

Organizing the Next Generation: Influences on Young Workers' Willingness to Join Unions in Canada

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Abstract

This paper argues that union attitudes and behaviour are important but neglected features of the school–work transition process. Using longitudinal panel data from a study of high school and university graduates in three Canadian cities, we examine how young people's previous union membership, attitudes and educational, labour market and workplace experiences shape their willingness to join unions. This paper establishes that views about unions are emergent during youth, solidifying with age and experience. The implications of these findings for industrial relations, school–work transitions research and labour movement organizing are discussed.

1. Introduction

As unions chart a new course for the twenty-first century, sustained membership growth depends upon how they confront two major challenges. The first challenge is to adapt their strategies and structures to the rapid growth and diversity of service-sector employment. Private-sector service industries have proved more difficult to organize than factories and mines in earlier periods of industrialization. This problem is compounded by new human resource management strategies designed to provide alternatives to collective bargaining. The second, related, challenge is demographic. Union membership in western industrial nations is ageing and tends to be concentrated in declining or slow-growth sectors. Thus, it is vital that unions devise effective ways to recruit the next generation of workers, the vast majority of whom work in the service sector (Weil 1994: 114–16).

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The International Labour Organization has identified the recruitment of new labour market entrants as a major goal for labour movements globally, although it has criticized unions for ignoring the needs of young people in their efforts to renew membership (ILO 1997; 1993: 39). Up until the late 1970s, it was safe to assume that each new cohort of workers would become incorporated into the labour movement as they settled into stable working careers and were socialized to the norms of paid employment. Since then, however, fundamental changes in industrial and employment relations, labour market structures and conditions of work means that this process of incorporation can no longer be taken for granted.

Questions about actual or potential union membership among young workers can be approached from two complementary, although distinct, perspectives: industrial relations, and school–work transitions. Core themes in industrial relations research are the changing patterns of aggregate union membership and support for union joining among non-union workers. However, there are few studies that examine either union membership patterns among young workers or their propensity to join. Reviewing this research, Barling *et al.* (1992) conclude that age as a causal variable becomes irrelevant once other work variables are considered. These studies typically treat age as one characteristic of employed adult samples. This misses the much stronger analytic potential of focusing on a specific age cohort — particularly young workers — to understand the dynamics of its changing relationship to unions over time. While research on school–work transitions examines the early labour market experiences of youth cohorts, it rarely addresses industrial relations issues (Furlong and Cartmel 1997: 30). None the less, this is a useful perspective from which to view the unionization of young people because of the emphasis on how transformations in pathways between school and work involve the dynamic interplay of social context and individual choice (e.g. Ashton *et al.* 1990; Evans and Heinz 1994; Furlong 1992). Our goal in this paper is to explore how a key issue in industrial relations — young people’s actual and potential union membership — is integral to the school–work transition process.

2. Unionism among young workers

Young workers (under age 25) entering the labour force during or after a major phase of their education typically have lower unionization rates than older workers (Spilsbury *et al.* 1987), reflecting a strong positive relationship between age and actual membership status (Bain and Elias 1985). Despite Sweden’s high overall union density (over 80 per cent), only 40 per cent of young workers are union members (ILO 1993: 38–9). In Canada, overall union membership was stable between 1989 and 1994, but it declined from 16 to 13 per cent among 15–24 year olds (Statistics Canada 1989, 1994). Thus, union membership is ageing at a faster rate than the labour force as a whole.

In one of the few studies of union involvement among young workers, Payne (1989) examines union membership and activism among 23 year olds using the UK National Child Development Study. She considers three explanations of low union membership among the young: industrial distribution of employment; exposure to unions; and individuals' union attitudes. Accounting for low union membership among young workers in terms of their anti-union attitudes, argues Payne, erroneously assumes that they make conscious decisions to join. She concludes that for young people, 'union membership goes with the job' (p. 125), because job characteristics and the work environment are stronger predictors of both membership and activism than are young workers' attitudes towards unions. This corroborates evidence (Spilsbury *et al.* 1987) that lower union membership among 18–24 year olds reflects their employment in industries and occupations that have low rates of unionization — what Els Sheikh and Bain (1979: 140) label the 'exposure effect'.

In their study of 16 year old UK school-leavers, Cregan and Johnston find that some young workers either actively support union-joining for reasons that are *not* instrumental, or are passive towards unions and do not join because the unions have not been effective in approaching them. In this latter situation, a job or exposure effect may influence these passive workers once they enter the labour market.

Yet the exposure effect is becoming a less reliable means of increasing union membership among the young. The incidence of young workers automatically becoming union members when a unionized employer hires them has become less likely in the last decade. Increasingly, employers are seeking flexibility through the use of contract, temporary or part-time workers and two-tiered employment systems, which effectively exclude many new recruits from union representation. Furthermore, downsizing has affected larger private and public-sector organizations where unionization rates tend to be high; job growth has been concentrated in smaller firms that tend to be non-union. The vast majority of workplaces in Canada that employ young workers are non-union, so if more young people are to become union members, they will have to do so by choice.

The unionization potential of the young must also be located in the context of the difficult labour market conditions that young workers have faced. Like other industrialized economies, high rates of youth unemployment have been a chronic problem in Canada since the 1981–2 recession (Betcherman and Leckie 1997: 10–14; OECD 1994).¹ Youth wages, compared with those of workers over age 25, have been declining since the early 1980s in most OECD countries (OECD 1996). Non-standard work arrangements among the young have greatly increased, with about half of employed Canadian young people now working in part-time or temporary jobs (Krahn 1995). A growing proportion of the young in many industrial nations have responded by leaving the labour market, precipitating declines in labour force participation rates among 15–24 year olds (OECD 1996). In Canada one result was rising post-secondary enrolments, such that by 1989

it had the largest proportion of young adults attending university of any major OECD nation (Oderkirk 1993).

The implications of these trends for unions are open to speculation. While more highly educated, there is no evidence that recent youth cohorts are better informed than earlier cohorts about workplace realities and their employment rights. In North America, the longer young people spend in school, the more they are exposed to low-paid, low-skill jobs in the student labour market (Mortimer *et al.* 1990). This exposure could make them more critical of poor working conditions and rewards (Krahn and Lowe 1992), a situation that does not necessarily translate into union support. Once out of school, the frequent job-changing that is often part of school-work transitions could encourage an 'exit' rather than a 'voice' approach (Freeman and Medoff 1984). Such labour market factors have also contributed to rising occupational aspirations (Lowe and Krahn 2000), possibly fostering a more individualistic orientation to the employment relationship and perhaps less support for unions.

After experiencing difficulties in the labour market, some young people may be encouraged to seek the assistance of unions to improve their terms and conditions of employment. Given that occupational aspirations tend to get scaled down after time in the labour market (Furnham and Stacey 1991: 67; Winefield *et al.* 1993: 147), those who reduce their goals may be more willing to seek union assistance. The larger question is, what influences youths' attitudes towards union joining at a stage in their life when attitudes about work are still being formed? In North America union certification must be sought in each workplace. It is well established that union attitudes are a good predictor of workers' voting behaviour in union representation elections (Getman *et al.* 1976; Montgomery 1989). Barling *et al.* (1992) propose that three sets of factors — job dissatisfaction, general union attitudes, and perceived union instrumentality — underlie the propensity to join a union. While this model applies to individuals already in the workforce, it is less useful for examining union attitudes among young people when their work experience is limited and their work-related attitudes are nascent. Beyond scattered evidence showing that, as young workers become integrated into the labour market and their workplaces, their willingness to join a union may decrease, we know little about how this latent unionism changes during the transition from school to work.

By addressing changes in union attitudes within the school-work transition process, this paper aims to shed light on the cumulative effects of work and education on the willingness to join a union. Unionization among the next generation of workers is an important yet overlooked issue in both the industrial relations and school-work transitions literature. The teenage and young adult years are periods in which a wide range of work attitudes and behaviours develop. From this vantage point, we examine how the diversity of educational and labour market experiences that characterize school-work transitions shape an individual's willingness to join a union. Specifically, we address four questions:

1. To what extent does union membership and a willingness to join a union change during the post-graduation period among two youth cohorts, each at a major juncture of the school–work transition?
2. Does prior union membership increase a young person's support for unionism if they are presently in a non-union job?
3. What are the cumulative effects of young people's labour market experiences and job quality on union membership and willingness to join a union?
4. Do the general attitudes of the young towards work and society help to explain variations in support for union joining?

3. Data and methods

Our data come from a four-year panel study of school–work transitions in the three Canadian cities of Toronto, Sudbury and Edmonton. Samples of high school and university students were initially surveyed at the time of graduation in the spring of 1985. Using a longitudinal panel design, 1605 of these respondents (836 high school and 769 university students) were followed over the next four years by means of follow-up surveys in 1986, 1987 and 1989. The high school cohort was identified using a strategic sampling design with the school as the sampling unit.² This provided access to students from a diversity of backgrounds in a range of school settings and programmes. The university cohort was selected by randomly sampling the list of graduands from the five largest faculties (Arts, Science, Business, Education and Engineering) at three universities.³ The average age of the high school cohort at the time of the base-line survey was approximately 18 years, compared with 24 years for the university cohort.

The panel comprises all respondents in the base-line study who completed follow-up surveys in 1986, 1987 and 1989. This represents response rates of 44 and 66 per cent, respectively, for the high school and university cohorts. These response rates are calculated using the number of 1985 respondents who provided names and addresses for follow-up purposes, which accounts for 87 per cent of all base-line respondents. These response rates for the four-year panel are comparable with many cross-sectional studies. Still, sample attrition is a potential source of bias in any panel study, because respondents who drop out of the study may differ from those who stay in the panel. A systematic analysis of attrition bias compared base-line respondents who dropped out of the study with those who completed all three follow-up questionnaires (Krahn and Mosher 1992). In both cohorts, males had a higher attrition rate than females. In the high school cohort, individuals who were less academically oriented (lower grades, lower educational aspirations, less interested in school) were more likely to drop out of the panel. In the university cohort, there was a higher attrition rate among respondents from racial and ethnic minorities, although these groups represent a relatively small proportion of all university students to begin

with. Minor variations in data collection procedures resulted in city differences in attrition, with respondents in Edmonton being more likely to stay in the study.

Readers therefore should bear in mind several caveats. Most important, males — especially those with lower educational goals at the point of leaving high school — are underrepresented. To the extent that these young people may face greater labour market difficulties than other panel members, the labour market effects on willingness to join unions could be somewhat muted. There also is a city difference, with Edmonton respondents being somewhat overrepresented in the panel. Considering the province of Alberta's historically lower rate of union density than Ontario and its less hospitable industrial relations climate, if anything this could slightly reduce the overall propensity to join unions among panel members. However, the inherent problems of panel data must be weighed against the strengths of this study design, particularly the ability to compare two distinct cohorts of young workers over a four-year period that represents crucial phases in the life-course. This is especially useful given our focus on how views about unions change during the school–work transition.

Our focus is on the effects of cumulative educational and labour market experiences, as well as social attitudes, on panel members' willingness to join a union in 1989. In 1989 this willingness was measured by asking respondents who were not currently union members, 'How likely is it that you would join a union if one existed in your workplace or profession?' with responses recorded on a five-point Likert scale (1 = very unlikely, 5 = very likely). The same question was asked in the 1986 and 1987 follow-up surveys, using a slight variation in how responses were recorded (three categories were used: no/maybe/yes). It is possible to recode the Likert scale used in 1989 to achieve comparability with the earlier version of this question (see Table 1). The study also provides rich detail about respondents' educational and labour market behaviour after leaving high school or university. Given that school–work transitions became more circuitous, prolonged and difficult in the 1980s (Krahn and Lowe 1991), it is crucial to measure the cumulative effects of further education and employment over the 1985–9 period. Many respondents moved in and out of the labour market, unions and post-secondary institutions, often combining all three. These overlapping and changing statuses were recorded in the three follow-up surveys on a monthly basis for the period since the previous survey. This means that in each follow-up survey different sub-samples answered the question about willingness to join. Because of this, our analysis also accounts for the impact of prior union membership on the propensity to join a union for respondents who moved into a non-union job.

In terms of school–work transitions, one-third of the high school cohort returned to high school during 1985–6 for upgrading, mainly to obtain admission to post-secondary institutions. In years 3 and 4 of the study (i.e. 1987–9), just over one-third were attending university, and another 20 per cent were enrolled in technical institutes or community colleges. By 1989,

40 per cent of the high school cohort reported no educational activity since leaving high school. In the university cohort, half had exited the educational system by 1987. In 1986, 38 per cent of this cohort was pursuing further post-secondary education (mainly at university); by 1989 this had declined to 27 per cent. While education is clearly important for these two youth cohorts, so too is employment. A total of 70 per cent of the high school cohort and 62 per cent of the university cohort reported having been in paid employment at some time during the 1984–5 school year.

Finally, we found no statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) city differences in willingness to join a union in 1989. While local labour market conditions influence school–work transitions (Ashton *et al.* 1990), the fact that our dependent variable shows no city effect justified the decision to focus on the two cohorts over time. This decision is also consistent with our interest in the overall impact of a variety of labour market experiences and job conditions on support for union joining.

4. Research findings

Table 1 displays union membership and, among non-members, willingness to join a union in the three follow-up surveys for males and females in each cohort. Union membership is calculated as a percentage of all respondents, given that these young people are potential members as they settle into the labour force. The main trends are a steady increase in the level of union membership and a considerably higher rate of membership in the university cohort, individuals who are older and better educated than their high school counterparts.

Among respondents in both cohorts who were not union members at the time of each of the follow-up surveys, over the 1986–9 period we note a shift out of the ‘neutral’ category into the ‘likely’ or ‘unlikely’ to join categories. In the high school cohort, 65 per cent were undecided about joining a union in 1986, declining to 30 per cent three years later. In the university cohort, this neutral category was smaller initially at 52 per cent and by 1989 had declined to 21 per cent. In both cohorts, the proportion of respondents expressing a willingness to join increased over time. Comparing the two cohorts, it is clear that the younger and less experienced high school graduates become more amenable to union joining as they develop a firm position on this issue. In all three years, gender differences in willingness to join are statistically significant. Generally, females are less decided than males in 1986, yet by 1989 females have become more pro-union.

It is clear that ‘fence sitting’ on union support is pervasive in both groups immediately following completion of high school or university, but that positions solidify in the space of three years. This finding is reason enough to investigate how union support is formed over time. Furthermore, the differences between the two cohorts may result from a systematic bias arising from: better informed young people holding clear positions on a

TABLE 1
 Union Membership^a and Willingness to Join a Union^b in 1986, 1987 and 1989, by Panel and Gender

	1986	1987	1989
<i>1985 high school panel</i>			
Union member	**	**	
Female	6.2	8.6	17.2
Male	13.0	15.7	21.0
Total	9.4	12.0	19.0
<i>n</i>	831	836	832
Willingness to join a union	*	*	*
Female			
% likely to join	17.8	24.9	45.2
% neutral	69.5	60.9	32.0
% unlikely to join	12.7	14.2	22.8
Male			
% likely to join	23.8	23.1	39.4
% neutral	59.6	55.3	28.3
% unlikely to join	16.9	21.6	32.2
Total			
% likely to join	20.4	24.1	42.5
% neutral	64.9	58.4	30.3
% unlikely to join	14.7	17.6	27.1
<i>n</i>	696	723	663
<i>1985 university panel</i>			
Union member	**	**	**
Female	19.6	26.9	40.5
Male	11.0	11.3	20.2
Total	16.1	20.4	32.1
<i>n</i>	766	768	766
Willingness to join a union	*	**	**
Female			
% likely to join	26.5	22.1	35.8
% neutral	54.3	50.3	24.9
% unlikely to join	19.3	27.6	39.2
Male			
% likely to join	21.8	18.5	30.9
% neutral	47.9	39.5	16.7
% unlikely to join	30.3	42.0	52.4
Total			
% likely to join	24.5	20.4	33.5
% neutral	51.5	45.2	20.9
% unlikely to join	24.0	34.4	45.6
<i>n</i>	388	588	511

^a All panel members were asked if they belonged to a union.

^b Panel members who did not belong to a union at the time of each survey were asked, 'How likely is it that you would join a union if one existed in your workplace or profession?' In 1986 and 1987 the response categories were 'no / maybe / yes'. In 1989 the response categories were a five-point Likert scale (1 = 'very unlikely', 5 = 'very likely'). To achieve comparability across the three years, 1989 responses of 1 and 2 have been combined into an 'unlikely' category and responses of 4 and 5 into a 'likely' category.

* Statistically significant at $p < 0.05$; ** statistically significant at $p < 0.01$.

range of attitudes; the influence of a university education; or a maturation effect, given that attitudes may crystallize in the interval between high school and university graduation.

Table 2 examines the extent of change in union membership between 1986–9 and 1987–9. Roughly seven out of ten union members in 1986 in both cohorts were still members one year later. This fell to 54 per cent in the high school cohort and 63 per cent in the university cohort by 1989, which reflects the labour market ‘churning’ among youth (Veum and Weiss 1993). Also interesting is the small but upward trend in membership among respondents who were not union members in either 1986 or 1987. Indeed, over one out of four of the university cohort who did not belong to a union in 1986 did so in 1989.

Table 3 probes the process of attitude formation and the extent to which there is continuity in support for unions over time. In the high school cohort, those with prior union membership are somewhat more supportive of union joining in 1989, although this is not a statistically significant relationship. A similar but stronger ($p < 0.01$) pattern is evident in the university cohort.

The table also reports a statistically significant relationship between a respondent’s willingness to join in 1989 and their position on this in 1986. Approximately two-thirds in both cohorts who were willing to join in 1986 were also receptive in 1989. While this attitude change mainly involves ‘fence sitters’ taking a firm position, the patterns are complex. For example, movement out of the neutral position is in the direction of union joining, especially in the high school cohort. University respondents who opposed union joining in 1986 are unwavering, in contrast to the high school cohort, where we find 30 per cent of those unwilling to join in 1986 shifting into the ‘joiner’ category.

TABLE 2
Changes in Union Membership^a Between 1986 and 1989, by Panel

Union Membership Changes, 1986–9			
	Membership in 1986	Member in 1987	Member in 1989
High school panel	Union member ($n = 78$)	71.8%	53.8%
	Non-union member ($n = 753$)	5.8%	15.5%
University panel	Union member ($n = 122$)	68.9%	62.6%
	Non-union member ($n = 643$)	11.2%	26.4%
Union Membership Changes, 1987–9			
	Membership in 1987	Member in 1989	
High school panel	Union member ($n = 99$)	56.6%	
	Non-union member ($n = 733$)	13.9%	
University panel	Union member ($n = 157$)	70.7%	
	Non-union member ($n = 608$)	22.0%	

^a See fn. a, Table 1.

TABLE 3

Willingness to Join a Union^a in 1989, by Union Membership in 1986 or 1987, and Willingness to Join in 1986: 1985 High School and University Panels

	1989 willingness to join			<i>n</i>
	% likely	% neutral	% unlikely	
<i>1986 or 1987 union membership</i>				
High school panel				
Union member in 1986 or 1987	51.7	24.1	24.1	58
Not a union member in 1986 or 1987	41.7	30.9	27.4	605
University panel**				
Union member in 1986 or 1987	49.2	20.0	30.8	65
Not a union member in 1986 or 1987	31.2	21.1	47.8	446
<i>1986 willingness to join</i>				
High school panel**				
% likely to join	64.8	15.7	19.4	108
% neutral	39.9	35.7	24.3	378
% unlikely to join	29.5	17.0	53.4	88
University panel**				
% likely to join	69.1	7.4	23.5	68
% neutral	38.6	28.8	32.7	153
% unlikely to join	9.3	12.8	77.9	86

^a See fn. *b*, Table 1.* Statistically significant at $p < 0.05$; ** statistically significant at $p < 0.01$.

An unresolved issue concerns the reasons for the firmer positions taken by the university cohort in comparison with the high school cohort. We tested the hypothesis that those high school graduates with well formulated union attitudes in 1986 were more likely to enroll in university. We found that high school respondents who went to university in any of the four years after 1985 did not have significantly different ($p < 0.05$) views on union joining compared with their classmates who did not attend university in the same period (results not reported). This still leaves open the possibility that union support is mainly a result of having attended university. Generally, further education does not affect support for union joining (results not reported).

Table 4 reports the impact of labour market experiences on union membership and willingness to join. Frequency of job changing, unemployment, involuntary part-time employment and temporary employment are indicators of labour market difficulties. The results in Table 4 exclude respondents who were full-time students during the entire study period. Only in two respects are union members in 1989 significantly different from non-members. In the high school cohort, members of unions were more likely to report no unemployment during the preceding four years, and in the university cohort the incidence of involuntary part-time employment is higher among members.

Regarding willingness to join among non-members, university graduates who had four to six jobs in the 1985–9 period were more pro-union than

TABLE 4
 Union Membership and Willingness to Join a Union^a in 1989, by Labour Market Experiences
 Between 1985 and 1989: 1985 High School and University Panels

	Union member in 1989	Not a union member in 1989: willingness to join a union			
		All non-members	% likely to join	% neutral	% unlikely to join
<i>Number of jobs, 1985-9^b</i>					
High school panel	<i>n</i> = 121		<i>n</i> = 483		
3 or fewer jobs	38.0	36.4	42.8	28.3	28.9
4-6	49.6	45.1	39.6	32.3	28.1
7 or more	12.4	18.4	51.7	27.6	20.7
University panel**	<i>n</i> = 239		<i>n</i> = 473		
3 or fewer jobs	41.8	46.5	27.6	18.0	54.4
4-6	42.7	41.6	40.0	20.0	40.0
7 or more	15.5	11.8	30.9	32.7	36.4
<i>Months of unemployment, 1985-9</i>					
High school panel ^{††}	<i>n</i> = 156		<i>n</i> = 669		
No unemployment	54.5	41.4	38.5	29.5	32.0
Unemployment in any 1 year	28.8	29.0	45.0	30.4	24.6
Unemployment in more than 1 year	16.7	29.6	45.8	31.8	22.4
University panel**	<i>n</i> = 245		<i>n</i> = 519		
No unemployment	49.4	54.3	28.7	17.5	53.8
Unemployment in any 1 year	30.2	28.1	34.0	22.9	43.1
Unemployment in more than 1 year	16.7	29.6	47.3	28.6	24.2
<i>Involuntary part-time employment,^c 1985-9</i>					
High school panel*	<i>n</i> = 156		<i>n</i> = 657		
Prefer part-time job	63.5	69.9	40.8	29.0	30.2
Prefer full-time job	36.5	30.1	47.2	31.8	21.0
University panel** ^{††}	<i>n</i> = 244		<i>n</i> = 510		
Prefer part-time job	79.1	88.2	29.7	21.4	48.9
Prefer full-time job	20.9	11.8	53.4	19.0	27.6
<i>Present job is temporary^d</i>					
High school panel	<i>n</i> = 155		<i>n</i> = 543		
Permanent (no end date)	71.6	73.5	41.9	28.2	29.9
Temporary	28.4	26.5	45.8	31.9	22.2
University panel*	<i>n</i> = 231		<i>n</i> = 442		
Permanent (no end date)	88.7	85.7	29.6	21.1	49.3
Temporary	11.3	14.3	44.3	13.1	42.6

^a See fn. *b*, Table 1.

^b Excludes respondents who were full-time students for more than three years, with full-time enrolment defined as seven or more months of full-time education in a 12-month period.

^c Defined as working in a part-time job but preferring a full-time one.

^d This question was asked only in the 1989 survey.

[†] Differences between union and non-union categories statistically significant at $p < 0.05$;

^{††} $p < 0.01$.

* Differences within 'willingness to join' categories statistically significant at $p < 0.05$;

** $p < 0.01$.

were their counterparts with greater job stability. Curiously, university respondents who reported seven or more jobs were *less* 'likely' to want to unionize than those who held four to six jobs, although relatively fewer of those in the over-seven-jobs category are in the 'unlikely' category. Unemployment rates for university graduates in Canada are well below the labour force average (Barr-Telford *et al.* 1996), so judged against this standard it is not surprising that being jobless in one or more of the four years also significantly increased willingness to join.

Furthermore, the rate of part-time employment is relatively low among Canadian university graduates, suggesting that involuntary part-time work could be especially problematic for them. Again, we find significantly higher union support among those university respondents who reported any involuntary part-time employment in the 1985–9 period. Temporary employment, associated with the rise of non-standard work arrangements, also increases support for union joining in the university cohort. This was measured only in 1989, so perhaps an even stronger effect may have been found with a cumulative three-year measure. The direction of these relationships is similar in the high school cohort, although only in the case of involuntary part-time work is it statistically significant. In sum, labour market difficulties contribute to a willingness to join unions among high school and university graduates.

The final step in our analysis, presented in Table 5, is a pair of ordinary least-squares regression equations that assess the relative impact of labour market experiences and a range of other relevant variables (see Appendix for details) on respondents' willingness to join a union in 1989. These are reduced-form equations, including only those variables that initially were significant at the $p < 0.10$ level. In addition to the labour market experience variables described in Table 4, we expanded the analysis to include socio-demographic characteristics, educational activity, the cumulative effects of job conditions between 1986 and 1989, prior union membership, and 1989 industry of employment.⁴

Attitudes about society, work and the economy are in a formative stage during the late teens and early twenties (Barling *et al.* 1991; Lowe and Krahn 2000) and could influence labour market choices — including union joining.⁵ We therefore included eight attitude measures tapping general dispositions — an individualistic versus a collectivist orientation and optimism versus pessimism about career prospects — that could influence a young person's receptivity toward unions.

The regression results support our earlier argument that cumulative labour market experiences and certain aspects of a young person's current job influence support for union joining, particularly in the university cohort. Prior union membership, net of other factors, has a weak positive impact on willingness to join. Socio-demographic characteristics are also important. Older respondents in the university panel are more supportive of unions and in the high school panel females are more supportive than males. Note the absence of an industry effect. Attitudes also matter, to the extent that a

TABLE 5
 Willingness to Join a Union^a in 1989, Regressed on Socio-demographic Characteristics,
 Labour Market Experiences, Job Conditions and 1989 Attitudes:^b 1985 High School and University Panels

Independent variable	1985 University Panel					1985 High School Panel				
	<i>b</i>	Std error	Beta	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>b</i>	Std error	Beta	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>
Constant	-1.95E-02	0.946		0.984		2.938	0.232		0.000	
Socio-demographic characteristics										
Age	7.992E-02	0.032	0.101	0.014	0.114					
Gender (male = 1)						-0.289	0.099	-0.115	0.004	-0.107
Labour market experiences										
No. of years part-time work	0.344	0.092	0.152	0.000	0.189					
Union member in 1986 or 1987	0.416	0.134	0.125	0.002	0.141	0.339	0.142	0.095	0.017	0.058
No. of months unemployed	0.282	0.079	0.150	0.000	0.217	0.121	0.064	0.079	0.061	0.118
Job conditions										
Job allows decision-making	-0.250	0.075	-1.39	0.001	-0.194					
Overall job satisfaction						-0.150	0.066	-0.096	0.023	-0.126
Attitudes										
People must stick together to get ahead	0.289	0.058	0.205	0.000	0.287	0.148	0.047	0.122	0.002	0.141
Poor people poor due to lack of effort	-0.239	0.056	-0.175	0.000	-0.262					
Model summary										
<i>R</i> ²	0.222					0.056				
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	0.211					0.049				
Standard error	1.29					1.23				
<i>P</i>	0.000					0.000				

^a See fn. *b*, Table 1.

^b The table presents a reduced-form equation, which contains only those independent variables described in the Appendix that were significant ($p < 0.10$) in the full equation.

collective orientation (a belief that people must stick together to get ahead) is the strongest predictor of willingness to join in both panels. Conversely, an individualistic outlook (believing that poor people are poor because of a lack of effort) is a good predictor in the university panel of anti-unionism.

While our basic argument has received further empirical support, given the low overall variance explained by each of the regression models (adjusted R^2 s of 0.22 and 0.06 for the university and high school panels, respectively), there are other factors beyond the scope of this study that shaped these young people's propensity to join unions. This is partly methodological, given that structural and socio-demographic factors typically explain less variance in attitude measures — essentially what we are predicting — than do other measures of attitudes.

5. Discussion

We have demonstrated empirically that unions are situated within school–work transition processes in complex ways. The formation of attitudes about unions — in this study, a willingness to join — during the early years of an individual's working life is a neglected aspect of industrial relations research. Future discussions of union membership therefore should take into account the needs and experiences of specific age cohorts. Views about unions are emergent during youth, solidifying with age and experience. In terms of influences on the formation of union orientations, obtaining post-secondary education itself does not affect willingness to join unions. The first four years after high school or university graduation involve varying combinations of labour market activities and further education. The potential for unionization is a byproduct of this process of preparing for and entering the adult (i.e. non-student) labour market.

Given the paucity of research on youth and unions, our study has been exploratory. We have suggested that issues concerning young workers and unions must be incorporated jointly in industrial relations and school–work transitions research, utilizing insights from both areas. In this respect, three major questions arising from our analysis provide a fruitful agenda for further investigation. First, what other factors influence attitude formation among high-school-aged young people? Second, why, in cases where specific labour market experiences and job conditions were significantly related to a willingness to unionize in both the university and high school cohorts, were the patterns of these relationships different? And third, how may the specific features of educational programmes, especially in universities, shape orientations towards unions?

Our findings extend previous research about union attitude formation among young people. Specifically, Willoughby and Barclay's (1986) study of juniors and seniors at a US state university found a high level of neutrality in opinions about unions. These researchers speculated that the development of professional identities following graduation would be likely to lead

to clearer views about unions. We corroborate this, but also find that the hardening of latent unionism is an ongoing process that can be traced back to high school. Willoughby and Barclay's point about professional identity formation raises a related issue for future research: the relationship between professional identity, or more generally an individual's identity as a worker, and their stance toward unions. Perhaps young people who are exposed during their undergraduate programmes, or in high school through work–study programmes, to the norms of a specific occupation or profession would be likely to conform to its orientation to unions. This raises further questions about how adolescents' emergent work attitudes shape their educational and career decisions, and the socializing influences of family, school and peers on these attitudes. A comprehensive explanation of what encourages pro- or anti-union sentiments among different groups of young people must address how these factors interact over time.

While we did not set out to test an explicit model of the propensity to join a union, we have documented the importance of specific demographic, labour market, job quality and attitudinal factors for latent unionism. We corroborate previous research showing the role of job dissatisfaction in support for unions (Barling *et al.* 1992). However, we did not discover a direct industry exposure effect on latent unionism similar to what has been suggested for actual union membership (Payne 1989; Spilsbury *et al.* 1987). Rather, if there is an exposure effect, it is through prior union membership — which tends to predispose young people to future membership if they move into a non-union job.

While we have found a link between a collective social orientation on one hand and support for union joining on the other more research is needed to untangle the causal patterns. It seems clear, at least among our respondents, that there is a group of pro-union youth who believe in collective approaches to social and economic issues — the opposite to free-riders, a conclusion also supported by Cregan and Johnston (1990).

Our research views the decision to join a union as being embedded in the context of an individual's work history. As such, it is useful to incorporate into models of union joining the process by which certain work history sequences make some workers more supportive, or opposed, to unions. Furthermore, because much of the research on union joining has taken a social-psychological approach, it has tended to focus on the role of attitudes about unions (e.g. Barling *et al.* 1991, 1992; Getman *et al.* 1976; Lowe and Krahn 1989). By showing that labour market and job factors also shape willingness to join in a cumulative way, we are promoting a more structural view of union attitudes than is found in this literature. The influence of gender and socio-economic background in the high school panel suggests that early socialization may interact with these experiences. Useful in this regard would be a panel study design covering a longer time period than ours and beginning in the early teenage years.

The key union membership trend in our study is that as the respondents grew older their membership levels increased. This increase in membership

over the four years after graduation highlights how the young adult years are a time of union joining or of passively becoming a member by virtue of finding a job with a unionized employer. This phase of the life course may vary cross-nationally, but it clearly deserves close scrutiny by industrial relations researchers. What our data cannot address is how either the union attitudes or membership among earlier or later cohorts of high school or university graduates vary from the 1985 cohorts we studied. This kind of detailed cross-cohort comparison is needed to explain why aggregate membership levels in Canada appear to be declining in the 15–24 year age group.

Kochan (1988: 187) has called for renewed roles for unions that better reflect workers' changing situations. He pointed out that new labour force entrants will be minorities, women, immigrants or some combination of these. We would add that many also will be young (Lowe 1998). The gap between the desire for representation and actual representation is apparently large, even in the USA (Freeman 1995). We do not know what understanding of the role of unions underlies the willingness to join or not join. Nor do we know what young persons expect or want from a union. Both issues deserve careful attention.

In practical terms, how and when views for or against unions crystallize has direct relevance for unions' communications and organizing strategies. Unions would be well advised to target their educational campaigns at young people before they make the transition into the labour market. Recent union organizing drives among young workers in Canada's fast-food sector highlight the hurdles that unions must overcome to organize the young, yet also suggest that young workers are receptive to collective bargaining (Lorinc 1994). The fact that a few unions in Canada, the USA and Britain have begun to target young workers in their organizing strategies reinforces the need to further investigate young workers' underlying motivations for unionization. Indeed, a better understanding of attitudes, concerns and experiences of the new generation of workers will equip unions to mobilize their latent interest in collective representation.

1. Appendix: Independent Variables Used in the Table 5 Regression Equation

Socio-demographic characteristics

Age

Gender (male = 1)

Family socio-economic status (high SES = 1, based on parent's educational attainment)

Education

Years full-time education since spring 1985

Years part-time education since spring 1985

Labour market experiences

Years full-time employment (average of 30 or more hours weekly), 1985–9

Years part-time employment (average of less than 30 hours weekly), 1985–9

Total number of jobs, 1985–9

Total months unemployed, 1985–9

Ever held a part-time job involuntarily (i.e. wanted a full-time job but could not find one), 1985–9 (yes = 1)

Present job is temporary (yes = 1)

Union member in 1986 or 1987

Job conditions (averaged for 1986, 1987 and 1989 surveys)

Skill: ‘The job lets me use my skills and abilities’ (answered on a 5-point ‘strongly agree–strongly disagree’ Likert response scale)

Intrinsic content: ‘The work is interesting’ (same 5-point Likert scale)

Autonomy: ‘I have the freedom to decide what I do in my job’ (same 5-point Likert scale)

Economic rewards: ‘The pay is good’ (same 5-point Likert scale)

Overall job satisfaction: ‘How satisfied are you with your job?’ (answered on a 5-point ‘very dissatisfied–very satisfied’ Likert response scale)

Industry (1989 job)

Five dummy variables (Natural resources; Manufacturing/construction; Distribution/business; Retail; Other consumer services = 1) with the public sector (education, health, social services, public administration) as the reference category (=0) because it has the highest overall level of union density in Canada.

Attitudes (1989)

(a) Individualism versus collectivism:

‘Most poor people are poor because of their own lack of effort’;

‘Ordinary people have to stick together and support each other if they want to get ahead’;

‘The only way to get ahead is to look after yourself first’;

‘You should always try to improve your position in life rather than accept what you have now’

(answered on a 5-point ‘strongly agree–strongly disagree’ Likert response scale)

(b) Optimism versus pessimism:

‘My education has improved my career prospects’;

‘There is little I can do to change many of the important things in my life’;

‘I have little control over the things that happen to me’

(answered on a 5-point ‘strongly agree–strongly disagree’ Likert response scale)

(c) ‘How likely is it that you’ll end up in that career?’ (answered on a 5-point ‘very unlikely–very likely’ Likert response scale)

Acknowledgements

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the conference 'Restructuring Work and the Life Course: An International Symposium', University of Toronto, 8 May 1998. We wish to thank conference participants for their useful feedback. Helpful comments on earlier drafts were provided by Gordon Betcherman, Harvey Krahn and the BJIR editor and reviewers. The research reported in this paper comes from the School-Work Transitions Project, Professors Harvey Krahn and Graham Lowe, principal co-investigators. Major funders include the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Alberta Advanced Education and Career Development and the University of Alberta.

Notes

1. The unemployment rate in Canada among 15–24 year olds averaged 15.8 per cent during the 15 years from 1982 to 1997, compared with an average of 8.6 per cent among 25–54 year olds for the same period (Statistics Canada 1998).
2. A random sample was not possible, given that data on the entire student populations in the three cities were unavailable. Furthermore, school boards would permit access to students only on a school-by-school basis.
3. The University of Toronto in Toronto, Ontario, Laurentian University in Sudbury, Ontario, and the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Alberta, were included in the study. At Laurentian University, a much smaller institution than the other two, graduates from the Faculties of Social Work and Physical Education also were included in the sample.
4. Among all our respondents, 62 per cent of those employed in the public sector were union members, compared with 14 per cent in construction and manufacturing, between 10 and 11 per cent in natural resources, distributive and business services and retail, and 7 per cent in other consumer services. Clearly there is an exposure effect, but it is minimal outside the public sector (which employs 25 per cent of the high school panel and 45 per cent of the university panel).
5. The four optimism/pessimism measures are fairly discrete, producing a Chronbach's inter-item reliability alpha of 0.558. The alpha for the four individualism/collectivism variables was 0.441. These statistics advise against scaling.

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