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The call for action: Necessity versus consequence of union strikes

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When I had first seen the topic for this essay I was immediately intimidated as I have not had the opportunity to learn much about unions. I believed that the “looming strike” I had been hearing people chatter about around my workplace meant that my summer student employment would be at risk, and I would be left without savings for my last year of University. It wasn’t until I had begun researching the topic and confiding in those who hold vast experience in both working for the union and the employers that are unionized, that I was able to give appreciation to all the hard work unions have been able to accomplish historically. As well, I have been able to understand the importance of the work that will always be left to accomplish as long as inequality exists in its many forms. Collective issues being pursued by unions felt bigger than my summer student employment and I felt like I had been disrespectful, I wasn’t thinking about others. The “others” is something that has sat with me as I began unpacking and forming my opinion on what unions have meant and mean today for society. This time next year, I hope to be accepting an elementary teaching position with either the GNWT or one of the two other education authorities in the GNWT. I study issues around Indigenous peoples and my philosophy of teaching has formed into a very strong belief that all students, but especially Indigenous students here in the NWT, are important and deserves to be heard and cared for. I want to be a role model for those students who need one. I feel strongly, that I have been given all the right opportunities to land me where I have been fortunate to fall so that I can be an advocate for those who need one.

Doing my research this all sounded familiar and I started to understand the purpose and need for strikes. History has proven that in any minority setting when we can band together, we are stronger and we can do great things. This is why although strike action is not an easy choice, it can be necessary as a last resort effort in attempt to come to fair agreements and to enact change that protect are rights as people. Todd Parsons, President of the Union of Northern Workers said in his Message to Members Regarding Strike Vote Results that “Rest, assured, a strike will not happen without all bargaining avenues being completely exhausted first.” (UNW, April, 2018). To understand this a little better, I wanted to look back at the historical importance of the union movement and how it has shaped society in Canada and its

effect on some issues close to my heart. Some of these things include: The Toronto Typographical Union Strike and the Trade Unions Act, 1872 – which fought for shorter working days and although unsuccessful in that certain fight, it made way for the Union movement in Canada by legalizing union rights (Palmer, 2006). This opened so many doors, such as equal pay for women all over but specifically, in the teaching industry where historically “Women teachers, paid less than men, were kept in the lower ranks and were supervised by male administrators. They were mainly young women, who left or were let go when they married and who rarely gained seniority or administrative responsibility.” (Gaskell, 2006). It is thanks to this work and the work done by the UNW in their 2015 Regulations, the UNW instituted The Affirmative Action policy which enables Indigenous people to join the workforce in “equal participation” (UNW, 2015, p. 53) that both women and indigenous people have been giving fair participation in the work force. Unfortunately power struggles will always exist, where some may not be given reasonable or fair offers and strikes become the hammer that must be slammed down.

Currently, the UNW is bargaining for things that are relevant to today’s needs, such as mental health initiatives, job security, and reasonable wage increases to keep up with inflation (UNW, 2016). This means that strike action becomes necessary when collective agreements or current practices are not in the best interest of everyone. Employees are not disposable and unions recognize this and protect their rights as a collective, where alone they have less power. As I have said before, this isn’t a decision that is made lightly and we must remember that these decisions will impact everyone, some people more than others. I think about the administrators in a workplace who may have multiple children and make half of what a single coordinator in a workplace makes and how this may impact them and their families. This makes sticking together a crucial aspect of a strike. The Government becomes impacted as operations shut down; there is an unavoidable growing cost, loss of business, and society impact. The Government, being one of the more powerful entities may be able to handle the blow. However, it still would be in the best interest of the collective to avoid a strike so that employees and employers can continue working together so relationships, teamwork, productivity stay intact to avoid further economic effects. This also means

that a union must wait for the most critical time to strike, so that their members have the best chance at being successful. All my preconceived opinions on the matter had been changed by simply doing my own research, both online and speaking to a colleague of mine who has experience working for a teachers union. I was no longer worried about losing my summer position and the process made me someone who is informed on issues I had been oblivious to.

The realization in a local context is that the cost of living in Yellowknife is continuing to grow substantially, “McLeod points out that the Northwest Territories is the only jurisdiction in Canada that’s seeing a decline, however slight, in its population and that the main reason for that is the high cost of living.” (Gleeson, 2018). The cost of living will continue to rise in the NWT and we must be able to keep up with inflation. To sign an unfair deal now means that we would have to wait another four years just for the chance to try to catch up with inflation. There are many considerations unions make such as, the type of strike: including deciding when would be the most crucial time for effectiveness, how compensation and benefits for their members would be handled and both parties would work together to ensure the health and safety of the public is protected. Once the union and the employer have considered all of these things and more it becomes the members who need to join in so that a strike may be successful, for there is strength in numbers. Burriss (as cited in Hoffa, 2018) said that “Those unions that enjoy the right to strike have no guarantee that sacrificing their jobs and their livelihood will result in victory but they nevertheless engage in lengthy strikes, not because they are assured of winning but because they are determined to fight.”. Although strikes are sometimes necessary, they are not done so blindly. History has been made thanks to the courage of others who stand up for the collective rights of their fellow colleagues and when faced with the same decisions, members must stick together and continue to do what is right for the collective even when it gets hard.

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