



HOW AND WHY ARE UNIONS IMPORTANT IN TODAY'S SOCIETY?

ABSTRACT

Labour rights are human rights. Unions fought for strong labour rights. When labour rights are weakened, then unions have less ability to fight for human rights for all workers. - Paul Champ, Senior Partner, Champ and Associates

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Unions have been important since the beginning of labour. The start of the labour movement in Canada can be traced back to the late 1800s. At that time, union activity was illegal. Employers had the right to treat employees in any way they choose and because of this, employees didn't really have any rights pertaining to their job. The labour movement was created by people standing up together for fair wages, safe workplaces and decent work hours. Many of the benefits and standards won for our members are enjoyed by all workers today, such as minimum wage, health and safety regulations, and overtime. (Canadian Labour Congress, 2017).

Unions are just as important in today's society. The wages we earn, overtime pay, workplace safety standards, maternity and parental leave, vacation pay, and protection from discrimination and harassment are just a few rights employees in Canada have obtained thanks to unions. Unions help maintain a healthy relationship between the employer and employee by ensuring the rights are met according to the collective agreement. Our communities are positively affected by unions through the work they do fighting for social justice, participating in charity work, raising awareness not only from a workplace setting as well as a political platform.

Unions also make employees more aware of their rights as workers. Not every individual who accepts employment are fully aware of their rights and privileges that come with the position. For example, an employer may try to exploit employees by denying them appropriately timed breaks in a high paced work environment, and many employees will tolerate this type of abuse out of fear of losing their job or having their direct supervisor upset towards them. The collective agreement protects employees from this kind of abuse by informing them of their legal

rights. As well, the union will make employers liable in if injury or illness were caused because of workplace abuse or neglect.

According to the Canadian Labour Congress; women earn \$7.10 an hour more on average with a union at work and workers under the age of 25 earn \$3.74 an hour more on average with a union. Overall in Canada, union members earn \$5.28 an hour more on average than working without a union. The Union of the Northern Workers has an average of 8,000 union members across the Northwest Territories, equaling to 40% of the workforce. Statistically on average, workers make \$10.55 an hour more than non-unionized employees. (Canadian Labour Congress. 2017).

A stronger economy is a result of the importance of unions. Members of a union can often afford houses, better food, and transportation. Being paid on average, higher than non-unionized employees and having enhanced benefits such as job security, health and dental benefits creates healthier families that can contribute positively to the economic growth. Canada currently has a unionized employee rate of 30%, a decline from 1981 when the rate was 38%, a decline in members may be an example of workers not understanding the importance unions play with employers. (Galarneau, D. and T. Sohn. 2013)

Personally, as an active union member and vice president of my local, I often educate members on how the presence of unions are still necessary. In my experience, there are a number of members that do not understand the history of unions in Canada or they have an idea that the unions are no longer needed because we have these rights. Explaining to members the role of the union and why the employer grants vacation, wages, and medical and dental benefits can be at

times cumbersome. At times, while using the union board at work to post information for the local as well as UNW information, I often have to seek out individuals and ask for participation.

As I reflect back to a decade ago, the differences with union participation and knowledge are vastly different. When starting a new position, I had more time with a union representative to review the collective agreement, ask questions, and receive information regarding union events, local meetings, and signing a union card. I remember feeling I was a part of something great and excited to be a member. Presently, in my local union there are a number of members that have little information or knowledge about their local, collective agreement, or meetings. There are less than ten percent of members that show up to meetings, participation is low and in order to gain back the momentum of unions, there has to be a change. We have to find ways to boost morale and recruit members to be more active within our locals, utilizing the resources we have available such as social media; twitter and facebook, participation incentives such as union swag, having catered food at meetings, and offering a wider range of courses so members can become knowledgeable and involved. Explaining to members that without the union, the rights we have currently in our employment may very well be taken away. We have to remain solid as a whole for a greater outcome and strive towards our goals for fair and equal rights. Unions are successful because of their numbers and gaining members' participation and support will only better us all in the future.

References:

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