



The Voice of Health: Reflections on the Importance of Unions Through the Eyes of a Future

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A thriving society— one rooted in equality, respect, and compassion— is contingent on a vast array of beliefs, structures, and initiatives having been set in place. Union contracts seek to set these measures into motion to ensure that the humanity and voice of all is never robbed from them but rather held in the highest regard. Personally, I believe that the core of what allows the individuals within a society to collectively thrive is wellness. As a university student who began my post-secondary schooling in psychology and have recently chosen to transfer into nursing, my most profound career aspirations, societal beliefs, and heartbreaks for humanity are all grounded in the importance of both psychological and physical well-being. I believe that physical and mental health have a synergistic effect on each other and, ultimately, one's quality of life. It is from this desire of my heart to see a healthy world that I structure my essay on unions' role in providing a society with the opportunity to thrive. Through prioritizing the preservation of workers' physical and psychological health, unions truly ensure that the workers' collective voice is heard and responded to.

Unions work to protect the physical health of individuals within a society in ways that are both preventative and involved. A 2016 study on “The Role of Labor Unions in Creating Working Conditions that Promote Public Health” found that all union contracts they studied promote workplace safety and include pension plans and health insurance as well as paid leave for vacation, bereavement, or sickness (Greenwich, Hagedorn, Hagopian, & Paras). Each one of these benefits promotes health for unionized workers. For example, paid leave allows members the time to receive adequate medical attention or recuperation time when they are sick, and allows for mental rejuvenation in times of loss, stress, or simply when one needs a break from the workplace environment. Unions also advocate for physical health through preventative means, such as the emphasis they put on ensuring employees are educated on workplace safety.

Giving members the right to refuse unsafe work without the fear of this refusal negatively influencing one's employment is a truly powerful way that unions guarantee workers' safety and security in the workplace (Wright 2016). Of course, the healthcare benefits that unionized workers receive also prioritize workers' health in a very direct manner.

Equally important to the physical wellness unions advocate for is psychological wellness. In addition to providing leave, unions reduce members' work-acquired stress by providing job security, prioritizing thorough training and mentorship in the workplace, recognizing minorities, and fighting for adequate compensation for all workers (Greenwich et al., 2016). If psychological health is sound, then quality of life and overall life satisfaction will also increase. A 2016 study on "Labour Union Membership and Life Satisfaction in the United States" found higher levels of life satisfaction amongst those working in a unionized workplace than those working in a non-unionized workplace. These findings rang true across all demographic groups, without income, gender, or age changing the reality that unions increase life satisfaction (Flavin & Shufeldt, p.178). This consistency of increased life satisfaction found among unionized workers, I believe, demonstrates unions' capacity to reach out especially to those suffering inequalities and discrimination while still benefitting members whose standing in society is not compromised by factors such as race, status, or sexual orientation. Union efforts have increased mental health across a broad spectrum, and that is truly commendable and impressive.

Through prioritizing the wellness of all, unions create a society of people who know they matter and are cared for. Prioritizing physical and mental health through the benefits mentioned in this paper, as well as the many not addressed, does more than just maintain the humanity of union members; it gives them a voice within the workplace and their lives. The 1986 Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion recognized the reality that "health is created and lived by people

within the settings of their everyday life.” Unions create a gateway into encouraging this lifestyle of health through the window of the everyday workplace.

As an aspiring nurse, my main intrigue and passion in respect to the importance of unions is within health care centres. When health care providers themselves are unionized, the benefits reflected in patient care and outcomes are extraordinary. In 2016, the correlation between unionized nurses and patient outcomes was studied. Research from this study indicated a “clear and immediate improvement in the average patient health outcomes following a successful union election” (Dube, Kaplan, & Thompson, p. 820). Overall, this research found that hospitals with strong unions experience notably less occurrences of a wide range of hospital-acquired illnesses, “ranging from less serious illnesses such as urinary tract infections to critical ones such as in-hospital death” (p. 830). Although hospital unions are just a small portion of the many job sectors that can and should be unionized, I find comfort in knowing that if I someday work within a unionized hospital my union will support me in providing patients with attentive and thorough healthcare.

A worker whose boss, colleagues, and overall workplace leaves them feeling heard, valued, and respected will treat their workplace with equal regard and their tasks with diligence. Nurses whose employing health care centre respect their breaks, regard their perspectives, and provide clear lines of communication to other health care providers will successfully facilitate progress in the health of their patients. A group of individuals whose physical and mental health is considered, lobbied for, and respected will collectively be able to thrive. Unions are important today because they allow individuals to step into their potential— both within the workplace and out of the workplace— through creating climates that allow all to feel safe, cared for, healthy, and heard.

## References

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