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Understanding the Absence of Unionized Workers in Rural Alberta, Canada.

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Abstract

This preliminary study spatially locates 333,881 unionized workers in the Canadian province of Alberta, identifying that a disproportionate percentage of unionized workers are located in urban centres and in bargaining units of greater than 100 members. Most unionized rural workers are found in large, public-sector bargaining units. Interviews with trade unionists suggest possible explanations for this pattern, including the unequal distribution of capital, rural workers' spatial embeddedness, unions' preference for large bargaining units, and the differentially and negative impact of weak labour laws on rural workers.

Keywords: unions; rural; labor geography; Alberta; Canada

1.0 Introduction

In late 2015, the Canadian province of Alberta granted basic employment rights to farm workers, including the right to unionize. This policy reversal and the opportunities it creates brought attention to the presence—and absence—of organized labour in rural Alberta. Except for analysis of a slaughterhouse in the town of Brooks, there is no research on contemporary unionization and labour relations in rural Alberta. The absence of a geography-based understanding of unionization in Alberta limits both academic analyses of unionization in Canada's least unionized province and public policy discourse during a time of expected change in labour laws. This study geographically located 333,881 unionized workers to draw conclusions about where unionization occurs and doesn't. It then identified three preliminary explanations for this distribution through interviews with 11 trade union organizers and labor relations officers, 10 of whom had significant experience living in rural Alberta and/or organizing rural workers.

2.0 Background

The western Canadian province of Alberta had 4.2 million residents in 2015, of which 2.2 million were employed (Alberta Government, 2016a). Alberta has long had the lowest level of union density in Canada, at 22.1% in 2014. The majority (60.8%) of unionized workers are in the public sector and the public-sector unionization rate (68.8%) is much higher than the private-sector rate (10.8%)

(Statistics Canada, 2015). In 2015, 63.5% of Alberta’s population was concentrated in seven large urban centres: Calgary (including Airdrie), Edmonton (including St Albert), Fort McMurray (including its rural servicing area), Grande Prairie, Lethbridge, Medicine Hat, and Red Deer (see Table 1 below). These cities act as cultural, economic, and service centres, thereby drawing our attention to the uneven spatial development of capitalism (i.e., in absolute numbers, there tend to be more firms and more jobs in urban centres than rural). Canada’s 2016 census—which uses slightly different terminology—found that 82.0% of Alberta’s population resides in Census Metropolitan Areas, a distribution almost exactly matching national trends (83.2%) (Statistics Canada, 2017a).

Table 1. *Unionized Workers and Population by Location, 2015*

Location	Unionized Workers #	Unionized Workers %	Population #	Population %
Rural	67,634	20.3	1,542,652	36.5
Urban	266,247	79.7	2,674,348	63.5
Calgary	101,918	30.5	1,289,605	30.6
Edmonton	111,306	33.3	941,151	22.3
Fort McMurray	22,063	6.6	116,407	2.8
Grande Prairie	5,047	1.5	68,556	1.6
Lethbridge	9,526	2.9	94,804	2.3
Medicine Hat	5,990	1.8	63,018	1.5
Red Deer	10,397	3.1	100,807	2.4
Total	333,881	100	4,217,000	100

Note: Urban populations based on 2015 municipal census data (Alberta Government, 2015). Fort McMurray population includes the rural service area of Wood Buffalo and a shadow population of 41,551. Edmonton population includes St Albert. Calgary population includes Airdrie.

The concentration of capital in some locations is driven by the uneven distribution of natural resources, the political context, and investment decisions—all of which can create a feedback loop. The spatial distribution of capitalism, in turn, shapes the kinds of industrial relations that emerge in different regions (Herod, 2002). For example, regions with a high concentration of industrial plants may have a higher rate of unionization and a more militant labour movement than regions characterized by fewer and small employers. And such militancy may help shape employer decisions about plant (re)location (Page, 1998). In this way, the geography of economic development affects the nature of industrial relations. Recent changes in Alberta’s economy speak to this relationship. Mining, oil, and gas is by far the largest industry sector in rural Alberta, often being an important source of income for rural residents (Hamm, 2016). Alberta’s petroleum industry has seen significant contraction since 2012 due to low oil prices (Alberta Government, 2017a). The

agriculture and forestry sector is also important to the rural economy (Conference Board of Canada, 2012). There has also been a continued shift in agriculture towards the consolidation of farming operations, with an increasing number of large operators adopting an industrial model of production (Barnetson, 2016). There has also been growth in large-scale food-processing industries, such as meat-processing (Broadway, 2007).

Alberta's 1.6 million 'rural' residents are settled across 661,190 square kilometres (255,290 square miles) in about 200 smaller cities, towns, and villages as well as several hundred small settlements and uncounted individual farms, ranches, and homesteads. 'Rural' is a slippery term, often defined as regions of low population and low population density which are distant from urban centres (Bealer, Willits, & Kuvlesky, 1965). This definition obscures differences among rural regions as well as similarities between urban and rural localities (Hoggart, 1990). It also suggests rurality is a fixed condition, rather than a condition that can shift depending upon economic and social policy (Hanson, 2013). Rural is often associated with agricultural activity, such as occurs in the plains and parkland regions of central and southern Alberta. This association obscures ecological and industrial differences, such as northern Alberta's boreal forest and extractive industries (Stark, Gravel, & Robinson, 2014). Winson and Leach (2002) note that, despite its vagueness, 'rural' has conceptual utility because it denotes something symbolically important to rural residents and because it identifies important material conditions affecting rural residents (e.g., limited access to services, exclusion from policy making, and a thinner job market).

For the purposes of this study, rural means areas and populations outside of Alberta's seven largest cities. Alberta's seven largest cities were selected to represent 'urban' Alberta for three reasons:

- Density: They each have population densities >400 persons per square kilometer, which is one of the traditional definitions of urban centres (Statistics Canada, 2017b).
- Size: They all have populations of greater than 50,000 residents, which encompasses Statistics Canada's (2017b) definition of large urban areas—greater than 100,000—plus larger cities in the 'medium population centres' category—30,000–99,999. The inclusion of these latter cities is based upon the researcher's assessment that, in the context of a Canadian prairie province with a relative small population for its land mass, 50,000 people is a sensible analytical break point.
- Service Hubs: Alberta cities with greater than 50,000 residents typically operate as economic, cultural, and service hubs to the surrounding communities in ways that smaller centres do not. The decision to roll Airdrie and St. Albert—each with greater than 400 persons/km² and 50,000 residents—into Calgary and Edmonton respectively was made because (a) separating them yielded no meaningful analytical outcomes, and, despite their size, (b) they function more as bedroom communities than service centres.

While there is significant literature on rural Alberta (Hallstrom, Stonechild & Reist, 2015; Larson, 2005; Epp & Whitson, 2001; Wilson, 1995) and Alberta unions (Finkel, 2012; Reshef & Rastin, 2003; Ponak, Reshef, & Taras, 2003), there is little written about labor relations in rural Alberta except a recent and preliminary study of farm workers (Barnetson, 2016) and analysis of a slaughterhouse located in

Brooks (Foster, 2016; Broadway, 2007, 2016). Alberta trade unionists suggested unionization is concentrated in urban areas and rural unionization is limited to public-sector institutions and large private-sector operations operating on an industrial model. The notion that Alberta unions are both urban and industrial makes intuitive sense. Labor unions are a response to capital; therefore, the form and spatial distribution of bargaining units are likely to be shaped by capitalism's patterns (Tufts, 1998; Herod, 1998). This relationship is evident in the historical shift from craft to industrial unions (Heron, 1996) and, more recently, the decline in union density associated with deindustrialization and increasing employment precarity (Peters, 2012).

The legal framework regulating unionization and collective bargaining may also play a role. Alberta's labour law has historically been characterized as impeding organizing and collective bargaining (Foster, 2012; Gibson & Boychuk, 2012). Canadian labour boards' insistence on community of interest in bargaining units augurs in favor of single-employer and often single-location units. Smaller worksites may be harder to organize, and their geographic dispersion may mean higher servicing costs (Tufts, 1998). Smaller units also remit fewer dues than larger units and may cost more to service because they have less internal capacity to manage their affairs. Overall, these challenges may make small and rural employers less desirable organizing targets than larger operations. That said, Alberta has province-wide bargaining units (e.g., in health-care) and sectoral agreements (e.g., in construction) (Fuller & Hughes-Fuller, 2005)

Labour geography also suggests that the spatial embeddedness of workers can affect their decision-making. Rural workers with limited local employment options and limited geographic mobility may see unionization as less desirable or achievable than urban workers (Herod, 1998). Falk, Schulman, & Tickamyer (2003) suggest that maintaining employment is a major pre-occupation for rural residents, who, more than urban workers, may view their livelihoods as closely intertwined with that of local employers. This may lead to spatial interests trumping class interests and provides an explanation for cross-class cooperation and/or aversion to class conflict (Herod, 2001). Rural workers' understanding of and response to economic restructuring may also be shaped by their social relationships and local opportunity structures (Tigges, Zoebarth, & Farnham, 1998). For example, Winson (1997; Kingsolver, 1992, 1998; Smith, 2010) draws our attention to the importance placed by some rural residents on hard work and the rights of the private sector as well as beliefs about independence and the undesirability of unions. That said, as Leach and Winson (1995; Leach 2013) remind us, it is important to recognize that different groups of rural workers—for example, women, older workers, non-citizens—may have different experiences and views. Rural labour markets may also be 'thinner' than urban labour markets, with fewer jobs opportunities that may be conditioned upon social conformity (Vera-Toscano, Phimister, & Weersinnk, 2004; Winson and Leach, 2002; Naples, 1994).

In light of Alberta's recent emphasis on more modern and nuanced labour policy, this study examines two broad and preliminary research questions:

- How are unionized workers geographically distributed in Alberta?
- What factors do trade union staff identify as influencing this geographic distribution?

Identifying the number of unionized workers employed in each Alberta municipality and patterns—and potential explanations for them—is the first step in a broader examination of rural labour relations in Alberta.

3.0 Methodology

Quantitative data about employee location is drawn from the provincial government's Collective Bargaining Agreement Listing (Alberta Labour, 2015). The November 2015 listing included 1,228 collective agreements negotiated under the provincial jurisdiction affecting approximately 440,000 workers. Collective agreements negotiated under the federal jurisdiction are excluded from this dataset. The data is unaudited, employer-reported information which means there is risk of misreporting. A specific municipality was associated with 82% of the collective agreements and this municipality was used as a proxy for the location of 219,618 workers. This proxy is imperfect, with an unknown number of unionized workers being mobile and/or employed in another location. Further, workers who live in a rural region but work in an urban region will be classified as urban workers—and vice versa. There is no practical way to correct for these threats to the validity and reliability of the data and, thus, the results should be viewed with caution.

Agreements where a specific municipality was not assigned were dealt with in two ways. First, information provided by three unions allowed the researcher to assign municipalities to 114,263 workers who were covered by five province-wide, public-sector collective agreements. The union-supplied data identified 6,172 more workers than the provincial dataset, possibly reflecting changes in worker numbers over time. This left 218 agreements—covering 124,789 workers or 27.9% of the original dataset—that were listed as multiple location or province-wide units. There is no practical way to assign these workers—mostly in the construction, logistics, grocery, and health-care sectors—to a municipality and, thus, they were excluded from further analysis. The exclusion of these workers again suggests the results should be viewed with caution. After data cleaning was complete, 333,881 unionized workers remained in the data set for analysis. The workers in each bargaining unit were then categorized as urban or rural based upon their work location and descriptive statistics were generated.

To identify possible explanations for the geographic distribution of unionized workers, the researcher conducted one-hour, semi-structured interviews with present or past trade union staffers—organizers and membership services officers. Ten of these staffers either lived in rural areas or had experience organizing in them. The eleventh interviewee was included because of the breadth of experience he provided. The interview research was approved by Athabasca University's Research Ethics Board (Certificate #22165). An initial group of 10 informants were identified based upon the researcher's knowledge of the Alberta labour movement with additional informants identified via snowball sampling. It was determined that interviews would stop when data reached saturation (i.e., no new explanations or explanatory factors were identified in three consecutive interviews). Saturation was reached in interview nine, but two already scheduled interviews were completed for a total of 11 interviews. Ten of the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed while handwritten notes were taken during one interview. All interview data was anonymized, thematically coded, and an initial explanation of why there are so relatively few unionized workers was developed. Each informant was offered the opportunity to examine the initial explanation and provide further comments. Two informants provided additional feedback.

While this paper was in review, Alberta significantly amended its labour laws (Alberta Government, 2017b). These amendments address many of the statutory limitations flagged by informants as barriers to rural organizing. This data has been retained as it provides a useful historical explanation for Alberta’s law unionization rate.

4.0 Results

As set out in Table 1, unionization is a heavily urban phenomenon, with 79.7% of unionized workers being located in Alberta’s seven urban centres. This uneven distribution was found to be statistically significant using Chi-Squared ($p < .01$) (see Table 2). Urban unionism also appears to be disproportionate to the overall population distribution. This difference may be—partly or wholly—the result of the greater proportion of working-age Albertans who are resident in urban areas (Alberta, 2017c). Lack of age-segregated data by municipality precludes further exploration of this possibility.

Table 2. *Chi Square Analysis, Unionized Workers and Population by Location, 2015*

Location	Observed	Expected	Difference	X2
Rural	20.3	36.5	-16.2	7.19
Urban	79.7	63.5	16.2	4.13
Total	100	100	0	X2=11.32*

* $P < .01$

A lack of labour force data by municipality precludes calculating measures of union density—that is, the percentage of workers covered by a collective agreement. It is possible to determine the percentage of a municipality’s population that is unionized and, thereby, assess relative differences in union density between municipalities. As outlined in Table 3, urban residents are more than twice as likely than rural residents to be union members (10.0% versus 4.4%). Again, these differences were found to be statistically significant using Z-score ($p < .01$). There are some significant differences by municipality. Edmonton (11.8% unionized) is the seat of government and, therefore, has a disproportionately large number of civil servants—a highly unionized group. Fort McMurray (19.0% unionized) has both a large and unionized industrial base and a younger population profile—meaning more workers per capita. Calgary (7.9% unionized) has a higher percentage of its population that works in—mostly non-unionized—private-sector jobs, such as the oil-and-gas industry.

Table 3. *Unionized Workers as Percentage of Population by Location, 2015*

Location	Unionized Workers #	Population #	% Population Unionized
Rural	67,634	1,542,652	4.4
Urban	266,247	2,674,348	10.0
Calgary	101,918	1,289,605	7.9
Edmonton	111,306	941,151	11.8
Fort McMurray	22,063	116,407	19.0
Grande Prairie	5,047	68,556	7.4
Lethbridge	9,526	94,804	10.1
Medicine Hat	5,990	63,018	9.5
Red Deer	10,397	100,807	10.3

As noted above, the public sector accounts for only 60.8% of all unionized workers in Alberta. This dataset indicates that 75.1% of unionized rural workers were employed in the public sector, although the exclusion of unionized workers in province-wide or multi-site agreements from the dataset means the proportion of workers in the public sector is somewhat overstated. Unionized rural workers in the private sector are typically employed by a small number of large employers with industrial-style operations, such as meat-processing plants, refineries, mills, and mines.

Table 4 shows the 12 largest clusters of rural unionism in Alberta. Together these locales account for 39.4% of rural unionized workers and illustrate the rural pattern of public-sector employers and large industrial units. These rural concentrations include large meatpacking units in southern Alberta, extraction, tourism and public-sector units in the western foothills, oil-field servicing and refining units in central Alberta, and public-sector units in other small central and northern centres. The remainder of rural units are small, mostly public-sector units—particularly government, health-care, and education—spread across rural Alberta.

The existence of five very large, province-wide, public-sector bargaining units—containing 34.2% of the workers in the dataset—makes it difficult to analyze rural and urban differences in unit size. If we exclude the five province-wide units from consideration, we find that the majority of rural bargaining units (53.5%) have fewer than 50 members and three-quarters (75.3%) of units have fewer than 100 members. Interestingly, despite the large number of small units, units under 100 workers represent only about 20% of all unionized rural workers. Approximately four in every five unionized rural workers are in bargaining units of ≥ 100 workers.

Table 4. *Rural Municipalities with Large Numbers of Unionized Workers*

Municipality	# Unionized Workers	Notes
Athabasca	1,440	Public-sector workers comprise 97.6% of unionized workers.
Brooks	2,859	Meatpacking plant workers comprise 77.0% of unionized workers; remainder are public-sector workers.
Camrose	1,448	Public-sector workers comprise 84.0% of unionized workers.
Fort Saskatchewan	3,103	Chemical plant workers comprise 60.2% of unionized workers; remainder are public-sector workers.
High River	2,983	Meatpacking plant workers comprise 61.8% of unionized workers; remainder are public-sector workers.
Jasper, Edson, Hinton & Grande Cache	3,615	Mine, mill, and hotel workers comprise 49.9% of unionized workers; remainder are public-sector workers.
Leduc-Nisku	2,994	Various oilfield-servicing workers comprise 60.2% of unionized workers; remainder are public-sector workers.
Parkland County, Spruce Grove & Stony Plain	2,595	Public-sector workers comprise 99.2% of unionized workers.
Peace River	1,515	Public-sector workers comprise 100% of unionized workers.
Ponoka	1,205	Public-sector workers comprise 100% of unionized workers.
Sherwood Park & Strathcona County	3,336	Public-sector workers comprise 78.0% of unionized workers.
Wetaskiwin	1,023	Public-sector workers comprise 98.4% of unionized workers.

By contrast, only 38.0% of urban bargaining units have fewer than 50 members and 56.1% have fewer than 100 members. On average, urban units with fewer than 100 workers represent approximately 10% of all unionized urban workers. Most unionized urban workers are in bargaining units of ≥ 100 workers. We cannot determine why a greater proportion of rural units are small, but part of the answer may lie simply in differences in average size of employer workforces in urban and rural Alberta. A lack of employer-size data by municipality precludes fuller exploration of this possibility.

Overall, this analysis confirms that the majority of unionized workers in Alberta are located in the seven large, urban centres. It also indicates unionization is disproportionately urban and that the majority of unionized workers in both rural and urban areas are clustered in bargaining units of 100 or more members. Unionized rural workers are mostly located in the public sector. To further develop our understanding of these patterns, interviews were undertaken with trade union organizers and labour relations officers.

5.0 Factors Contributing to Low Union Density in Rural Alberta

Informants advanced three broad explanations for low union density across rural Alberta:

- reluctance by rural workers to unionize,
- reluctance by unions to organize small bargaining units, and
- a regulatory structure that impeded organizing.

Informants suggested rural workers perceive unionization as a less effective way to improve their lot in life than the other strategies available to them. This perception is partly rooted in the material circumstances of their lives, “there is no practical opportunity to co-operate with other people... [The] way you get ahead is you work hard and you impress somebody and you form a relationship with someone and they give you a job” (Informant 9).

This perception of how to succeed can be reinforced by groups of opinion leaders—such as chambers of commerce, evangelical churches, rotary clubs, and long-time residents—who have the power to shape social norms in rural communities. These groups—often with interlocking memberships—were said to disparage collective action, thereby creating “...a cultural and social hegemony... [that suggests] you are more likely to advance through being a hard worker and canny businessperson than you are through social solidarity with people who share your lot in life” (Informant 7).

The result can be that workers feel they have few options:

When you are talking about a problem and what should I do about it, in a smaller community, the mindset is not “let’s just call a union.” ...If you have problems, you either suck it up or you get another job (Informant 11).

There were various explanations provided as to the anti-union consensus among opinion leaders which propagates throughout the community. The economic importance of the agricultural and the oil-and-gas industries were flagged by some informants as important historical sources of anti-union animus. Farmers and other

petty commodity producers were said to have self-reliant mindset limits that appetite for class-based responses:

Farmers work awfully hard and they take all kinds of occupational health and safety risks. They put their families to work. In my experience, that kind of life leads to an attitude that says you really are doing it all on your own and that is how you should conduct yourself when it comes to seeking outside employment (Informant 1).

Some respondents noted the exploration and extraction side of the oil-and-gas industry has a profoundly anti-union outlook. This animus may reflect historical efforts to prevent unionization in the petroleum industry in order to attract foreign investment (Finkel, 1989, Caragata, 1979) as well as the cowboy culture that traditionally permeates this portion of the industry (Houser, 2010). Exploration and extraction have been an important historical source of employment in rural Alberta: “Big oil doesn’t mind having their refineries unionized. But the exploration side has always had employers who were, even more than most employers, violently anti-union...” (Informant 9).

Other informants noted anti-union positions among evangelical and Mormon churches, although religious heterogeneity in some regions was said to attenuate the power of these churches. And, finally, some informants identified the economic self-interest of community leaders—who are often small business persons—as a factor in anti-union sentiment.

While valorizing individualistic behaviours is not confined to rural communities, the small size of rural communities was said to limit the social space for other narratives:

[If you live in a community that is] a little bigger, and particularly where you have a union movement, you have competing groups. The union group may not be as powerful as the management group, but they can still influence public opinion (Informant 3).

No informants suggested that rural workers were without agency, but they did identify various rural-specific barriers to unionization. Some informants noted that rural communities lacked space for class consciousness to develop, with an employer being more likely to be viewed as a peer or neighbor than a boss:

Unless you have an issue to rally around that is not purely monetary, putting people together is very difficult. Their next-door neighbor may be their boss or a municipally elected individual.... Unionizing isn’t seen as community building, it is seen as a divisive action because it [is] confrontational.... It affects the kids going to school. It affects the community league’s darts game (Informant 10).

Workers may also face community pressure to not engage in union activities in order to protect their community from the purported harms of unionism.

The manufacturing plants that I know were started with a lot of government largesse obtained by the local entrepreneur. ...Are you going to take on the local Mafia don who got that huge grant from the government? ...There is all kinds of political and social pressure on people to not upset the apple cart (Informant 1).

Other informants suggested there may be less space in a rural community for dissension and conflict to play out because of fewer job opportunities—which heightened the economic risks associated with union activity—, less personal privacy, and greater integration of work and social lives than is typical in urban environments:

You are dealing with the same 15 to 20 guys day in and day out. ...And you are going to run into these guys in the grocery store and the [bar] and it is your life. These small units are... a lot more impervious to organizing because you can't have every facet of your life in open conflict with your employer for very long before you go nuts. In a city, you can escape it (Informant 7).

Despite the barriers to unionizing in rural Alberta, informants noted countervailing factors. While there can be social pressure not to unionize, “there are existing social networks that allow rapid organizing because everyone knows everyone else” (Informant 6). Several informants also noted that the connectedness could translate into significant community support when organized workers came into conflict with their employer, “The employer... couldn't find anyone to cross their picket lines. [The strike] lasted less than a week because the employer had to get... workers from Calgary and ship them up” (Informant 8). “We had one strike and ...[t]he local business community realized we were the money makers and the spenders and they came on board” (Informant 4).

The interconnectedness of small communities can also be used to exert pressure on employers. This sort of direct action may be one of the non-union strategies that rural residents consider:

Everybody in a small town—the businesses—are very susceptible to public opinion in the town. When they fired a [worker] who was very popular, people organized an ad hoc phone zap. They didn't get the [worker the worker's] job back but they exercised a lot of power and employers paid attention (Informant 7).

Some respondents also noted that rural communities can rally around public-sector unionization, particularly if the service or quality of service is under threat.

Informants also noted unionization is only one option for workers who are dissatisfied with their employment situations, particularly given the mobile nature of workers in Alberta's oil-based economy, “when things that drive people crazy in the

workplace... get to the point that they can't stand it anymore, rather than thinking about joining a union, they say 'fuck it, I'll just go work somewhere else'" (Informant 3).

The second factor informants identified as contributing to low union density in rural Alberta was reluctance by unions to organize small bargaining units. While small units exist in both rural and urban locations, informants noted that organizing opportunities in rural Alberta almost always centre on small units. The definition of 'small' varied among informants, but there was broad consensus that units of fewer than 50 workers represented marginal targets for organizing, "we have to get approval of targets from the executive. [U]nits smaller than 50 being more likely to be rejected" (Informant 2).

Small units were said to be hard to organize, have limited bargaining power, and are costly to service. Several informants identified the close relationship between employers and workers in small workplaces as a barrier to unionization: "[In] the small workplaces, there is much more interaction and there is no separation: you don't get an us and them. [Instead, you get] 'we all have to work together, we're not very big'" (Informant 4).

Employers may also be more likely and better able to manage their workforce in a small operation and, thereby, keep unions out: "there are relatively few people so you only have to change the minds of one or two" (Informant 3).

Some informants reported small employers intentionally manipulated the composition of their labour force to minimize the opportunity for union organizing: "there was a grocery store in [town]...[that] would specifically hire people who had not worked in union environments before" (Informant 8).

Such tactics reduce the likelihood of a successful organizing drive. Consequently, unions may be less likely to target small employers. Some informants suggested that many unions' disinterest in rural organizing is also related to unions'—predominantly urban—office locations and urban population density: "It is the Ohm's law of labour organizing—[unions] take the path of least resistance. [Edmonton and Calgary] is where the population is growing and already a large part of the population is here" (Informant 5).

Most informants identified that small units tended to have limited ability to extract a meaningful collective agreement from a—usually—small employer who may have limited capacity to absorb an increase in labour costs:

[T]he leverage just isn't there. ...So I organize a Tim [Horton]'s. That is one store. ...Now the employer is running around and is saying "I'm competing with the employer next door and I can't pay that." We face that in our big units, but it is 10 or 20 times more when dealing with ma-and-pops [operations] (Informant 4).

Once organized, small units can also be resource intensive to operate. Some respondents flagged that the allocation of union resources can sometimes result in organizational discord:

You put a lot of work into building up a new workplace and having educated stewards.... That [investment] can potentially mean neglect of other units

and locals. There can be political resistance to that because established chapters and locals don't like the diversion of resources (Informant 8).

Informants also suggested that smaller bargaining units often have higher servicing costs because they lack a large enough pool of union activists to become self-sufficient in most day-to-day union tasks: “[In] locals of say 2,000 people, you will have a small group of activists—maybe 30 and some will be air-quotes activists. In a bargaining unit of 60 or 70, it is hard to get 2 or 3 people” (Informant 9).

Several informants note that unit size is not always determinative when making organizing decisions. Ideological and moral factors also impact organizing decisions:

You can't run a local if the money doesn't work. But if you have a large membership with a few big units, you can kind of kind of make up for it. ...If you are looking at it like a business, it doesn't make sense. But I'm not always about making sense. When someone needs help, we will go out of our way the help them (Informant 11).

Informants indicated that the nature of the workplace can be a factor. For example, a large workforce employed at multiple worksites (e.g., group homes, convenience stores) may lack group coherence, thereby being susceptible to employer efforts to thwart an organizing drive and lacking leverage during bargaining. Some informants also indicated that the desirability of a unit can be shaped by whether or not the union already had a bargaining relationship with the employer:

There may be 10 people. But with that same employer elsewhere, we have thousands of their workers. It gives me a better chance to keep the employer nice. “Are you so stuck on 20 people that you want to jeopardize [labour relations with] the other thousand?” (Informant 4).

All informants indicated that Alberta's labour laws—which have historically made union organizing and collective bargaining difficult—intensify unions' reluctance to organize small units. The specific weaknesses of Alberta labour law included requiring a vote before certifying a unit, having no meaningful remedy available when an employer interfered in an organizing drive, and having no access to first-contract arbitration: “One of the first things I learned was, in Alberta, [employers] can do anything they want. Those were [the employer's] words to me: ‘We can do anything we want’” (Informant 4).

These regulatory arrangements have historically had a greater effect on rural organizing because, faced with a high risk of failure, unions become more conservative in their organizing. “[If] you are dealing with [employers] who are committed, hysterical anti-unionists, you are guaranteed of a fight and that just doesn't make economic sense for a union” (Informant 3).

The lack of ‘space’ in rural communities could result in both community and employer pressure on workers to vote against certification during the—approximately—10-day period between the filing of a certification application and

the vote. Most informants suggested that this pressure could be attenuated through adopting card-check certification procedures. Other informants were less interested in card-check provisions and, instead, flagged the lack of meaningful remedy to employer interference in organizing drives. “I don’t need card check [procedures]...I win votes, I just want a fair process [that]... take[s] the employer’s intimidation out” (Informant 4).

Alberta employers who interfered with an organizing campaign have not faced automatic certification as a remedy. Many informants pointed to the lack of meaningful consequences when employers committed unfair labour practices during organizing drives as a significant issue:

[Having] an employee terminated during an organizing drive... can put a damper on the organizing drive and you don’t have an example of justice to show the other union members.... It can make people go... “If the union can’t stop the employer from doing something during a drive, how are they going to stick up for me on the job?” (Informant 8).

We have been in organizing drives when the employer has fired people knowing it is illegal and they will have to pay back pay in order to put a chill on the campaign. They do it because it works (Informant 11).

Some informants noted that workers with precarious legal status—such as temporary foreign workers—were particularly vulnerable to employer pressure, “employers will threaten temporary foreign workers with deportation and pressure them to vote against unionization” (Informant 6). Another informant stated that “all the boss has to say is ‘I will send you home’ and we’re done because of intimidation” (Informant 4).

Finally, informants identified employers’ historic ability to stall collective bargaining due to the absence of first-contract arbitration in Alberta as a barrier to organizing units.

...[Y]ou got 10 months to get an agreement and [the employer] drags it out, the workers get frustrated. [The employer] erodes your support by going after your supporters or the bargaining committee until they finally get fed up and leave and then you are dealing with the decertification [application] (Informant 4).

A number of informants suggested that first-contract arbitration and/or industry-wide collective agreements to which newly organized employers would be bound—which exist in Alberta’s construction industry—would significantly reduce this barrier to organizing.

6.0 Discussion

Examining the distribution of unionized workers in Alberta reveals three clear patterns. First, nearly four in every five unionized workers (79.7%) were located in large urban centres, a concentration disproportionate to the overall population distribution in Alberta. Second, most unionized workers were found in large (>100 members) bargaining units. Third, most unionized rural workers worked in the public-sector (75.1%).

One explanation for these patterns lies in a preference by unions for large bargaining units. Interviewees suggested large units are easier to organize and service as well as have greater bargaining power. There is no comprehensive dataset available on business size and location in Alberta. That said, it seems likely that employers with workforces greater than 100 workers are located primarily in Alberta's urban centres. The majority of public-sector employment is concentrated in urban areas because these areas service both their local—and quite large—populations and the population of the surrounding rural regions. Similarly, the small percentage of private-sector businesses (2%) with ≥ 100 employees are most likely located in or near a large population centre in order to access an adequate workforce (Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, 2016). There are a small number of exceptions to this pattern, such as the mobile workforce housed in camps around Alberta's bitumen oil deposits or the transient workforce associated with large slaughterhouses in southern Alberta. But these instances are notable because they are aberrations and employers must make significant efforts to maintain their workforce in such circumstances (Broadway, 2016; Foster and Taylor, 2013).

Overall, this pattern suggests that the spatial distribution of capital in Alberta may play an important role in the pattern of unionization. Specifically, workers are more likely to be unionized in urban regions where there are more large employers. Unionized rural workers are also most likely to be employed by larger employers and are found either in stand-alone units—in the private sector—or in region- or province-wide bargaining units—in the public sector. There are, of course, also other factors that may contribute to the large proportion of rural unionized workers found in the public sector. For example, many public-sector bargaining units began as units mandated by legislation and have created a tradition of unionization in the public sector that public-sector unions have endeavored to build upon (Finkel, 2012). Further, unions may organize rurally to change the scale of struggle (Herod, 2001). For example, the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees is organizing private-sector nursing homes across the province in order to eliminate the labour-cost advantage that motivated past governments to privatize seniors' care.

Interviewees also suggested that rural workers—as a group—may be less likely than urban workers to see unionization as an effective strategy to improve their lives. This may reflect the social dynamics of rural Alberta. Specifically, interviewees mooted that widely felt hostility towards unionization combined with the potential for social and economic consequences might make rural workers reluctant to engage in class-based resistance. This assertion may reflect the spatial embeddedness of rural workers. That is to say, these workers may be unable or unwilling to move for work—due to kinship connections or property ownership, for example—and thus they may be unwilling to behave in ways that they believe will harm their local employment prospects. Alberta's historically weak regulatory system—wherein employers could punish union supporters with effective impunity—may have had a much greater impact on workers in locations where alternative employment

may be unavailable or denied to known union supporters. This suggests that recent changes to Alberta's labour laws may disproportionately benefit rural Albertans seeking to exercise their associational rights.

We should be cautious about drawing conclusions about rural Albertans' attitudes towards unions because the interviewees do not represent the view of rural workers, and generalized notions about rural workers ignores that there are significant differences among workers as well as between rural regions. Rather, these themes may serve as a useful starting point for conversations with rural Albertans. That said, there is some independent support for the notion of an attitudinal difference between rural and urban Albertans about unions. A survey by the Population Research Laboratory (2012) at University of Alberta found 50.0% of residents of Edmonton and Calgary agreed that workers are better off if they belonged to a union versus only 44.4% of residents in the rest of the province. There were similar differences in agreement—46.8% versus 40.2%—with the statement that Alberta would be better off if more workers belonged to a union. Neither of these differences were statistically significant but they are suggestive.

7.0 Conclusion

This study demonstrates that nearly four in five unionized workers in Alberta are located in seven large, urban centres. The disproportionately small proportion of unionized workers in rural Alberta are mostly employed in the public sector. The study also reveals that the majority of unionized workers are members of bargaining units of 100 or more workers. While there certainly are a large number of bargaining units with fewer than 100 members, small units only contain 10–20% of all unionized employees. One possible explanation for this pattern is that it reflects that distribution of large employers, whose workers are more likely to be unionized and who are predominantly found in urban centres. Large employers in rural areas tend to be public-sector operations. Where there are large private-sector employers in rural Alberta operations—for example, mills, mines, and slaughterhouses—their operations are often unionized.

This study also raises questions about whether rural workers might be less inclined to join unions. Interviewees suggested social pressure and limited employment prospects may make rural Alberta workers reluctant to unionize. Further research would be necessary to substantiate this very tentative conclusion. Such an inquiry would need to include a cross section of rural workers in order to recognize that there are multiple 'rurals' in Alberta and that local and, perhaps even individual, contextual factors may shape how workers respond to workplace adversity (Tigges et al., 1998). Such an inquiry would also need to account for differences (e.g., gender, occupation, and citizenship status) among workers (Leach, 2013).

Such an inquiry might also examine non-union alternatives that workers employ when faced with workplace adversity. Several interviewees mentioned workers exiting difficult employment situations and one interviewee suggested that collective action organized outside of trade unionism can occur. Hamm (2016) notes that employment-related geographic mobility (e.g., working away from home) is a common occurrence in rural Alberta. Workers may also engage in cross-class cooperation. For example, when workers at rurally located Athabasca University faced layoffs or job relocation to an urban centre, workers, community members, and local businesspeople cooperated to apply political pressures and thwarted such a move. These behaviours may be part of a broader repertoire of resistance in rural areas.

Interviewees also suggested that Alberta's historically weak labour laws may have differentially affected workers by location, possibly by making union-suppression tactics by employers more effective in rural regions. Additional research would also be necessary to assess the validity of the assertion that smaller and rural bargaining units are more difficult to organize and have more difficulty securing a first contract. Statistical analysis of a comparable set of rural and urban organizing drives before and after Alberta's 2017 labour law might be an effective way to test this hypothesis. Interviews with rural workers and employers conducted in a manner that recognized regional and individual differences may help flesh out the nature of union suppression activity in rural Alberta. Interviewees specifically identified workers with precarious citizenship status as particularly vulnerable to union-suppression tactics. While there is significant research on the effect of precarious citizenship status related to farm workers (Basok, 2002; McLaughlin & Henneby, 2013; Preibisch, 2016) there is much less written about foreign workers employed outside of the agricultural sector in rural Canada (Hanley, Gravel, Bernstein, Villaneuva, & CrespoVillarreal, 2015).

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