

## Regional Dimensions of the Impact of Free Trade on Labour

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Regional issues have always been important in Canada. This is as true of issues pertaining to the labour market and industrial relations as it is of broader issues pertaining to culture, language, and regional development. Regional labour market issues pertaining to mobility, persistent wage and unemployment differentials, occupational licencing, training, segmented labour markets, and labour market adjustment have long been at the top of the policy agenda, as have those industrial relations issues relating to the collective bargaining laws, labour standards legislation, human rights initiatives, and dispute resolution procedures. The importance to each region of labour market and industrial relations issues is compounded not only by geography, culture, and language, but also by the fact that approximately 90 percent of the Canadian work force is under provincial jurisdiction with respect to labour and industrial relations legislation. Even those areas of federal or shared jurisdiction—such as unemployment insurance, training, and social assistance—invariably have a regional dimension. In addition, interregional trade has about the same magnitude as international trade in Canada (Whalley 1987: 212).

Free trade, as exemplified by the recently negotiated Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (FTA), will both affect and be affected by these important regional labour issues, particularly those related to labour adjustment, labour laws, and industrial relations and human resource practices. This article analyzes the regional dimensions of the

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impact of free trade on the labour market and on industrial relations and in doing so focuses on Canada rather than the United States, in part because the smaller country will sustain disproportionately the larger impacts of the FTA.<sup>1</sup> The article begins with a description of the different impacts of the FTA on the regional labour market and the reasons for those differences. A discussion of the anticipated responses of the three main actors—governments, employers, and labour—in the labour market and industrial relations system follows.<sup>2</sup>

### Regional Impact

The econometric model of the Economic Council of Canada predicts that a net 251,000 jobs (representing an 1.8 percent growth in employment) will be created by the FTA over the next 10 years—that is, 439,000 jobs created and 188,000 jobs lost (Magun et al. 1988: 61). Job gains are predicted to be greatest in the service and construction sectors, largely because of the spending that should emanate from the general economic benefits of free trade. Job losses are predicted to be greatest in the sectors of non-durable manufacturing where tariffs were highest.

Table 1 indicates the effects of the FTA on employment by region (province) and industry. The regional effects are fairly evenly distributed, but, relative to the overall expected growth in employment of 1.8 percent, above-average employment growth is expected in the Prairie provinces (Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan) and the Atlantic provinces (Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia), reflecting the importance of primary industries and the construction of energy projects in these provinces. Average employment growth is predicted for British Columbia, and below average growth is predicted for Quebec and Ontario, a fact that reflects the importance of otherwise tariff-protected manufacturing in these two provinces. Interestingly, the positive effects of the FTA on employment are concentrated in the

1. Canada's exports are 27 percent of its gross national product (GNP), and over 27 percent of these exports go to the United States. In contrast, U.S. exports are 11 percent of its GNP, only about one-fifth of which goes to Canada (Morici 1989: 360).
2. The emphasis here is on the anticipated response because there is a reasonable consensus among those analyzing the labour impacts of the FTA that it is too early to ascertain the actual effects. In fact, given the 10-year phasing and the myriad simultaneous interrelated pressures (global competition, industrial restructuring, technological change, privatization, deregulation, mergers and acquisitions, and demographic and labour force changes), it may never be possible to ascertain the independent effects of free trade with any reasonable degree of certainty—see, for example, Adams (1990), Betcherman and Gunderson (1990), and Lemco et al. (1990).

TABLE 1 Employment Effects of the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement, by Province and Industry (percent)

| Province                | Primary | Durable Manufacturing | Non-durable Manufacturing | Construction | Service | All Indus. |
|-------------------------|---------|-----------------------|---------------------------|--------------|---------|------------|
| Nfld.                   | 0.11    | 0.01                  | 0.19                      | 0.42         | 1.22    | 1.95       |
| P.E.I.                  | 0.26    | 0.00                  | 0.18                      | 0.49         | 1.09    | 2.02       |
| N.S.                    | 0.16    | 0.03                  | 0.07                      | 0.32         | 1.30    | 1.88       |
| N.B.                    | 0.08    | 0.06                  | 0.12                      | 0.33         | 1.35    | 1.93       |
| Que.                    | 0.05    | 0.05                  | 0.09                      | 0.26         | 1.31    | 1.75       |
| Ont.                    | 0.05    | 0.04                  | 0.08                      | 0.20         | 1.32    | 1.70       |
| Man.                    | 0.08    | 0.03                  | 0.12                      | 0.27         | 1.46    | 1.97       |
| Sask.                   | 0.23    | 0.02                  | 0.07                      | 0.34         | 1.26    | 1.93       |
| Alta.                   | 0.27    | 0.03                  | 0.06                      | 0.49         | 1.23    | 2.08       |
| B.C.                    | 0.11    | 0.11                  | 0.08                      | 0.26         | 1.28    | 1.83       |
| All Canada <sup>a</sup> | 0.09    | 0.05                  | 0.09                      | 0.27         | 1.30    | 1.80       |

Source: S. Magun, et al. 1988. "Open Borders: An Assessment of the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement". Discussion Paper No. 344, Economic Council of Canada, Ottawa.

a. Excludes the Yukon and the Northwest Territories.

otherwise slower growth regions, and the negative effects (more accurately, the weaker positive effects) are in the more prosperous regions, notably Ontario.

Historically, the economy of Ontario has always benefited from the protective tariff and the east-west transcontinental railway established by John A. Macdonald's National Economic Policy of 1879. The tariff led many U.S. multinationals to establish branch plants in Canada as an alternative to exporting into the tariff-protected Canadian market. Ontario has a heavy concentration of branch plants, which account for approximately one-third of the manufacturing value added in that province. Because the branch plants are typically small scale to serve only the Canadian market, their operating costs tend to be 10-15 percent higher than those of their American counterparts. In the past this cost differential was largely offset by the tariff (O'Grady 1990: 3).

A concern often raised in Ontario is that without the tariff there would be no need for such branch plants; they would simply be converted to "warehousing" operations for U.S. exporters.<sup>3</sup> This concern has been heightened by the downsizing under way in Ontario in such heavy industries as steel and the ever-present threat of downsizing in autos and parts production. There is also concern that the FTA will induce Asian auto manufacturers to locate in the United States and

3. On the basis of a survey of the 17 largest U.S. subsidiaries in Canada, Rugman (1987) found that most subsidiaries expected to continue their branch plant operations and adjust to the FTA with a minimum of disruption.

that the imperatives of just-in-time delivery (parts shipped immediately for assembly, with no inventory buffer) will result in the associated migration of parts and steel producers (O'Grady 1990: 4). Moreover, manufacturing provinces such as Ontario, a net exporter in interregional trade, may suffer from tariff reductions—and the associated increase in international trade—that lead to a reduction in interregional trade (Whalley 1987: 212).

Alternative scenarios suggest that Ontario may disproportionately gain from the FTA. Although Ontario manufacturing will be affected adversely by the imports resulting from reduced Canadian tariffs, it will benefit from the additional exports associated with the reduction of U.S. tariffs. The proximity of its "golden horseshoe" to the border crossings in Buffalo and Detroit give it a locational advantage and access to a large segment of the U.S. market. There already appears to be considerable economic revival in those parts of the U.S. market, especially in western New York, and this interrelated prosperity should spill back into the proximate Canadian regions. Indeed, although the Ontario economy may be disproportionately affected by the tariff reductions (just as it was disproportionately helped by the tariff protection), it is well positioned to take advantages of the new opportunities resulting from the FTA. Industrial restructuring in such areas as steel and autos and the development of market niches have enabled Ontario to maintain competitiveness despite increased international competition. Its branch plant economy may have given rise to inefficient small plants, but the economies of large-scale production (essential in heavy industry such as steel and assembly production such as autos) are no longer as important in today's economy in which modular, flexible factories are linked together by elaborate communications systems, just-in-time delivery, and specialized product lines. In a related area, Ontario's financial and commercial importance make it well equipped to deal with the increasing business transactions emanating from the FTA and the concomitant industrial restructuring. The province is well on its way in the transition from an industrial to an information-based economy and is therefore ready to take advantage of changing market conditions.

The expectation that Ontario and Quebec will experience the greatest direct adjustment consequences from the FTA because of reductions in the tariffs that have protected their manufacturing sectors explains in part Ontario's opposition to the FTA. This opposition has been fortified by the province's strong and influential trade union movement. At first glance, Quebec's support for the FTA is somewhat puzzling, given the importance to the province of tariff-protected, non-durable manufacturing such as textiles, clothing,

knitting, leather goods, and shoes. Plausible explanations for Quebec's support include its desire to look south in order to shed some of its east-west links with English-speaking Canada; its anticipation of the benefits of energy exports, especially hydro; the influence of a new "entrepreneurial class" ready to compete in expanding markets; a perception that its jeopardized industries—clothing and textiles, for example—needed restructuring more because of Third World competition than because of the FTA; and the possibility of a "deal" in which Quebec supported the federal FTA initiatives in return for federal support for Quebec rights during the Meech Lake debate.

The Prairie and Atlantic provinces should experience an increase in employment opportunities from expanded markets for energy and natural resources. These provinces supported the FTA on the basis of anticipated lower import prices resulting from the reductions in the tariffs that had benefited Ontario manufacturing. Western Canada will also gain from the FTA prohibition against energy price-fixing policies, such as those of the National Energy Programme, which had benefited central Canada at the expense of western energy exporters (Whalley 1987: 212, 216).

For the poorer Atlantic provinces, however, a very real risk was associated with the FTA. Regional development policies and government subsidies, which have been very important to these provinces, could have been at risk if they had been interpreted as trade subsidies and hence subject to countervailing duties or other retaliatory actions. This would have included, of course, both industry-specific (for example, fisheries) or firm-specific (for example, bailouts of specific firms) policies and subsidies. Even if such policies are not prohibited directly by the FTA, they may be indirectly discouraged in the free trade environment, which puts greater emphasis on competitive market forces.

Thus, the net effect of the FTA on the poorer provinces will reflect the complex interaction of a variety of competing forces. These provinces will gain because they happen to have the industries that are in a position to gain the most and lose the least. In that vein, the FTA has the unusual potential of enhancing efficiency and equity or distributional objectives. More important, it could enhance the equity objectives by giving the "have-not" regions the chance to "earn their own living" by expanding their export markets and reducing their dependence on tariff-protected purchases from the rest of Canada. This is generally acknowledged to be a better way of dealing with distributional issues than the current practice of transfers through such mechanisms as regional development policies, regionally extended unemployment insurance benefits, and income maintenance programmes that work against, rather than in the direction of, market forces.

Although the poorer regions could gain disproportionately from the FTA, they could also lose if regional subsidies are removed because of direct pressure (the subsidies become subject to countervail) or indirect pressure (greater emphasis on market forces).

### Government Responses

The ultimate effect on labour of the FTA, both overall and regionally, will be heavily influenced by the way in which the federal and provincial governments respond to the adjustment consequences. The federal government has eschewed a specific trade adjustment strategy on the grounds that it is not feasible to distinguish the adverse effects of free trade from the myriad interrelated forces adversely affecting workers. Even if the adjustment consequences of free trade could be identified, there is little reason *ex post* to provide special adjustment assistance to workers affected by free trade when other forces such as technological change, industrial restructuring, privatization, and global competition are also at play.<sup>4</sup> Instead of providing a specific trade-related adjustment assistance programme for displaced workers, the federal government is using the existing array of adjustment assistance programmes, largely through the Canadian Jobs Strategy Programme, to deal with both the downside adjustment consequences (for example, job losses) and the upside adjustment consequences (for example, skill shortages). It is often forgotten that policies such as free trade can create adjustment consequences on the upside as well as on the downside.

Although free trade will create pressures for governments to deal with the adjustment consequences (and such initiatives may be costly), it will also create pressures for governments to reduce costly labour initiatives that inhibit Canadian employers from competing with countries that may not have such costly initiatives (Betcherman and Gunderson 1990). There has been no rigorous and comprehensive analysis of the labour legislative cost differences between Canada and the United States, but Canadian employers do tend to operate in an environment subject to more costly legislative initiatives. For example, pay equity legislation (termed "comparable worth" in the United

States) exists in all but the three western Canadian provinces, and it is being implemented in the private sector in Ontario in a manner that requires employers to have a pay equity plan in place whether there has been a complaint or *prima facie* evidence of discrimination. In the United States, in contrast, comparable worth is largely restricted to the public sector, and, given the deregulatory environment there, it is largely "on hold". Affirmative action initiatives are also on hold for the most part in the United States, but they are gathering momentum in Canada, chiefly under the impetus of initiatives in the federal jurisdiction and for federal contractors. They will apply to women, visible minorities, Native Canadians, and the disabled. Restrictions on hours of work and overtime are also generally more onerous in Canada than in the United States, where an overtime premium of time-and-a-half is usually required after 40 hours per week. In Canada, not only do such legislated premiums prevail, but there are often further restrictions such as the one requiring a special permit for work done beyond a maximum number of hours. Moreover, many Canadian workers have the legislated right to refuse overtime work. The advance notice requirements for the permanent termination of workers are more prevalent in Canada as well, the typical requirement being one week of notice for every year of service, up to a maximum of eight weeks; longer periods of notice are often required for mass layoffs. Workers' compensation payments are also generally regarded as more generous in Canada than in the United States, as are unemployment insurance benefits and the legislated minimum wage.

In the labour relations area, Canadian legislation is generally more favourable to the formation and retention of unions than is legislation in the United States, and this is one reason for the much higher unionization rates in Canada (currently about 38 percent versus 16 percent in the United States). The aspects of Canadian legislation favourable to unions include: certification through cards rather than votes; mandatory first contract arbitration; prohibitions against the use of replacement workers during a strike; easier unionization of public sector workers, who are often granted the right to strike; requirements for the dues checkoff; and labour board rulings on unfair labour practices (Adams and White 1989; Betcherman and Gunderson 1990).

In all likelihood, the FTA will create pressure for the harmonization of labour laws and regulations between the two countries so that competition will be on the basis of a "level playing field". The Canadian trade union movement is concerned, of course, that such forced harmonization will be downward toward the lowest common denominator, perhaps toward the U.S. Sunbelt. The mechanisms whereby that will occur are twofold. First, Canadian

4. *Ex ante*, it may be strategically wise to offer adjustment assistance and compensation to those who lose from free trade to reduce their resistance to such policies. The efficiency gains from such policies should provide the means to pay for such assistance (Gunderson and Hamermesh 1991). This is in contrast to other shocks (for example, external energy price increases or changes in the terms of trade) that may induce adjustment and reduce a country's endowments or production possibilities, making costly adjustment assistance more difficult.

employers will have a more viable threat of relocating to the less regulated environment of the United States from where they will export into Canada. Second, at the political bargaining table they will have more clout when these legislated initiatives are changed because they can argue that they cannot compete under the pressure of such costly regulatory programmes.

At the provincial level there will also be pressure for the harmonization of labour laws for the same reasons. Provincial jurisdictions will be pushed to provide a business climate favourable to plant expansion and the opening of new plants, partly as a result of the increase in mergers and acquisitions and in the number of multinationals established in Canada, especially from Japan, as a base for exporting to the large U.S. market. One of the most important policy instruments at the disposal of provincial governments seeking to attract new business is labour laws. Even governments reluctant to compromise their labour standards will find they may have to choose between protected jobs and no jobs.

The FTA will also increase the pressure on provincial governments to harmonize other labour-related standards such as occupational licencing and certification programmes, thereby enhancing the mobility of labour and its ability to take advantage of changing trade opportunities. With greater globalization it will be increasingly difficult for the provincial governments to remain "provincial" with respect to other labour market policies. It must be remembered, however, that the FTA involves free trade in goods and services only. It is not a common market, like the European Community, and therefore does not involve a common external tariff and the free mobility of labour (the latter is increasing pressure for the harmonization of occupational licencing and social welfare standards in Europe).

### Employer Responses

Free trade in general, and the FTA in particular, will increase the competitive pressures on Canadian employers. Such pressures are also growing as a result of global competition, deregulation, privatization, and the recent appreciation of the Canadian dollar. Employers have responded to these pressures in a variety of ways: implementing mergers and acquisitions as well as downsizings and plant closures; creating flexible, modular factories linked by advanced communications and just-in-time delivery; increasing pressure for flexibility in the workplace (broader job classifications, fewer restrictions in collective agreements); emphasizing workplace

cooperation, employee involvement, and productivity-related pay systems; and increasing employer resistance to unionization.

Under the FTA, Canadian employers are more prone to compare their labour position to that of their U.S. counterparts, who have instituted flexible workplace practices with much less interference from government regulations and collective bargaining restrictions. The concern of Canadian employers is exacerbated by the fact that their compensation costs (wages plus fringe benefits, adjusted for exchange rates) increased from approximately 83 percent of U.S. costs in 1986 to almost par by 1988, largely because of the appreciation of the Canadian dollar (Capdevielle 1989: 12). Moreover, productivity growth rates have been much lower in Canada than in the United States—by 1987, productivity in Canadian manufacturing was only about three-quarters of the U.S. level. This combination of rising compensation costs, falling relative productivity, and the recent appreciation of the Canadian dollar has led to a substantial increase in the unit labour cost (compensation adjusted for productivity and the exchange rate) in Canada relative to the United States. Specifically, the unit labour cost in Canada rose from about par with U.S. costs in 1980 and 1985 to over 20 percent higher than the U.S. unit labour cost in 1988, largely because of the appreciating Canadian dollar (Economic Council of Canada 1989:13-15). This deterioration in Canada's position with respect to the various components of unit labour costs (compensation, productivity, and the exchange rate) is coming just at the time when it matters most—when Canada has embarked on free trade with the United States.

On a regional basis, this will put more pressure on Canadian employers to rationalize production away from serving a smaller, tariff-protected national or regional market and toward serving the larger North American market with more specialized "niche" products. This will be done in anticipation of gaining greater access to the growing number of regional trading blocs, including Japan and Asia, Europe, Canada-United States-Mexico, and possibly Eastern Europe (Belous 1989; Lemco et al. 1990).

These competitive pressures should lead to reductions in the regional wage and unemployment rates that have characterized this country. This change will be enhanced by the fact that the positive impact of the FTA is greatest for the low-wage, high-unemployment regions of Canada. Moreover, there will be greater regional specialization, with the result that high-cost urban centres such as Toronto will specialize in high-wage activities.

## Union and Labour Responses

Enhanced market forces such as those generated by free trade are detrimental to unions in a variety of ways. Union wage premiums, typically in the neighbourhood of 10-20 percent, will be more difficult to sustain in the face of open market competition. Also difficult to sustain will be any costly restrictions that may be imposed by the collective agreement and its associated grievance procedure. This is, understandably, one reason why Canadian unions strongly opposed the FTA and business supported it.

Organized labour in Canada was concerned that the FTA would be the catalyst to a round of deunionization and concession bargaining just like that recently occurring in the United States (Betcherman and Gunderson 1990). Such changes would occur directly, the unions feared, as Canadian employers increased their resistance to unionization and union wage demands in order to compete with the less unionized United States. They would also occur indirectly, as governments became less prone to support legislative initiatives facilitating unionization and jeopardizing the increasingly fragile competitive position of Canadian employers. In essence, the FTA would enhance the bargaining power of employers at the collective bargaining table as well as at the political bargaining table.

On a regional basis, then, various opposing forces will affect Canadian unions. On the one hand, the pressure for more decentralized bargaining and regional variation in collective bargaining outcomes will increase to reflect the different labour market realities that prevail in the different regions. On the other hand, there will be increased pressure for centralized bargaining to provide a common front and to hinder employers from shifting production to areas where unions are weak or non-existent. It is well known that unions are more effective if they can organize up to the level of the product market in which they operate. In this vein, there will be pressure for Canadian unions to foster their international links with U.S. unions in order to organize the common product market (Adams 1990). This is likely to be offset, however, by the pressure for Canadian unions to distance themselves from their weakened U.S. counterparts to avoid being drawn into the round of deunionization and concessions that has occurred there.

## Conclusion

The following conclusions emerge from this examination of the regional dimensions of the impact of the FTA on labour.

1. Job gains are expected to exceed job losses in all regions, with only small differences in the net employment gains across regions.
2. The greatest job gains are expected to occur in the poorer Prairie and Atlantic provinces because of the importance of their primary industries and energy, and the fewest job gains will likely occur in the more prosperous provinces of Quebec and, especially, Ontario because of the importance there of otherwise tariff-protected manufacturing.
3. In spite of its opposition to the FTA, Ontario may well gain from it because of its locational advantage in exporting to the U.S. market and because its financial and commercial sectors can benefit from FTA-associated restructuring, largely through mergers and acquisitions.
4. Although the poorer regions may disproportionately benefit from the direct effects of the FTA, they may be at risk indirectly if regional development programmes and subsidies are removed in response to the threat of countervail or because of greater emphasis on market forces.
5. The FTA will likely result in considerable pressure for the harmonization of labour laws between Canada and the United States, and this will probably mean retrenchment in Canada in such areas as pay equity, employment equity, hours of work and overtime regulations, advance notice requirements, workers' compensation, unemployment insurance, minimum wages, and legislation favourable to the formation and retention of unions.
6. The pressure will also be on to harmonize labour legislation across provincial jurisdictions (under the pressure of plant location decisions) and to harmonize occupational licencing and certification (to enhance mobility).
7. Canadian employers will increasingly compare their labour situation to that of their U.S. counterparts who face fewer regulatory and legislative restrictions, lower unionization rates, and lower unit labour costs—the latter occurring because of slower compensation growth, higher productivity growth, and a depreciating dollar in the United States relative to Canada.
8. There will be increased pressure for the deunionization and concession bargaining recently experienced in the United States.
9. These pressures will produce conflicting responses from unions—that is, they may decentralize so that regional variations in collective bargaining outcomes can reflect the different regional labour market realities and centralize to provide a united front.

10. There may be some pressure for Canadian unions to foster their international links with their U.S. counterparts with the goal of organizing a common product market, but this is likely to be offset by pressure for the Canadian unions to distance themselves from their weakened U.S. counterparts.

11. In general, the FTA is part and parcel of the broader set of pressures (globalization, technological change, industrial restructuring, deregulation) affecting the labour market and labour relations scene. The FTA enhances the regional and spatial consequences of these interrelated forces.

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