

ABOUT UNIONS



Millions of Canadians belong to unions. Union members work in every kind of occupation, using their skills and wisdom to build cities that work and a society that cares about social justice.

The labour movement is a crucial part of the changing reality of Canada's largest urban centre.

Since the First Nations peoples gave Toronto its name – a gathering place – this city has been built by immigrants and their descendants. Each new generation of immigrants discovered both opportunity and one vital lesson: ***that they needed to have unions in order to raise living standards for themselves, their families and their communities.***

2



Monument to Chinese Railway Workers

That was true of the Irish who dug the roads and canals, of the Jewish garment workers who worked on Spadina Avenue, of the black railway porters, of the Italian construction workers, the West Indian and Filipino healthcare workers, and today of new Canadians from all over the world working in every part of our economy. And it is also true for those whose families have lived here for generations.

The first unions were formed by workers with similar skills who joined together to set a minimum wage rate for their trade, or to help in case of injury. Often their struggles were to simply to stop employers from cutting wages when work was scarce. But unions in Toronto quickly set their sights

higher, and fought for shorter hours, better safety, public education and democratic rights in society.

After the Second World War, veterans who had fought overseas demanded fair treatment at home. Huge strikes took place to win the right to have unions in the major industries.

The Toronto Labour

Committee on Human Rights led the

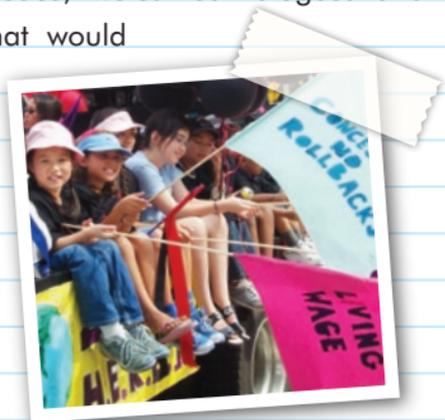
way in challenging employers, landlords and restaurant owners – and yes, even unions, at times – to end racist practices, and lobbied to have Canada's unfair immigration policies changed and human rights legislation created.

Later, many unions took up the cause of women's equality, bargaining equal wages for women at work and supporting the demands of women for social change. Union activists in Toronto helped in the struggle against apartheid and colonialism, worked for peace, welcomed refugees and sought to shape a city that would

provide the basic elements of a just society. All this was shaped by a deep understanding that gains made collectively are far stronger and last longer than those made through individual advancement.



3



What Does A Union Do?

The most basic function of a union is to give a collective voice to workers when dealing with their employer. A written contract between workers and their employer lays out the terms and conditions of work, including benefits, holidays, and wages. Union members decide together what issues are most important to them and then a bargaining committee meets with the company to negotiate. Over 95% of the time a contract is agreed upon without a strike or lockout.

4



When the economy is strong and workers stand together, they can make gains that are reflected in the contract. Often those gains are shared by others who work for the same company or even by

those in a given sector of the economy. That is how standards are raised over time – and why today most people enjoy benefits that were unheard of in the past. Unions have won for workers not just higher wages and medical or dental benefits, but also paid vacations, overtime rates, sick time, and pensions.

The struggle for health and safety on the job has been another important union goal. The right to know about the health effects of materials we work with, the right to refuse unsafe work, and the concept of joint safety committees were only won through direct job action, followed by political lobbying to ensure that these gains were extended to all workplaces – union or non-union.

Bargaining a collective agreement does not guarantee that it will be lived up to. Unions have to ensure that the terms of the contract are honoured by employers. Usually they can do this using the grievance procedure, and violations of the contract can be corrected. Sometimes it can involve unions mobilizing members to stop jobs from being contracted out. And sometimes it involves huge campaigns to pressure corporations to respect the rights of workers in different parts of the world.

It is a basic role of unions to defend their members' jobs and to make sure the value of work is properly recognized by those who make the key economic decisions in our society. Unions are independent of government. Acting together with our political allies, unions have been a powerful force for social justice on issues as diverse as public healthcare and affordable housing. Toronto's labour movement has a rich history of advocacy and social leadership, as well as political involvement.

5

What Unions Helped Achieve:

Healthcare - unions bargained healthcare benefits for their own members, then helped to win a national public healthcare system

Employment Standards - unions fought to establish minimum wages, work hours, and overtime pay

Holidays - at one time, workers lost income if they wanted time off - unions bargained for paid holidays and vacations

Health and safety - union pressure and workplace action forced governments to enact laws to protect workers health and safety

Unemployment Insurance - the labour movement organized to demand benefits for people who lost their jobs

Paid maternity leave - it took strikes in the public sector to win paid maternity leave for women, now part of federal law

Human Rights - union contracts were the first to forbid discrimination in the workplace



Labour Day Parade celebrates union pride.

6

The Union Advantage

Most people involved in organizing a union want dignity and respect more than a big increase in pay. But there is a distinct financial advantage to having a union contract. Across Canada, unionized workers earn almost \$5 per hour more than their counterparts without a union. That's a huge advantage – but it only came about because past generations put their time and energy into building strong unions. Not every unionized workplace will have better wages and conditions, but overall, unions make the difference in raising the standards of millions of workers. In many cases, non-union companies raise their wages to stay close to the rates set by union contracts.

What Rights Do You Have Without A Union?

Canadians give up all kinds of rights once they enter their employer's property. You no longer have the right to go where you want, write about your ideas, or, in some cases, go to the bathroom without permission. You lose the right to free speech or assembly. Without a union, the boss is the supreme decision-maker. There are employment standards that are supposed to

be upheld, but in far too many cases employers ignore even these basic elements. As work becomes more pressured due to technology and globalization, individual workers' rights are being even further eroded.

How Do People Join Unions?

Most people become a union member by getting a job with a company that is already unionized. But every year thousands of workers who don't have a union decide they want one and set out to organize their workplace.

The law in Ontario prohibits companies from acting against their workers for supporting a union. If employees decide to have a union voice at work, they sign a card that names a union to represent them. If enough cards are signed, a vote is held by the Ontario Labour Relations Board. The union is certified when a majority vote for the union. That means the company is obliged to recognize and bargain with the union, and come to an agreement about the conditions of work.

Sometimes, however, companies will do everything they can to stop workers from organizing. But when working people don't let themselves be scared off or divided, they can succeed. It's worth it, because history has taught us that "united we bargain, divided we beg."

**"Everyone has the right to form
and to join trade unions for
the protection of his/her interests."**

**Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 23
United Nations, 1948**



The Bromley Armstrong Award is named after the respected labour and human rights activist.

The Foundation of a Just Society

Respect at work. Safe working conditions. A decent income. The ability to retire with dignity. Basic levels of social justice. Strong public services. An opportunity for the next generation to have good jobs...These are the legacies of Toronto's labour movement. They are the goals that union women and men set for themselves many years ago and they remain our goals today.

In a world where corporations exercise enormous levels of power and strive to commercialize every aspect of human interaction, society needs a counterbalance. The most effective balance has been and will always be the power of working people, acting together. That is the essence of our labour movement: making a positive difference to your future.



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