

Unions continue to play an integral part in today's society.

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In today's society unions are fundamental to the equal treatment of employees throughout the world. As we've seen over the past few years, the issues in developing countries where people are forced to work 16 hours per day/ 7 days per week, for substandard pay and no job protection. We've seen unequal wages for women, substandard working conditions in manufacturing, and unsafe work practices throughout Canada. Unions bring people together to address these concerns in a collective manner and ensure that employees have their rights protected. Unions ensure equal opportunities are provided, regardless of your sex, sexual orientation, gender, race, religious beliefs, etc. As a young man who identifies as queer, I have directly felt the impact of discrimination in the workplace. At the same time, I have also felt the benefits of having a union to provide support on issues of harassment and discrimination. I believe that this one of the most important roles of a union in today's society.

In 2013, Bangladesh experienced the country's worst industrial disaster – Rana Plaza, a complex which housed five garment factories supplying global brands collapsed killing 1135 peopleⁱ. This disaster, along with many others, sparked protests and demands in the country for greater safety in the garment manufacturing industry. Among the number of issues noted in a 2014 report conducted by Bangladesh Accord Foundation, overloaded ceilings proved to be the cause of the Rana Plaza disaster. Additionally, exposed cables, too few fire alarms and sprinklers, and locked emergency exits were a number of unsafe practices found in these facilitiesⁱⁱ. The issues surrounding this industry don't stop at unsafe work conditions – Bangladesh garment factory workers make approximately \$68 per month compared to a monthly minimum wage in mainland China of \$280 per monthⁱⁱⁱ. These workers don't get to experience the health and safety benefits of a unionized workplace.

While there are many ways for employers to ensure that their workers stay safe, unions can plan an integral part in ensuring the health and safety of workers around the world and throughout Canada. Under the Canada Labour Code Canadians have three fundamental health and safety rights: 1. The Right to Know; 2. The Right to Participate; 3. The Right to Refuse Dangerous Work. Unions help to inform and empower workers to speak up against unsafe work practices and have a positive influence on the health and safety of workers in Canada. Often times without this knowledge or the protection of a union, workers fear punishment or discipline for speaking out against unsafe work practices. Furthermore, unions often offer greater employee participation in Occupational Health and Safety efforts which have been found to have fewer injuries in both unionized and non-unionized settings^{iv}. It has also been found that unionization increases workers access to Occupational Health and Safety programs along with access to training regarding workplace hazards^v.

According to a recent study, women make approximately 72% of men's wages for similar work. Even in 2017, women are typically disproportionately represented in lower-paying industries. Unions have been an integral part for fighting for Equal Pay legislation at the provincial and federal levels in the 50s and 60s, but more is needed to push for further change. Unions play an important role in ensuring that jobs are evaluated based on their skill, effort, responsibility, and working condition, not on their gender. Furthermore, unions are an important part in developing strategies to promote women's participation in the workforce. While there has been tremendous progress since the 1950s and 1960s there is still a lot of work that needs to be done towards gender equality in the workplace. For example, in 2013, there were approximately 2,425,000 women union members working across Canada. They earned, on average, \$6.89/hour more than non-union women. The difference in wages is a result of unions willing to negotiate fair wages and work hours.

Unions play a very important role in the fight for a fair and safe work place for all workers, regardless of the sex, sexual orientation, race, gender, and gender identity. Without union protection, employers have the freedom to treat employees in an arbitrary fashion. However, there is still a very long battle for the LGBTQ+ community when it comes to workplace harassment and discrimination. According to the Trans PULSE Project and the National Center for Transgender equality, 97% of transgender people have been harassed in their workplace^{vi}. While unions have the potential to help negotiate human rights protection based on gender identity, unions and union members need to work harder to recognize and implement anti-discrimination policies.

As a young member of the LGBTQ community, I believe strongly in the need to fight discrimination in our society and especially in our workplace. I have been on the receiving end of workplace harassment due my sexual orientation. Fortunately, I was part of a union that supported me by assisting to address these issues with my employer. It was during this experience that I realized the importance of a workplace union. Without the protection of the union, this leaves employees vulnerable and susceptible to discrimination in the workplace. I was also in a position to stand up for what I believed in at the time, but for someone who may not be as confident and be experiencing the same form of discrimination, they may be affected by this for years.

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At a recent union delegation meeting I attended, representing the LGBTQ+ equity committee for the Northwest Territories, I spoke with a number of LGBTQ+ from Nunavut and the Yukon. The purpose of this union delegation meeting was to bring together members of the number of equity committees in Northern Canada. Upon arrival to the conference, I was pleasantly surprised by the gender neutral washrooms on site. After speaking to a few people, one being a transgender man, I was advised that this was his initiative, and wouldn't have been done if it wasn't for him addressing this at the start of the meeting. About halfway through this meeting a number of delegates raised their concerns regarding the gender neutral bathrooms and the fact that they were uncomfortable with the whole idea. I was shocked and deeply bothered that delegates representing a union, at a delegation meeting to specifically address issues related to human rights within the workplace, would be opposing the simple accommodate of a gender neutral washroom. If unions are to be serious about protections for all union members, there needs to be a shift in the way we address minorities in the workplace, and most of all, within the union itself.

As a young union worker, I take pride in the fact that I have the protection of a union and I'm part of the ongoing labour movement. I am fortunate and grateful for the fight that others put in to lay the groundwork for what is now the modern labour movement. Unions do and will continue to fight for a safer workplace. They continue to provide and work towards more training and tools for employees to be empowered in determining the safety of one's work. Additionally, unions help to ensure equal wages without discrimination based on one's sex and gender identity. While there are a number of arguments why unions are important in today's society, there is also a number of challenges that we will continue to face as minority members within the union. As I experienced first-hand, some union members themselves fail to see the challenges that lay ahead for the LGBTQ+ workforce and this is something that will need to change to make unions relevant for tomorrow's workforce.

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