

*A rising tide lifts all boats: how and why unions are important in today's society*

Maya Fernandez

June 30, 2017

From 1978 to 1981, my father was a Frontier College labourer-teacher at the United Keno Hill Mine in Elsa, Yukon. He worked underground as a miner-helper during the day and in the evening taught English to some of his fellow workers from Hungary, Vietnam, India and other places as a volunteer. Although it was the oldest operating mine in the Yukon, the workers at the mine had the lowest wages among the mines in the territory. My dad and some of his co-workers decided to discuss how to improve things as a new contract had to be negotiated in 1979. They ended up going on strike to back up their demands – a long 8-month strike that began in 1979 and went into 1980. My father was elected to the bargaining team, took his place at the picket and organized the strike kitchen throughout the strike. At the end of the process, he and his peers were successful in bringing wages, working conditions and benefits on par with other mines in the territory (Phil Fernandez, personal communication, April 30, 2017). I provide this story as a reference because despite the 38-year gap between 1979 and 2017, the core principle of justice and fairness—and the important work of unions in upholding these principles—remain the same. Whether it is a mine in the Yukon, nurses in British Columbia, or teachers in Nova Scotia, unions have and continue to play an important role in protecting workers.

*‘How are unions important today?’* and *‘Why are unions important today?’* are separate, but interrelated questions. I will address these questions by examining first why unions are important, with a particular focus on the collective value of unions to workers. I will then address how unions are important by focusing on the specific function of unions that bring value to workers.

To understand why unions are important today, one must understand the importance of unions in the past, as the historical work of unions plays a key role in their modern significance. Unions have played and continue to play an important role in raising the standard of living for workers in Canada. This includes fighting for stronger labour laws, fair compensation, pension plans,

safe working conditions, health, vacation, and other benefits that many workers enjoy today and which contribute overall to the prosperity of Canada. The gains made by unions over decades of struggle must continue to be defended and improved upon.

Although many workers in Canada are fortunate to have job security and receive benefits that unions long worked for, there are many workers who are unprotected. Young workers are an example of a group facing significant job insecurity, unemployment and underemployment. Canada's youth (15 to 24 years of age) unemployment rate was estimated at 13.3% for January, 2017 (Statistics Canada, 2017). Beyond unemployment, youth are also underemployed. Record numbers of youth are employed on a part-time basis involuntarily, which works to erode labour quality and the standard of living in Canada (Foster, 2012). As a report by Canada 2020 (2014) explains, "underemployment can be detrimental to a country's quality of labour as it does not allow an individual to work in his or her desired capacity, whether in terms of the level of skills and experience that can be offered by that worker or the hours worked" (p. 14). The current predicament faced by young workers highlights that there is still much work to be done by the labour movement and unions.

The question of how unions are important gets at the function of unions. I will focus on three key elements of how unions are important: first, in uniting and mobilizing workers; second, in informing and educating workers about their rights; and third, in advocating for workers.

Unions vary in organizational structure and function, but broadly speaking, they play a critical role in uniting and mobilizing workers. The organization provided by unions allows for workers to convene regularly, bring forward concerns as a united front, and come together during times of collective agreements and negotiations.

The dissemination of information and education are an essential function of unions. Laws and policies are living documents that change over time. Unions have played and continue to play an

important role in keeping workers informed about the changes in labour law. Information and education are also essential to keep workers engaged in their union, as well as for workplace safety and wellbeing.

Additionally, unions act as an advocate for workers both at a macro political level, and at an individual level. Unions can work to lobby governments for change in labour law and practices. For example, unions were essential in the push for better parental benefits in Canada (Pulkingham, J and Van de Gaag, T, 2004). At an individual level, unions offer important advocacy and protection for members in times of turbulence and uncertainty. Members can reach out to their union and request representation and assistance through what can often be stressful and confusing employment changes and processes. Unions also advocate for individuals who face additional barriers to employment, such as persons with disabilities.

Taken together, how and why unions are important today encompasses numerous elements that have been essential to the creation of Canada's labour standards and remain crucial to their improvement. This essay has just scratched the surface of the work done by unions and is in no way comprehensive. At the core of the work of unions are the same principles of justice and fairness that my father and the miners were fighting for years ago.

As the aphorism goes, a rising tide lifts all boats, and so too does the work of the labour movement and the work of unions. The rising tide created by unions has helped to make working conditions better for both unionized and non-unionized workers because the standards created by unions are becoming the norm. The collective strength of unions as a powerful force for fairness and justice help to ensure those workers and their families can have a bright and prosperous future.

## References

- Canada 2020. (2014). *Unemployed and Underemployed Youth: A Challenge to Canada Achieving its Full Economic Potential*. Retrieved from [http://canada2020.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/2014\\_Canada2020\\_PaperSeries\\_EN\\_Issue-04\\_FINAL.pdf](http://canada2020.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/2014_Canada2020_PaperSeries_EN_Issue-04_FINAL.pdf)
- Foster, K. (2012). *Youth employment and un(der)employment in Canada: More than a Temporary Problem? Behind the Numbers*. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, October 2012.
- Pulkingham, J and Van der Gaag, T. (2014). Maternal/Parental Leave Provisions in Canada: We've Come a Long Way, But There's Further to Go. *Canadian Women's Studies*, 23(3,4), 116-125.
- Statistics Canada. (2017). *Labour Force Survey, January 2017*. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/170210/dq170210a-eng.htm>.