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## The Importance of Unions in our Society

Nearly 30% of Canadians belong to unions. That equals to approximately 4 million people, however, unions often go unrecognized for their many important roles within society. Unions in Canada are regulated by

federal as well as provincial legislation. They assist workers in obtaining a decent wage so they and their families can enjoy a quality standard of living and financial security. Unions help workers achieve workplace benefits over and above legislative benefits and universal public programs. Vacations, extra medical insurance, disability/life insurance and a retirement income are all areas where unions have negotiated enhanced provisions. All unions provide workers with reliable job security and thus economic security for themselves, their families and their communities.

Without unions, individuals would suffer in the workplace due to the lack of resistance from the working class. Within Canada our labour movement has a long history due to the dedication of improving workers daily lives. Over a century ago, in 1872, working individuals were on a 10 hour schedule per working day. The society came to a realization and discovered the unnecessary and unrealistic demand the workforce wanted. A union in Toronto at the time referred to as 'Toronto Typographical Union' which dealt with printers for local articles, raised attention to this ongoing problem and demanded for a nine hour work day. Employers refused, and the printers walked off the job on March 25, 1872. During that time, companies hired replacements, however, the strikers earned a great support system from local workers in Toronto. On April 15, 1872 a crowd which consisted of approximately 10,000 people held a rally at a local park to show their support.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century union activity could be recognized as a criminal behaviour. George Brown was a Scottish-Canadian journalist, politician and one of the Fathers of Confederation which ordered the strike committee to be arrested. He stated the arrest was for criminal conspiracy. This did not stop the community from protesting. On April 18, 1872 John A. Macdonald, the prime minister of Canada, introduced the Trade Union act. This act was known for protecting and legalizing unions. Due to the issue of shorter work weeks, the 'nine-hour movement' convinced workers joining unions would change lives for the better.

Employees did not stop fighting for their right just then. This continued to the year 1919 when soldiers returned home after World War 1 to find high unemployment rates and inflation. Each soldier was not able to get their job back after fighting for their country. Not only did this bring anger to the individuals and the community, this marked the largest general strike Canada has ever seen. On May 15, 1919, the society decided to show support to those soldiers who were incapable of receiving their job back. At exactly 11am workers had a walk out, leaving their jobs and duties unattended. Strikers took over the streets of Winnipeg. This ranged from garbage men to police officers, everyone had shown support. On June 21, 1919, the Royal North-West Mounted Police had hired union busters, who rode on horses to fire into a crowd of thousands of workers, killing two and injuring countless others. This marked the last day of the strike.

Still fighting for appropriate measures, a major history event led unions to great measures today. This includes the 'Right to safety at work'. During the 1960's the exploitation of workers was still widespread. Oftentimes this affected the immigrants more as many barely earned reliable support. Support is essential to care for your family, to have a safe work environment and for the immigrants to not live with fear that they will be deported.

The individuals who spoke little to no English had the most disrespect as they were unclear of any rights they had. On March 17, 1960, five Italian immigrant workers climbed 35 feet underground to continue their work on a tunnel at Hogg's Hollow in Toronto. The tunnel consisted of just six feet in width. Pasquale Allegranza, Giovanni Battista Carriglio, Giovanni Fusillo, Alessandro and Guido Mantella had to crawl underneath a 36 inch water main running through it to pass one another. They hadn't been equipped with hard hats or flashlights which led the scene to be extremely dangerous. Unfortunately, a fire had occurred and the five men became trapped. Each exit was blocked from smoldering cables. In a state of panic, rescue workers began to shut off the air to the tunnel. Having no air way allowed the tunnel to cave-in. The working men suffered from nitrogen exploding within their bloodstream. A sad and traumatic death for the workers as the mud around the tunnel buried them alive. They died of carbon monoxide poisoning and suffocation from inhaling smoke, sand and water. This raised a major deal for all workers alike making a stand for reliable safety procedures.

Moving ahead to the present year of 2020, unions are more reliable and important than ever. With the ongoing pandemic, better known

as covid-19, spreading across society, workers are relying under the supervision of unions for stable support, financial needs and benefits. With unexpected new protocols, unions acted in a fast manner to protect their employees. For instance, in this difficult time unions called for increased inspection to ensure safe working conditions, proper guidelines, adequate sanitization and to ensure conditions met the occupational Health and Safety act. This would lead to a more approachable workplace. The steelworkers unions was able to get appropriate 'personal protective equipment' for the steelworkers who work as airport screeners. Allowing proper equipment for safety measures increased the workers comfort and safety. Fighting for health and safety for the members who belong to united steel workers has been adapting and responding to provide full support for employees. Continuing to work on those who have suffered from employment loss due to the pandemic.

Unions are solidary. They have faced tough, unfortunate and unexpected times before and will continue to remain strong today. In conclusion, it is hard to have a strong working middle class without unions. A long journey of dedication and reliance allowed workers today to have anti-discrimination rules, overtime pay, sick leave, pensions, collective bargaining rights for employees and countless other benefits. All of which are important and have improved our society.