

Josie Gould Memorial Scholarship 2018

“Why do you think it is necessary at times for unions to take strike action? What impact does it have on the employer, the union and the members?”

By

Bradley Hazenberg

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Introduction

As a resident of Yellowknife with two parents who both work in the public service, it is timely to reflect on why it might be necessary at times for unions to take strike action, and the impacts that this can have on all of the stakeholders. As most Yellowknifers know, the Union of Northern Workers (UNW) has been bargaining for new collective agreements with the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) and the Northwest Territories Power Corporation (NTPC) for over a year. Since both of these groups of union members have voted in favour of strike action, the topic of strike has been on the minds of many families who I know, including mine. This essay will examine the reasons why strike action can be necessary at times, as well as a discussion on the impacts that strikes can have on the employer, the union, and the members.

Why Strike Action Can Be Necessary

A strike is defined as “a temporary stoppage of work to enforce a demand or protect a right” (Trade Union Futures, 2016). Strikes provide a way for employees to protest what they see as unfair treatment by their employer, giving them a voice to express their unhappiness with how they are being treated when bargaining efforts fail or reach an impasse. Strikes allow employees to take a position of power against the employer, forcing them to come to the bargaining table in an effort to get employees back to work as quickly as possible so that normal business can resume (Trade Union Futures, 2016). A legal strike provides protection for employees against any repercussions from exerting their voice against the employer, and provides them with support from their union in the form of services and strike wages. The right to strike is protected by law, but it is never the preferred way to resolve a dispute, which was

confirmed by UNW President Todd Parsons in a recent media interview, where he stated “We are in fact trying to avoid a strike” when discussing the GNWT strike vote (Wilkinson, 2018).

Impacts on Stakeholders

The employer.

In a strike, the employer faces a number of impacts that can be negative. First, when the services they provide are reduced or stopped because of worker shortages, their customers or clients can become upset or angry, resulting in impacts to their reputation. As a result, they can face significant public pressure to resolve the strike, and may be pushed to offer union members concessions that they would not have normally considered prior to the strike. Together with potential loss of business from unhappy clients, the loss of productivity from workers can significantly impact the earnings of the company or organization they work for (Trade Union Futures, 2016). They can also possibly lose good workers who become unhappy with working for a company or organization who they may feel treated them unfairly and may look for other work when the strike is over.

The union.

When a strike happens, the union is faced with the huge responsibility of upholding the trust of their members, who have put their families’ livelihoods in their hands by voting in favor of a strike. They have to do everything in their power to balance bargaining for the best interests of their members, while also doing so as quickly as possible so that they are not off of work longer than needed. Having a strike is very costly for the union as well, since they have many expenses related to the strike, including having to pay striking workers directly while also not collecting union dues from workers who are either not at work, or working reduced hours.

On the positive side, a strike that results in a favorable outcome for workers can bolster union support among its members and increase member engagement in union activities. If an agreement is reached that results in increased wages for workers, the economy of the entire community or region can benefit, since employees will have more income to spend at local businesses. This can contribute to a more favorable public view of the union and of their power in the community at large.

The members.

Some unions refer to their members as the “heart” of their organization (British Columbia Nurses Union, 2018; Teamsters, 2015). This shows how important members are, and why their interests have to be the most important consideration when a union takes the step of declaring a strike. During a job action, members face lost or reduced wages as well as possible loss of employer benefits such as health insurance and other benefits. The union has to take steps to make sure that these sacrifices are well known, and that they use the power of their member’s job action to get an agreement that is in their best interests.

I think that during a strike, members could form strong bonds with their fellow strikers and their union leadership that comes from their collective effort to make sure workers have a better work situation. They can have a chance to hear from the public or their customers about how their services are appreciated and feel the support of the community when the public pressures the employer to get workers back to work.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I think that strikes can be an effective way for workers to exert their power in an organization, when other ways to have their voices heard have failed. As I have outlined,

strikes have an impact on employers, unions, and their members that are both challenging and also powerful. I hope that Yellowknife and the rest of the NWT can avoid having strikes happen in our communities, however it is reassuring to me to understand that the option to strike exists if needed, so that UNW families can have a fair chance of a deal that will be our best interests.

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