

Original Proposal – Workers and Social Cohesion

The process of globalization poses an immense challenge to social cohesion in Canada. Cohesion in post-war Canadian society was to a great extent based upon a political economy model that incorporated key workers and national labour organizations in the creation of a 'Fordist' welfare state. The increasing mobility of capital and relative immobility of workers in a global era has undercut the basis of this model and its elements of social cohesion. This proposal is designed to examine the changing position of Canadian workers in the global economy and analyse the implications for social cohesion and public policy. Globalization increases insecurity in much of the Canadian workforce by putting a premium on labour market flexibility, increased productivity and competitiveness, competition for investment and transformation of the welfare state. The resulting disparity in income and living standards contributes to increased social exclusion, the fracturing of communities and a breakdown in social cohesion. The major issue we address is how Canadian workers respond to these challenges and the possibilities for increasing social cohesion through policy innovation and civil society action. We view the fate of workers and their response to globalization as one of the main determinants of Canadian social cohesion.

Our proposal examines the issue of workers and social cohesion through three streams of research. The first stream, (social cohesion in a shifting national labour market or national stream) examines civil society responses to economic restructuring by studying the responses of unions within a national context. Two key issues examined are workers' representatives reinventing their organizations and the channelling of frustration with economic decline away from anti social behaviour such as racism. The second stream (social cohesion in a regional and sectoral context or regional stream) examines the impact of the transnational restructuring of automobile production on workers and social cohesion in the Americas. This section focuses on restructuring in a particular sector and the attempts by workers to rebuild social cohesion on a regional level. The third stream (social cohesion at the global level or global stream) shifts attention to the global level where workers are trying to rebuild social regulation. This will involve a study of the efforts of Canadian workers to influence global regulation through corporate codes of conduct and international institutions. A specific study of the International Labour Organization's (ILO) recent modification and its implications for Canadian workers will also be undertaken.

Research Objectives

The project has four main research objectives. First, we examine how Canadian workers are responding to the pressures of globalization and the challenges this creates for social cohesion. Second, we investigate what steps can be taken to mitigate the negative effects of globalization on workers and what actions might be undertaken within civil society or through policy changes at the provincial, national and international levels. Third, we will expand opportunities for young researchers and students in social sciences to be trained in policy relevant research on the issue of workers and social cohesion. Finally, we will contribute to the knowledge base needed to provide effective solutions to

the problem of decreasing social cohesion as workers, corporations and governments respond to a changing global economy.

Achieving the Objectives

The objectives will be achieved by examining Canadian workers' interaction with globalization at several levels (the local, national, regional, international and global) and contexts (civil society, firms, state/interstate institutions). We will work within these contexts and levels by dividing the project into three streams:

1: Social cohesion in a shifting national labour market

The first stream focuses on the relationship between the changing national labour market and social cohesion. Over the last 20 years market restructuring under pressure from intensifying international competition has changed the nature of work, eliminating, creating, de- and re-skilling jobs. Governments have responded with a strategy of reshaping labour markets, notably through immigration policies which make new groups of people available for work, equity policies which improve labour market accessibility for previously marginalized workers, and new more flexible labour standards that alter the scope of protection offered to workers. These restructuring processes have dislocated workers and modified the range of opportunities available to them. They have also heightened general tensions among workers concerning social and economic equality rights within an increasingly diversified labour force. These shifts and emerging tensions have weakened social cohesion by pitting workers against workers and excluding some citizens from enjoying the benefits of increased wealth. While the source of many of these tensions may be global in nature, we propose that different national institutions and communities may respond differently, sometimes augmenting the competition amongst workers and other times seeking to construct a rearticulated social cohesion around diversity and equality issues.

This part of the research, therefore, will examine the interconnections between market and government restructuring, and resulting tensions within the labour force concerning social and material equality. We will investigate how these labour market shifts and emerging tensions contribute to national debates over the politics of immigration, to local workplace and union struggles over diversity and equality, and to workers' perceptions and experience of vulnerability and opportunity vis-a-vis other communities of workers. This will be done by focusing study on Hamilton, Ontario, a city which has experienced extensive economic restructuring. The politically contentious issues of citizenship, cultural diversity, and national identity and culture are key to understanding the reduction in levels of social cohesion within the working population and the possibilities and directions for its renewal.

2: Social cohesion in a regional and sectoral context

This component of the project assesses the impact of the transnational restructuring of automobile production on workers and social cohesion in the North American region. Ongoing restructuring of the automotive industry, with its simultaneous trends to transnational integration, on the one hand, and local and national

disintegration/fragmentation on the other, undermines the capacity of governments to maintain a coherent industrial relations system and a coherent set of reasonably inclusive social policies that have come to be the basis of a sense of common citizenship for many Canadians. Analysis of the public policy implications that flow from this industrial restructuring will be central to the proposed research. More specifically, we propose to conduct research on the producer-supplier linkages developing among several Canadian automotive assembly plants and their suppliers. This research would be linked to similar research conducted by International Research Network on Autowork in the Americas (IRNAA) researchers in the U.S. and Mexico. The main purpose would be to assess the implications of this restructuring for: 1. working conditions (intensity and duration of work; quality of jobs (e.g. skill content); health and safety; human rights; etc.); 2. the geographic location of investment and employment; 3. collective bargaining; 4. internal and external labour markets (e.g. variations in wage and benefit levels; skill requirements; gender, age, and other characteristics); 5. union representation.

To carry out such an assessment we propose to: 1: map the relationship between Canadian automotive production sites and this broader restructuring of producer chains; 2. identify the policy concerns of unions in Canada, the US and Mexico in relation to this restructuring; 3. investigate the links between state policy and this restructuring process; 4. examine the policy options available to governments and unions to ameliorate the social, economic and political burden of this restructuring (e.g. employment insurance, health care, pensions, public education, skills training, etc.), and the increasing social costs of the competition of various communities for foreign direct investment in this sector; 5. assess policy options related to the industrial relations, social, and trade and investment policies that might be needed for the creation and maintenance of a new regime of transnational social cohesion within North America.

3: Social cohesion at the global level

Two central elements of the globalization process are the creation of new sets of social relations and the emergence of new centres of authority. This stream will examine both of these trends in a Canadian context. One part of the stream will investigate how Canadian workers have tried to influence state and corporate actors to respect core labour standards. One aspect of this activity has been the drive to have the government support international regulation of labour and social standards in trade treaties and international agreements. Examples of such campaigns are the drive for labour standards in NAFTA, a social clause at the World Trade Organization (WTO) and integration of social concerns at APEC. We will attempt to judge the impact and relevance of these campaigns. Another element of concern is the growing push for corporate codes of conduct aimed at protecting social standards by influencing firm behaviour. An example of advanced activity in this field can be found in the UK with the government sponsored Ethical Trading Initiative. We will investigate similar activity in this country and consider whether a Canadian ETI would be of assistance in bolstering social cohesion.

Second, we propose to examine the changing role of the ILO and its implications for Canadian workers and social cohesion. The objective would be to address two related sets of questions: first, how and to what extent is the ILO joining the powerful core of market-generating institutions such as the World Trade Organization, the OECD and the

World Bank in shaping global social policy? Given that this organization was founded, in part, to provide guidance to countries seeking to devise just labour standards, what impact is its shift in role having on social cohesion? Second, how are prevailing trends within the ILO affecting its relationship with trade unions and what ramifications (if any) will changes within the organization have for Canadian workers? Policy questions to be addressed include the role of the Canadian state in respecting and enforcing ILO conventions and the diffusion of core labour standards into all segments of Canadian