

Why I believe the Canadian Labour Movement is Important in this Day and Age

By Nick Brown

A healthy Canadian Labour Movement is vital. People of my generation know little about the struggles that their parents and grandparents had to create unions. We don't learn about unions or their history in school. Many of the benefits we take for granted today were hard fought by the labour movement. I can't imagine a time when workers could be fired on a whim, had to be on the job 6 days a week, received no vacation pay or sick leave, and were frequently killed in unsafe working conditions. But such conditions existed a century and a half ago in Canada, and still exist today in many parts of the world.

I have had free dental care, and prescription drugs because my parents' unions negotiated these benefits for their employees. Best of all, the financial security my family has enjoyed is due to the work of my parents' unions. There has never been much stress at home about their job security. They were able to parent us, and focus on our well-being, without worrying about whether they could pay for what we needed. They work hard and don't take their jobs or security for granted. I believe it is because of the security and their attachment to their places of work that they work as hard as they do. We have learned a good work ethic at home.

Now it seems my sister and I must prepare for a different kind of future, or so we are told. We are being told unionized jobs and the benefits that go with them may not be available to us. More often, work in new sectors, which pop up every year, lack unions. Most unionized employees in Canada work for the public sector, and that sector is always shrinking. In the private sector, there's a kind of disregard, almost contempt for unions. Many people my age don't see the difference between a unionized and non unionized workplace. Most opportunities that seem interesting to us are in the private sector. When you are young you don't worry about the future. You live in the present. Unions keep workers safe by requiring employees to protect them on the job with the right safety equipment and training. That's just one way they protect our futures.

I have two part-time jobs. One is in retail, the other, at a climbing gym. Neither workplace is unionized. The permanent employees, who are in their mid-thirties and up, are starting to worry about their futures, and how they will pay for them without the benefits that a union negotiates - things like pensions and health benefits. The rest of us, because we are younger and at university, think the jobs are cool. The subject of unions never comes up. According to the Conference Board of Canada between 1977 and 2011 union density in Canada declined almost 2% and that decline is continuing as the baby boom generation reaches retirement age, and my generation starts to enter the work force.

Source: (http://www.conferenceboard.ca/topics/humanresource/commentaries/11-11-09/are_unions_relevant_in_canada_today.aspx)

With all the video games, reality shows and other social media we've grown up with, it's easy to live with the impression that we, individuals, are masters of our destiny. There's not much attention paid to the importance of collective efforts. Unions are all about collective efforts. I am 19 and am being encouraged to begin saving for my retirement, even before I have graduated from school. That's because of the fear my future employment won't include a defined group pension plan. My parents have these plans, and they don't have to worry about saving a lot of money and investing it for the future once their working lives are over. The pressure is on me, as an individual, to make a success of the next 45 years, and beyond. By myself. What do I know about investing? It wasn't taught in school. And the only collective I hear about is that of a financial agency that sells mutual funds!

So I would change the title of this essay to "why I believe more information about the Canadian Labour Movement is important in this day and age" Armed with this information, my generation would cherish unions more, and membership would go up. Few my age know anything about Canadian union history and function. So it's not surprising that only 26% of today's labour force in Canada is unionized, and that number is declining all the time.

So what is the history? In the 19th century hardly anyone in Canada was unionized. The Canadian labour movement took off in the 1870's, and I mean, took off, thanks to what was happening among workers in the United States and Great Britain. Ten thousand people participated in a demonstration to support the Toronto typographical union when it went on strike. The workers wanted a shorter work week and a 9 hour work day, as opposed to the 12 hours they worked at the time. Those who turned out at that massive demonstration, wanted to make a point. Strikes were illegal at the time. In 1872, thanks to this kind of public pressure, the federal government, under Prime Minister John A. MacDonal, passed the Trade Union Act which legalized unions. Governments started to take unions more seriously, and began to see their benefits. Labour departments were set up within the provincial and federal bureaucracies, and eventually, labour relation boards were established, to help unions and companies resolve conflicts and establish rules. The union movement helped in the establishment of Occupational Health and Safety boards that protect workers from on the job injuries, and compensates them when injuries occur. These injuries can be physically and financially crippling.

Citizens have to be ever vigilante as governments and companies frequently try to whittle down the power of collective labour organizations. As recently as 7 years ago British Columbia wanted to pass legislation that would have hurt workers in the health care sector. The provincial legislation would have undermined their collective union agreements. Their unions fought the legislation in court and the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that the B.C. government was out of line in what it was trying to do.

On the way to school last year we daily passed brewery workers who were on strike. My mom always honked her horn at those on the picket line, to show solidarity. I

was embarrassed at first by this, but when she explained why these men were sitting on lawn chairs outside the brewery, even in the coldest days of winter, I wanted to show my solidarity as well. I learned what "scabs" are, and why these men resented the casual workers who were replacing them during the strike. I learned that the struggle was to maintain unionized jobs since the company wanted to hire more casual, non union personnel, who wouldn't qualify for the same benefits as other workers in the brewery. Those unionized workers were doing what a good collective does - looking out for others, the people working beside them, and assuring that a new generation can benefit from what unions do best.

I found some interesting facts about unions in a Globe and Mail article written to commemorate Labour Day, 2012. There's a quote from Ken Georgetti, head of the Canadian Labour Congress.

"This is how I sell the union movement," Mr. Georgetti says. "Do you want your kids to earn \$600,000 more in their lifetime? And if the answer is 'yes,' then all they have to do is join a union. The union advantage will give the average worker in Canada \$600,000 more in cash – that's not benefits, just wages – over their lifetime."

Source: <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/the-weakening-state-of-canadian-labour-unions/article4515873/?page=all>

That works for me! And I agree with Mr. Georgetti who also says in that article that unions need a higher profile and better image among young people like me who see people making a lot of money in the private sector, but don't have a crystal ball to see that in the long run those jobs and salaries might not be sustainable.

There's another reason why unions are important in today's world. Let's look at that devastating garment factory fire in Bangladesh. Women mainly were sent into a deadly workplace by uncaring employers who just wanted to maximize their profits. The trend by Canadian companies, like Loblaws, to contract out work to third world citizens not protected by unions, is deplorable. My small part in protesting this is to refuse to buy Joe Fresh products, but it seems an inadequate response to such an enormous tragedy.

More emphasis must be placed on the importance of workers grouping together through the union movement to protect each other in a world that is focussed more and more on individual convenience and prosperity over the common good. I want to be part of a union when I start full-time work. I want to change the statistics so that union participation grows in Canada, not dwindles.