

The Importance of Unions in Modern Society

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It is not a question that unions have historically been an influential force in protecting workers from exploitation. Thanks to unions nearly all workers in first world countries now profit from benefits that we now take for granted such as weekends, minimum wages and maternity leave (Canadian Labour Congress 2015). But unions are not simply a thing of the past, something to thank for getting us to where we are today. They are still extremely vital institutions that help provide higher wages, more stringent workplace safety standards and a higher collective bargaining power to the workers who are members. Union workers profit from better benefits such as paid vacation time and improved pension plans. When unions stand up for workers' rights, they raise the bar for all other employers to follow suit.

One of the most touted benefits of unions is that they provide higher wages for their workers. Unions raise wages of unionized workers by roughly 20% and raise compensation 28% compared to non-unionized workers in the same sector (Walters and Mishel 2003). The average union worker makes 5.28\$ an hour more than a non-union worker in the same industry (Canadian Labour Congress 2015). These financial benefits end up extending to non-unionized workers as well. Strong unions set a pay standard that other employers must follow if they want to retain employees (Walters and Mishel 2003). For example, a high school graduate whose workplace is not unionized but whose industry is 25% unionized is paid 5% more than similar workers in less unionized industries (Walters and Mishel 2003). This means that unions impact on non-union wages is almost as large as the impact on total union wages (Walters and Mishel 2003). This rise in income is increasingly important in a society where the trend is to lower wages. Between 2000 and 2007, income for the median working age household fell by \$2,000 (Bernstein 2008). Unions provide a medium for middle class workers to fight against large corporations.

An increased wage doesn't only help the individuals receiving the paycheck. The benefits extend to other businesses in the community and to the local and federal governments as well. The increased incomes that these workers receive at least partially gets spent on goods and services in their vicinity. This helps support local businesses who then in turn can create more local jobs (Canadian Labour Congress 2015). This produces a positive feedback loop where everyone is better off. A well off community attracts more professionals such as dentists, teachers, doctors and lawyers (Canadian Labour Congress 2015). The higher paychecks union employees obtain also augments the local tax base which goes on to bring benefits to all who live there by supporting community services and public works projects such as roads, bridges, welfare programs and new sports arenas (Canadian Labour Congress 2015).

Unions help to ensure that the workplace is as safe as it can be and that every worker can return home unharmed at the end of their shift. They do this very effectively, with a 2004 study finding that unionized workplaces have an astoundingly 24% lower injury rate than non-unionized workplaces (Prospect 2017). A 1995 study on the relationship between worker representation and industrial industries in British manufacturing found that employers with trade union health and safety committees had half the injury rate compared to those who measured safety without unions or joint arrangements (Prospect 2017). This same study concluded that the highest injury rates occur where management deals with occupational health and safety without consultation (Prospect 2017). Unions help to safeguard workers from employer negligence. Increased safety measures and meetings as well as hiring more staff whose job is to look after safety may be more expensive to the company in the short run, but they may well end up saving money when they are not sued by an injured employee. Unions safety representatives

are professionals whose jobs revolve around ensuring safety (Prospect 2015). Having them around is vital and beneficial.

Unions vastly increase workers' abilities to bargain with their employer. Unions allow workers to become united and to come together effectively during times of collective agreements and negotiations. (War on Want 2016) Unions provide trained representatives to lead negotiations with the employer (War on Want 2016). This is more effective than a disorganized and non-united group of workers trying to bargain with their employer. As the famous proverb goes: "United we stand, divided we fall." Unions fight for key middle class interests in both the workplace and in the political arena (Peralta 2015). Union workers profit from 26% more vacation time, 14% more leave time and 28% higher pensions than non-union workers in part because they benefit from collective bargaining (Walters and Mishel 2003).

Thus, unions have a lasting and vital importance in our modern society. Ironically, the very fact that unions have been so successful in fighting historic abuses may lead some to conclude upon superficial consideration that they are no longer necessary because conditions have improved. Yet as discussed above, unions are essential in today's world for creating higher wages for both union and non-union employees; for increasing economic activity, and for promoting workplace safety. Unions make sure that workers get heard. Unions have evolved over the years and will continue to do so over the future, but their role in promoting worker and economic wellbeing will never change. In order to protect our rights, we must be able to unionize. Unionization benefits everyone, from workers, to other businesses, to the government itself.

References

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