

Union of Northern Workers

The Significance of Strikes: Pressure, Time, and Change

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Constant pressure will always lead to a change. Diamonds are not formed overnight, they take pressure and time to be crafted to perfection. This is similar to the goals of a strike in a workplace which is defined as: “withholding of labour by a group of employees in support of a demand” (Israelstam). In order to achieve the change that is desired, there must be pressure from workers on the employer or government. Until 1873 in Canada, workers were without a voice, worked inexplicably long hours, and had little to no rights when working. Unions were illegal. Thanks to unions and the right to strike, workers are now entitled to three basic rights, as well as vacation pay, maternity leave, sick days, dental, and other benefits. Strikes have been an asset, a last line of defence, and a provider of balance between employer and employee since the eighteenth century. This is achieved through pressure from the employees, and time. Strikes will always be necessary at certain times because the financial well-being of a company is weighed against the well-being of the workers; strikes have a measurable impact that stretches further than the economics, affecting the employer, employee, union, as well as the community around them.

In order to understand the necessity of strikes, one needs to understand why strikes occur. Although it is a common explanation for the cause of strikes, wage disputes are usually not the real reason strikes happen. Strikes occur because of the employer or government's failure to address disputes regarding terms of employment with their employees. Workers become fed up with how they are being run, making wage disputes and finances become the tipping point for workers and unions. This was seen in 2015 in Hay River when the Union of Northern Workers went on strike after a new collective bargaining agreement was unable to be made. This was due to a higher cost of living and an “extremely poor wage offer” that ignited the strike (Wohlberg). Because of the intense focus of financial stability by employers and governments alike, strikes will always need be not just an option, but a necessity in protecting the working class. The majority of businesses are focused on their finances, basing their

decisions on what is best economically. This may mean putting the well-being of the employee after the financial well-being of the company. This doesn't mean all businesses and governments only care about money, it is just a priority that is hard to ignore. For example, this year in the NWT the territorial government's new collective agreement left the Union of Northern Workers "angry and frustrated with their employer." The cost of living is increasing in the NWT which is directly lowering the population, creating a cycle. This means an increase in pay will become necessary for workers to be able to afford the high costs of living to combat inflation. For the government "a period of stagnant revenues never before experienced" will stop them from coming to an agreement, although the government's revenue had increased \$46 million dollars in 2016/17 as compared to the previous fiscal year (Beers). For this reason, it is necessary that workers have the ability to strike. Strikes are a last resort option for workers to have protection over their financial and social well-being, stopping employers and governments from having totalitarian-like control. Pitting money against well-being will always cause conflict between employer and employee, strikes provide the solution. Strikes are radical proof that the only way to create a change is through pressure, and time.

Strikes have a long-lasting social and economic effect on employers, governments, employees, unions, and lastly, the community. All parties are impacted to some degree by a strike. For employers and governments, there is an immediate loss of income as employees have stopped working. Unlike the economic impact, the social costs of a strike are unmeasurable as employers immediately lose respect, status, and credibility in their community. This was seen during the 1998 United Auto Workers (UAW) strike at General Motors, which led to total sales, profits, and market share declining because of the strike (Coon). This is a hefty price to pay but it will bring immediate awareness of the employer to the working conditions of the employees. Employees are heavily affected by strikes as they are not getting paid, and may lose their job. The community may lose access to public services during strikes. The worker's

requests for wage increases are certainly called for due to the increasing cost of living in the Northwest Territories. If workers are not given a reasonable wage increase, or if public pensions are not protected, the economy will be hurt by a lack of demand and investment due to the public having less money to put back into the economy. Strikes also defend public services; because when things such as pay, pension, and conditions are driven downwards in the public sector, the quality of service is directly impacted (Milne). Unions are also impacted by strikes; employees that are apart of a union are obligated to not work during a strike and can face fines if refused. Union members may lose funding for benefits if a strike continues for long enough (Gardapee). All strikes have an impact, even if it is not immediate. In the Winnipeg General Strike, the largest general strike in North America had exposed the violent attitude of employers at the time. It ended with killing two, injuring about thirty-four, and arresting people. At the time, the strike didn't have too much of a positive impact. But, it later resulted in the creation of a new political party, the CCF - which is now known as the NDP. It led to changes in labour relations that prompted more unions, better pay, improved working conditions, and an economy that was growing in a way that was narrowing the wage gap ("The Winnipeg General Strike"). Strikes create a change and impact the community, government, workers, and employers both socially and economically.

Strikes are a movement for the betterment of working conditions that is accomplished through pressure from the employee and union. Strikes will always be necessary because of the conflict between well-being and finances. This means both parties, employer and employee, have their own wants: the employer/government wants to run their business in a financially stable way, and the employee wants change for the betterment of their well-being. The importance of finances can take over the well-being of the worker, making strikes the last line of defence for workers to be able to afford their cost of living. Strikes have long-lasting economic and societal effects on the employers, employee, unions,

governments, and communities. Diamonds form over a very long time through the use of pressure and time, which is the same for creating change for the better in the employee-employer relationship.

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