

Unions in Today's Society: A look at how unions have changed the lives of workers.

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By

Harold Ethan Hartley

Submitted to

The selection committee for the Josie Gould Memorial Scholarship

June 26, 2017

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Most employees will agree that unions are one of the benefits of living in modern day society. Unions were first organized in Canada in 1883; this change gave your average worker a voice to stand up for their rights. An individual has very little power as an employee, but with thousands of members, unions are a force to be reckoned with. In the past workers were expected to work long hours with few benefits. In the union song "Which Side Are You On?", Florence Patton Reece sings "Don't listen to their lies, Us poor folks haven't got a chance, Unless we organize". Here Reese is singing of her father's experience as a coal miner and the struggles he endured as an employee and the fight to organize. The fights of the early union organizers have paved the way for today's union members. Unions have raised the standard of living in Canada and are responsible for rights like minimum wage, paid vacation, and workplace safety protections. Unions are one of the only forces that divide our country from being comparable to countries like Saudi Arabia, where unions have been completely banned, considered one of the worst countries for workers' rights (Tudor, 2015). As unions have increased in power, they have also come under attack as industry tries to wrestle power back into its corner. Despite the attacks and attempts to undermine unions, they continue to be the best line of defense to ensure workers are treated fairly.

Before unions, workers were expected to work virtually every waking moment with no breaks and no overtime. Without unions, employers would "happily sacrifice the quality of life, economic well-being, the health and safety, and the very lives of working people if it pads their profit margins" (Hunter, 2014). Sick of being treated unfairly, workers began to organize

protests. Unions have been supporting the work force in Canada since the 1870s, all starting with 10,000 supporters showing up at Queen's Park in Toronto on April 15, 1872 protesting to standardize shorter working days. The strike evolved into the "Nine-Hour Movement". The Nine-Hour Movement was the first organized movement toward labor laws in Canada. The movement was a failure, but it created a snowball effect and started a turn of events that led Canadians toward our current working norms. Before the protest during the mid-19th century, Canadian workers felt adversity. The new union movement was rising in the United States and Britain. "This movement, which focused entirely on skilled workers, spread into Canada by the 1860s through the establishment of 'craft unions'" (Morton, 1982, p.26).

In recent decades, there has been increasing animosity towards unions by the business world, the government, and the media. Society has been told by business leaders that to be competitive in a global economy we need to increase flexibility by cutting benefits and protections. Unions have been accused of having a negative impact on workers by driving jobs to countries that do not have unions. These negative attacks are meant to justify actions that are designed to undermine unions, such as the denial of collective bargaining rights to farm workers or government intervention into strikes (Mendleson, 2012). But the reality is that unions are "really the only organized line of defense against the broad right-wing assault on a wide range of social programs and government regulations important to most Canadians" (McQuaig, 2013). Society must remember how unions have improved the lives of all workers, not only union members. The public must not be fooled by propaganda but remember the amazing progress that has been made in society since the introduction and rise of unions.

Unions have a strong presence in northern Canada including in the NWT. I recently spoke with the NWTTA LRO for Aklavik, Lisa Schachtschneider, about how unions have helped

union members in this community. She identified the help the union has provided in professional development opportunities for teachers. Living in an isolated community makes finding professional development opportunities difficult. The union has been active in organizing and funding training for teachers. Without the union, teachers would not have many options for professional development. She also identified the importance of the Collective Agreement between the teachers and the government. Without the union, this Agreement would not exist and workers would not have the benefits and protections that it provides. In addition, she has seen many instances of the employees contacting the union to enforce the Collective Agreement. As an individual, it is hard to force the government to honor the Agreement but as part of a union, employees have the power to stand up to the government and demand the Agreement be followed.

Unions have changed not only the working conditions for unionized workers but all workers in Canada. The pressures created by unions have changed how all employees are treated and the benefits and compensations they are entitled to. Unions have been a part of Canadian society for many years but this should not be taken for granted. We cannot forget how working conditions have improved with unions, or be fooled by the attacks on unions from business and government. Unions are one of the only organizations that represent the average person against the power of large corporations and government seeking to serve the corporate interests. If workers stick together and maintain a collective effort to fight for their interests, workers will continue to see improvements in benefits and protections.

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