

APPENDIX to the
BCFED Submission to the
Labour Relations Code
Review Panel

BCFED Response to
Labour Code Review

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Authority

This document is respectfully submitted on behalf of the Executive Officers of the BC Federation of Labour and represents the views of more than 500,000 affiliated members across the province of British Columbia.

Appendix: Economic benefits of sectoral and broader-based bargaining

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Introduction and summary

Collective bargaining plays a vital and powerful role in creating conditions for shared, sustainable prosperity. Without collective representation, voice and bargaining power, few workers are able to negotiate effectively with their employers, and thus achieve decent work and living standards. No society in history has achieved inclusive prosperity – whereby most working people have access to comfortable, secure living standards – without widespread collective bargaining.

However, the capacity of conventional Wagner Act-style collective bargaining regimes to fulfil this potential is being undermined by economic, technological, and political changes. Average workplaces have become smaller – which makes traditional workplace-based certification and bargaining systems less viable. Companies have exploited organizational and technological innovations – such as franchising and outsourcing, or platform-based gig work models – to avoid unions and the responsibility to negotiate collectively with their employees. In fact, in many cases these firms deny their workers are employees at all. The tremendous struggles which workers in many such industries (from coffee chains to warehouses to on-demand gig platforms) are forced to undertake just to win basic union recognition and collective agreement coverage, is proof positive that the current system does not ensure meaningful access to these rights. Meanwhile, sectoral changes in the economy are reducing the relative size of traditionally unionized industries (including mining, forestry, and manufacturing). In their place, private service industries have grown, but most have relatively lower bargaining coverage.¹

The result of these intersecting trends has been a steady and worrisome decline in collective bargaining coverage, concentrated in private sector workplaces. In BC, private sector union coverage has fallen to below 15%. Barely one private sector worker in seven now has access to the protections and benefits of collective bargaining. This erosion of collective bargaining has contributed to income inequality and social polarization.

To counter these worrisome trends, reforming labour laws to facilitate greater use of sectoral, occupational, multi-employer and other forms of broader-based collective bargaining holds great potential to expand collective bargaining coverage and achieve fairer labour market outcomes. Such reforms would also help to make collective bargaining more efficient and effective. This would generate significant economic benefits for workers, employers, industries and the broader provincial economy (even benefiting the provincial government's fiscal situation). Those benefits fall into two broad categories.

First, a major rationale for the introduction of sectoral and broader-based bargaining systems is to extend effective access to collective bargaining to a broader group of workers. A majority of workers in the private sector are effectively excluded from collective bargaining arrangements – because of their location in small or fragmented workplaces, their engagement in insecure or non-standard employment relationships, overwhelming employer opposition to unionization and bargaining, and other barriers to conventional Wagner-style representation and bargaining. For these workers, the economic benefits of accessing collective bargaining through alternative, broader-based channels are similar to the general

¹ The most recent employment forecast from the B.C. government shows that the retail and accommodation/food service sectors will be the third and fourth-fastest growing sources of net employment growth over the next decade (B.C. Ministry of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills 2023, p. 15), reinforcing this shift toward lower-wage and largely non-unionized jobs.

benefits of collective representation and bargaining already experienced by other workers (through conventional collective bargaining arrangements).

However, in addition to the direct benefits arising simply from the expansion of collective bargaining, a second category of economic benefits arises from specific advantages of sectoral, multi-employer or broader-based bargaining systems. In other words, it is not just that sectoral and broader-based arrangements allow greater access to bargaining: they also provide for the better coordination of bargaining, and the establishment of equivalent benchmarks for wages, working conditions and benefits that apply across entire sectors. In this context, the introduction of sectoral or broader-based arrangements could generate benefits beyond just those workers who cannot presently access collective bargaining at all. Additional benefits would be attained from the application of sectoral practices to industries and occupations which already feature at least some collective bargaining.

This appendix will review both broad categories of economic benefits from sectoral and broader-based bargaining: those associated with the general expansion of collective bargaining coverage, and those arising from the particular features of sectoral coordination. The appendix references abundant published research regarding the correlation between sectoral and broader-based bargaining systems, collective bargaining coverage and economic performance. The appendix also reviews data and analysis regarding the current use of sectoral arrangements in Canada and in other industrial countries – confirming that the practice is common and well-established, and hence, its introduction in British Columbia can be informed by the structures and experience of other jurisdictions.

This review confirms the following main findings:

- International experience shows that coordinated and broader-based collective bargaining systems are associated with higher bargaining coverage than decentralized systems based primarily in individual workplaces.
- Increasing collective bargaining coverage, to ensure that more workers can benefit from collectively-negotiated compensation and working conditions, likely requires the use of sectoral and broader-based bargaining systems.
- Collective bargaining coverage provides workers with consistently stronger monetary and non-monetary employment outcomes: including higher and more equal wages; stronger supplementary pension and benefits; regular and secure channels of voice, communications, and input in workplaces; better access to training; better job security; and more protection against occupational health and safety dangers (including risks such as mental health injuries and workplace harassment).
- In addition to expanding bargaining coverage, sectoral or coordinated bargaining systems often demonstrate superior outcomes in negotiating, implementing and administering collective agreements. Countries with greater reliance on coordinated bargaining systems are able to establish stronger wage norms that apply across industries and occupations; they are more able to attain lower unemployment rates in the long-run, coincident with stable inflation; and they provide extra stimulus to innovation and productivity growth by firms (which are spurred to compete on grounds of quality, productivity and efficiency – rather than trying to suppress compensation costs).

Sectoral, multi-employer, and broader-based bargaining systems in other jurisdictions

International practices

In an exhaustive study of labour relations across industrial countries,² the OECD recently developed a rich categorization of collective bargaining systems. This categorization captures the extent to which collective bargaining occurs mostly at the enterprise level (decentralized) versus various forms of sectoral, broader-based or multi-employer bargaining (centralized). It also considers the extent to which bargaining is coordinated across occupations, industries or broader portions of the labour force. The OECD summarized this international diversity in bargaining systems, with the following four broad categories:

1. ***Coordinated centralized systems***: Nine countries in Europe have very structured, centralized collective bargaining systems, in which major negotiations occur at a centralized level (for entire industries and occupations), involving participation by multiple unions and employer associations, often joined by government representatives. The OECD recognizes that the form and intensity of coordination in these centralized systems varies, but they are similar in their shared attempt to coordinate bargaining at the sectoral or national levels.
2. ***Coordinated decentralized systems***: Six countries (also in Europe) possess highly coordinated collective bargaining systems, but which operate in a more decentralized manner. They combine sector-wide provisions with considerable flexibility to negotiate specific terms at the level of individual firms or workplaces.
3. ***Partial sectoral bargaining or coordination***: In five identified countries, collective bargaining occurs primarily at the firm level, but is supplemented by opportunities to negotiate on a sector-wide basis in certain circumstances, negotiate pattern contracts, and/or undertake wage coordination by peak-level union and employer organisations.
4. ***Firm-level collective bargaining***: In this most decentralized category, collective bargaining occurs mostly at the firm level, with little capacity to coordinate bargaining or set broader conditions and benchmarks. Even within many of these countries, however, opportunity exists for multi-employer bargaining: including pattern, sectoral and occupational arrangements extending across many employers.³

Table 1 lists the countries belonging to each of these four broad categories of industrial relations systems.

² See OECD (2019).

³ For example, as discussed further below, multi-employer bargaining is common in Canada in many industries, including the construction, manufacturing, education and health sectors. Industry-wide or multi-workplace bargaining occurs in several UK industries (including construction, arts and manufacturing). Industry-level collective bargaining has become common in the Czech Republic following a 2004 labour law reform. These countries are characterized by higher collective bargaining coverage than other countries in the OECD's decentralized category, and this partial use of sectoral and broader-based bargaining systems is important in supporting that higher level of coverage.

Table 1 Major categories of industrial relations systems	
Category	Members
Coordinated centralized¹	Belgium, Finland, France, Iceland, Italy, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland
Coordinated decentralized	Austria, Denmark, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden
Some sectoral bargaining or coordination	Greece, Ireland ² , Japan, Luxembourg, Slovak. Rep.
Mostly workplace based	Australia ³ , Canada, Chile, Czech Rep., Estonia, Hungary, Korea, Latvia, Lithuania, Mexico, New Zealand, Poland, Turkey, U.K., U.S.
<p>Source: Adapted from OECD (2019).</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Includes two sub-groups: weakly and strongly coordinated centralized systems. 2. Ireland appears in two categories in the OECD taxonomy; we have placed it in this category on the basis of its system of system of sectoral employment orders and joint labour committees. 3. Australia has a unique system of sector-specific minimum wages and labour standards, called the Modern Awards system, which the OECD considers as an alternative to sectoral collective bargaining. However, the Awards system no longer features direct negotiations between employers and unions, and almost all collective bargaining in Australia occurs at the level of individual workplaces. 	

One very strong conclusion from this international comparison of bargaining systems is that multi-employer bargaining systems of all kinds are associated with notably higher collective bargaining coverage. The widespread use of sectoral and multi-employer systems of all kinds results in a higher proportion of workers in each country covered by the terms of collective agreements. There is a strong and almost monotonic relationship between the availability of multi-employer bargaining systems and the scope of bargaining coverage. With options for multi-employer bargaining, and the ability to negotiate across multiple workplaces, collective agreements can reach a larger share of workers, lifting wages and improving conditions for a broader segment of the labour market.

Table 2
Bargaining systems and bargaining coverage
OECD countries

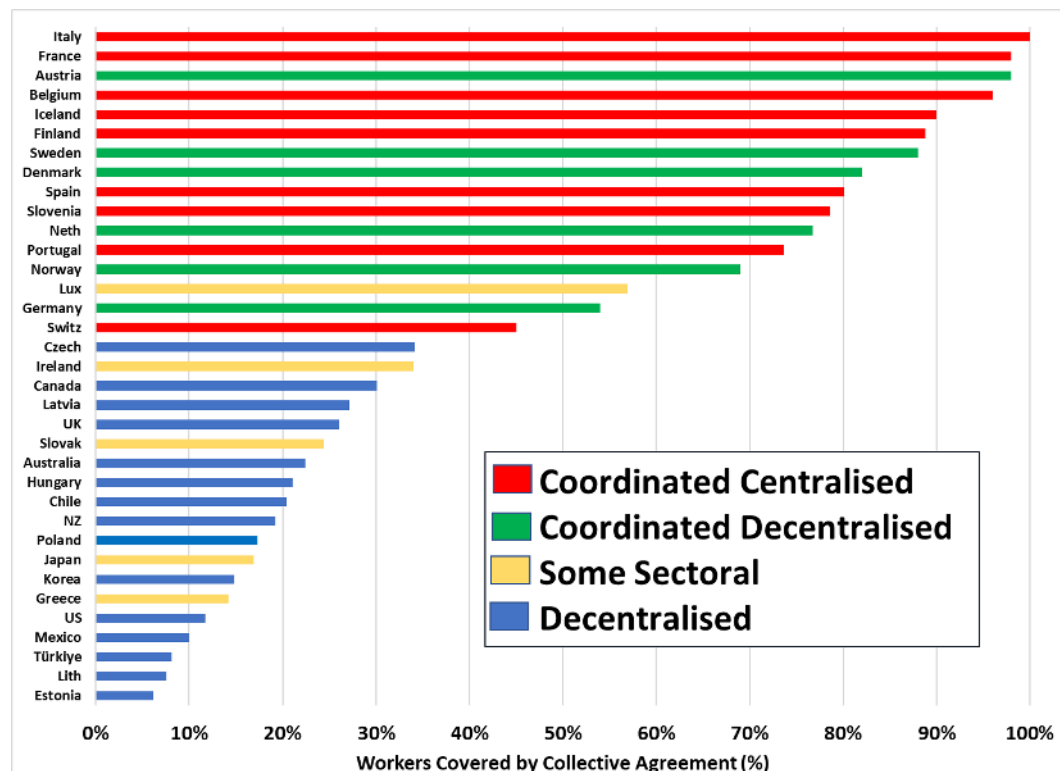
	Coverage (2018 or latest)	Change since 2010 (or latest)		Coverage (2018 or latest)	Change since 2010 (or latest)
Coordinated centralized			Some sectoral bargaining / coordination		
Belgium	96.0%	0.0	Greece	14.2%	-85.8
Finland	88.8%	1.3	Ireland	34.0%	-6.5
France	98.0%	0.0	Japan	16.9%	-1.5
Iceland	90.0%	0.0	Luxemb.	56.9%	-1.5
Italy	100.0%	0.0	Slovak Rep.	24.4%	-15.6
Portugal	73.6%	-4.2	Average¹	33.1%	-6.3
Slovenia	78.6%	8.6	Mostly enterprise-based		
Spain	80.1%	0.7	Australia ²	22.4%	-11.5
Switzerland	45.0%	3.9	Canada	30.1%	-1.3
Average	83.3%	1.1	Chile	20.4%	5.0
Coordinated decentralized			Czech Rep.	34.2%	-1.8
Austria	98.0%	0.0	Estonia	6.1%	-9.6
Denmark	82.0%	-0.6	Hungary	21.1%	-6.2
Germany	54.0%	-5.8	Korea	14.8%	2.6
Netherlands	76.7%	-13.9	Latvia	27.1%	-5.8
Norway	69.0%	-5.0	Lithuania	7.6%	-3.3
Sweden	88.0%	-0.7	Mexico	10.0%	-0.2
Average	77.9%	-4.3	N.Z.	19.2%	3.6
			Poland	17.3%	-1.3
			Turkiye	8.1%	1.2
			U.K.	26.0%	-4.9
			U.S.	11.7%	-1.4
			Average	18.4%	-2.3
Source: Adapted from Stanford, Macdonald and Raynes (2022), citing OECD Labour Market Statistics, Collective Bargaining Coverage.					
1. Excluding Greece.					
2. Includes current federally- and state-registered enterprise agreements.					

Table 2 provides data on collective bargaining coverage in OECD countries for 2018 (the latest year for which near-complete data is available⁴), and the change in coverage in each country since 2010. The table is organised into the same four categories of bargaining systems described in Table 1. Countries with coordinated centralized systems have the highest average coverage rate (83%), followed closely by those with coordinated decentralized systems (78%). The group characterised by partial sectoral

⁴ Some countries do not report bargaining coverage data each year, so the most recent available data prior to 2018 is reported in Table 3.

bargaining or coordination has average coverage of 33%.⁵ Decentralized systems report the lowest average coverage, at just 18%. Canada’s coverage rate (30.1% in 2018) was second-highest of all the countries in this category (behind the Czech Republic).

Figure 1. Bargaining Systems and Bargaining Coverage, 2018 (or most recent)



Source: OECD Labour Market Statistics, Collective Bargaining Coverage.

Figure 1 provides visual confirmation that achieving higher bargaining coverage is very much dependent on access to some form of multi-employer bargaining arrangement. The half of countries with above-median bargaining coverage rates is composed exclusively of countries with coordinated systems, whether centralized or decentralized (illustrated in red and green, respectively, on Figure 1). Meanwhile, almost all of the countries with decentralized systems (illustrated in blue) have very low coverage rates. Moreover, within the group of decentralized systems, countries which feature more scope for broader-based or multi-employer bargaining (including the Czech Republic, Canada and the UK) have achieved significantly higher bargaining coverage than other countries in the decentralized category.

About two-thirds of OECD economies have seen collective bargaining coverage decline since 2010, although as indicated in Table 2, that trend is not universal. The coordinated centralized category experienced stable collective bargaining coverage – increasing, on average, by just over one percentage point since 2010. Most countries in the other three categories experienced declining coverage since 2010, with some exceptions. Countries with decentralized systems, but where bargaining coverage grew,

⁵ The averages for this group reported in Table 1 exclude Greece, which experienced a radical retrenchment of collective bargaining practices following the global financial crisis I 2008-09: moving rapidly from centralized to decentralized as a condition of structural adjustment measures negotiated with the EU and the IMF.

include Chile, Türkiye, Korea and New Zealand. The decline in bargaining coverage in Canada was relatively modest in this period; again, this likely reflects the partial use of sectoral and broader-based policies in some industries (especially public sector occupations, where collective bargaining coverage has been stable⁶), which has helped to stabilize coverage. However, with Canada maintaining among the highest coverage rates of countries in the OECD’s decentralized category, it seems that collective bargaining coverage in Canada is unlikely improve without the introduction of alternative channels for accessing collective bargaining.

The critical importance of multi-employer collective bargaining systems to stronger collective bargaining coverage has been acknowledged by policy-makers in other countries, who have prioritised the expansion of collective bargaining coverage as a strategy for lifting wages and improving income equality.⁷ In Europe, for example, a new directive from the Council of the EU has instructed EU-member countries to expand collective bargaining coverage toward 80% of employment, as part of an ambitious strategy to lift wages and reduce the incidence of low-wage work across the EU:

“One of the goals of the directive is to increase the number of workers who are covered by collective bargaining on wage setting. To reach that objective, countries should promote the capacity of social partners to engage in collective bargaining. Where the collective bargaining coverage rate is, for instance, below a threshold of 80%, member states should establish an action plan to promote collective bargaining. The action plan should set out a clear timeline and specific measures to progressively increase the rate of collective bargaining coverage.” (Council of the EU, 2022)

As is clear from Table 2 and Figure 1 above, reaching bargaining coverage of 80% would require the widespread implementation of coordinated multi-employer bargaining systems. No OECD countries without such systems have bargaining coverage even close to that 80% level. So the EU directive in effect is instructing its member countries to implement multi-employer bargaining systems in order to attain the desired coverage rate (as argued by Muller and Shulten, 2022).

In sum, the international evidence linking the existence of multi-employer collective bargaining practices with higher collective bargaining coverage is very strong. Countries which aim to expand the scope of collective bargaining coverage, as part of a broader strategy for lifting wages and attaining more equal income distribution, need to include multi-employer bargaining opportunities as a central component in their strategies.

Canadian practices

Sectoral and broader-based bargaining systems are a common and familiar dimension of collective bargaining in many Canadian situations. And in Canada, too, the correlation between broader-based bargaining and higher bargaining coverage is also clear.

Sectoral and broader-based bargaining systems have been implemented in most provinces in a variety of broader public sector activities, including education, health care, social services and public

⁶ The decline in bargaining coverage in the private sector, however, has been more severe: private sector bargaining coverage declined by one-tenth (to just 15.5%) in Canada from 2010 through 2023, and by more than one-sixth in B.C. (to 14.6%).

⁷ Traxler and Behrens (2002) provide a detailed survey of the mechanisms of collective bargaining extension mechanisms across 20 EU countries.

administration. In most provinces, public sector bargaining is commonly coordinated across multiple worksites, often involving multiple unions and employers (such as individual school boards or hospitals), who coordinate their bargaining engagement through collective union- and employer-side councils. These structures, through which strong collective bargaining relationships are sustained and applied across whole sectors, is clearly an important factor explaining the higher rate of union coverage in public sector work.⁸ In Canada, union contracts covered 77% of public sector employment in 2023,⁹ and that share has not changed in recent decades. In BC, public sector union coverage equalled 79% in 2023, and that coverage ratio has been similarly stable.

Sectoral, multi-employer and broader-based bargaining structures are also common in many private sector settings in Canada. Examples include construction, film and entertainment production, private transport operations (including owner-operator arrangements in trucking and taxis), cleaners and some manufacturing industries.¹⁰ There is great variety in the history, rationale and specific processes incorporated into these private sector broader-based models. It is not a coincidence that private sector industries where broader-based bargaining is common, are also characterized by higher levels of bargaining coverage. For example, bargaining coverage in the construction industry (where sector-based bargaining is the norm) averaged 31.4% across Canada in 2023 – twice the average for the overall private sector.¹¹ Other private sector industries where various forms of broader-based and multi-employer bargaining exist include manufacturing (22.9% coverage in 2023) and transportation and warehousing (40.7%). This positive relationship between broader-based bargaining and coverage is self-reinforcing: industries with higher coverage have been able to introduce broader-based bargaining structures, which in turn support continued or even expanded coverage.

It is worth noting the particularly extensive experience with broader-based bargaining models in Quebec. Quebec has a unique “decree” system which established innovative systems for negotiating and extending collective bargaining provisions across specified occupations and regions, in which collective bargaining would otherwise be unlikely to occur. Examples include private security services and motor vehicle maintenance shops.¹² In addition, Quebec’s construction industry has a well-developed sectoral structure. Other channels for multi-employer or sector-wide collective bargaining have also been established in Quebec, including a unique system for province-wide collective bargaining for self-employed workers in home-based childcare centres.¹³ In light of this experience, and with continuing support within the Quebec industrial relations system for innovation with broader-based bargaining systems, it is no surprise that private sector union coverage in Quebec in 2023 (23% in 2023) is significantly stronger than in any other province.

Across both industries and across provinces, therefore, the correlation between sectoral and broader-based bargaining systems and union coverage is clear in Canada – just as is true in the international data.

⁸ Other factors contributing to higher union coverage in public sector roles include more conducive employer attitudes to collective bargaining in many cases, the higher average educational qualifications of public sector employees and reduced exposure to private competitive pressures.

⁹ Calculations from Statistics Canada Table 14-10-0070-01.

¹⁰ A survey of broader-based bargaining models including in many private sector applications is provided by Mitchell and Murray (2017); see especially pp. 352-368.

¹¹ Calculations from Statistics Canada Table 14-10-0070-01.

¹² For more details on the history and workings of the “decree” system, see Jalette (2006) and Unifor (2015).

¹³ See CBC News (2020).

Where collective bargaining can be solidified within the framework of ongoing broader-based and multi-employer arrangements, they are less vulnerable to the efforts of employers to evade or defeat union representation and bargaining. Moreover, the application of established bargaining procedures to new workplaces that fall within defined sectors ensures that bargaining coverage grows with the overall level of sectoral employment. Particularly in private sector workplaces, sectoral bargaining arrangements seem critical to attaining and maintaining a critical mass of collective bargaining coverage – so vital to the ability of workers to negotiate better compensation and better jobs.

General economic benefits from extending bargaining coverage

The preceding section described the clear correlation – both internationally and across Canadian provinces and industries – between sectoral and broader-based collective bargaining systems and bargaining coverage. A major motive for pursuing the implementation of such structures in BC is precisely to extend the effective ability to use collective bargaining to a broader range of BC’s labour force. This is particularly important in private sector industries, especially those characterized by small, dispersed, or fragmented business structures and workplaces. At present, workers in many of these private service sectors (such as food service, warehousing and on-demand platforms) must confront daunting obstacles – not least being the unremitting efforts of employers to defeat and evade collective bargaining responsibilities, even shutting down locations or franchises which manage to unionize despite the odds – to winning access to basic representation and bargaining rights.

In this context, one major category of economic benefits from sectoral and broader-based bargaining systems derives simply from the fact that more workers (including in these fragmented private service industries) will have access to collective bargaining. There is a vast international research literature attesting to the positive impacts of collective representation, collective voice and collective bargaining for both the well-being of workers, and the quality and success of workplaces. This section briefly summarizes several of the major channels through which broader collective bargaining coverage can benefit workers, employers and the economy.¹⁴ Collective representation and bargaining coverage, giving workers more say in their workplaces and opportunity to negotiate improved compensation and conditions, is not only important to the well-being of workers directly covered. There is abundant evidence that collective representation and bargaining coverage contribute positively to broader economic and social outcomes, in many ways.

Wages

A central benefit of collective bargaining is it allows workers to counter-balance the disproportionate bargaining power of employers in setting wages and other components of compensation. On an individual basis, few workers possess leverage to negotiate wages that keep pace with their skills, efforts and productivity: the “cost of disagreement” facing an employer who prefers not to improve wages for any individual worker is small, limited to the possibility that that individual might quit. Collective bargaining evens the scales, allowing workers to impose a more significant cost of disagreement on employers (up to and including work stoppages if necessary to win a better outcome), and thus attain a more balanced wage structure.

¹⁴ For more detailed surveys of the economic benefits of collective representation, voice and bargaining coverage, please see Stanford and Poon (2021), Wilkinson et al., (2020), Bennet and Kaufman (2007), and OECD (2019).

In Canada, median hourly wages for workers covered by a collective agreement were 27% higher in 2023 than for those with no contract.¹⁵ In BC, this union wage premium is similar (25%). The union wage premium has narrowed since the turn of the century; one key reason is the significant increases in minimum wages implemented in most provinces (including BC) over the last decade, which has significantly and positively lifted median wages for non-union-covered workers. Nevertheless, the impact of collective bargaining on wages remains strong, and is vitally important for maintaining a sustainable balance of income distribution between labour and other factors of production.

Recent research on the problem of monopsony power in labour markets (whereby large and concentrated employers can exert a negative wage-suppressing influence on labour markets due to their large size) attests to the importance of workers having countervailing power to negotiate better wages.¹⁶ In the case of monopsony, the ability of collective bargaining to lift wages serves a dual purpose, since it can simultaneously lead to both higher wages and higher employment: since the incentive for large firms to limit employment in order to suppress wages is dissipated when wages are set through negotiation rather than employer preference.

Income distribution and inequality

Empirical evidence confirms that collective bargaining leads not only to higher wages, but also more equality in wage incomes – both within workplaces and across broader society.¹⁷ There are many dimensions to this equity-promoting effect of worker voice and agency. Jaumotte and Buitron (2015) show that reduced inequality results from both lifting the bottom of the wage distribution (by raising wages for lower-income workers) and curtailing excessive growth at the top (limiting escalation of salaries and bonuses for executives and other elites).¹⁸ Freeman et al., (2015) show that higher wages resulting from unions and other wage-regulating institutions result in greater intergenerational mobility, by facilitating more economic opportunity for the children of workers who benefit from these structures. Other dimensions of inequality are also ameliorated by stronger union representation and collective bargaining, including gaps in household wealth¹⁹ and racial inequality – since the benefits of union-negotiated benefits are especially important for Black, Indigenous and workers of colour.²⁰ Across all of these dimensions, union representation plays an important role moderating the economic and social consequences of growing inequality in Canadian society.

Health and safety

By ensuring regular channels of input and communication, including standing joint health and safety committees and related structures, unionized workplaces are best able to monitor emerging health and safety threats, educate both workers and managers on how to prevent risks and pressure employers to

¹⁵ Calculations from Statistics Canada Table 14-10-0066-01.

¹⁶ See Naidu et al. (2018) and U.S. Department of the Treasury (2022) for more theoretical and empirical evidence on the impacts of employer monopsony power.

¹⁷ Important contributions to this finding are Blanchflower and Bryson 2010; Eidlin 2016; and Card, Lemieux, and Riddell 2018.

¹⁸ Doorey and Stanford (2023) provide empirical data for Canada attesting to the impact of unions in moderating incomes for the richest segments of society.

¹⁹ See Weller, Madland, and Powell (2016).

²⁰ See Rosenfeld and Klaykamop (2012) and Weller and Madland (2018).

undertake pro-active investments in prevention and care.²¹ This applies to newly emerging occupational risks, such as repetitive strain injuries, mental health injuries and exposure issues. Union representation is also effective in the increasingly important area of public health education and protection, as evidenced so dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic. By providing a reliable and trusted voice in workplaces around public health issues (including contagion prevention, vaccinations, etc.), and providing workers with assured channels for implementing health practices, union representation constitutes a critical asset in helping to build safer, healthier workplaces and communities.²²

Productivity

Abundant empirical research confirms that labour productivity and efficiency are improved in the context of collective representation systems that provide for workers' regular voice and input, and close-off lower-productivity cost-minimizing employment strategies.²³ These positive productivity effects are stronger when managers are encouraged or compelled to listen and respond to workers' input and demands, rather than being allowed to ignore or obstruct these processes (as is often the case in non-union workplaces, where workers' input is dependent on managers voluntary discretion). One channel through which collective representation contributes to productivity is through improved employee retention (discussed further below). But there are many other links between union coverage and productivity. The existence of more stable jobs and better compensation (associated with unionization and other formal structures of worker voice) encourages employers to adopt more skill- and capital-intensive business strategies. It also curtails the use of "low-road" business strategies based on labour cheapening and insecure employment models, which are associated with lower productivity.²⁴ By collecting information on worker experiences and preferences, stronger voice mechanisms also induce better staffing decisions and management practices that improve morale and cooperation in workplaces, and further boost firm performance. And by lifting wage levels, collective bargaining provides a spur to labour-saving technological change and innovation, that reinforces productivity growth.

Turnover and retention

Workers who are more satisfied with their work arrangements, conditions and compensation are more likely to stay in their positions, reducing costs of turnover, recruitment and training. Canadian data indicate that satisfied workers are 17% more likely to stay in their current job than those who are not.²⁵ Worker satisfaction is also closely linked to having more control over working hours and conditions. Avoidable turnover can add tens of thousands of dollars per year to labour costs per worker. Unfortunately, Canada's labour market is currently marked by very high levels of job turnover and churn. About one-fifth of Canadian workers start new jobs in any given year; in some low-wage, less appealing industries, turnover is much higher. Canada's accommodation and food services – with among the lowest union coverage rates of any industry in Canada – has by far the highest turnover and shortest average job tenure of any industry. Average tenure in this sector in 2023 (52 weeks) was less than half as long as

²¹ For example, Zoorob (2018) finds a one percentage point decline in union density is associated with a 5% increase in the incidence of workplace fatalities.

²² Soares and Berg (2023) provide strong evidence of the impact of unionization in reducing mortality from COVID-19 in the US. If unionization had maintained its postwar peak level in the US (35% density in the mid-1950s), the national mortality rate would have been reduced by over one-quarter.

²³ See, for example, Addison et al., (2007); Bart et al., (2020); Huebler and Jirjahn (2001); and Jirjahn (2014).

²⁴ See Kochan and Kimball (2019).

²⁵ See Martin (2018).

highly unionized industries (such as utilities, transportation, education and health care).²⁶ This ongoing flux, driven in part by dissatisfaction among workers with their jobs (as well as the insecurity of precarious positions) adds to labour costs, underutilizes skills and training and undermines productivity.

Macroeconomic performance

Paid work is the most important source of personal income in Canada, and personal consumption spending is the largest component (by expenditure) of GDP. So by lifting total incomes, collective bargaining also strengthens aggregate demand conditions, economic growth and job-creation. A more equal distribution of income has an additional, secondary effect on aggregate demand: by shifting more income toward those at the lower end of the distribution ladder, who have a higher propensity to spend (rather than save) that income, total spending is boosted. In most industrial countries, redistribution of income toward lower-income households will produce a net boost to aggregate demand and economic growth, thanks to the higher spending propensity of lower-income households.²⁷

Quality of care and service

Workers who have a greater say in working conditions and work organization are also more likely to be able to deliver higher-quality output. This is especially clear in various service occupations, where quality is at least as important as quantity in measuring productivity. In human and public service jobs, for example, workers who are empowered with voice, representation and job security are better able to demand practices and improvements that facilitate better quality service delivery – benefiting both the workers and the clients they serve. A timely example of this effect was provided during the COVID-19 pandemic: rates of mortality in privately-run long term care facilities (largely non-unionized) were much higher than in non-profit or publicly-owned centres (most of which are unionized).²⁸ Long-standing research in other human service industries (such as health care and childcare) also confirms the positive link between union representation, job stability, compensation levels, reduced turnover and the quality and safety of service delivery. A similar benefit is visible in many private service jobs, too. Rapid job turnover, poor training, low wages and irregular work schedules all undermine the quality of service in many low-wage private sector roles – including hospitality, personal services and retail trade.

Other benefits

International research has documented and quantified many other spin-off benefits that flow from collective representation, voice and bargaining. Better wages, more stable jobs and the provision of supplementary pensions and benefits means that workers in better jobs pay more taxes, and have less need to rely on public programs and income supports; the net impact on government fiscal balances of broader collective bargaining is thus positive.²⁹ Empirical evidence indicates that workers with more control over their working hours have better sleep patterns, better mental and physical health, less use of prescriptions and stronger family relationships.³⁰ US research has found that unionized workers with

²⁶ Statistics Canada Table 14-10-0054-01.

²⁷ Lavoie and Stockhammer (2012) provide

²⁸ See Stall et al., (2020) and Armstrong and Cohen (2020).

²⁹ See Sojourner and Pacas (2019).

³⁰ See Peetz (2019), pp. 185-186.

better-paid, more secure jobs are also less likely to die from suicide or overdose³¹ – a finding that is especially relevant in the context of BC’s continuing opioids crisis.

Broader collective representation and bargaining coverage can even translate into stronger democracy. Research suggests that when politicians face organized worker voices in their constituencies, they are less likely to be swayed by the concerted influence of wealthy elites; this advances the democratic principle of “equal responsiveness.”³² The skills and experience that workers learn through participation in workplace systems of voice and representation (associated with union-covered workplaces) enhance their confidence and capacity to participate in broader democratic processes outside of the workplace.³³ Finally, US research suggests that collective representation (leading to both enhanced channels of workplace dialogue, and higher and more equal wages) helps to reduce racial resentment among white workers, improve internal solidarity and cohesiveness in workplaces and reduce the extent of racial and social polarization in the broader community.³⁴

Through all of these channels, therefore, broader coverage by collective bargaining arrangements and related structures and practices (including channels of internal voice and representation, health and safety committees and other structures) can advance a wide range of economic and social goals: from stronger wages, more economic equality and safer, more productive workplaces, through to diffuse benefits such as inclusive communities and stronger democracy. In this context, actively facilitating collective bargaining should be a policy priority for any government concerned with those issues. And given the clear correlation between sectoral and broader-based bargaining systems, and stronger collective bargaining coverage, implementing opportunities for sectoral and broader-based bargaining is an obvious means of promoting stronger bargaining coverage.

Specific advantages of sectoral and broader-based bargaining systems

As discussed above, the most obvious and direct economic benefits resulting from sectoral and broader-based bargaining systems arise from their evident value in supporting greater extent of collective bargaining. This allows the well-documented benefits of collective bargaining to be experienced across a broader segment of the labour market.

However, there are additional, incremental economic benefits which result from sectoral and broader-based systems, in addition to the general benefits of extending access to broader collective bargaining. In essence, these additional benefits reinforce and amplify the gains achieved through expanded bargaining coverage. Not only is coverage broadened, and thus more accessible to more workers (including those in occupations and workplaces effectively barred from collective bargaining via conventional Wagner Act processes), but bargaining itself can become more effective and efficient. In this section, we briefly describe several ways in which sectoral and broader-based bargaining systems can generate additive economic benefits:

³¹ See Eisenberg-Guyot et al., (2020).

³² See Becher and Stegmüller (2020).

³³ See Patmore (2020).

³⁴ See Frymer and Grumbach (2020).

More focused, coordinated bargaining

In industries where collective bargaining is widespread but dispersed and uncoordinated, multiple bargaining processes can overlap, conflict and/or result in more frequent and unpredictable work stoppages. This is particularly true when major facilities incorporate multiple collective agreements covering different groups of workers (across occupation or function). Indeed, an important motive for the past introduction of sectoral or broader-based bargaining systems in many industries in Canada (including construction, education and health care) was precisely to build a more consistent and predictable bargaining system out of disparate and fractured decentralized arrangements, and thus reduce the frequency of disputes.

Another advantage of focused, coordinated bargaining is that it allows both parties in negotiations to concentrate their resources (including leadership attention, research, legal resources and other inputs) at particular points in time. This ensures that bargaining is well-resourced, supported by adequate attention and resources on both sides. Economies of scale in the costs of bargaining can also be attained by concentrating bargaining around larger, more concentrated tables, rather than dealing with a broad and overlapping portfolio of smaller negotiations.

Level playing field

Sector-wide bargaining arrangements aim to establish benchmarks for wages, working conditions and other key dimensions of employment that would apply evenly across all players in a given industry, region or occupation. This provides a more consistent, transparent and reliable footing for all parties to enter into employment relationships.³⁵ It also channels competitive pressure between firms into more useful and productive directions: instead of competing with each other to find new ways of driving down labour costs (in a “race to the bottom”), firms are steered toward more genuine improvements in efficiency, technology and innovation, to the benefit of employers, workers and consumers. Common sector-wide standards facilitate increased mobility across workplaces or employers within any industry, since any worker can be confident they will achieve similar compensation and conditions if they find a new role within the industry. This is useful for industries that are adapting to technological, economic or demographic change. European research confirms that under sectoral bargaining arrangements, firms are more adept at responding to shocks and disruptions, while providing employers with enhanced confidence regarding reliable labour supply and stable labour costs.³⁶ With the establishment of clear sector-wide standards, and well-resourced bodies for implementing and overseeing those standards, responsibility for monitoring and enforcing labour standards can be taken up, in the first instance, by unions and employers (often operating through respective councils), instead of under-resourced employment standards departments of government. This enhances confidence that the agreed, uniform standards will be respected on all sides.

Training and qualifications

Sectoral and broader-based bargaining regimes can facilitate stronger, more uniform and more reliable training and qualification systems for sectors and occupations. By providing structures through which workers, employers, educational institutions, professional regulatory bodies and other stakeholders can discuss training needs, design and implement training and qualification standards and support

³⁵ Glass and Madland (2022) discuss these benefits in the context of recent innovations in sector-wide wage boards in various U.S. states and cities.

³⁶ See Marginson et al. (2014).

workplaces to ensure that skills and training benchmarks are well-known and achieved, sectoral bargaining systems can lift and harmonize skills and certification performance across broad industry and occupational groupings. This benefit is visible in other industries with well-established broader-based bargaining systems. In construction, for example, skills and apprenticeship requirements for specific building trades are defined and enforced through collective bargaining and contract administration. In many broader public sector activities (such as health care and allied services), sectoral bargaining tables also serve as a vehicle for defining, monitoring and improving skill and qualification expectations. Quebec's decree system has also been paired with sector-wide training and certification standards.³⁷ When these standards are set on a consistent sector-wide basis, employers can be sure that new recruits meet accepted standards. For workers, mobility across employers is enhanced by the existence of uniform and transparent standards and certifications. Moreover, by negotiating pay progression systems that are tied to these industry- or occupation-wide training standards, workers can be certain their investments in their own skills and qualifications will reliably pay off in better incomes and increasing responsibilities – thus enhancing the incentives for skills acquisition.

Boost to innovation and productivity

With wage and compensation benchmarks established across whole sectors or occupations, the innovative and entrepreneurial efforts of employers can be better channeled into more productive and socially useful channels. For one company to gain an edge over its competitors, management attention must now be directed toward other strategies – instead of pursuing strategies to reduce labour costs through more exploitive terms and conditions. Evidence from Europe indicates that sector-wide and broader collective agreements facilitate positive, technology-intensive innovation strategies, with corresponding benefits for productivity performance.³⁸ Improved training, job retention and income security provided under sector-wide agreements has also been found to contribute to productivity growth.³⁹ Enhanced workforce stability can also help employers achieve more stable workforces, with assured qualifications and capabilities (thanks to the universal application of consistent standards for training and qualification).⁴⁰

Applications to non-standard employment

There are numerous industries in the BC economy marked by working arrangements for which conventional collective bargaining arrangements are difficult to organize and maintain. Despite those challenges, some such industries have a long and successful experience with collective bargaining. Even for workers in self-employed or contractor positions, collective bargaining can even the scales with purchasers or contracting firms and improve compensation and working conditions. Examples include collective bargaining for self-employed or owner-operator workers in fishing, forestry and trucking. Most often, given the fragmented nature of these industries, these arrangements must apply to multiple employers or across entire sectors.

³⁷ In the decree covering vehicle maintenance facilities in Montreal, for example, the “Parity Committee” which negotiates and implements the decree also establishes standards for mechanic certification tied to respective pay grades.

³⁸ See da Silva Bichara et al., (2023) for recent evidence.

³⁹ Benassi and Wright (2023) review data from numerous OECD countries to find a positive correlation between sectoral bargaining and productivity.

⁴⁰ See Roberts (2021) for examples.

The growth of non-standard or precarious employment arrangements requires that the application of collective bargaining structures to nominally independent producers will become more important in the future. A specific current example is the case of platform-based work-on-demand workers, whose access to traditional collective bargaining processes is limited by virtue of their supposed “contractor” status, the dispersed nature of their work, and very high turnover among participants. It is difficult to imagine how compensation and working conditions for these workers could be improved without access to some form of broader-based collective bargaining. Possible models would involve elected representatives of platform workers negotiating terms with platform firms, that would then apply to all workers engaged through the business.⁴¹

Macroeconomic outcomes

More coordinated collective bargaining systems can also exert a positive impact on broader labour market and macroeconomic outcomes. The OECD’s recent review of collective bargaining systems (OECD, 2019) explored these impacts. Researchers used multivariate analysis to compare labour market outcomes across the various categories of labour relations systems identified above. The report showed that coordinated multi-employer bargaining systems achieve better employment and unemployment outcomes than decentralized firm-level systems. It also concluded that multi-employer options achieve greater equality and economic inclusion. As the OECD summarizes:

“Co-ordinated systems are shown to be associated with higher employment, lower unemployment, a better integration of vulnerable groups and less wage inequality than fully decentralized systems. Weakly co-ordinated, centralized systems and largely decentralized systems hold an intermediate position, performing similarly in terms of unemployment to fully decentralized systems, but sharing many of the positive effects on other outcomes with co-ordinated systems.” (OECD 2019, p. 113)

Multi-employer bargaining, therefore, opens the possibility of achieving stronger macroeconomic and distributional performance. When collective bargaining is coordinated on a sectoral or economy-wide basis, there is no trade-off between bargaining progress and aggregate employment. To the contrary, coordinated multi-employer bargaining is associated with better employment outcomes.

This finding is especially important in the context of current concerns in Canada and other industrial countries with inflation, in the wake of supply chain disruptions and the other after-effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Coordinated bargaining allows all parties to negotiations (including employers, unions and where relevant government) to respond to shocks like the recent inflationary cycle with a longer-term, more collaborative process. This is better than letting stakeholders fight each other for their best possible outcome, in hopes of protecting their own interests amidst macroeconomic uncertainty. Coordinated bargaining can thus facilitate longer-term deals that restore real wages for workers (which fell as a result of recent inflation), but in a gradual manner that does not exacerbate that inflation. Strong and coordinated collective bargaining, in this context, can play a positive role in stabilizing macroeconomic and inflation conditions.

⁴¹ Collective bargaining arrangements for platform workers have been implemented in several European countries, generally with application across multiple firms or platforms; see Stewart and Stanford (2022) for details.

Conclusion

International and Canadian evidence confirms that expanding sectoral and broader-based bargaining is essential for arresting the decline in bargaining coverage and ensuring that more BC workers have access to basic representation and bargaining rights – and the economic and social progress they can facilitate. Expanding bargaining coverage will usher in a broad portfolio of economic benefits: including higher and more equal wages, better health and safety practices, spurs for productivity growth, reduced employee turnover and better access to training. Moreover, specific features of broader-based and sectoral bargaining systems hold out the prospect of more efficient and effective bargaining, even for workers who are already covered by conventional collective bargaining. These include making bargaining more focused, predictable and better-resourced; facilitating bargaining for workers in non-standard employment relationships; and creating transparent and fair benchmarks for wages, qualifications and working conditions that apply across entire sectors, hence enhancing stability and best practices in all workplaces.

For all of these reasons, the development of new certification and bargaining processes to facilitate sectoral, broader-based and multi-employer collective bargaining systems should be a top priority for future labour law reform in BC. There is a growing consensus among industrial relations experts in Canada⁴² and internationally that this will be necessary for bringing the benefits of collective bargaining to workers who at present are denied that opportunity and ensuring that collective bargaining will continue to contribute to a fairer, more inclusive economy and society.

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⁴² See Doorey (2021) and Harcourt et al., (2023) for recent statements of this emerging view in Canada.

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