

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?

Submitted by: Kelsey Wick

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Strikes are necessary in the workplace. Without the power to strike, unions and its members would not have the bargaining power seen today. Strikes have an impact on the employer, the union, and the members. While it may cause stress at times, strikes are crucial in allowing employees to be heard by their employer. Consequently, the union's power to utilize strike action is of vital importance.

Why Strikes are Necessary

Unions and their ability to allow workers to strike gives agency to its members, allowing workers to have a say in their pay rate, work conditions, and benefits, among other reasons. Strikes can be necessary when negotiations fall short on the bargaining table. Having a strike increases the pressure to come to an agreement so the workplace can once again operate as normal, or hopefully under improved conditions.

Impact of Strikes on the Employer

A strike allows employers to be made more cognizant of employee rights and employee working conditions. As such, this leads to a more informed discussion between union leaders and management (Lameck, 2017). A strike can also lead to negative effects as the employer is unable to run their organization without their employees. However, I believe this allows the employer to take the employees' and union leaders' concerns seriously.

Impact of Strikes on the Union

Research by Hodder, Williams, Kelly, and McCarthy (2017) shows a positive relationship between strike action and an increase in trade union membership. When they surveyed new members it seems perceived union effectiveness and perceived injustice were motivating factors in one's decisions to become a member of a union (p. 165). As such, this shows unions can and do make an impact, and the power of a strike can help a union grow. This allows their influence to extend and help more workers be heard regarding their working conditions.

One negative impact is that the community may be upset services have been cut as a result of union action. However, I see this as more of a short term consequence that will fade to the background

once the strike is complete. A long term consequence to be aware of is the potential divide of union versus non-union supporters which can pit the community against one another (Thunstrom, 2018). As such, unions must be prepared to deal with these consequences should any arise.

Impact of Strikes on the Members

When a strike leads to conversations that increases wages, members are able to have a higher salary leaving more disposable income for the unionized workers' community; therefore, helping to build the economy in that area (Thunstrom, 2017). As such, this helps both the members of the strike, and other members of the union in different workplaces, as more money is changing hands in the community. Also, a strike allows members' voices to be heard in a safe environment as it is the union leaders who voice these concerns to management without identifying the person responsible for the concern.

One major worry about a strike is the uncertainty of when it will end, which can lead to stress for those on strike as they do not know when they will be back to work. This affects their wages as they are now being paid a daily rate for strike action rather than their normal salary (Union of Northern Workers, 2018). However, I believe in the long run it does work out as workers get their concerns voiced and listened to.

Equal Pay Act of 1970

Made in Dagenham, a movie based on the real life strike of the female Ford Machinists, is one of the most memorable strikes in my mind. The movie depicts the struggle these workers faced when they fought for their right to be compensated for their skilled labour at a rate equal to that as the men who did the same labour. Rita O'Grady's and her coworkers' efforts, with the help of their union, and their subsequent strike, made them largely responsible for the establishment of the "Equal Pay Act of 1970."

As a result of the Act, the female Ford workers were offered equal pay. Not only were Ford workers given fair wages, but also all female workers in the United Kingdom. Females could no longer be discriminated against because of their sex (Karlsen & Woolley, 2010). O'Grady may have been the figurehead of this historic strike, but without her union backing her each and every step, the female Ford

workers would not have succeeded. While this occurred almost half a century ago, it is still relevant today, as a pay gap still exists between men and women. Having the power to strike is of vital importance so all workers are treated fairly.

Personal Experience and a 'Living Wage'

I have been a member of the Union of Northern Workers (UNW) on and off since high school due to my education down south and term employments in the North. While I am not currently a member, I am still proud of what my union has accomplished for its members. I was thankful knowing the union had my back if something were to go wrong in the workplace. I also appreciated the bargaining the UNW had done to negotiate a competitive salary for summer students. While I never went on strike as a member, I would have gladly done so to support my union in the quest for better working conditions and hourly rate.

One's quality of life is tied to both their job and pay. A person spends a considerable amount of time at work. As such, one should be able to feel safe and appreciated there, as this can greatly impact their physical and mental health. Furthermore, one's pay and benefits also help determine the quality of life one has. Unions repeatedly fight for a 'living wage' rather than a 'minimum wage' to help with this. The power of the strike greatly helps with this. However, it should be noted that in the Northwest Territories it can be difficult to live even on a 'living wage' and as such, unions in the North are aware of this and take into consideration trying to achieve greater than this at the bargaining table (Thunstrom, 2018).

Conclusion

All in all, the power to strike allows the employees' and union leaders' voices to be heard and taken seriously. While there are both positive and negative consequences to the employers, the union, and the members, I believe the positive outweighs the negative. Strikes can increase membership (Hodder, Williams, Kelly, & McCarthy, 2017), and let employers know the concerns of workers and allow bargaining to happen (Lameck, 2017). This all combines to give workers solidarity with their union, to join their employers in making a workplace benefiting all.

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