Introduction

Union renewal or revitalisation has become a cottage industry. Around the world, there has been an explosion of studies examining the current state of unionism and the prospects for the future (Kumar and Schenk 2006). They have dealt with a broad range of topics, including union decline, deficiencies in union structure, organisation and leadership, and prescriptions for turning around the fortunes of organised labour. With few exceptions, the diagnosis is unions are ill, they will require extensive treatments and their recovery will be prolonged, difficult and not necessarily guaranteed. This chapter examines the plight of Canadian unions. The salient issues involve, first, considering the strength of the Canadian labour movement, both in absolute and relative terms. Over the past 30 years or so, dramatic changes in the external environment have forced unions to reassess their position and develop renewal strategies. Hence, union renewal usually involves responding to external factors (for example, making adjustments to relationships with employers, state and community) and internal ones (for example, developing new priorities and increasing member commitment and participation). It is also important to link process changes with tangible outcomes, for example increasing union membership and density (Rose and Chaison 2001). To achieve that end, unions must exploit opportunities for new organising. The chapter is organised into five sections. It begins with a brief overview of the state of Canadian labour unions. Next it examines the meaning of union renewal and the environmental forces that influence it. The third section examines the organising challenge facing Canadian unions and their response to it. In the fourth section, the chapter explores the future
prospects for union organising. The final section provides an overall assessment of union organising activity and how it will impact on union renewal.

The state of Canadian unions

In relative terms, Canadian unions have fared reasonably well compared to many labour movements in the industrialised world (Visser 2006). This is especially so in relation to the US, where the Canadian union density rate is more than two times higher (Rose and Chaison 2001). Measured in absolute terms the picture is less rosy. Although union membership rose from 3.67m in 1985 to 4.48m in 2007, a 22% increase, these gains have not kept pace with employment growth. As a result, union density declined from 36.4% to 30.3% in the same period (Workplace Information Directorate 2008). While union density in the public sector has remained steady (between 70% and 73%) over the same period, the private sector density rate has fallen below 20%.

There are, to be sure, other indices of union strength. There is broad agreement that renewal must focus on internal change as well as promote social and economic change. One indicator is the degree to which unions increase membership involvement, develop and promote union democracy, encourage solidarity among members and actively support ‘collective action in defence of workers’ rights in the workplace and citizens’ rights in the community’ (Kumar and Schenk 2006: 21). Because many unions continued to grow, the Canadian labour movement did not experience a crisis similar to that of American unions. While Canadian unions faced some of the same challenges of other labour movements, there was not the same urgency to develop new strategies and initiatives. Accordingly, the status quo prevailed with respect to union activities such as collective bargaining and organising, the ‘commitment to change on the part of leadership, staff, and even members’ was often circumscribed and fragmented, and bureaucratic inertia impeded innovation and bold action (Kumar and Schenk 2006: 45).

Part of the numerical strength of Canadian labour unions can be attributed to their commitment to a broader and activist role for unions in society. In contrast to the business unionism model widely practiced by American unions, Canadian unions have traditionally embraced social unionism. As discussed below, this has enabled Canadian unions to outperform their American counterparts by achieving a greater workplace presence, better collective bargaining outcomes and the ability to exert greater political influence (Rose and Chaison 1996). In the