

The Necessity of Strike Action

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June 29, 2018

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The necessity to strike can arise for a number of reasons, all of which stem from the fundamental need of the employee and union to be heard, and for employee to be protected by a collective agreement that guarantees workers be treated with respect and compensated in a manner that is consistent with the value they bring to the employer. While strike action can yield positive results, it must be entered into cautiously, as the impacts can also have precarious effects on all of those involved. Although strike action can bring with it an essence of uncertainty, it is such a significant element in protecting the rights of workers it has been the driving force in the creation of various labour laws throughout history, that protect us in the workplace even today. In fact, it is such a valuable tool in creating equitable and just outcomes that it is a fundamental right protected by the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (Government of Canada, 2018).

Strike action is a powerful tool in collective bargaining, both tremendously valuable and precarious. While advantageous, strike action should be used cautiously as the impacts on the employer, the employee, and the union can be significant. Striking, or the threat of strike, can strain the symbiotic nature of the union-employer, or employee-employer relationship, potentially causing turmoil for all those involved. Although cautiousness must be exercised in these situations, strike action can be a necessity in eliciting change when the parties involved in collective bargaining are deadlocked. That said, strike action is not about greed or attaining undeserved benefits in the workplace, but rather about protecting employees and demanding a workplace that is safe and where workers are compensated fairly through their wages and benefits.

The Union of Northern Workers (UNW) has been in negotiation with the Government of The Northwest Territories (GNWT) since January 2016 for the current collective bargaining agreement. Despite a budget surplus of over \$175 million in the last fiscal year, the GNWT continues to deny its ability to pay workers in a manner that would allow their pay to increase to meet inflation and the ever increasing costs of living in Canada's North (UNW, 2018; NWT Bureau of Statistic, 2018). Not only is this unacceptable, it can be argued that it is in violation of the current *Mandate of the Government of the Northwest Territories*, which highlights the governments commitment to economic prosperity and “to helping our residents achieve their aspirations for themselves, their families and their communities” (GNWT, 2018, p. 6). With the cost of living in the North being abundantly high, affordability becomes a significant factor in the quality of life for many Northerners. Not only do fair wage increases lighten financial stress for families, addition funds also significantly improve the local economy (Canadian Labour Congress, 2018). This mutually advantageous effect benefits all of those involved. While the GNWT denies pay increases as a cost-saving measure, their approach is not only shortsighted, but also detrimental for both employees and the economy. When employers and the union cannot agree on a mutually beneficial collective agreement, and negotiations are stalemated, strike action can be the only option that remains to showcase the importance and value employees bring to the workplace. This is possibly why an overwhelming 70% of union members voted in favour of a strike mandate against the GNWT (UNW, 2018).

While strike action is a powerful tool that can elicit change when negotiations have stalled, it can be burdensome on all of those involved. The expected financial hindrance is has on the employer can spill over and negatively impact the employee and union as well. While this can be a stressful and financially trying time for families, it can also lead to a more cohesive and

united workforce. The union also has the added burden of paying strike wages and covering the cost of medical and dental services, otherwise incurred by the GNWT as a part of the benefits package (UNW, 2018), and of enduring the possible backlash of a strained relationship with the employer. Despite the strife strike action can bring employees, the union, and the employer, the benefit greatly outweighs the potential detriment it may coincide with. Only with collective efforts in demanding labour reform were advocates able to attain workplace certainties that are now commonplace, including minimum wage, the 40-hour work week, maternity leave, and health benefits, in addition to laws protecting vulnerable persons against child labour and workplace harassment and discrimination (Canadian Labour Congress, 2018).

On a personal level, I correlate strike action to the decision to go back to school. Deciding to attend post secondary education after years away from formal education and while raising a young family was a difficult decision. The financial impact alone was such a deterrent that our family had to sit down and truly evaluate what our priorities for our children and future were. The uncertainty was paralyzing. Yet, I knew that in order to better our situation, short-term sacrifices were required for long-term gain and prosperity – much like strike action.

Although there is always a looming uncertainty in strike action, the need to sacrifice for the greater good, both personally and collectively, is paramount. The work of unions and union members must be continuously ongoing to guarantee workers be treated with respect and compensated in a manner that is consistent with the value they bring to the employer. When words fail, action is required in the fight for fair and equitable compensation and protection of employees. If they will not listen, strike action may be needed to showcase to the GNWT that while they state they cannot afford to increase the pay or benefits of their employees, that the question should be, can they afford not to?

References

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