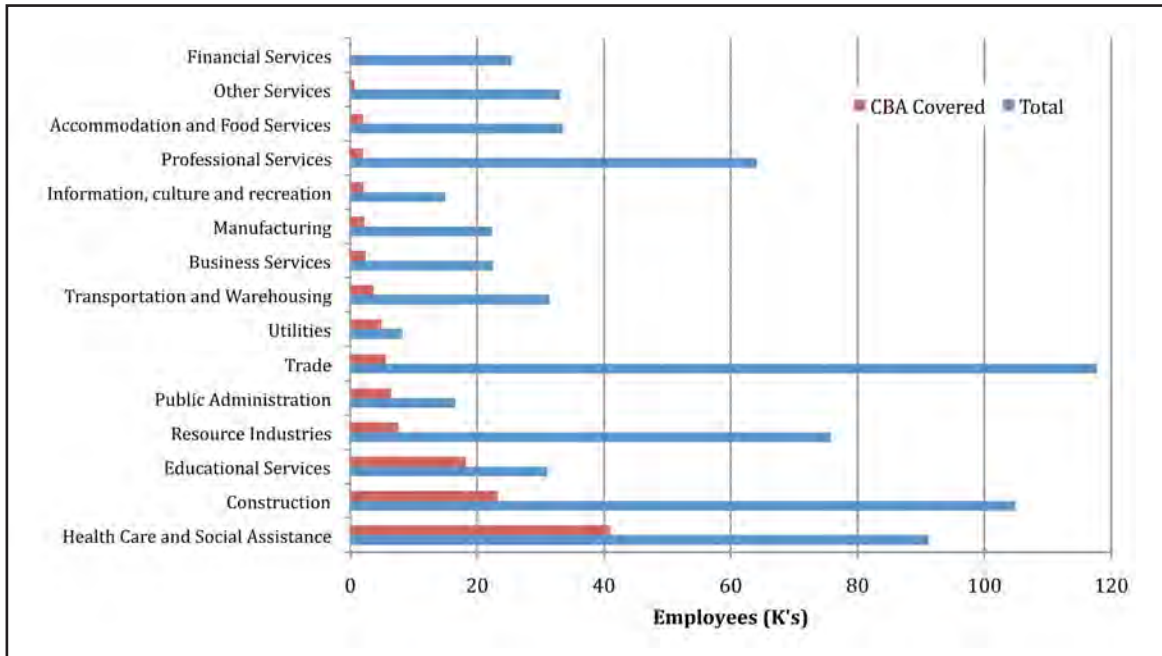
**Figure 3** Union Membership, Total Employees, and Union Density in Alberta, 1976-2013<sup>43</sup>

“The growth of unions in Alberta has been heavily reliant on the public sector: principally, health care, social assistance, education, and public administration.”

As is evident from Figure 4 below, since 1997 the growth of unions in Alberta has been heavily reliant upon the public sector. The growth in the number of employees who are covered by a CBA occurred primarily in three industries: health care and social assistance, construction, and education. These three industries alone accounted for more than two-thirds of new employees covered by a CBA.

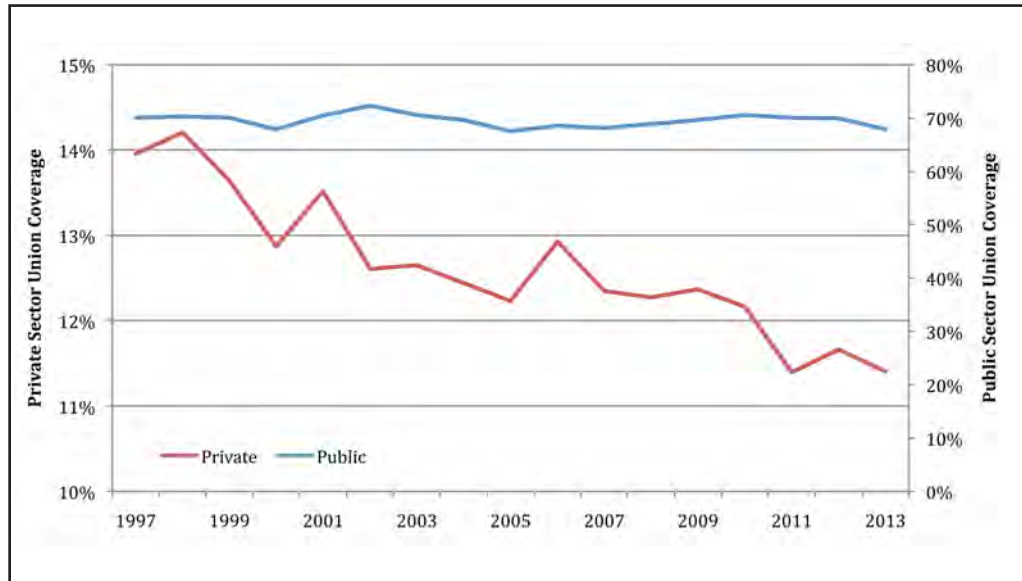
Union coverage also depends upon the change in employment. The five industries with the highest number of new jobs accounted for roughly two-thirds of all jobs created. Only one of these five industries - health care and social assistance - is in the public sector.

So, from 1997 to 2013, union growth in Alberta was concentrated in the public sector, while job growth was concentrated in the private sector. Accordingly, the only industries to have an above-provincial-average rate of new unionized jobs were, with the exception of utilities, in the public sector. On average, 24% of the jobs added over this time period were unionized. In education, health care and social assistance, and public administration, 59%, 45%, and 39% of new jobs were unionized, respectively. Overall, while 64% of new jobs in the public sector were unionized, only 7% of the jobs added in the private sector were union jobs.



**Figure 4** Job Growth, Overall and Unionized, by Industry, 1997-2013<sup>44</sup>

As seen in Figure 4 above, the province’s overall unionization rate has remained more or less the same over the last decade. Obscured by that general stagnation, however, is the steady erosion of unions in the private sector. As seen in Figure 5 below, union coverage in the private sector sat at just 11% in 2013, meaning only slightly more than 1 out of every 10 private sector employees in the province was unionized. Sixteen years earlier, private sector union coverage was already low at 14%. Public sector unionization, on the other hand, was 68% in 2013, the level it has more or less been at for the previous decade and a half. Union influence is largely, and to an increasing degree, restricted to the public sector.



**Figure 5** Private and Public Sector Union Coverage in Alberta, 1997-2013<sup>45</sup>

Since 1997, the already-deep cleavage in Alberta between public and private sector unionization has intensified. This is problematic for unionization in Alberta for two reasons. One, job growth is heavily concentrated in the private sector, where unionization is increasingly weak. Indeed, of the jobs created since 1997, 64% of those in the public sector were unionized, and only 7% were unionized in the private sector.<sup>46</sup> The second problem is that the long-term prospects of public sector unions are greatly diminished without the presence of a significant private sector unionism. As we've seen in Alberta and elsewhere, public sector unions are readily targeted by politicians when the public - which predominantly works in the private sector - is not, and has no prospects of being, unionized. The individual benefits of union membership (higher wages, better benefits, pensions, job security) then appear monopolized by a small group of workers, and the resulting resentment can be exploited for political purposes. A poignant example of how this can unfold is the Alberta government's attempt to reduce the pension benefits of frontline public sector workers.

“Long-term prospects for public sector unions are diminished without significant private sector unionism.”

## 3. Unions and Wages in Alberta

A defining feature of our economy is the power relationship between employers and workers. In a capitalist economy, employers are driven to maximize their profits. This generally entails minimizing costs and boosting productivity. Employees, on the other hand, generally want to see their time at work reduced, as well as to be safe and fairly rewarded. In this context, individual workers have very little bargaining power to pursue their interests when they conflict with the employer's profit-motive. When negotiating with employers collectively, workers have historically been able to more successfully pursue these interests: acquiring higher wages, as well as a host of other financial compensations, such as pension plans, paid sick leave, and health benefits.

While this might be true in general, some might point to Alberta as a specific case where workers have managed to be well-compensated without significant union activity. Indeed, Alberta has in recent years managed to simultaneously have the highest average wage and the lowest unionization rate in the country. How rewarding is Alberta's economy for workers? Are unions still able to improve the welfare of their members? Do their actions have any effect on non-union members? These questions are explored in the following section.

### a) Alberta Wages

Alberta is routinely lauded in many circles as an economic success story. The economic figures are seemingly clear on this point. Over the decade beginning in 2002, Alberta's gross domestic product (GDP) grew more than twice as much as that of the rest of the country.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, median wages in Alberta over the same time period increased 53%, while in the rest of the country median wages grew just 36%.<sup>48</sup> It seemed clear that Alberta's booming economy was delivering very significant gains for workers.

While these figures are true, they do not reveal the full picture. For instance, when inflation is accounted for, Alberta's wage growth has been rather unremarkable. Alberta's booming economy over the last decade has contributed to the province regularly recording the highest inflation rate in the country.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, while median wages increased in Alberta on average 4.4% between 2002 and 2012, inflation growth in Alberta averaged 2.4% over the same period. Inflation therefore eroded more than half the wage gains over that span, leaving a real impact of 2.0% wage growth per year over the decade. In comparison, the Canadian average over that time span was 0.7%, with both Newfoundland and Labrador and Saskatchewan having higher average real median wage growth than Alberta.<sup>50</sup> Indeed,

“ Alberta’s economy has not provided substantial benefits to workers when considered in relation to the amount of wealth generated in the province.

Alberta’s real median wage over that decade was only 5% higher than Ontario’s, a “have-not” province whose economy has been decimated by the collapse of the manufacturing sector.<sup>51</sup>

Moreover, Alberta’s wages should be assessed in terms of the overall economy. That is, how much of the province’s total income is being distributed to working people through wages? Figure 6 below compares the productivity (measured as real GDP per capita) and median wage of every province relative to the national average over the last decade of available data (2002-2012). The figure indicates that relative to the national averages, Alberta’s productivity growth far outstripped the increase in real wages. Specifically, while Alberta’s real median wage was 9% higher than the national average between 2002 and 2012, the province’s real GDP per capita was 55% higher than the national average. In other words, far more economic value is generated in Alberta than in the rest of the country, yet wages are only slightly higher than average. In contrast, most other provinces have maintained higher than average wages with lower than average economic growth.

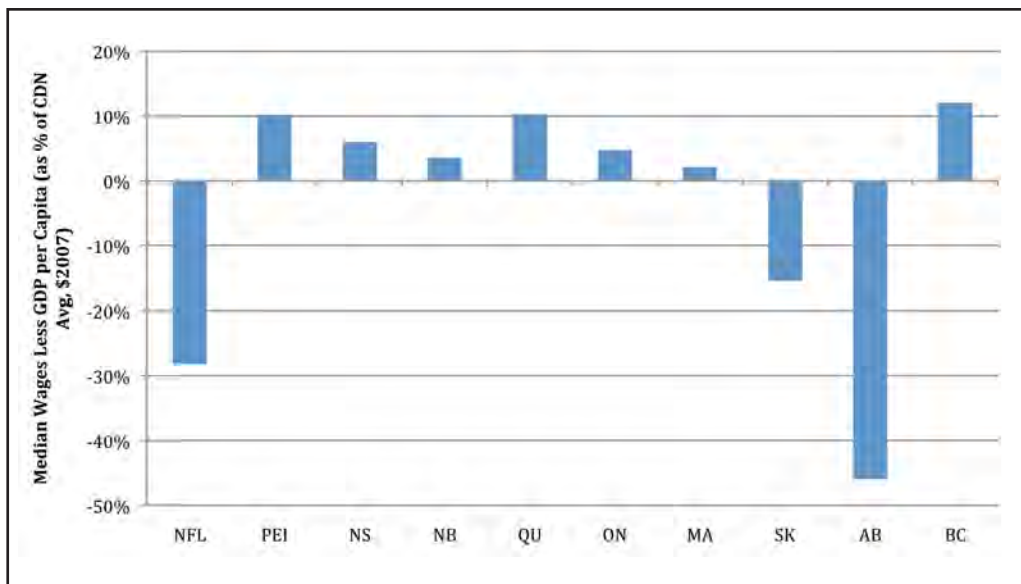


Figure 6 Wages and Productivity by Province, 2002-2012<sup>52</sup>

Alberta’s petroleum-induced economic boom has not trickled down substantial benefits to workers. Wages in Alberta remain relatively low compared to the massive growth in overall income. It would seem then that there is much room for unions in the province and their ability to increase the share of wealth delivered to working people.



### b) Alberta's Union Wage Premium

Perhaps the most well-established and widely-accepted aspect of unions is how they materially benefit their members through, for example, higher wages. Economists have termed the difference between union and non-union compensation the “union wage premium.”<sup>53</sup> The existence and size of the premium is an important indicator of the strength of collective bargaining in a given jurisdiction or industry. Moreover, higher wages undoubtedly influence the success of union organizing. A promise of a wage bump can make for an enticing pitch to unorganized workers. And the larger the premium, the more likely workers are to accept the risk that comes from agitating for a union. A demonstrated, material gain from union membership is a direct and straightforward rationalization for the payment of union dues, and can therefore also help a union retain members. Of course, unions provide non-compensation benefits to their members, such as protection from harassment or arbitrary dismissal, and tend to actively campaign for broader welfare reforms, but the attractiveness of a union to some members can be limited to the material benefits it provides them.

**“ In 2013, Alberta’s union wage premium was \$4.75 per hour—18% above non-union wages.**

Table 4 on next page breaks down Alberta’s union wage premium in 2013. Average hourly wages for unionized (i.e. covered by a CBA) and non-unionized workers are broken down by gender, age, industry, and occupation. Overall, the union wage premium in Alberta was \$4.75 per hour in 2013, or 18% above non-union wages.<sup>54</sup> It was significantly higher for women where the union premium is 35%, since women are more likely to be employed in occupations with high union premiums, such as sales and government service. Young workers also have an above average union premium of 32%, as non-unionized youth often work in low-wage service sector jobs.

**Table 4 Union Wage Premium in Alberta, 2013<sup>55</sup>**

	Union	Non-Union	Union Premium	Union Premium as % of Non-Union
<b>All</b>	\$31.39	\$26.64	\$4.75	18%
<b>Women</b>	\$30.25	\$22.45	\$7.80	35%
<b>Men</b>	\$32.64	\$30.11	\$2.54	8%
<b>15-24</b>	\$21.88	\$16.53	\$5.36	32%
<b>25-54</b>	\$31.78	\$29.02	\$2.76	10%
<b>55-64</b>	\$33.56	\$30.36	\$3.20	11%
<b>INDUSTRY</b>				
<b>Resource Industries</b>	\$37.63	\$39.75	-\$2.11	-5%
<b>Construction</b>	\$37.58	\$27.87	\$9.71	35%
<b>Manufacturing (durables)</b>	\$29.76	\$28.98	\$0.78	3%
<b>Manufacturing (non-durables)</b>	\$25.44	\$27.42	-\$1.97	-7%
<b>Wholesale Trade</b>	\$31.03	\$28.46	\$2.57	9%
<b>Retail Trade</b>	\$18.91	\$18.13	\$0.78	4%
<b>Transportation and Warehousing</b>	\$28.38	\$29.81	-\$1.43	-5%
<b>Private Services (Financial, Professional, Business, Other)</b>	\$30.43	\$28.16	\$2.27	8%
<b>Education, Health Care, and Social Assistance</b>	\$32.77	\$26.67	\$6.10	23%
<b>Information, Culture, and Recreation</b>	\$26.63	\$22.49	\$4.14	18%
<b>Accommodation and Food Services</b>	\$17.91	\$14.72	\$3.19	22%
<b>Public Administration</b>	\$32.98	\$37.23	-\$4.25	-11%
<b>OCCUPATION</b>				
<b>Management</b>	\$40.56	\$43.48	-\$2.92	-7%
<b>Financial, Secretarial, Administrative and Clerical</b>	\$24.77	\$23.25	\$1.53	7%
<b>Sales and Service</b>	\$18.80	\$15.47	\$3.33	22%
<b>Natural and Applied Sciences</b>	\$40.40	\$39.72	\$0.68	2%
<b>Social Science, Government Service and Religion</b>	\$37.91	\$29.56	\$8.35	28%
<b>Transport and Equipment Operators</b>	\$30.11	\$25.71	\$4.40	17%
<b>Occupations Unique to Resource Industries</b>	\$31.13	\$27.96	\$3.17	11%
<b>Chefs and Cooks</b>	\$18.02	\$14.95	\$3.06	20%
<b>Non-Construction Trades</b>	\$36.33	\$28.83	\$7.51	26%

In economically important industries in the province where collective bargaining is widespread, the union premium is substantial. For instance, the wage premium is 35% in construction, 26% in education, and 21% in health care and social assistance. Other industries, however, have negative union premiums despite having significant collective bargaining. These include resource industries, non-durable manufacturing, transportation and

warehousing, and public administration. A major reason for these negative wage premiums is that high-paying management positions, and especially senior management, are rarely unionized. In Alberta public administration, the tremendous incomes going to upper management were recently disclosed in the province's "sunshine list" reporting the compensation of government employees earning over \$100,000 per year.<sup>56</sup>

Indeed, in almost every broad group of non-managerial occupations in the province, unionized workers have higher average wages than their non-unionized counterparts. The table above includes each group of occupations in which more than 70,000 Albertans were employed in 2013. Every non-managerial group of occupations shows a union premium, including 17% for transport and equipment operators, 11% for occupations unique to resource industries, and 26% for non-construction trades.

### **c) Alberta's Non-Wage Union Premium**

The benefit of unions to their memberships is not limited solely to wages. Unions have also attained a wide range of other benefits. These include non-monetary benefits, such as workplace health and safety, job security, and the quality of work. They also include non-monetary forms of compensation, such as health benefits, retirement income, vacation pay, skills training, and paid sick leave. Indeed, employers have increasingly placated worker demands for higher wages by improving the provision of these benefits. The success of unions in this area is substantial and well-documented.<sup>57</sup> For instance, in 1999, about 80% of union covered workers in Canada had health insurance and pension plans compared to just 40% and 27% of non-unionized workers, respectively.<sup>58</sup>

It is difficult to quantify the level of non-wage benefits union members receive in Alberta. However, an analysis of CBAs in Alberta's construction industry allows for an approximation of this additional union premium by comparing the CBAs of trade unions to those of the employer-friendly Christian Labour Association of Canada. Here, CLAC is used as an imperfect proxy for non-unionized workers. Unlike non-unionized workers, there is publicly available data on the non-wage benefits of CLAC members through their CBAs. Although CLAC is an employer-friendly union, and has undercut the organizing efforts of other unions, CLAC likely has used collective bargaining to offer some benefits to its membership. Therefore, the non-wage union premium measured by comparison with CLAC is conservative.

**Table 5 Non-Wage Union Premium in Alberta's Construction Industry, 2013<sup>59</sup>**

Hourly Non-Wage Compensation	Building Trades Union	CLAC	Building Trades Union Premium	Building Trades Union Premium as % of CLAC
<b>Carpenter</b>	\$10.48	\$7.27	\$3.21	44%
<b>Electrician</b>	\$12.10	\$7.24	\$4.85	67%
<b>Labourer</b>	\$7.72	\$5.38	\$2.34	43%
<b>Plumber</b>	\$12.29	\$7.84	\$4.45	57%
<b>Welder</b>	\$12.29	\$7.53	\$4.76	63%
<b>All</b>	\$10.97	\$7.05	\$3.92	56%

Table 5 above compares the monetary value of benefits reported in the CBAs of five main trade union locals in the province (industrial and commercial), and CLAC's CBAs in the Alberta construction industry. CLAC figures are the average of the benefits reported in each active CBA (Local 63) in the industry found in the provincial database. The four main types of non-wage benefits reported in the CBAs are vacation pay, health benefits, pensions, and training funds. On average, the five trade unions had additional non-wage benefits of \$10.97 per hour. In comparison, CLAC members on average had just \$7.05 per hour of non-wage compensation. At nearly \$4 per hour, this non-wage union premium is an additional 56% of the non-wage compensation received by CLAC members.

#### **d) Unions and Non-Union Wages**

The union premium is not necessarily limited only to union members. It is well documented that non-unionized firms will raise wages and benefits to attract workers and to fend off union organizing drives.<sup>60</sup> This phenomenon is commonly referred to as the "union threat" effect. Of course, this effect will be stronger the more credible the threat of unionization. Union density and labour law are therefore important parts of the equation. Indeed, if union density is high enough in any given sector, unions may be able to establish a widely accepted wage floor. In Sweden for example, which has high union density, jobs that in Canada are low-paid and typically filled by women (such as in hotel services, retail, child and elder care) are much closer to paying the average wage.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, unions have a long history of struggling to establish socially-defined "fair" wages for low-paid workers.<sup>62</sup>

If a credible union threat is associated with rising non-union wages, logically the opposite should also apply. That is, a reduced threat should result in lower non-union wages. Recent studies of US states that have passed so-called "right to work" (RTW) legislation, which make it far harder for existing unions to operate and new workplaces to be organized, substantiate

this. Two separate studies, one of Idaho and the other of Oklahoma, have found that, following the introduction of RTW laws, the wages of non-union workers fell significantly.<sup>63</sup>

**Reduced barriers to union organizing are likely to boost non-union wages, while increased barriers are likely to suppress non-union wages.**

It is notable that this relationship was found in Oklahoma, where union membership was already below 10% of the workforce, nearly 2 ½ times lower than in Alberta. If the RTW laws had such a noticeable effect on non-union wages even amid already low union density, the effect of the union threat is likely much stronger in a jurisdiction like Alberta, with a higher level of union density and a stronger tradition of unions. In sum, legislative changes that remove barriers to union organizing are likely to have a positive effect on non-union wages and benefits, and reduce the gap between union and non-union earnings. Alternatively, legislative changes that increase barriers to union organizing are likely to reduce non-union wages.

Currently in Alberta, it is clear that unions are still having a substantial impact on improving the welfare of their members. Overall, union members are earning on average about \$5 an hour more than non-union workers, a premium of nearly 20%. This premium is highest for women and young workers, as well as in highly unionized sectors such as health care, education, and construction. The union premium also extends beyond wages and includes other benefits such as paid vacation, health benefits, pensions, and skills training. In the construction industry, where trade union CBAs could readily be compared with those of the employer-friendly Christian Labour Association of Canada, a conservative approximation of this additional union premium was found to be nearly \$4 per hour over and above the existing wage premium. These benefits are often just as important to workers as wages. Moreover, researchers have shown that the upward pressure unions put on wages extends beyond just their membership. Accordingly, unions in Alberta have been able to deliver a higher share of the economy's total income to workers, both member and non-member, than would otherwise be the case. However, the ability of unions to push the wage level higher is clearly limited by their declining density, particularly in the private sector. This is especially concerning given the already minimal transfer of economic gains in Alberta to its working people.

## 4. Unions and Workplace Safety in Alberta

**Unions remain the critical actor in Alberta for ensuring workers are safe in the workplace.**

Every worker wants to make it home from work safely, yet work can be an exceptionally dangerous activity. For the most part, workers have the responsibility to protect their own safety. By pooling the bargaining power of workers, unions have historically been able to require employers to identify and mitigate hazards, as well as grant workers the right to refuse unsafe work. Unions have also won worksite inspections, information about chemical hazards, and financial compensation for injury-related losses. Yet even in contemporary Alberta, workplace injuries and deaths continue to occur regularly. Unions remain the critical actor in Alberta for ensuring the workplace is safe for workers.

### a) Workplace Injury

Each day, workers in Alberta are injured and killed on the job or as a result of exposure to hazards on the job. In 2012, the Workers' Compensation Board of Alberta reported 145 occupational fatalities and 27,745 workers injured so badly that they required time off from work to recover.<sup>64</sup> In 2013, workplace fatalities rose to 173.<sup>65</sup> Although dreadful, these numbers significantly underreport the true level of workplace injury and death in the province. This underreporting occurs because official "injury" data is actually the number of accepted workers' compensation claims and therefore excludes unaccepted, unreported and unreportable injuries and fatalities.<sup>66</sup>

Workplace injury profoundly affects workers. Despite the availability of workers' compensation benefits, a temporary or permanent inability to work can cause workers to lose pay, promotions, or even employment. Wage or job loss can ripple through workers' lives, affecting relationships, activities, and ability to feed and shelter their families. Workplace injuries can also traumatize workers by depriving them of certainty, status, and a sense of control.

The root cause of all injuries is the existence of a hazard in the workplace. Employers introduce the vast majority of workplace hazards when they design a job or organize work. While it is inaccurate and unfair to paint all employers as amoral calculators who trade workers' health for profits, it is important to recognize that employers have incentives and opportunities to externalize production costs to workers, their families and communities via injury as well as a history of doing just that.<sup>67</sup> Employers often view the risk of injury as an economic issue, casting this risk as minimal, unavoidable, and acceptable.<sup>68</sup> In this view, perfect safety is unattainable, so safety initiatives

should be assessed on a cost-benefit basis: put bluntly, safety should only be improved when it costs less to prevent the injury than the injury itself costs. On the surface, this economic perspective appears quite sensible. Every activity entails some risk, and risk reduction can be very expensive.

Yet workers, those most often injured and killed, tend to see things differently. Workers note that workplace injury is not some natural phenomenon that no one can control. Rather, the risks workers face reflect decisions employers make - decisions about what, when, where, and how goods and services are produced. Employers make these decisions with the goal of maximizing profitability. In this way, injury is a cost imposed on workers by employers. And allowing employers to do this is a political choice by governments. Managing this tension has resulted in various injury-prevention efforts by governments.

### **b) Injury Prevention**

All Canadian jurisdictions, including Alberta, have adopted the internal responsibility system (IRS) for occupational health and safety. The three main principles of IRS are employer responsibility, worker participation, and government enforcement.<sup>69</sup> Worker participation is necessary because employers typically do not know or control the production process well enough to identify and manage hazards without worker participation.<sup>70</sup> Worker participation (along with government enforcement) also counterbalances the tendency of employers to trade worker safety for profitability.<sup>71</sup>

It is always contentious to suggest that employers ignore their statutory and moral duty to protect workers from harm. Yet, workplace injuries are rampant and there is substantial evidence indicating widespread employer non-compliance with basic OHS obligations in Alberta. A 2013 survey of 2000 workers found uneven employer compliance with the province's *Occupational Health and Safety Code*.<sup>72</sup> Under the Code, employers are obligated to identify and control workplace hazards, as well as include workers in the hazard assessment process, and inform them of the control strategies. However, workers reported that 36% of employers seldom or never conduct hazard assessments. Only 19% of workers reported their employer always involved them in the hazard assessment process. And approximately 30% of workers reported not being told about workplace hazards. This data suggests that a significant number of employers do not consistently comply with their statutory obligations around hazard assessment and control. Additionally, a 2011 safety-inspection blitz in the residential construction industry uncovered widespread employer non-compliance. Despite knowing government inspectors were coming, the majority of the 387 employers inspected had safety violations, including 90 cases where the violations posed an imminent danger of injury or death.<sup>73</sup> These results were broadly

consistent with the result of other safety blitzes.<sup>74</sup>

Employer non-compliance stems from the fact that the employers face almost no chance of being caught violating safety rules. While the provincial government's reporting in this area is sparse and opaque, some indications of the lack of enforcement are available. For instance, on average, Alberta workplaces are inspected less than once every 14 years.<sup>75</sup> And it can take safety inspectors up to 18 days to respond to reports of unsafe workplaces.<sup>76</sup>

Employers also know that, if they do get caught, there is almost no chance they will be penalized. Most commonly, inspectors simply order employers to comply with the Code - something that took employers an average of 86 days in 2010.<sup>77</sup> Actual prosecutions are increasingly rare. Between 1985 and 1988, the government averaged 39 OHS prosecutions per year.<sup>78</sup> As shown in Table 6 below, the government successfully concluded an average of only 12 prosecutions per year between 2004 and 2013, with numbers declining appreciably in recent years. Overall, the number of prosecutions and the penalties for safety violations in the province are low. The increase of the average penalty in recent years is not due to any renewed effort by the government to crackdown on safety violations, as can be seen by the very low number of prosecutions, but rather by two unusually large penalties.<sup>79</sup>

**Table 6 OHS Fatalities, Prosecutions, and Penalties in Alberta, 2005-2013** <sup>80</sup>

Year	WCB-accepted Fatalities	Prosecutions	Average Penalty
2004	124	9	\$66,389
2005	143	12	\$46,171
2006	123	10	\$153,450
2007	154	12	\$143,333
2008	166	22	\$231,045
2009	110	7	\$65,318
2010	136	11	\$157,932
2011	123	20	\$172,888
2012	145	9	\$392,444
2013	173	5	\$489,400

The resulting health and safety dynamic in Alberta is that ineffective enforcement encourages and facilitates non-compliance that, in turn, compromises workers' right to safety.<sup>81</sup> Workers themselves, largely through their unions, are the critical force in protecting their safety.



### c) The Union Safety Dividend

Unions offer a means by which workers can impose their desire for safe workplaces on employers and governments. One of the main ways in which unions create safer work is by educating their members. All Canadian workers have basic safety rights, such as the right to know about workplace hazards and the right to refuse unsafe work. But these rights are frequently violated by employers, while unions are central in limiting or preventing those violations.

For instance, workers' right to know is often compromised by employers withholding information and systematically underestimating the risk associated with work processes and materials.<sup>82</sup> But unionized workers are typically better informed about workplace hazards because unions educate their members about these things—something employers often do not do.<sup>83</sup> Unionized workers are also more likely to refuse unsafe work than non-unionized workers. For example, a Quebec study found non-union workers accounted for only 2.9% of work refusals even though they comprise 72.2% of the workforce.<sup>84</sup> This difference indicates that non-unionized workers may not know about their right to refuse unsafe work or fear (illegal) retribution for exercising that right.<sup>85</sup>

Even when workers do refuse unsafe work, the employer does not have to make the work safe—just safe enough that the worker will do it. Or, the employer may simply assign the task to another worker without telling that worker about the hazard identified by the worker who refused.<sup>86</sup> Employers may also haggle with workers, applying pressure such as “you’re holding up the line” or “we have to make this deadline.” Pressuring workers is effective because workers know that refusing unsafe work may make them a target for retaliation or discipline.<sup>87</sup> Unionized workers are less susceptible to this kind of pressure, because they have recourse to grieve illegitimate disciplines or dismissals.

## **Unionized Nurses: Empowered to Refuse Unsafe Work**

In 2011, a group of nurses in Grande Prairie were confronted with a dangerous situation. A patient exhibited violent behaviour, including injuring a security guard, breaking the door on the hospital's "secure" room, and threatening to kill staff. There were several security flaws in the workplace that exacerbated the situation, such as poorly trained security guards, an emergency button that was inconveniently located, and a lack of restraints. When the employer would not address the clear hazard posed by the patient, the nurses evacuated other patients from the ward to protect them and refused to care for the dangerous patient. After threatening the nurses with professional misconduct charges, the employer disciplined them, which the government Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) inspector incorrectly upheld. Only a spirited appeal to the OHS Council by the nurses' union saw them exonerated.<sup>88</sup>

The right to participate in workplace safety may provide workers with their most effective tool to prevent injury. Greater worker participation in OHS efforts is associated with better OHS outcomes, including fewer injuries.<sup>89</sup> Worker participation tends to be more effective in larger workplaces and in the presence of unions.<sup>90</sup> Again, unionized workers are more likely to speak out and demand the remediation of hazards, because they have the protection of a union. A common and effective form of worker participation in OHS is through joint health and safety committees (JHSCs). Unlike other Canadian jurisdictions, JHSCs are not mandatory in Alberta. Collective agreements are often the only way for Alberta workers to get a JHSC. JHSCs tend to increase the chance of workers knowing about hazards.<sup>91</sup> Further, JHSCs appear to be more effective on unionized worksites, likely because workers are less intimidated to speak out about safety issues.<sup>92</sup>

Unions have also proven able to pressure governments into improving their worker safety protocols, as unionization is associated with more frequent and stringent government inspections.<sup>93</sup> Again, the presence of a union is critical, as it reduces the risk workers face when reporting unsafe work practices. The ability to demand an inspection is an important issue in Alberta, since the provincial government conducts relatively few random inspections, relying instead upon worker complaints to trigger enforcement activity. Furthermore, unions also seek better OHS legislation and policy by lobbying politicians and participating in stakeholder consultations. In Alberta, this has included successfully advocating for stiffer penalties for safety violations, the creation of a targeted employer program for repeat offenders, reductions in legal exposure limits for certain hazardous materials,

and greater (albeit imperfect) statistical reporting of injuries.<sup>94</sup> Frequently, union representatives are the only ones representing the interests of workers in policy consultations.

Interestingly, few studies have been able to establish a statistically significant correlation between unionization and lower injury rates.<sup>95</sup> An impediment to quantifying the union safety dividend is the limited and biased data available. Consider, for example, the analytical difficulties posed by government “injury” data that reports only 1 injury in 10.<sup>96</sup> Comparative analysis is further confounded by factors such as unions being more likely to form in hazardous workplaces, and unions increasing injury reporting. Finally, employers and governments, neither of which has any interest in documenting a union safety effect, control virtually all research opportunities and data sources.

Unions also assist workers after an injury has occurred. Workers who are injured and must seek wage-loss, medical-aid, and vocational rehabilitation benefits from the Workers’ Compensation Board (WCB) often face an uphill battle. Employer efforts to minimize their workers’ compensation premiums often result in employers hiding and disputing claims, and instituting phony modified-work arrangements.<sup>97</sup> Further, WCB workers are often rewarded for minimizing the duration and cost of claims.<sup>98</sup> Not surprisingly, many injured workers don’t report injuries, and those who do have difficulty receiving the compensation benefits to which they are entitled. Unions educate their members about what injuries are, when and how to report them, and what benefits workers are entitled to receive. Some unions also assist their members with their claims. These union activities help to offset the greater knowledge and power of employers and the WCB, knowledge and power that are sometimes deployed to intimidate workers and limit the benefits they receive.<sup>99</sup> When Alberta workers appeal decisions about their claims, they must often face down both the WCB, which is trying to have its decision upheld, and the employer, which is trying to keep its claims costs down.<sup>100</sup> Employers and the WCB typically employ experienced advocates in these hearings, while non-unionized workers are generally on their own, unless they can afford a lawyer. Some unions represent their members in these appeal hearings to ensure their members receive a fair hearing. Unions also lobby workers’ compensation boards and the government for better compensation. For example, lobbying by Alberta firefighter unions resulted in presumptive coverage for many forms of occupational cancer.<sup>101</sup> Without such provisions, firefighters would have to somehow prove when and how they contracted cancer, which is an impossible task.

**“Unions not only provide their members with safety training, but also support broader workplace safety efforts that benefit all workers.”**

Finally, unions not only provide their members with specific safety training, but also support broader workplace safety efforts. In Alberta, unions have funded workplace safety education for children through the Alberta Workers' Health Centre (AWHC). The AWHC has used theatre-based education to introduce over 100,000 Alberta junior- and senior-high school students to the hazards of the workplace and their rights to be safe from these hazards. The AWHC's "That's Danger" and "Work Plays" efforts are necessary due to the high rate of teen employment and injury, and the provincial government's lack of enforcement of child labour laws.<sup>102</sup>

Alberta workplaces remain dangerous places for workers. Government reports of 145 deaths and 27,745 serious injuries in 2012 are evidence to this fact. Indeed, even these figures underreport the true level of risk to the health and well-being of workers in Alberta's workplaces. Employers have largely proven uninterested in ensuring safe work for Albertans. They tend to view safety in economic terms, and have an incentive to externalize the costs of risk reduction onto workers. Widespread employer non-compliance with Alberta's OHS regulations has also shown the provincial government as ineffective in creating safe work.

Unions remain the central force in the province protecting worker safety. Union members are more educated as to what constitutes a hazard, and are more empowered to report and demand the remediation of workplace hazards, as well as refuse unsafe work. Unionized workplaces are also associated with more frequent and stringent government OHS inspections. Unions in Alberta have successfully pressured the provincial government to implement improved OHS legislation. After an injury or death occurs, unions play a critical role in helping workers receive the compensation benefits to which they are entitled. In sum, in Alberta's dangerous workplaces, unions are critical in protecting the safety of workers.

## 5. Unions and Inequality in Alberta

Unions have an impact beyond just the wages, benefits, and safety of their members. The collective impact of workers striving to improve their well-being also has far-reaching social implications. Perhaps one of the most important roles of unions is their potential to address pressing social crises affecting Alberta, such as growing income inequality.

Income inequality is a major economic and social problem, globally and in Alberta. In each of the last three years, the World Economic Forum has reported that “severe income disparity” is the factor most likely to result in a major disturbance to the global capitalist economy within a decade.<sup>103</sup> Oxfam International recently reported that the richest 85 people in the world own as much wealth as the poorest 3 billion.<sup>104</sup> In the United States and Canada, a pair of economists has shown that income inequality has reached heights not previously witnessed since the Great Depression.<sup>105</sup> Alberta, meanwhile, has the dubious distinction of being the most unequal province in the country,<sup>106</sup> and its long struggle with growing inequality has been extensively documented.<sup>107</sup>

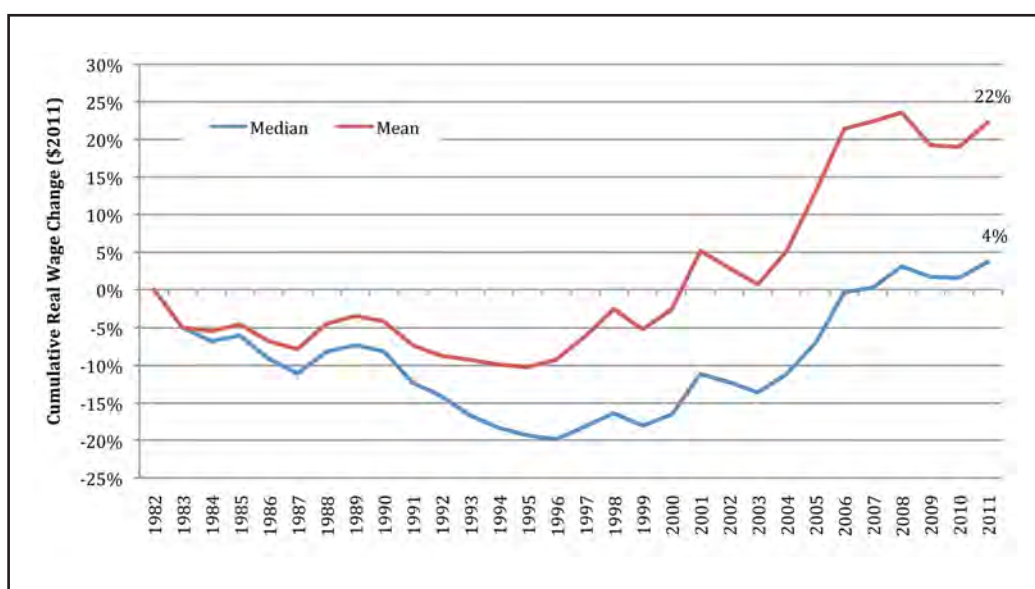
“The trend of growing inequality is intricately linked with the declining influence of labour unions.”

New research has documented the widespread repercussions of income inequality. Highly unequal societies have been shown to suffer from a higher prevalence of detrimental outcomes, such as higher crime rates, lower educational scores, and lower life expectancy.<sup>108</sup> A recent study by the International Monetary Fund found that higher levels of inequality are linked to shorter periods of economic growth.<sup>109</sup> And a high concentration of wealth among a small section of the population subverts democratic governance, as economic power invariably translates into political power. As Armine Yalnizyan summarized in a recent op-ed, “[w]hether you want less poverty or a more robust economy, greater innovation or improved productivity, better life chances or a healthier democracy, the way forward in Canada involves reducing income inequality.”<sup>110</sup> The trend of growing inequality is intricately linked with the declining influence of labour unions.

### a) Inequality in Alberta

Inequality in Alberta has risen largely because, like elsewhere, income has been increasingly distributed upwards to a small minority. Concern over inequality in Alberta is often undercut by reports of the province boasting the highest average wage in the country. But a high average wage does not mean that all Albertans are realizing boosts in their incomes from the province’s economic growth, as is often implied. Instead, Alberta’s average wage has been increasingly skewed upward by a small number of very

high earners. This can be seen statistically in the divergence between the province’s mean wage and median wage.<sup>111</sup> If the income of high-earners increases disproportionately to the rest of the population, the mean wage will rise faster than the median wage. As seen in Figure 7 below, Alberta’s mean wage has grown far higher than the median wage over the past three decades. While the real median wage increased 4% between 1982 and 2011, the real mean wage grew 22%. These diverging trends indicate a growing bifurcation of the province’s labour market, with high-earners claiming a larger portion of real wage increases.



**Figure 7** Cumulative Real Median and Mean Wages Changes in Alberta, 1982-2011<sup>112</sup>

“Over the last several decades, those with the highest incomes have benefited almost exclusively from Alberta’s economic growth.”

Provincial tax data also shows that over the last several decades those with the highest incomes have benefited far more, and indeed almost exclusively, from Alberta’s economic growth. As seen in Figure 8 below, real income growth in the province is highly concentrated among Alberta’s very top income earners. The inflation-adjusted average income for the bottom 99% of income earners in the province increased a modest 13% between 1982 and 2011, from \$41,749 to \$48,800. Meanwhile, the average incomes of the top 1% and top 0.1% grew 93% and 149%, respectively. This growth in reported income for the richest Albertans translates into real income gains of \$313,871 and \$1,476,206, respectively. These figures do not include capital gains, a key source of income for the wealthy. As such, those at the top of the income spectrum in the province have seen their fortunes rise to fantastic new heights over the last three decades, while the rest of Albertans have seen their incomes essentially stagnate. Indeed, in 1982 the average

income of the top 1% was 9 times higher than that of the bottom 99%. By 2011, this income gap had grown to 16 times. These divergent realities for the wealthy and the rest of Albertans are masked by focusing on Alberta's high average wage level.

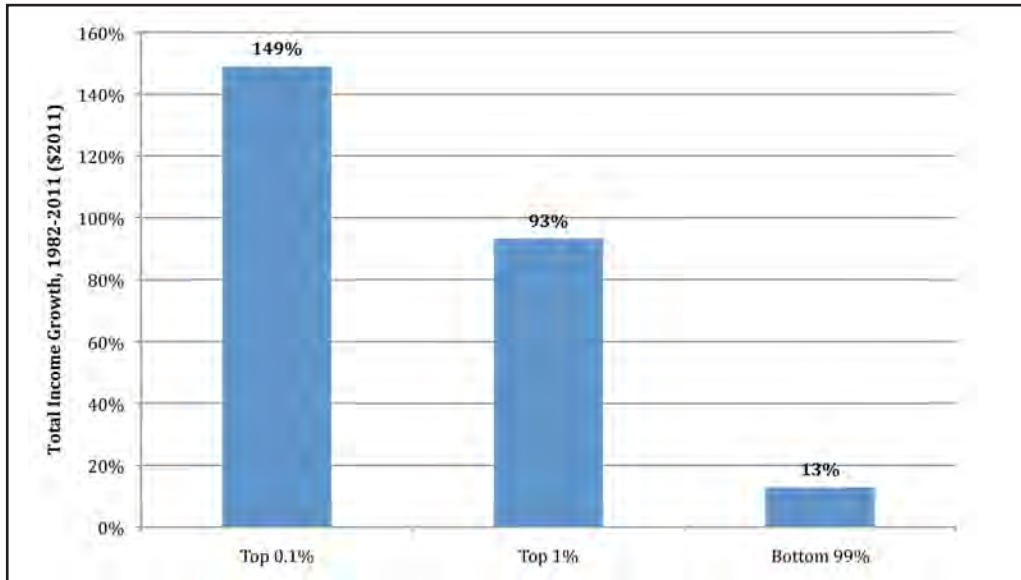
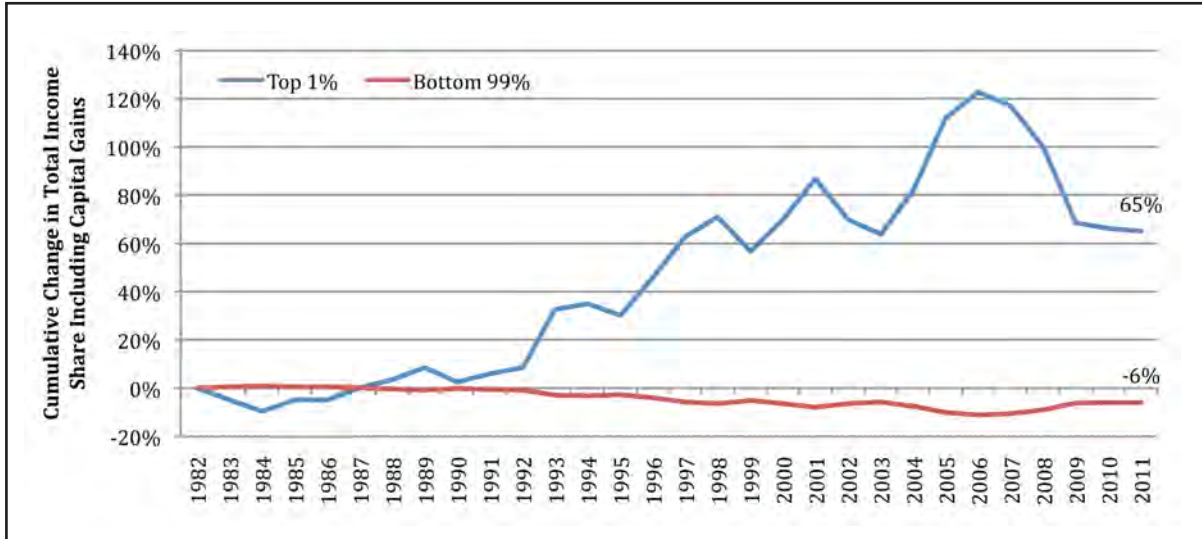


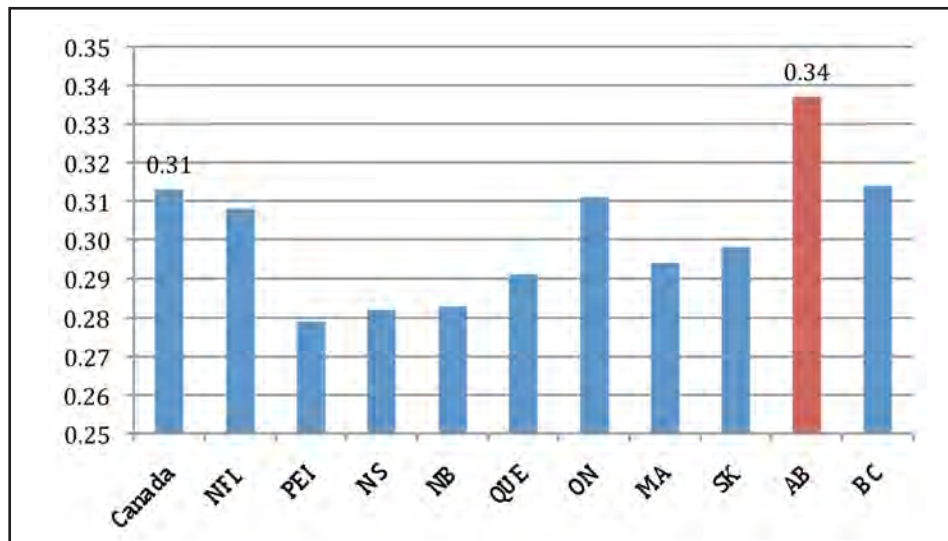
Figure 8 Real Income Gains in Alberta, 1982-2011<sup>113</sup>

The boost in real income high-earners received has dramatically altered the overall division of Alberta's income in favour of the wealthy. Since 1982, the share of total income, including capital gains, accruing to the top 1% of earners in the province had more than doubled before the onset of the Great Recession in 2007 (see Figure 9). Indeed, in 2006, the share of total income captured by the top 1% was 19%, up from the 1982 level of 8%. Over the same period of time, the income share of the bottom 99% had fallen 11%, from 92% of total income in 1982 to 82% in 2006. The Great Recession hammered the income of the high earners more than others, as is typical, likely due to the major drop in the value of their financial holdings. However, without major revisions to the way in which income is distributed in Alberta, the highly unequal trend previously seen is set to reoccur.



**Figure 9** Cumulative Change in Total Income Share in Alberta, 1982-2011<sup>114</sup>

Similar trends in the division of income have no doubt occurred in other provinces. The situation appears to have been particularly extreme in Alberta, however, as Alberta is now by far the most unequal province in Canada. As seen in the Figure 10 below, in 2011 Alberta had the highest Gini Coefficient in the country. The Gini Coefficient is a common measurement of inequality. It measures the difference between the actual distribution of income and a measure of perfect equality. Thus, a measurement of zero indicates a perfectly equal distribution of income, and a measurement of one indicates a perfectly unequal distribution of income (meaning that a single individual receives all income). Alberta's after-tax Gini Coefficient of 0.34 dwarfs that of all other provinces. Indeed, Alberta's after-tax Gini Coefficient now sits at the highest level in the 36-year period that Statistics Canada has been measuring it provincially.

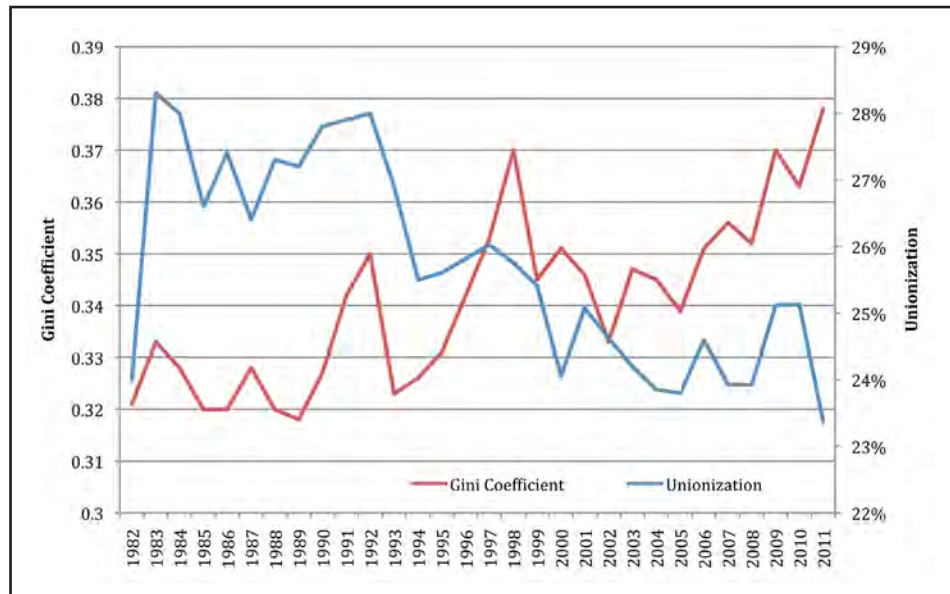


**Figure 10** After-Tax Gini Coefficient by Province, 2011<sup>115</sup>

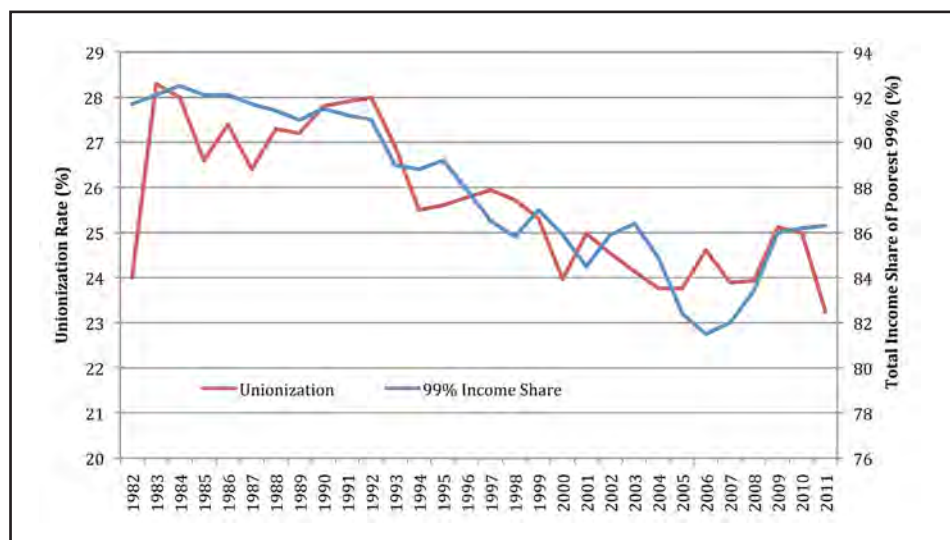


**b) Unions and Inequality**

Rising income inequality in Alberta has coincided with the declining presence of unions in the province. These parallel trends are depicted in the two figures below. Figure 11 shows Alberta’s Gini Coefficient and unionization rate from 1982 to 2011. Figure 12 maps the province’s unionization rate onto the share of total income accruing to the poorest 99% of Albertans. Clearly, there is a strong relation between unionization and the distribution of income.



**Figure 11** Unionization Rate and Gini Coefficient in Alberta, 1982-2011<sup>116</sup>



**Figure 12** Unionization Rate and Income Share of Poorest 99% of Earners, Alberta, 1982-2011<sup>117</sup>

The close association between the decline in unionization and the rise in income inequality is not a coincidence. Granted, attempts by mainstream economists to quantify the causes of rising inequality in the US, Canada, and elsewhere using econometric methods have tended to downplay the role of unions. Economists have instead found explanations in the changes in education,<sup>118</sup> demographics,<sup>119</sup> and the value of the minimum wage.<sup>120</sup> Others point to how technological changes have impacted the labour market, such as the greater ease of outsourcing jobs to low-wage countries,<sup>121</sup> an increased demand for skilled rather than unskilled labour,<sup>122</sup> and automation leading to a hollowing-out of middle-class paying jobs.<sup>123</sup> Although one study found that declining union density in Canada, the US, and the UK did contribute to growing inequality in the 1980s and 1990s, it only explained a small percentage, and only among men.<sup>124</sup>

**“The equalizing effect of unions on income is not limited only to union members, but also includes non-unionized workers.”**

If however a political economy lens is used to analyze the coinciding trends of union decline and growing inequality, the connections between the two become much clearer. For instance, sociologists Bruce Western and Jake Rosenfeld take a broader view of the influence of unions. They recognize that unions do not operate solely in the economic realm, but are also political and cultural agents. Accordingly, unions act to equalize income distribution through cultural channels (e.g. by publicly expressing support for equality), political channels (e.g. by shaping public policy), and economic channels (e.g. by intervening in the labour market).<sup>125</sup> Unions have an effect not only on the specific workplaces where they represent workers, but the economy as a whole. The equalizing effect of unions on income is thus not limited only to union members, but includes non-unionized workers as well. With this broader understanding of unions, Western and Rosenfeld found that on an empirical basis, union decline in the US between 1973 and 2007 accounted for a third of the rise in income inequality for men and a fifth for women.<sup>126</sup>

A political economy lens also shows that many of the explanations for income inequality proposed by mainstream economists are themselves directly linked to the decline of unions. For instance, economists who argue inequality is due to the increased prevalence of low-wage jobs assume that certain jobs are inherently “low-wage.” But the ability of unions to improve the lives of working people has much to do with their transformation of “bad” jobs to “good” jobs. The obvious example of this transformation is in manufacturing, which began as low-paying and grueling labour, but through union activism became the foundation of the middle-class in Western countries. Mainstream economists’ claims that technology explains the rise of inequality is a form of “technological determinism,” which views technology as existing independent of, rather than as shaped by, social forces. The massive investments in automation, for instance, were in large part politically driven by the desires of industrial capitalists to suppress the

**Unions promote greater equality through economic, social, and political means.**

growing militancy of labour.<sup>127</sup> The eroding value of minimum wages and the establishment of “free trade” are two other explanations of inequality offered by mainstream economists that fail to account for the influence unions have in their outcomes. These are both examples of political struggles in which unions are and have been deeply involved.<sup>128</sup> As such, the erosion of minimum wages and the spread of free trade agreements should be viewed in part as symptoms of the weakening of unions and their diminished influence in cultural, political, and economic channels.

While growing inequality is a national and international problem, Alberta stands out as the most unequal province in the Canada. Indeed, the last three decades are characterized by tremendous income growth for the province’s upper echelons, while the incomes of most Albertans have essentially stagnated. As the gap between the rich and the poor has expanded in Alberta, inequality has become a social problem of growing significance.

The decline in union density over the last few decades is closely associated with the widening income gap between the rich and everybody else, in Alberta and elsewhere. We know that part of the impact unions have in the labour market is the acquisition of a larger share of the economic pie for workers, by putting upward pressure on wages. But unions are also political and cultural agents who value and agitate for equality through these additional channels. Their broad pursuit of equality across society, combined with their unique economic clout, make unions critical to overcoming the increasingly narrow distribution of wealth in Alberta.

## 6. Conclusion

Much of this report has detailed the current benefits of unions for working people in Alberta. Although some have claimed that unions are no longer relevant in contemporary society, the benefits unions provide workers in the province are very real. These include, but are not limited to, monetary benefits such as wages. In 2013, Alberta's overall union wage premium, the difference between union and non-union wages, was \$4.75 an hour. It was even larger for women, young workers, and in highly unionized sectors such as education, health care, and construction. Workers also benefit from higher forms of non-wage compensation, such as pensions, health benefits, and vacation pay. An approximate measure of this additional union premium in Alberta's construction industry was found to be substantial, at nearly \$4 per hour. Union activity does not solely boost the wages and benefits of its members, as the "threat" of unionization has been found to encourage non-union employers to increase the compensation offered to workers in order to stave off organizing attempts.

The effect of unions in the province extends beyond the monetary benefits for workers, member and non-member. As this report details, unions are also critical in protecting worker health and safety. This is especially important in Alberta, where workplace injuries and deaths occur regularly. A major part of the problem is widespread employer non-compliance with OHS obligations, due to financial incentives to download the risk of injury onto workers, and ineffective enforcement by the provincial government. In this context, unions are critical to worker safety. Evidence shows unionized workers tend to be better educated as to what constitutes a workplace hazard, and are more likely to assert their right to refuse unsafe work. Unions in Alberta, like elsewhere, have also successfully lobbied the government for changes in OHS legislation to better protect workers.

Unions are also critical to addressing pressing societal concerns, such as growing income inequality. In Alberta, inequality has become especially extreme. Due to exceptional increases in income for the richest 1% of Albertans, while the incomes of the rest of the population have virtually stagnated, Alberta is now the most unequal province in the country. These changes coincided and are closely associated with the declining strength of unions in the province. As union density has declined, unions' direct influence on the labour market, and their ability to pull-up the incomes of members and non-members, has waned. Their influence in the political and cultural arenas, where they have historically agitated for policies and ideas that promote equality, has also dwindled. A reverse of the union decline is crucial to addressing the pressing crisis of extreme income inequality in Alberta.

This report also highlights the precarious position of Alberta's unions. Union coverage in Alberta is near the lowest it has been in decades, and has been trending downward since the early-1990s. When only the private sector is considered, the situation is even more worrying. Union organizing continues to be very difficult, due in large part to the province's regressive labour laws and ineffective enforcement. Applications to certify new workplaces have fallen dramatically, while the success rate of organizing drives has remained effectively the same. In a few industries, unions are no longer providing higher wages to their members. It appears as if a downward spiral is in motion, where falling union density hampers the ability of unions to provide for their memberships, which generates further declines in union density, and the cycle continues.

While the situation for unions in Alberta is somewhat distinctive, it is also embedded in broader struggles and changes occurring across Canada. Diagnosing the root causes of the union movement's challenges and articulating a strategy for success is a complex task that falls outside the scope of this report. Fortunately, many labour scholars, rank and file members, and union leaders have for some time been aware of organized labour's precarious position across Canada. While the embrace of right-to-work rhetoric and policy by emboldened right-wing organizations and politicians is new, it represents the intensification of a long-running struggle. Over the last decade, there has been much discussion about how to instigate the labour movement's "renewal" or "revival."<sup>129</sup> For instance, even before the economic boom in Alberta failed to deliver significant dividends to working people in the province, Sam Gindin and Jim Stanford called for a labour strategy that was "more activist, more democratic, [and] more radical."<sup>130</sup> Even before the demands for austerity took hold in the wake of the Great Recession, Charlotte Yates argued that unions cannot afford to pursue "a non-ideological politics of pragmatism."<sup>131</sup>

Much of the literature on union renewal implores Canadian unions to respond to the fundamental shift of the political terrain in recent decades with an equally profound change in union tactics and structure. Proposals for such change vary, but generally entail deepening the democratic practices of unions, committing major resources toward organizing new workers, and focusing on educating, empowering, and mobilizing existing members. There are signs that such a shift may be underway within the Canadian labour movement.<sup>132</sup> Unions can also look to European countries such as Finland, Sweden, and Denmark, which have managed to maintain strong union memberships in the face of neoliberal globalization.

In Alberta, organized labour faces clear challenges, both broad-based and uniquely Albertan. While recognizing the seriousness of these challenges, it is also possible to see that Alberta unions possess substantial resources

that could be used to galvanize broader social transformation. Although private sector union density in Alberta is low by Canadian standards, it has not fallen to the depths witnessed in the US. While lower than in previous generations, in 2013 more than one in five employees in Alberta was a union member. This provides incredible opportunities for unions to reach a wide segment of the Alberta population. Unions are also well-funded relative to other social organizations as a result of member dues. Finally, workers and their unions maintain a unique and potentially powerful position in the economy. If these resources are mobilized toward building a social movement in Alberta and elsewhere, unions could vastly improve the well-being of all workers in the province. Looking to the past, the history of labour organizing in Canada suggests that the labour movement has done better when it has dreamed bigger.

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