

The Value of Unions in our Society

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



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What does the value of Unions in our Society mean for a young person of my generation? To be honest, it doesn't mean anything. It doesn't mean anything because most of us have never been exposed to Unions.

The only thing we know about Unions is that they strike or protest. For a young person who is finishing his secondary school, it's the last of my worries. The fact that my father is a Union member and that it is now time for me to apply for scholarships, I started to research Unions but my father didn't want to help me. He told me: "Do your research, you will better understand and maybe learn something that will stay with you for life".

So, here is what I found in my research. I learned that Unions lobby governments, had to strike and that many have lost their lives to improve our society. Let's start with governments. For example, let's take the Westray law. It came from the fact that a mine exploded in Nova-Scotia and killed 26 miners in 1992. After many investigations, it was determined that the employer knew the mine was dangerous and that an explosion was imminent but the employer did nothing to fix the situation.

The Westray law says that if an employer knows of a dangerous situation and that an employee is killed because the employer didn't fix the situation, he can be accused criminally. That law came in effect because of one reason only. It's because the United Steelworkers never stopped lobbying the government to change the law and protect the workers against shameless employers who don't care about the safety and security of their employees because they want a richer month-end. Here, in that case, the Union's values have changed our society.

I also learned that Unions are not always on strike like some people think. Most of the time when we hear of Unions it's on television and they are mostly on strike. But in reality, Unions settle 90% of their negotiations to prevent strikes. We rarely hear by Medias that settlements have been ratified by Union members. From the point of view of a young person like me, Unions will have to do better there to promote their settlements because we never hear of them. Unions negotiate working conditions and language like work hours, paid vacation, paid holidays, grievance settlements, seniority, health and safety, bereavement pay, pension plans, short and long term sick leaves and wage increases. All those conditions, from what my father explained to me, are employers' rights that Unions have taken away from employers. Unfortunately, many Union members have lost their lives to establish these working conditions so that others could benefit from them. Simply, let's look at the Reesor Siding monument near Opatatika to understand that the region has been harshly touched by a strike where workers have been killed. All these conditions that Unions negotiate improve the values of our society. The better the working conditions of workers, the better the community is doing. Entrepreneurs of the region are also thriving. Workers of these communities can afford to spend more and the community benefits from that. Furthermore, parents can afford to pay for post-secondary education for their kids. In return, society gains a population that is more educated and productive.

Unions do a lot of protests so that our society reflects their values. Values like increasing the minimum wage so that people working at minimum wage can get out of the threshold of poverty. Unions also protest so that the Canadian government put pressure on other countries where governments don't respect peoples' rights, like the exploitation of children or women's rights. I realize that the Unions' values are the same as mine and of those my parents taught me. Also, I understand more why Unions use the terms "Brothers and Sisters" and "you are your Brother's keeper". I must admit that my father was right. I learned a lot on Unions with my research and it will stay with me for all my life. In the end, they have nothing but good values these Unions!

So let's continue to fight HIGH AND LOUD to have our rights heard and win against social injustice.