

## **The Challenges for Youth Workers**

Bethany Giovanetto  
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Youth workers experience several unique challenges in the workplace. Young workers are often placed in temporary positions, where they receive minimal support and are at risk of being taken advantage of. Additionally, youth workers have a 75% higher risk of experiencing a workplace injury than established employees (Youth Safe). Finally, workplaces often operate under a power imbalance. When an employment hierarchy exists alongside job scarcity, youth employees are less inclined to advocate for their rights. Through unionizing workplaces, establishing standardized workplace protocols, and providing resources to small companies, the negative challenges experienced by youth employees in the workplace can be minimized.

The jobs youth workers attain after graduating from post-secondary education, or as a temporary summer student are often not unionized. In such situations, youth workers can be taken advantage of. When youth employees are unaware of their rights as a worker, policies and procedures intended to protect the worker's wellbeing are frequently overlooked. Unions ensure standards are maintained by employers in the work environment, taking the worker's safety and wellbeing into consideration when making decisions. Additionally, without the support of a union, youth workers are less likely to know their rights, and therefore, could be oblivious to unjust situations in the workplace. When complications arise in the workplace, ununionized individuals have minimal support and representation, often being left unheard without the support and advocacy of a union.

Despite the health and mobility of youth, young workers are the most vulnerable to work related injuries. The Canadian Center for Occupational Health and Safety recognized that each day over 40 workers under the age of nineteen are injured in the workplace. Such high workplace injury incidents can be traced to a lack of education. When hiring young employees, supervisors often overlook the importance of providing proper training, assuming such information is self-

explainable. Despite such assumptions, proper training is a necessity. Without ensuring all employees are trained on policies and procedures specific to their company and position, workplace safety cannot be guaranteed, thus endangering the workers. Additionally, when introduced into a new work environment, youth employees can easily feel pressured to push themselves beyond their boundaries to complete tasks they are unqualified to complete. Youth workers need to recognize their limitations, and express their concerns, being sure to ask questions when unsure rather than putting themselves at risk.

Ununionized companies can easily experience power imbalances which are detrimental for youth workers. With the current scarcity of jobs for new graduates and summer students, youth workers frequently settle for jobs unrelated to their field of expertise hoping to secure any form of employment. Approximately 60% of twenty-five-year olds have been educated beyond secondary school when entering the workforce, yet 35% remain unemployed or underemployed (The New Work Reality Report). Such statistics confirm the fact that youth employees are often anxious to find and maintain employment. Under such circumstances, youth workers frequently refrain from speaking out and advocating for themselves. They recognize the fragility of their job and their lack of job security, and as a result are inclined to sacrifice their rights as a worker, hoping to maintain their employment. According to Harassment in Canadian Workplaces, youth workers are one of the most vulnerable groups for experiencing sexual harassment in the workplace. Despite such statistics, only 16.6% of women and men are predicted to report workplace harassment. Youth workers are fearful and hesitant to report sexual harassment incidents due to the insecurity of their jobs, and the fear that their coworkers won't support them and believe their testimonies (Kate Jenkins). Without unions, power imbalances can easily consume the workplace, creating an unhealthy, untrustworthy workplace.

Unions provide steady support to youth workers, by providing a collective voice at work, promoting equality, and fighting for equal opportunities (Unions in Society). The benefits of unions for youth workers is clearly demonstrated through youth employment opportunities with the City of Yellowknife. The City of Yellowknife employs numerous youth workers as lifeguards, city workers, and librarians. All City of Yellowknife employees are members of the Union of Northern Workers, and as a result, are able to succeed in their line of work. The youth employees have generous wages, are required to complete training specific to their line of work and are provided with necessary safety equipment to complete their tasks. Such regulated training requirements and various work policies minimize the risk of injury for City of Yellowknife youth employees, in addition to increasing their job security. These policies work to increase promotion of workers' rights and ensure the establishment of a safe work environment.

Unions provide endless benefits to youth workers. Through the establishment of standardized policies and procedures, unions can ensure workers receive adequate training and are mindful of the rights and responsibilities associated with their job. Additionally, unions provide workers with a powerful collective voice. As a legally recognized entity, unions have the capacity to fight for workers' rights, objecting against discriminatory, dangerous, or unacceptable expectations placed upon youth workers. By advocating for workers' rights, unions provide a counter balance to employers, preventing inappropriate power imbalances in the workplace. Being a member of any union creates fair opportunities for youth workers, providing them with the freedom to take risks and work to their full potential.

## References

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