

The Value of Unions in our Society



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Most kids my age do not recognize the value of unions in our society in the current economy as well as their benefits. Often we hear that unions are only good to defend those who do not conform to the employer's rules. I now understand that unions do so much more than defend those people. I was like those kids before talking to my dad, a long-time member of the United Steelworkers Local 1-2010.

One thing my father made me understand is that unions are constantly attacked by employers or anti-union governments who reduce or simply take away their right to strike by imposing collective agreements on them. We must understand that removing the right to strike from a union, it is rendering it ineffective. The strike is the last option for a union to convince the employer of improving the working conditions.

With time, we tend to forget that it is the unions that contributed to the creation of the 40 hour week; a week that every worker can benefit of today. Before, workers were working twelve, fourteen or even sixteen hours a day, 7 days a week. Unions are constantly attacked to reduce this benefit; we see more and more 44 hour weeks, and what to say about weekends. They exist less and less because employers require weekend shifts to remain competitive on the global market. Unions also contributed to paid holidays such as Good Friday, Christmas Day and New Year's Day, to name just a few. Today, it's our society that benefits from that. Pay equity is another good example. Before, women had a salary that was inferior to men's. My father told me that this still exists in Canada and the United States in certain work sectors but that it is not the norm. Again another value that is really important and that unions helped contribute to our society and of which everyone benefits. And what about medical, dental and vision care benefits. All those are included in collective agreements to improve workers' benefits. In return, society benefits with an extremely strong work force who keeps the economy rolling all through Canada.

It is thanks to unions that the norms for Canadian workers on health and safety are so progressive. Unions constantly battle with governments to improve norms and regulations to protect workers. It is unions who defended common interests and who lobbied governments to declare April 28 as National Day of Mourning. It is also the unions who lobbied governments for the Westray Bill where miners lost their lives due to their employer's negligence. This Bill shows that if there is voluntary criminal negligence from the employer, he can be sued and can go to jail for having killed a worker, unionized or not.

A United Steelworkers Local 1-2010 representative came to my school to talk to us about workers' rights. We, the workers, have the right to refuse unsafe work and there are laws that exist to protect us. Often, employers don't tell us what is dangerous or not. We are just cheap labour. Kids of my generation need to be informed on our rights and on what to expect when we enter the workforce.

But before all, unions are the voice for those who don't have the power to express themselves. For those in society who, without unions, would be exploited by governments and employers. We just have to watch television to see the union presence during manifestations. Unions are in the forefront with respect to discrimination towards First Nations, women, law projects, regression of workers' rights or international situations that do not conform to our Canadian values.

We have to look overseas, like in Bangladesh, and in other underdeveloped countries to see those companies without conscience who exploits workers where unions are prohibited. They are the same employers who deal with Canada, or even Canadian companies who go in those countries to exploit women, men and kids to make more profit.

After watching short films on "You Tube" on the exploitation of workers in Bangladesh, and seeing and understanding that the 10 or 20 more developed countries like the G8 and/or G20 do nothing to stop what, in my eyes, is modern slavery. Those same governments are not afraid to sanction countries that don't conform to their requirements regarding petrol or other ideologies. But when it is time to abolish exploitation of women, men and children or modern slavery, governments do nothing and no sanctions or efforts are given. It is obvious to me that the manifestations against G8 and/or G20 are necessary to stop exploitation and the non-action towards the less fortunate. In my opinion, my generation needs to react and do everything in our power to stop this.

I now understand why my father encourages me to get involved in manifestations that reflect my values and ideologies. Also to continue pursuing the socialist values of unions so that in return the society can benefit from it.

As a future young taxpayer, the union values are primordial. Without unions, what other organisation will fight for workers who have no defense against unscrupulous employers? Who will support and make our values and rights go forward? What other organisations than the unions will face these employers or governments who exploit everyone like the more vulnerable and the poor in underdeveloped countries?

In my opinion, there is no question. It is essential in our society to have the values of our unions in our present economy.