

Theory of Change

Canada is ruled by the capitalist class. This tiny group controls the national means of production — the infrastructure, natural resources, machinery, factories, land, and buildings used to produce goods and services. Under capitalism, this small minority controls the means of production and operates them to generate profit for themselves. The capitalists make profits and accumulate wealth not by working for themselves, but by employing others to work for them. Owning the primary sources of wealth gives them the power to control society. They rule with the aim of amassing more money and assets for themselves.

To accumulate wealth, the capitalist class must exploit the working class. The working class is defined by its separation from the means of production and constitutes a large majority of the Canadian population. Our class includes not only the employed, but also the unemployed — those who rely on public assistance, care for children or disabled relatives, pensioners, students, etc. It includes not only “blue-collar” workers, but also workers in fields such as healthcare, education, the civil service, sales, technology, administration, and others. Owning no means of production, the working class is forced to beg for jobs from the capitalists, selling our ability to work in exchange for a wage to survive. Despite our central role in generating Canada’s wealth, we accumulate little for ourselves. Instead, the wealth we produce is captured and hoarded by the capitalist class.

Canadian capitalism has been built on the oppression of other peoples and nations. Its foundation is a multigenerational genocidal project aimed at eradicating or assimilating Indigenous peoples and expropriating their land and resources. Canadian capitalists have also dominated and exploited other nations around the globe, as junior partners to British and US imperialism, including the historic oppression of the Québécois nation within our own borders.

This system benefits the capitalist class at the expense of the global majority. From low wages, high rents, economic insecurity, inflation, and eroding public services to endless war, ecological destruction, rampant police violence, and the growing strength of fascist and far-right political forces, all are symptoms of the crisis of capitalism.

The only way to end this horror is for the Canadian working class, in concert with the workers of the world, to take power and build different types of societies — socialist societies in which the means of production are controlled collectively and democratically to produce what is necessary to meet the needs of the people. Achieving the transformation of Canadian society requires a movement of working-class people capable of taking control of its political and economic institutions. The working class has always and will always stand on the frontline of the fight to overturn undemocratic state structures and private ownership over the means of production. Our class’ majoritarian character and separation from the means of production mean it is the only social group with a consistent material interest in fighting for collective, democratic control over political and economic life.

Capitalism is a global system, so Canadian workers also need to build international class solidarity to counter the international coordination of the capitalists. Developing this solidarity requires that Canadian workers stand for the right to self-determination — for Indigenous peoples, for oppressed nations all around the world, as well as for the Québécois. We must recognize that our long-term interests lie in solidarity with the oppressed and avoid being tempted by whatever immediate economic gains may come from the exploitation of other nations or peoples.

Today, however, our class is emerging from an era of defeat and does not have the organization necessary to transform Canada or stop its oppression of other nations and peoples. In the first half of the 20th century, economic hardship was met with decades of working-class economic and political organization. A powerful industrial union movement arose and confronted employers' power in the workplace. Closely tied to this union movement were new working class political organizations — such as the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation and the Communist Party of Canada — which put forward a socialist vision that threatened the capitalist class. Capitalists and their political allies responded to this challenge by repressing those elements in the workers' movement which aimed to overcome the capitalist system with “red scare” tactics. At the same time, the Canadian state began to make room for a law-abiding “responsible” unionism which abandoned the militancy and political aspirations which had threatened the capitalist social order.

In the wake of the Second World War, Canada benefited both from a period of generalized economic expansion and its privileged position within the new global capitalist order constructed by the US. Canada's post-war economic boom enabled the expansion of the welfare state and collective bargaining, leading to a significant increase in workers' standard of living. These material improvements increased the acceptance of the permanence of capitalism amongst workers and working-class organizations. Working-class politics in Canada began to revolve around fighting to improve our class' conditions within the system rather than challenging it as a whole.

In the early 1970s, the Canadian economy entered a period of “stagflation” (low growth rates combined with severe inflationary tendencies) which put profit margins and state budgets under increased pressure. As a result, the material concessions made to our class over the previous period became increasingly intolerable to capital and state. Many of the recently won pro-worker public institutions and policies began to be dismantled or eroded — including collective bargaining, economic and labour market regulations, and the welfare state.

In the decades that followed, these changes decimated Canadian workers' organization and consciousness. The decline of trade unions in the private and public sector, an increasingly precarious and informal labour market, economic dispersal and suburbanization, an increase in credit-fueled individual consumption, and the growing power of mass media all worked in concert to produce an increasingly disorganized and atomized working class.

These factors have led to a fragmented Canadian working class separated from our history of class struggle and unity. While our class is experiencing a decline in its living standards, we no longer understand ourselves as a collective with the power to challenge this, but as individuals in competition with one another over a shrinking portion of the pie. The results of this warped understanding are heightened resentment, division, and demoralization. Our fractured class no longer recognizes itself as a collective force with the power to transform society. Over the course of the 20th century, the Canadian workers' movement has been decimated and the possibility of a socialist horizon has disappeared along with it. Rebuilding our class' organization and consciousness from the ground up is the primary task of socialists in our time.

Building the Working-Class Movement

1. Structure-Based Organizing

To our class, organization is like oxygen. The erosion of working-class organization has undermined the basis of workers' power and confidence. Workers need mass, collective institutions to enforce our interests, whether in workplaces and apartment buildings, on the streets, or at the ballot box. Building working-class institutions requires drawing a continually expanding base of ordinary working people into the process of fighting for social change through *structure-based organizing*.

Structure-based organizing involves targeting a bounded constituency — a workplace, building, or neighbourhood, for example — to build majority support for a cause or course of action that addresses injustices broadly felt by that constituency. This organizing approach develops the mass disruptive capacity needed to win material gains. It also keeps organizers focused on reaching out to and winning over those who have no preexisting interest in, or experience with, collective action. Buildings or workplaces often provide effective venues for structure-based organizing campaigns because their constituents can be organized into tenant or labour unions to address their material concerns.

2. Broadening the Struggle

Organizing coalitions of labour or tenant unions is one important method for broadening the scope of struggles beyond a given bounded constituency. Coalitions can wage broader struggles than any single union, enhancing the disruptive capacity and political influence of our class. There is a particular need to organize regional or national federations of tenant unions to expand the power of Canada's growing tenant movement. While federations of labour unions are more established, openings exist to build coalitions of different labour unions or locals around particular issues or struggles. A broader-based struggle can help encourage those fighting to think not just about *their* employer or landlord, *their* workplace or building, but rather the struggle of *the whole class* of workers against the whole class of capitalists.

3. Class Mobilization

Mobilizing around local struggles is a less effective method than organizing for building the working-class movement. Mobilizing only rallies those already invested in a given issue, while organizing continuously expands our base. Nonetheless, mobilizing remains an important, though secondary, component of developing the working-class movement.

Many protests address important political issues. Showing up to support these fights is an important task in its own right. Movement spaces can also be useful grounds to provide a socialist analysis to newly politicized people and develop contacts with left activists and organizations. Further, where mobilizations snowball into genuine social movements, they may radicalize those involved *en masse*, creating a more favourable environment for future organizing. In this sense, mobilizational earthquakes may loosen the soil, easing future organizational spadework.

Raising Horizons

4. Learning Through Struggle

The purpose of working-class organization is to achieve some form of collective control over our economic life. Even where our class' demands for collective control take place in limited forms — such as regulating wages or rents — we are demanding that our collective social needs come before private profits. This is unacceptable to capital, and it is this opposition between working-class organizations' demand for collective control and capital's demand for private profit that gives rise to class conflict.

While engaged in these struggles, working class people learn that we can only win when we are united and that the broader that unity is, the more powerful we are. We also come into conflict with a hostile capitalist class and state, illustrating that these forces are obstacles to our collective aspirations. Class struggle thus develops workers' recognition of collective class interests and enemies, and demonstrates the possibility of joining together with others to fight for these interests and against these enemies. The road to a mass constituency who understands itself as “working class”, and has an openness to socialist politics, is necessarily paved with the re-embedding of class organization into workers' daily lives.

5. Political Education

Education is an integral part of developing working people's class consciousness. While workers learn important political lessons when engaged in class conflict, this message is often complicated by our day-to-day experience of capitalism. The system encourages us to see ourselves as dependent on capitalists for survival, and pits us against other working-class people in competition for housing and jobs. The exhaustion of work robs us of the chance to read, learn, and engage politically, and the pressures of survival tilt us towards immediate gains at the cost of solidarity.

To internalize the lessons of class struggle, workers need an opportunity to reflect on their direct experiences, and to connect them to the history of the workers' movement and the theoretical analyses drawn from that history. Providing this education requires the development of accessible political education which draws a connection between the struggles we are engaged in, and a broader class and political analysis. Workers are the only social group capable of bringing about the transformation necessary to secure humanity's future. Our class needs to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to struggle for, and govern, a new world.

The Political Struggle

6. Sectionalism and Economism

Even where we strive to influence economic organizations — such as tenant and labour unions — with a socialist perspective, their horizons will always remain limited. To wage effective economic struggles, such organizations need to activate super-majorities of their constituency. This requires that they organize around the broadest possible basis of unity i.e. fighting on behalf of *their members* to achieve *immediate material improvements*. Any effort to make membership in these economic organizations conditional on agreement with political positions beyond this limited mandate undermines their majoritarian appeal and thus reduces their efficacy.

By their nature, such organizations are *sectional*, in that they cannot bargain on behalf of the entire class. Instead, their struggles tend to be fought by and for sections of the class. Further, their struggles tend to be *economistic*, limited to addressing workers' immediate economic problems — such as wages, rents, working, and living conditions. Such organizations tend to focus on fighting for a better deal under capitalism, rather than for the social transformation necessary to address the economic problems facing our class in an enduring way.

7. Political Organization

To overcome the problems of sectionalism and economism, we need socialist political organizations. Although union struggles play an important role in raising workers' consciousness of shared class interests, the sectional character of these organizations make them an imperfect vehicle for raising class-wide demands. An intervention of the working class, as a unified class, requires pursuing our interests politically. Not workplace by workplace or building by building, but by making our class' demands legally compulsory through the force of governmental power — e.g. a minimum wage, a maximum working day, rent control, etc.

Socialist political organizations also do not need an *immediate* majoritarian appeal, which means they can form their basis of unity around programmatic positions which go beyond workers' clear-cut, immediate economic interests. Adopting bold positions on constitutional

questions, international policy, economic socialization, and more, is necessary to project a clear socialist alternative. But, in most cases, principled socialist positions on such questions initially lack mass support.

8. Socialist Unity

The working class can only capture state power, and carry out the societal transformation we so desperately need, where some part of it is organized into a socialist party with genuine leadership and legitimacy among the broader masses. The project of constructing such a party is beyond the capacity of any existing organization in the Canadian socialist movement, including our own. In no small part, this is because the capacities of the movement are divided between dozens of small organizations. This fragmentation is particularly repellent to the working-class people we need to be bringing into the socialist movement. The idea that “unity is strength” is the central basis of working-class organization, and is a view stamped on the consciousness of our class’ best fighters. It is no wonder, then, that many ordinary workers are alienated by a socialist political scene divided into a slew of competing groups, separated by differences they find incomprehensible.

What our class needs right now is not yet another small group prematurely declaring themselves “the party”, but rather a socialist political organization that aims to rebuild class organization while also building unity on the socialist left. Both these tasks are essential preconditions to constructing a socialist party worthy of the name. Engaging other socialist groups in coalitions around organizing projects will simultaneously develop relationships between socialists and build the working-class movement on which the future of all socialist tendencies depends. We should also aim to engage other socialist groups with social events — to build the relationships necessary for any organizing effort — and engage them in discussions and debates meant to build the mutual intellectual understanding and respect necessary to overcome socialist fragmentation.