

The Challenging Workforce of Young Workers

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The generation of youth today is entering a workforce very different from that experienced by their parents and grandparents. Conversely, this population will never understand the struggles and hardships related to employment. Technology's impact on the market has forever changed our society, and depending on the spectator, perception varies. In this essay, I will discuss specific challenges youth workers face relating to technological advancement that impacts the labour force, as well as the union's role with building a stronger culture that can help overcome these challenges. The Public Service Alliance of Canada defines young workers at the age of 35 and under (UNW, 2018).

The reality of the future is unknown. Employers and service providers are unsure what types of jobs will exist in 20 years, especially with the technological advancements of today's society (Statistics Canada, 2016). In the past decade, the service industry is rapidly replacing direct labour positions with technology. Fast food chains such as McDonald's is an indicator. Unlikely to see more than one bodied person at the storefront, but instead several touch screen menus, where you can order on directly and receive a printout of the pickup order. Given its success, many grocery stores, restaurants, hardware, and department stores have now implemented self-checkouts (Greene, 2016). In this context, youth are encouraged to focus on the development of transferrable skills, adaptability, and resilience. Fortunately, there are current programs in Canada that target improving youth employment outcomes. Both the federal and provincial governments offer wage subsidies, hiring incentives, training and skills upgrading (Statistics Canada, 2016).

When I started my first unionized job, I did not know about unions. Being 20 years old and the youngest care-aide in the facility, there was an overwhelming sense of vulnerability and

intimidation until a shop steward approached me on my first day. We met for an hour to discuss the local, membership details and the collective agreement. After signing my union card, I was taken on a short tour and introduced to all staff, including other shop stewards. The members greeted me with similar introductions: “Nice to meet you, if you have any questions, don’t hesitate to seek me out. We are all in this together.” The inclusion felt, was not only joyful but also necessary. Since then, I have always been unionized and have held executive roles in many of the locals.

A specific challenge that youth workers face, as well as unions today, is the lack of motivation. With a decreasing union labour market, youth workers will be challenged with a lack of full-time positions, pay, and benefits (Lee, 2014). Organizations want to decrease service costs by replacing full-time employees with short-term contracts. Education involving unions and their history are disconnected from young people. In a recent experience at a college, students were found to have little knowledge about the importance of unions or historically, why unions exist. During the time, strike action of the union was pending, including the instructors of the institution. Instead of teaching about the union, solidarity, and what members are fighting for, there was fear mongering and false information given regarding classes being on hold, impacting graduation times. The negative notion of the union was avoidable if there would have been more education regarding unions in the classroom.

In an interview with a new nurse hired at a hospital in Newfoundland, the only union-related information given to her was that she was unionized. She spent months working without the knowledge of the local number, shop stewards, or executives. When asked what the other unionized employees thought about the union, her reply was “no one knows what the union is doing for us.” During a dispute after a year of employment, she spoke with a shop steward. She

had been approached the next day from the manager who asked: “why did you go to the union?” After the incident, she felt management became unfair with allocating available shifts and cancelling professional development. Understandably, the employee did not feel protected by the union.

To create a strong workforce with solidarity being the core value, unions must work harder in reaching out to youth workers. To instill the teachings of history and reiterate the trials and tribulations that have structured the workforce today. The benefits that the union has strived for in today's workforce may cease to exist in the coming generation, so it is imperative to become more inclusive than ever. Technology is ever-changing, social media is everywhere and connects more people than ever, but it does not necessarily *connect* people. In the previous generation, unions were stronger, the message was clear, solidarity was plentiful, and this happened despite the number of resources available. It happened because of the culture.

Unions are the driving force of stability in the workplace. Today, organizations are eliminating full-time employment and replacing it with temporary contracts that often pairs with a lower wage and fewer benefits and youth workers will be the most impacted. Unions hold the power of change, but not without the youth workforce; it is all connected. The generation of youth workers has the solution to overcome the noted obstacles. At some point during the union's progression, a decision to reinvent the wheel was established. However, a quick study of the history and founding movements will argue that the wheel did not require reinvention. People need people, face-to-face inclusion and acceptance so we can continue to dare greatly and rise strongly at work.

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