

The Importance of Strike Action

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Labour unions were created to represent and advocate for employees needs and wants in the workplace (Public Service Alliance of Canada North, 2015). They play a vital role in ensuring employees are treated fairly and respectfully in the workplace. However, when employees feel that their voices are not being heard by the employer, strike action may be necessary. Strike action typically occurs once collective bargaining has been attempted on several occasions by the labour union on behalf of the employees (Bilodeau, Cloutier, & Denis, 2013, p. 1016). Once the collective bargaining has been unsuccessful, the union and the employees need to decide if strike action is necessary. However, both the union and employee need to consider the possible risks of strike action and if they outweigh the benefits.

So why strike action? Why not just continue to attempt collective bargaining and avoid possible conflict? Strike action allows the union and employee to amplify their voices to the employer. Strikes show collective power among all the employees, the union and the labour market. Most importantly, it shows the employees discontent with the employer. The strike publically shows the employees unhappiness with the employer, which has potential negative implications on the employer.

The Role of the Union

The union acts as the middle man between the employee and the employer. The union is responsible for negotiating terms with the employer on behalf of the employees that have registered as a member with the union. When the employer is continually not negotiating terms that are consistent with what the employees want, the union can suggest the employees take strike action. Typically, the employees have a good deal of trust in the union. They trust that the

union will fairly bargain for their wants and needs; if they suggest a strike, employees are more likely to strike if they trust their union (Bilodeau et al., 2013, p. 1034). During a strike, the union continues to play the middle man to continue to negotiate terms and communicate with the employer on behalf of the employee.

Impacts on the Employee

An employee risks their financial security when taking strike action. During a strike, an employee refuses to attend work until the employer renegotiates the terms of the settlement. Since the employee has refused to work, they will not get paid. When considering strike action, an employee has a dilemma. They need to choose between risking their financial security or standing up for their beliefs. If the employee chooses to strike, they can stand at the picket line to receive some compensation but it is often very little.

At the same time, employees risk their job security when striking. Their job may not be there or may have been replaced by another individual during the strike. In addition, the employee may experience victimization or shame from the employer or other colleagues when returning. While one would think that this last point would not occur in a respectful work environment, the relationship changes after a strike. This change can happen on either or both sides of the relationship. From the employees and unions point of view, they may feel that they cannot trust the employer in the future.

The Impact on the Employer

If employees have refused to work until terms have been renegotiated, the employer has work that is not being completed. An employer must decide how to ensure that work is still being completed. Earnings may be lost during a strike depending on the type of business it is. In

addition, there may be increased costs in hiring temporary workers, paying over-time to employees who have chosen not to strike or hiring outside firms to assist in the renegotiation of terms with the union. The list of additional costs could go on.

Conclusion

Strikes have historically been used after the union has tried several times to negotiate terms with an employer on behalf of the employee to little or no avail. Overall, strike action is used to voice the discontent employees have with employers. Strike action shows the collective power that a union and the employee have together. The union, employee and employers all play different roles during strike action. There are possible negative ramifications that can arise during a strike for both the employee and the employer. When considering the use of strike action, the union and employee must consider all possible outcomes from the strike and whether or not the benefits outweigh the risks.

References

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