

## **Trade unions and work-life rights: the challenge of work-life interface in a union environment**

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### **Abstract**

The issue of work-life rights is increasingly present in trade unions, who advocate for improved working conditions and living standards of workers. Indeed, unions have adopted numerous resolutions on the subject of work-family balance over the years and they have been negotiating with companies and public organizations in this field, and started to look at the situation within their own organization. However, while unions have negotiated work-life rights for their members, this may appear to apply more to the workplaces unions represent than to unions themselves, as employers, and the situation of their own employees. Our research shows that a culture of long hours and strong commitment to the cause sometimes makes it difficult to balance work and family for union employees. Also, the younger generation appears to question the culture of long hours as a signal for performance.

### **Introduction**

The issue of work-life rights is increasingly present in trade unions, who have advocated for improved working conditions and living standards of workers, including for a work organization that is sensitive to work-family balance. Indeed, unions have adopted numerous resolutions on the subject of work-family balance over the years and they have been negotiating with companies and public organizations in this field, but they have not been as sensitive to the situation within their own organizations, and have not structured paid union jobs accordingly. We have studied the case of one Canadian union, which may not be generalized to all Canadian unions, or to other countries, but the information collected with this union, and more informally with other unions in Canada and abroad, seems to indicate that the situation is quite similar in most unions, as the type of work is very similar. While it would be important to pursue the research with other Canadian unions and abroad, this first research on work-life issues in unions is valuable inasmuch as it offers insights on an issue which has not been the object of publication to this day, as our literature review indicates, that is the work-life issues for paid union staff. The literatures' silence on this specific issue makes our research important.

## Literature Review

Work-family balance has become an important theme over recent years and has produced a significant body of literature. The debate has evolved from work-family conflict, to measures for work-family balance, and finally to organizational support for work-family balance, all these themes being the object of attention at this point in time (Korabik et al., 2011, Matose and Galinsky, 2012, Thompson, 1999, to mention only a few).

However, we have found no literature on work-life balance in a union context, and there is very little scholarship on the working conditions of paid union workers, working conditions which have an impact on work-family balance. There is much more work and publications on union organizing, which according to our literature review, seems to be the main topic of interest as concerns unions (for ex., Devinatz, 2014, Hodder, 2014, Lepie, 2014), as well as attitudes towards unions (for ex., Arts, 2012, 2010, Sarkar and Charlwood, 2014; Hogler et al., 2015).

One notable exception is the article by Daisy Rooks (2003) on American union organizers. In the first part of the paper, Rooks (2003) centers on occupational demands of union work, including long hours, extensive travel and emotionally demanding work. Rooks (2003) indicates that union job holders often have a mentality of total devotion to and sacrifice for the union. They also appear to hold other job holders to the same devotion and sacrifice and do not give as much attention to their life outside of work. Still, there is little consideration for work-family balance per se and the second part of the paper is on organizing in the new union context.

As concerns the new context, with recent challenges such as globalization and the competition from low-cost countries, unions have been called to redefine their role and become partners in innovation (D'Amours and Bilodeau, 2015). They have had to renew their expertise to deal with new management approaches: lean management, quality management, and "just in time" methods. For many, it means abandoning the adversarial bargaining model to become closer to employers while continuing to defend the interests of members (Rheaume et al., 2008). In short, employers demand more, but often offering fewer resources. Thus, union staff are experiencing changes in their role because of the major changes in work organizations and in the world of work in general (Rooks, 2003, Rheaume et al., 2008). It seems that these changes have an impact on union employees and representatives as well as their ability to control their work-family balance and preserve their mental health (Rheaume *et al.*, 2000).

Indeed, while unions have acted upon the work-life rights and work-family balance issue over recent years, and have moved this agenda forward in the community, this appears to apply more to the workplaces in which unions represent workers than to unions themselves, as employers, and the situation of their own employees.

We have found only one article looking into work-life issues and unions but it actually analyzes the contribution of unions in firms and not in their own organization. Strand and Skogseid (2013) explore the factors that impact on the implementation of broad collaboration between employees, unions and managers in the context of the regional traditions as well as the Norwegian work life model. The article compares a case of success and a case of failure and the authors suggest strategies for how to develop an environment for broad collaboration in companies that have no such tradition. While the work-life issue is mentioned, it is not the core of the paper, but it does remind us that work-life issues are more prominent in Nordic countries such as Norway, and thus in Nordic countries' unions.

In Canada, work-life rights have progressed somewhat, although not as much as in the Nordic countries (Moss and Kamerman, 2009). Canada offers a maternity and parental leave which has been extended to one year in 2001, and the province of Québec has also developed a specific parental leave regime, which also includes a non transferable paternity leave or "daddy days" (Doucet et al. 2014; Doucet et al, 2009). However, Canadian workers do not have the "right to request" flexible working time arrangements, as is the case in a few countries such as Great Britain, the Netherlands and Australia (Nogues and Tremblay, 2015). This proposal was put forward by the Liberal Party in the October 2015 federal election campaign, but is not presently a right for Canadian workers.

Our research looks into the work-life practices of unions themselves, not those of companies where they are present, including issues such as working hours, work-family measures and demands on this issue of work-life or work-family rights of union employees. Literature is quite silent on the situation of union staff, except for a few studies on psychodynamics and mental health; to our knowledge, there has not been work on work-life rights and work-family balance for this group and this is why we decided to look into this issue.

Commitment is very important in trade union work (Rooks, 2003, Rheaume *et al.*, 2008, 2000), but while many want more time for family, it is not always easy to balance work and personal life. Being a union advisor is also a personal commitment to the values of the labor movement; it calls for a higher level of involvement, which requires availability, and strong personal and professional aspirations. Rheaume et al. (2000) speak of the idealism of workers in this occupational group. The "passion for the job" is important and frequently referred to with union staff, organizers as well as employees. Rheaume et al. (2008) indicate that their strong motivation is based on a few ideals: the pursuit of self realization through the ideal of reducing inequalities between social groups in relation with a history of activism, a commitment and concern for social change, as well as a willingness to help others in a perspective of social justice, in response to violence and injustice observed in various workplaces. Within the union, these ideals are constructed through development of skills, leadership and expertise for union staff,

as well as through the collective dimension of union work, the most attractive aspect for many. Finally, there is the motivation, the commitment, the notion of activism within the union structure. Union staff like to think that they play an important role in changing society and work. Our research shows this can come into conflict with the achievement of work-family balance as it often translates into long hours and overwork. While overwork is not only characteristic of the union environment, being common in private companies as well (Wharton and Blair-Loy, 2002), it presents particular challenges when workers are strongly committed as is the case in union work, and all the more so when they will hesitate to criticize their employer, the union, from this point of view.

Clinical studies in psychodynamics of union work showed that the work of union staff can be an important source of psychological stress (Rheume et al, 2008; Carpentier-Roy *et al*, 2000; Rheume *et al*. 2000). Union staffers face constraints in their work; facing these constraints, they will implement defensive strategies to protect their psychological equilibrium, strategies which in the long run may turn against them (Rheume *et al.*, 2008).

In the following pages, we present the methodology of the research. We go on to present the results on the content of union work, the idealization of this work, the importance of commitment in this context, and the challenges that this presents with regards to work-family balance, and then the conclusion.

## METHODOLOGY

The research is based on a semi-structured interview guide that has been used and validated in previous qualitative work on work-family balance in different occupational groups (Tremblay, 2012a,b). The interview guide contains questions on family situation, job history, job content, working time, work-family balance issues, legal rights and working time arrangements, occupational and organizational culture, and challenges of the job.

Our own research is based on 16 interviews with the staff of a Canadian union. Data were collected from December 2010 to March 2011, in interviews lasting from 45 minutes to 2 hours; these interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded. We extracted the main themes from the interviewees' responses and grouped the quotations on the same theme, according to the method of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Given space limits for publication, we cannot quote all respondents on each theme, but chose the most significant quotations for each theme.

The union studied has some 300 000 members, divided almost equally between men and women and between the private and public sector. The organization represents about 4,400 workplaces. The union is very active on work-life issues and a few years ago, it even proposed the adoption of a law that would require every workplace to undertake a proactive joint (union-employer) approach to the development a formal work-family balance program in response to employees' needs, and its implementation and monitoring. The vision of the union in terms of

work-family balance favors women's presence in employment as well as a more balanced sharing of responsibilities between parents. But what is the situation for union staff? Are the activist culture and the compulsory 42 hours week an obstacle to work-family for these union staff? Before entering into the heart of the matter, we briefly present our interviewees.

We met ten trade union staffers or advisors (including a legal advisor), six office staff, eight women and eight men, for a total of 16 persons. There are three female union advisors, and seven male advisors. This staff mainly advises various local unions on legal, financial and economic questions, and can sometimes do some organizing or support to striking workers. Women outnumber men in clerical work since there are six in this job category. Note that prescribed hours for union advisors are 42 hours a week, while the work schedule is generally 32.5 hours for office workers. Respondents were between 40 and 50 years of age and they usually had two or three children. Table 1 (at end of paper) presents a full profile of our interviewees. (Tremblay and Mascova, 2013)

Of course there are limitations to our work and more research remains to be done to complement this study, which is an in-depth study of one organization, but cannot be considered perfectly representative of all unions, even if many interviewees mentioned it was quite similar in other unions. We plan to study unions in other regions and countries to determine if the situation is the same or if some have gone further on this issue, although we did chose a union which is amongst the most progressive and could be expected to be more attentive to this issue not only for union members but also for union employees. The results confirm the interest of analyzing work-life balance by taking into account the characteristics and particularly the professional ethos of a specific occupational group.

## RESULTS: NATURE OF WORK

The nature of work is not the same for office workers and union advisors, as the latter are subject to more pressure and work intensification. Union advisors have considerable autonomy in their work, at least on paper. However, their jobs are very demanding, and overwork is common, although this can vary depending on the specific department where they work, and autonomy is often highly constrained by work obligations. The jobs are in various departments such as labor relations, legal service, negotiation, education and mobilization, research, communications, the women's committee, as well as political action. Union advisors must regularly prepare and write papers or reports as part of their duties. They are also asked to assess the economic and socio-political situation of their sector, region or industry and the balance of forces in specific situations. Those who are at the forefront in the negotiation of collective agreements must be able to develop an argument, properly communicate the results and provide useful information for the negotiation of collective agreements. As in any labor organization, membership services are important and union advisors often live complex situations in their various responsibilities towards local unions, supervisors, courts, and journalists.

In general, work is done in teams which are supervised by a coordinator appointed for two years. Each team is composed of the coordinator, union advisors and clerical employees. Clerical workers provide the necessary support to all staff of the union but some office workers are more stressed than others depending on the department that employs them. For example, an office employee working in the health and safety sector may be required to participate in audit meetings, and need to report more frequently to another department. This office staff may also be called upon to coordinate the entire IT infrastructure for conferences or other activities, which sometimes increases their working hours. Clerical employees are often requested to attend various meetings, often held outside the office, and in this case, reconciling work and family can be difficult.

### WORKING HOURS

For all advisors and some office workers, work overload is common and it is due to the gap between the prescribed work and reality, as we will see in quotes further on. For union advisors, the work schedule of 42 hours is the (minimum) norm, but there is also a strong variability of working hours. The workload may vary during the year and schedules are adjusted accordingly. In general, union advisors have the feeling of having some professional autonomy, but they have no right to cap their working hours and "should be available" at all times. They are often required to work evenings and weekends in order to attend union meetings, executive meetings for activism and demonstrations. One person asked to work a 4 day week, but this was refused.

Some of the interviewees tend to minimize the variability of their working hours by saying that this is only occasional. For example, writing memoranda sometimes requires them to work evenings or weekends. Meetings sometimes end late at night, and union employees often have to be present. As our interviewees mentioned, this is a world of unexpected work commitments, as it is sometimes necessary to work beyond normal working hours to complete papers and documents, to appear before various committees (governmental, legal or others), or to release a statement later in the evening for distribution to striking workers and the media in the morning.

Union advisors often have to be available during vacation. It is not uncommon for them to have two or three phone calls per week in the first two weeks and the last week of their vacation (of 4 weeks usually).

For office workers, the work schedule is 32.5 hours per week, but there is also some overtime for special events, meetings or urgent matters.

### FLEXIBILITY

For union advisors, the flexibility of working hours is at the heart of the profession. The workload may vary over the year and even change from week to week. In general, the respondents say they have a large professional autonomy and a lot of flexibility. However, they also mention that the boundary between working time and time off work is not as clear as it usually is among office workers. Indeed,

when there is emergency, "it is not uncommon to have to do things" (10)<sup>1</sup> but more importantly, it is often required to work evenings and weekends. Flexibility is advantageous because it allows you to stay home with a sick child if necessary on the one hand, but on the other, it is often necessary to sacrifice personal or family time for the union.

#### TELEWORKING

Telecommuting can be a way to get work done more quickly or to have better concentration for certain activities as many respondents consider that " in the office, one is always disturbed." (7) Some also work from home simply to get ahead or scan through the documents they did not have time to read at the office. But telecommuting is not possible for all union staff.

*"Ah! yes! Especially when I need concentration to write, because the office is disturbing at times. In general, I do my reading at home, I take my written notes. However, I'm better at writing in a somewhat hectic environment. It's strange, but I'm like that."* (10)<sup>2</sup>

*"To my knowledge, none of my colleagues are telecommuting. Given the peculiarity of this service, with the media and all, the work is done by a team. That does not stop people from working at home after the meetings."* (4)

*"Although at first glance telework may seem an interesting avenue for office workers, work at home is not encouraged by the coordinators and, even, is not well seen at all. So it is little practiced by office workers. They find it hard because office workers it looks like they are afraid we do not do our job to true when one is at home."* (11)

#### IDEALISM AND PERFORMANCE

Commitment is very important in trade union work, and we see that even though many want more time for their family, it is not always easy to balance work and personal life. Being a union staffer is also a personal commitment to the values of the labor movement, a greater involvement, which requires availability, and strong personal and professional motivation. Many interviewees refer to their passion for the job. As mentioned above, union staffers like to feel they play a role in changing society and work. Our respondents' comments confirm Rheaume et al. (2008)'s work which indicates that this type of work is both rewarding and sometimes source of suffering.

*"Exciting and fascinating, but you still need to keep an area of life for yourself, in order not to burn or kill yourself. Not so long ago, union staffers who spent their life in the office were glorified. It has changed a little bit. It is no longer valued not to have a personal life now."* (6)

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<sup>1</sup> The numbers in parenthesis refer to the interviewees, in Table 1.

<sup>2</sup> Numbers refer to the respondents presented in Table 1.

*“That's why I say I believe those values. I have the desire to change things, the desire for a world where people are not afraid to be unionized, where they can be unionized as they wish.” (3)*

Several union advisors we interviewed have chosen this work as a result of their previous involvement as a union activist.

*“Basically, I'm an activist... That's interesting... Well, I did not go through psychoanalysis, but perhaps we'd find something... In the end, this job led to a separation from my wife. That's what happens. And hey, I came to Montreal after three years working in a peripheral region, far from my family.” (6)*

This job is something of a paradox. It is a job which is characterized by passion but many respondents say it is also a source of difficulties and sometimes intense suffering. Although union staffers recognize that passion is perhaps not present in everyone, the strong common vision and ideals are deeply embedded in most, so they do not give themselves the same right to working time arrangements as those that they claim daily for all other workers. For some, the culture of the union is almost sectarian in its practices and methods. If the spouses and families do not share the same ideals and passions as trade union activists or staff, it may be difficult for the family to understand and this can lead to family problems and quarrels.

*“It is a work of passion, the work of passionate people. If you have them talk a little about their work ... you'll also meet people who are disappointed or disillusioned. But it is a work of passion and that is why it is often difficult to reconcile work and family. The difficulty I had with my ex-wife is that she did not understand how I could go on to a demonstration on the weekend when I had spent the whole week working with union members, answering phone calls, working like crazy. On Saturday, there was a demonstration I want to participate in and she said: "You spend your life negotiating better working conditions for others, but you do not give yourself any of this. Why go demonstrate? What is the point? ". It's difficult when your spouse does not understand. When your spouse does not have the same passion ... or does not share this passion. So this is where the paths diverge ...” (6)*

*“You know, I do not want to be negative here, but there is a somewhat sectarian side to our practices and work, you know ... If you knew how long it took to get cigarettes out of the office, you would be impressed. But ... when I say that it is a cult or a sect ... I mean we have shared visions.” (7)*

This commitment is also found among office workers. If, for union advisors, it is difficult to hear critiques on the role of unions in today's world, it is the same for many clerical workers who share this vision of the social role of unions, as our interviews show.

## WORK AND MENTAL HEALTH

As mentioned above, union advisors face constraints in their work and will implement defensive strategies to protect their mental health, strategies which in the long run may turn against them (Rheaume et al., 2008). For example, one of them said to us: "I don't have the gene for depression" (5). He tries to prove to himself and to others that he is a good union worker and that he remains productive despite personal difficulties. Another realizes too late that he been overworked and that, ultimately, it is what has led to his burnout. He then realized that he had not developed any other interests in his life.

*"Work is not the only reason that led to our separation, my wife and I, but it did not help that ... I've been away. This work takes up all your life... So in terms of mental health, when I did the assessment ... I remember that a doctor had come to do an evaluation. We had a kind of grid to complete and I had 27 files and strikes to follow; you know it was a new work environment, new job, then the separation ... I scored really badly... (6)*

For office workers, the strong organizational culture of activism and personal and professional commitment may also have effects. The complex tasks, the constraints and excessive demands can lead to difficult periods or extreme fatigue, even depressive episodes. Some ask to change jobs and/or look for another job in order not to affect their marriage or family.

*"When I returned, my husband was crying, he wanted me to come back... because for two full weeks I was not at all at home. I came back, I spent two days at home, I went away again... It was difficult.... (15)*

## A MODEL OF IDEALISM DIFFICULT TO AVOID

Beyond the pursuit of a personal ideal, the organizational culture is imposed upon all. This culture promotes a high social commitment, which stems from the very mission of the labor movement. Union staffers feel important as they defend the status workers in society. They are working not only for their personal fulfillment, but also to advance the cause of workers in general.

Once reserved for men, the position of union advisor conveys the image of the proud and strong man, whose work is important and challenging. In the words of our interviewees, this evokes the image of a person of power, almost invincible. This mentality is more frequent in industrial areas such as metallurgy, a predominantly male sector, more so than in other areas, such as the health sector, which is mainly female:

*"In the labor movement, union staff used to be men. They saw themselves as knights: "we are strong, we never fall, we are never sick, we never cry." That was*

*the reality before, and we were proud of that. Today, work-family balance is increasingly important, not just for women, but for men also ... some try to make us forget the old mentality, the vision of the knight, but it is still present in male sectors.” (7)*

For a union advisor, overwork, irregular hours that extend during evenings and weekends, this is typical of the union environment. The work implies that to be a good union employee or a good union representative you "must put in the hours" and "must put in the time".

*“When I was working for mobilization, I had a really huge workload, completely disproportionate, so I had a very high level of stress, I was able to organize some parts of my schedule to take into account family responsibilities, but the burden was very heavy...” (12)*

Many interviewees say that a union representative or employee must have a "crazy schedule" to demonstrate that he is working hard. Some also mention that they must also deal with jokes from fellow workers, especially if they are in a “lighter” job, with lower workload.

*“There are many here who need to have a crazy schedule to show that they work hard. I'm sorry, I am as strong and as good but I'll manage the work in a decent time frame.”(2)*

In order to better reconcile work and family, some will refuse a promotion because it is a "crazy job" with "a huge workload". For example, the coordinator position is not as attractive as it used to appear, as it is associated with a high workload and it is multi-faceted, political and technical, not to mention the personnel management, which results in overwork. Our interviewees say it is difficult to take such a position when you have a family and young children and want your employer to respect what you consider as your work-family rights.

## WORK IN CONFLICT WITH MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE

The life of a union advisor may be difficult to reconcile with marriage and family. As they need to represent workers in various regions far from major urban centers, this leads to many long absences from home, away from the family. As a result, it can be difficult sometimes to get a satisfactory situation for both partners and this can lead to separation in some cases. It is also difficult to envisage a joint custody arrangement when there are children and the union employee needs to cover a wide territory in performing his job.

*“In 1996, a first separation, and then I separated again in 1999 or 2000 ... I've been separated a good ten years ... I was working in the construction sector and I was always on large projects, everywhere. And that, well it was a difficult life ... My wife got used to it, but then we separated because of all these absences, a lack of presence. Well, love just disappears, you know ... I said, "That's my job, you knew*

*me like that, you know." She'd say " yes, yes, yes, but it does not work." Well that's it. Bad times ... I was really upset with all these breakups..."(3)*

The sufferings of the past, however, can be a springboard to avoid the pitfalls of the excessive workload of union action imposed by the organization and by individuals themselves. We try to be careful and "not go in the same patterns, trying to develop new strategies to avoid falling into excess". (3)

In sum, the nature of union advisors' work requires more time commitment than that of an office employee, although it seems that a strong culture of organizational activism and commitment is also required for the office workers in a union. Advisors appear to enjoy considerable autonomy, at least as concerns the organization of their working hours. However, they recognize that this is not a real autonomy. Taking into account the spillover of working hours over the evening, and sometimes the weekend, as well as the use of telework to get work done during "family" time, there appears to be a certain level of denial of the extent of the spillover of work into private/family life. Some interviewees have indicated that this denial led to burnout or separation from their spouse. Thus, autonomy appears fraught with paradoxes as union workers claim that autonomy is central to the profession while in fact, their autonomy is limited by the long hours and the high stress associated with their job. They feel it is difficult to enforce rights that other workers have to a limit in working hours, as it is implicit for all that there are no limits in union working time.

## BALANCING WORK AND FAMILY

Balancing work and family is a daily challenge for most parents in this occupation. This is particularly difficult for younger workers, or those who still have young children, while the older ones no longer have as important family obligations.

With a prescribed schedule of 42 hours, to which working evenings and weekends often has to be added, it becomes difficult to balance work and family. Spouses also have to consider the career paths of their partner while redefining the division of labor between the couple or within the family.

For union advisors, it is often necessary to count on the support of the entire family to maintain a balance between work, time spent with family and personal time. One counselor says he relies on the autonomy of the oldest child who goes to school alone, then he brings the youngest to daycare as early as possible in order to take public transport and avoid traffic jams.

Some couples share domestic tasks to accommodate their spouse with an evening or night work schedule. It may be difficult to ensure the presence of a parent at home when the children come home from school or daycare. One parent may take care of children in the morning and the other in the evening. It is a form of

teamwork to enable the longest parental presence possible and a less hectic pace of life for the whole family.

The return home from work is also well planned. Many say they try to get home as early as possible and this is the beginning of a long evening: making dinner, doing the dishes, monitoring homework, bathing children and other tasks.

It is also difficult to convince colleagues and union members that taking time for family is not detrimental to work performance. Many find it difficult to impose their right to limit their working time. One even says that companies he deals with are often more open to the work-life issue than his own colleagues.

*"You have your family, but you can also be a good negotiator ... I negotiate from 9 to 5 p.m." Then at 5, or it may be 6, the other party says, " Listen, I cannot answer you on this, give me one hour"; I propose to adjourn to next week. Even if they are very focused on performance, I have less difficulty "dealing" with the employer's lawyer on these issues. It's easier to say to them than to my own colleagues or employer : "I'm sorry, it's spring break at school, I'm taking a vacation and I'm going skiing with my children". It was harder to say this to colleagues within the union." (2)*

Although union staffers consider they should impose their right to limit working hours in order to prioritize their family, the nature of the job, and the required commitment often make it difficult to spend more time with the family.

When union meetings are held on weekends, often outside the place of residence, some try to bring along spouse and children, but this is not always possible. Some say they use videoconferencing to get news from home and participate in family life, while it remains difficult to use videoconferencing for negotiations or even for meetings with union members.

*"I have to stay overnight in another city... but I phone every day ... that's clear. I also use videoconferencing because we always have Internet connections now, and the kids like it: "Oh, Dad, it's funny!" they say". (7)*

While a female advisor says she does not want to be the "panicking mom", she says it can happen that children miss sport or other extracurricular activities because there is nobody to take them.

A union staffer says it is necessary to learn to negotiate with union members to put "limits" when there is much overtime requested, especially when you are personally involved. Some will ask for a change in duties or position to better balance work and family life.

For a better balance between work and family, some will also opt for a union

position that requires less travel outside the city or the country. One interviewee said he felt that he still had much to bring to the organization but sometimes finds the context difficult in terms of the time required for activism.

When both spouses are union advisors, one parent must pick up the children and take care of household chores. One says it is his wife who deals with all the parenting issues, but he supports his wife when her work requires her to be available for union members.

For office workers, work-family balance seems easier to achieve than it is for union advisors because their workload is less invasive. But even with regular schedules and somewhat more limited overtime, work-life balance often remains challenging. The parents take advantage of the autonomy of older children and they cook over the weekend to have less to do during the week. Some schools offer help with homework after class, which can also help parents. It is a way to gain a little time, but the daily routine is also heavy and overwork is common.

A new challenge is also on the horizon: caring for a sick spouse or aging parent while staying on the job. Many workers now deal with a double challenge, taking care of children but also their own parents, and this can be a heavy burden, especially when the disease lasts some time or when the parent lives a considerable distance from the worker caring for them. People often take their vacation time to fulfill their caring responsibilities, while their spouse takes over the immediate family responsibilities. It is extremely difficult to combine a union job with heavy family commitments such as these, which are also unpredictable (a parent falling, having to go to the hospital, etc.). And while the Canadian government has designed a right to Compassionate Leave (within the Unemployment Insurance program), this is often not sufficient, nor appropriate (Lero *et al.*, 2012, 2007; Keating *et al.*, 2011).

*“I had to take care of my dad... I took my vacation time. Well, I went on Friday because my father lived far away, I was with him on Saturday and Sunday, my mother rested a bit, then I came home on Sunday evening. There, I saw my family a bit, but I was working on Monday, it was crazy. It was crazy for me but also for my partner who took over all the other work for the family of two boys throughout the weekend. I was trying to be at home, to be at work, and also to be with my father.”*  
(9)

Our interviews show that female workers want to be good mothers and want time to play with the children, cook, take care of everyone's health, in addition to being good wives, good employees, good friends, good housekeepers. They run all the time and many admit they are exhausted. When they do not spend part of their day in quality time with children, some feel guilty. Some say you sometimes have to let go to reach some sort of balance for the good of the family, but this is extremely difficult for them to do. Also some feel guilty because they do not have the time to

do the household chores as they wish, and this can be a source of difficulty for them; although it is not easy, they say, some try to give less importance to these tasks.

This is especially important for single parents. They often feel some form of guilt towards children when the latter complain that they are "not often at home" and they work several nights a week or on weekends. If each day the children complain because the parent is working late in the evening, these comments can cause great stress and impact on their health.

The daily routine is very busy for union employees, but when children are old enough to have extracurricular activities, the week may simply become overloaded, according to our interviewees. It is not so much the activity itself which requires about two hours here and there, but also travelling to the site, getting the kids dressed for the activity, and returning home. Some parents are also personally involved in these activities, volunteering and helping out, and this also takes time. Some mention that if they don't do it, they also feel guilty. So while they negotiate working time arrangements and rights, as well as reduced working time for some of the employees represented by the union, some union employees, especially the younger ones, resent not having these rights themselves, as they mentioned in the interviews.

For single parents, the physical and emotional challenges are all the more important. Simply going to the corner store to buy milk may represent a huge effort, and take up time that is not really available to them. These are small things of everyday life that may seem insignificant, but they represent an important challenge for many union workers we met, especially for single mothers.

Finally, when work schedules of both spouses do not complement each other, the work-family challenge is even more difficult. This can create tension between the couple. Sometimes career choices have to be reorganized when union workers prioritize family over work, something which seems to happen more often with younger employees, who question the dominant union mentality of overwork and spillover of work into family/personal life.

Except for a few exceptions, the division of tasks between spouses seems pretty equal in couples where both are union workers, at least according to their perception of everyday life. Some use a housekeeping service to improve living conditions and make it easier to reconcile work and family. Some also occasionally use a caterer for food preparation or cook over the weekend to make it easier during the week. However, for single parents, it is always much more complex.

#### **WORK-FAMILY RIGHTS IN UNIONS: THE OTHER SIDE OF THE MIRROR**

Work-family balance is becoming more prominent in the discourses and negotiations of trade unions, both in regards to the external negotiations and the internal discussions. It is certainly difficult for union workers to criticize the organization that employs them, since their work is simultaneously a source of

satisfaction and difficulties, due to the idealism and activism that characterizes it. Newcomers to the job however seem to present to the older generation a different picture of today's activism and commitment to work. They often consider they should have the same rights to work-life arrangements as other workers, especially unionized workers, but this is not the case. This brings older union workers to reflect on their own attitudes and habits within the organization. They then realize that they are defending the cause of work-family rights, but they do not necessarily have the same rights in their own workplace. There is a clear disjoint between the objective of not overworking people to burnout and the fact that it is "the choice of work we made" (4), as many interviewees mentioned. Moreover, no one can really criticize the union workers' requests regarding work-family balance in the organization, as they are themselves the spokespersons on this issue in firms and in society. And yet ...

*"This is a debate currently, but it is a choice ... I say that we must do something to avoid putting everyone in burnout but it is still the choice of work we made. At the same time, we must have time with our children but the work is so overwhelming... What can I do?" (4)*

*"I would say it is a very delicate issue. Who will take the blame for saying that our union staff calls for measures of work-family balance? And it is incompatible with the nature of our activism, nobody will want to wear the hat for saying things like that. However, in some cases, they will disguise the requests for work-family balance behind other requests to get the message across!" (7)*

*"I think that there are measures in place to help but I do not think they are sufficiently developed or widely offered and used. From what I hear when I'm in meetings, regardless of where you are and what you do, even if you have good measures or large teams, it is not always possible to balance work and family. Especially for those who work in the peripheral regions, because it is not the same as working in Montreal or central areas. In the peripheral regions, when they have union meetings, they lose a lot of time on the road, I hear it all the time in meetings." (4)*

Some tend to trivialize the others' difficulties in work-family balance. The discourse of the committed activist tends to be internalized by all the union staff to the point of not recognizing that a colleague may have work-family difficulties. Everyone is just so busy, that this issue seems to be put aside.

Beyond the "politically correct" speech on work-family balance, and the reality for the union staff, there is often a big difference. Some are surprised to find that union colleagues will criticize them, while this is not the case for example with the employers in negotiations.

Unions are an environment that is "extremely severe" towards colleagues, according to the younger workers. Some union workers mention that certain colleagues make jokes to make sure they get the message across as to what a good

union worker should do, the number of hours to put in and the like. Unfortunately for those with family responsibilities, work-family arrangements and rights are not necessarily a part of the deal. It goes without saying that this situation can create tensions between colleagues.

*"This is an environment that is not favorable to work-family rights and even worse, it is an environment that is extremely severe. We judge each other very harshly. You give your time without counting, you never count, you're going to give your full potential and the day you do something stupid, you'll be an outcast. ... I had a colleague, I passed his door, and he made this comment: "Yeah, you're coming in late today ..." The third time he made this remark, I walked into the office, I closed the door and I told him my way of thinking..." (6)*

With regard to taking leave, whether it be a family or personal reason, colleagues can make negative remarks. It is not uncommon that a union worker must cut short his vacation because of an urgent matter or a strike.

*"Just between us, I heard that someone who takes all his leave or vacation is frowned upon. It's kind of scary here, you know. Yet we do have vacation time and various forms of leave...but you are not expected to take them all..." (6)*

The younger employees have a different attitude. We met a few who indicate they have a different vision of union work. Thus, while in previous generations, workaholics were put on a pedestal, we now see young workers concerned about their quality of life and less willing to sacrifice everything to show that they are "good union employees". They aspire to balance work and family and this seems more legitimate for the majority of them. Younger workers thus present a wind of change: they consider their lives outside the office to be important, they work seven hours and then try to devote themselves to their family and they require flexible schedules to reduce stress. However, this vision is definitely not yet dominant in the union environment.

*"The older people complain that young people are only doing their seven hours a day and then it's over. But I'm not ready to take on young people, saying: "No, you have to suffer, yes this is our work, this is activism." I'm not sure I want to defend this traditional vision." (10)*

## CONCLUSION

In summary, balancing work and family is a challenge in most contexts, but it is definitely more the case when you are a union worker, even if this is an organization which puts forward the importance for employers to respect workers rights with regards to the work-family issue. Although this union has in its collective agreement various measures and forms of leave to help its employees to better reconcile work and family, the strong organizational culture of commitment and activism still weighs heavily on the involvement and working hours which should characterize a "good union worker", and this makes it difficult or impossible

to actually use these options. In the end, except maybe for office workers, when there are no urgent matters, there are no real rights to reduce or even have normal hours in order to respect family time.

Colleagues take a very harsh and negative view of those who come in late and leave early to deal with family obligations, even if they do their “regular” hours. As we have seen, the performance culture that also comes from society and requires that one be a good parent, a good housewife, a good wife-husband, weighs heavily on the shoulders of union workers. The younger workers aspire to a better work-family balance and try to impose their right to normal working hours on older employees, for whom the notions of "workaholics" and professional commitment are core values of the union organization.

Since little work has been done on work-family balance and work-life rights within unions, and even in other contexts of advocacy or activism, this constitutes a form of exploratory research in this field. We found that union counselors are strongly influenced by the ethos of the profession (advocacy, commitment and long hours), something similar to what has been observed in another type of workplace, that of lawyers in large firms (Tremblay, 2015). However, it is somewhat paradoxical here since union staff negotiate better working conditions and work-family rights for other workers, but seem to forget this issue in their own work environment and have not come forward as much as other work environments on this issue.

In other words, the "strong work ideal " (Rheume *et al.*, 2008) is very present among employees of the union we studied, and probably so in many others, as these union employees mentioned in the interviews, when comparing themselves to other unions. We also saw that the strong organizational culture of activism and commitment is seen as essential to all union workers, and this poses a challenge in terms of working hours, for advisors in particular. For example, they feel they enjoy considerable autonomy with regards to the organization of their working time, but in reality, the long hours and the workload required by the union make work-family balance quite a difficult objective in this work context. Again, this is something similar to what is found in the literature on work-family balance in liberal professions (see part IV in Connerley and Wu, on various professions such as law and medicine).

Further to this, we even found a frequent denial of this spillover of work into family and personal life. The ethos of the profession or the "strong work identity " (Rheume *et al.*, 2008) may partly explain the paradox of this difficult work-family balance within the labor movement, while the union is constantly requesting better work-family rights for its members, negotiating reduced working time, reorganization of hours and schedules in other work places.

Reconciling work and family within a union appears to be a very challenging exercise even though, over the years, the union has put measures in place and developed various forms of leave (parental leave, extended vacations, sabbatical). As we have seen, organizational culture weighs heavily on the shoulders of union

employees who want to be seen as having a "good performance" ; they must demonstrate commitment, while undergoing criticism from colleagues if they appear to spend too much time out of the office, for family reasons.

This research may open a space for discussion and begin a process of transformation in union work. Indeed it is paradoxical that such an organization aiming at better working conditions for workers in general does not seem to be able to apply the same principles and rights to its own employees. The organizational culture and perceptions clearly play an important role (Allen, 2001). In organizations such as unions, activism and commitment may stand in the way of the development of work-family arrangements for union workers, but the specific needs of such work environments surely have to be addressed in future work on work-family balance (Andreassi and Thompson, 2008). Not only are other unions probably prone to such situations, but non profit organizations could also present similar characteristics, as many are also often characterized by activism and idealism in work, as well as overwork.

**Table 1. Profile of respondents**

<b>Occupational Category</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Hours of work</b>	<b>Number and age of children</b>	<b>Age</b>
Union Advisor (1)	F	42 hrs (at least in theory)	Two : 6 and 2 yrs	40 yrs
Union Advisor (2)	M	8 h 30 or 9 to 5 (sometimes works at home at night)	Three : 13,10 and 2 yrs	47 yrs
Union Advisor (3)	M	42 hrs	Two : 14 and 1	Not disclosed
Union Advisor (4)	F	42 hrs	Three : 15,8 and 2 (single mother)	Not disclosed
Union Advisor (5)	M	42 hrs	Three : 17, 14 and 2 yrs (one with chronic illness : la Tourette syndrom)	53 yrs
Union Advisor (6)	M	42 hrs	Three : 20, 18 and 2 yrs (with 9 yr old child from a previous union in shared custody)	Not disclosed
Union Advisor (7)	M	42 hrs	One : 1.5 yr old	Not disclosed
Clerical worker (in IT) (8)	M	32.5 hrs	Three : 14, 11 and 9 yrs	42 yrs
Clerical worker (9)	F	32.5 hrs	Three : 13, 10 and 2 yrs	Not disclosed
Union Advisor	M	42 hrs	Three : 20, 5 and 3	47 yrs

(10)			yrs	
Clerical worker (11)	F	32.5 hrs	One : 1 yr (single mother)	Not disclosed
Union Advisor (12)	F	42 hrs	Two : 12 and 15 yrs	44 yrs
Clerical worker (13)	F	32.5 hrs	Two : 3 and 6 yrs	Not disclosed
Clerical worker (14)	F	32.5 hrs	none	40 yrs
Clerical worker (15)	F	32.5 hrs	Two : 4 yrs and pregnant mother	Not disclosed
Union advisor-lawyer (16)	M	42 hrs	Three : 12, 11 and 6 yrs	48 yrs

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