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The Value of Unions in our Society

Note: This essay was submitted in French. This is a translation of the original.

Work is the activity that allows the production of goods and services; it's the essential element of production of the economy and the viability of a community. Work is provided by the employee who, today, has the right to work in a safe workplace, benefits of parental leaves, paid vacation, fair wages and is part of an associated collectivity to preserve those rights and more. These associations are more commonly known as unions.

The idea of defending common interests, to meet and establish rules exists since the beginning of the human and civilized history. It's this ideology that is still present at the heart of unionism.

The 1800s mark the birth of the union model and of the modern unions of today. In Canada, the union movement has been improving the worker's life for a long time but this did not happen overnight and unions had to face many challenges to obtain the rights that the workers currently have. First of all, groups of workers had to obtain the right to gather and to associate. It's in 1872, following a strike of printers in Toronto that the Trade Unions Act was signed. This law legalized and protected union activities. It's also this event that allowed us to imagine a 9 hour work day and Labour Day. One thing leading to the other, other fights were won and other ideas were presented like, for example, the birth of unemployment insurance in 1940, the automatic contributions from wages to the union for its members in 1945, the procurement of acceptable remuneration, benefits and pension plans for the public service staff in 1965 as well as parental and maternity benefits in the 1970s.

The right to security at work is, in my opinion, one of the most important fights for union groups. Even if this fight seems to have no end, the health and safety of workers has improved. It's in the 1960s that Ontario adopted the law for industrial safety, that we write the Canada Labour Code and the Occupational Health Act. The latter makes the health and safety a shared responsibility between the employer and employee. Consequently, the employee has the power to refuse unsafe work, has the right to be informed of dangers present at the workplace and can participate in discussions regarding health and safety. WHMIS is just an example of the efforts deployed by the union, the government and employers to promote the access to information on dangerous products and protect the worker.

Health and safety at the workplace is not only indemnities for injuries, coffee breaks, sick days, a safe workplace and the procurement of safety equipment. Health and safety at the workplace is also zero tolerance for discrimination, harassment, abuse of power, intimidation and the bad treatment of an employee.

In Canada exists the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. This protects the fundamental rights of every Canadian. There is also the Human Rights Act to promote the equality of Canadian citizens and prohibit discriminatory practices. At the same time, union representatives are looking at the question: What are our rights and are they recognized and protected at the workplace? Unions develop a language in collective agreements and apply pressure on different levels of the government to develop laws to reinforce workers' rights.

About a quarter of Canadian workers are union members. Being a union member means that you have the power and the right to negotiate, enter a grievance and promote change. In addition to benefiting from a higher hourly rate than a non-member colleague, being a unionized worker can also give you the right to legal representation, to education, to financial support during unusual circumstances like for example a strike, to fair wages, to national or international solidarity, to a means of communications, etc,...

In the course of history, the union movement has made itself known and heard and has fought to obtain rights for workers. Those that have the privilege of being a union member have the responsibility to recognize the efforts of union groups and preserve the rights by exercising them.

Strength lies in numbers!