

Protecting and Supporting Workers

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We live in an uncertain world: from an economic, social, and environmental perspective. Never has the assertion that “Life is Flux” (Mark) been more true. Post-secondary education no longer guarantees a good job. More people are competing for a shrinking pool of good jobs. Employers are cutting staff to balance their budgets or to maintain profit margins. The gig economy is becoming more prevalent. Jobs are being automated or moved to developing countries where overhead costs are cheaper. The cost of living continues to increase and housing affordability looms large. Nevertheless, Canada is amongst one of the wealthiest countries in the world. We also have employment legislation to protect workers and various public programs and services to meet the needs of Canadians. So, why do we need unions?

We live in a highly individualized society where we strive to fulfil personal needs, wants, and desires. In contrast, unions are a collective with a focus on the rights of the workers as a group while also providing protection and representation for individual workers. Standing together and speaking with a unified voice gives unions their strength when lobbying government or negotiating collective agreements with employers. The voice of an individual worker may not be heard when calling for change to legislation and government programs and services. The strength of a unified voice lends itself to securing better pay and benefits as well as supporting equity and diversity for all union members. Standing alone, as non-unionized workers do, weakens a worker’s position when negotiating their employment package or at least, creates a greater likelihood of inequitable employment packages. Additionally, unions provide resources to assist their members with disciplinary actions and grievances, whereas non-unionized workers must make their own case. Imagine having to learn about the relevant legislation and regulations to determine one’s rights and responsibilities, and then making the case to an employer who holds the balance of power?

Unions strive to ensure their members are treated fairly, work in a safe environment, and receive reasonable compensation. Accordingly, unionized workers in Canada earn more than non-unionized workers; earning, on average, \$5.28 per hour more (Canadian Labour Congress). Unionized workers are more likely to have an extended health care and dental plan, as well as a pension to support them in their retirement, all of which contribute to one's quality of life. Unionized workers typically have paid sick and vacation leave which are beyond the basic legislative requirements. Although there are few guarantees, unionized workers are more likely to enjoy job security than their non-unionized counterparts. Given the benefits of working in a unionized environment, it is unfortunate that only 31.8% of all Canadian workers are unionized (Government of Canada) and suggests that there is still much work to be done to establish new unions to include more Canadian workers.

Unionized workers benefit from and are protected by the collective agreements negotiated by their unions. However, both unionized and non-unionized Canadians enjoy workplace benefits, rights, and protection as a result of legislation fought for by unions across Canada. Unions won the right to bargain on behalf of their members in the 1960s (Canadian Labour Congress). They lobbied hard for workplace safety with an emphasis on "the right to refuse unsafe work, the right to know about hazards in the workplace and the right to participate in health and safety discussions" (Canadian Labour Congress). Maternal and paternal rights have been won through union efforts with the resulting legislation benefitting all Canadians. Unions are involved in the ongoing minimum wage debate, regardless of whether it directly impacts their members or not. Accordingly, unions are arguing for better wages to support a better standard of living for the employee and their family which also supports the local economy (Canadian Labour Congress). In addition, the economy and society are constantly changing, and the relevant legislation must

keep pace to meet the needs of Canadian workers and their families. Despite numerous consultation opportunities and varying degrees of access to politicians, many workers rely on unions to represent their interests when legislation is developed, reviewed, and/or revised. Canadians are often too busy or don't learn about legislative review and subsequent changes until after the fact. Consequently, unions have a role to play in monitoring, informing, and at times, advocating for these changes.

Canadians take so many of the gains achieved by unions for granted. We appreciate guaranteed vacation and sick leave, as well as parental leave. We want our work environments to be safe. We appreciate and benefit from employment standards, as well as health and safety legislation. The employment packages secured and enjoyed by unionized workers support a reasonable standard of living. Canadians enjoy a high quality of life which is under pressure. Given the economic uncertainty and the shrinking pool of good jobs, as well as the jobs which are projected to disappear, we need unions now and in the future. We need unions to fight to maintain the rights and benefits which have been secured by past efforts and to continue to work toward enhancing the rights and benefits enjoyed by workers into the future.

## References

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