

Labour's Contribution to the Community

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Worker movements have been developing in Canada since the 1850s (Canadian Labour Congress [CLC], n.d.). However, it wasn't until 1872 that the labour movement began to gain some real traction, after the Toronto Typographical Union demanded that its workers' work days be shortened from ten hours to nine. This demand was met with resistance and employers hired new workers after print workers walked off the job on March 25, 1872. However, by then it was too late; news of the strike had already reached the supportive ears of many Toronto citizens, and on April 15, 1872 a crowd of ten thousand people rallied together to advocate for the print workers' rights. Back in those days union activity was illegal, and the strike committee was arrested for their actions. However, Toronto citizens protested once again against the arrest of the strike committee and this time their voices were heard by the current Prime Minister at the time, Sir John A. MacDonald who introduced on April 18, 1872 the Trade Union Act - a document that legalized and protected the formation of unions. This movement, which would later come to be known as the "Nine-Hour Movement", was therefore a pivotal moment in Canadian history as it helped pave the way for the multitude of benefits that union members today are able to enjoy.

The benefits that union members enjoy can be loosely categorised into three main categories: income and job security; health and safety benefits that improve quality of life; and equality/advocacy within the workplace. However, to fully explore the impact that the labour movement has had on Canada, this essay will not only explore the benefits that union members receive, but also how the labour movement is able to positively affect the lives of those in the greater community.

Job and income security is one of the main issues that the labour seeks to advocate for. For example, unionized workers are more likely to be full-time, permanent, and work longer for their employers than non-unionized workers (Canadian Union of Public Employees [CUPE],

2016). Unionized workers in Canada are also paid an average of \$5.40 an hour or 23% more than non-union members, and over 70% of unionized members have access to a pension plan compared to less than 30% of non-unionized workers (CUPE, 2016). These advantages are also higher for women and those in lower paid occupations, which is important because Statistics Canada has revealed that Canadian women only make eighty-nine cents for every dollar that men make (Canadian Women's Foundation [CWF], 2022). Labour therefore helps improve the gender pay gap in Canada which has been identified by the United Nations Human Rights Committee as a “persisting inequality” that needs to be resolved (CWF, 2022). Pension plans also help the greater community because they help provide income security for retired workers, which means that fewer seniors have to rely on family members or social programs to get by (Canadian Labour Congress [CLC], n.d.), thus increasing the amount of resources that are available within the community.

Another major focus of the labour movement is improving the health and safety of its members. For example, in the construction industry unions experience 30% lower critical injury claims, 17% less mobility impairments, and 23% lower lost-time claims (CUPE, 2016). Unionized workers are also more likely to report health and safety violations and no-lost time injuries, which makes the workplace safer overall (CUPE, 2016). Labour movements have also succeeded in making unions provide their employees with access to a variety of insurances such as dental, medical, pharmacy, and legal. This is important because the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] has found that employee health frequently carries over into better health behaviors that impact not only the employee, but also their family, such as cooking more nutritious meals at home and increasing physical activity levels (2015). On a community-wide scale, this is important because healthy eating and physical activity are health promotion

strategies that can keep people out of the hospital, thus preventing them from being a drain of resources on the community. The benefits enjoyed by union members also positively impact the community by attracting the health care professionals such as dentists, doctors, and therapists, and chiropractors into geographical areas where their services are needed (CLC, n.d.). Finally, unions also help negotiate additional pay, health and safety measures, and paid sick leave (McNicholas et al., 2020) - issues where the gravity of having such benefits became even more important and visible during the recent COVID-19 pandemic that disrupted the lives of millions of Canadians across the country.

The third major issue that labour movements focus on is advocacy, equity, and workplace democracy. According to the CLC, “when unions stand up for fairness, they improve our communities and the lives of all Canadians” (n.d.). For example, many of the issues that were first won by unions (such as minimum wage, overtime pay, maternity and parental leave, vacation pay, and workplace safety standards), are now enjoyed by many workers today regardless of whether or not they’re part of a union (CLC, n.d.). By improving conditions for their workers, unions have forced non-union employers to have to compete with them to attract workers (CUPE, 2016), thus helping set a higher standard of working conditions for everyone. By providing a democratic workplace, labour also gives workers the power to enact change into their workplace, their community, and on a larger scale, the wider world (CUPE, 2016). With training and education being a major priority for unions (CUPE, 2016), the labour movement also helps advocate life improvement opportunities such as training, university scholarships, and free online courses (United Food and Commercial Workers [UFCW], 2022). Protection against discrimination and harassment in the workplace are also major issues that the labour movement

seeks to make a priority (CLC, n.d.), thus improving the overall health and safety of the general community.

In conclusion, the labour movement is a rich part of Canadian history, full of monumental events that have led to the safe working conditions that many people today take for granted. Whether addressing issues related to income and job security, health and safety measures, or advocacy/equality within the workplace, labour helps improve the lives of everyone - union-members and non-union members alike. Its contribution to the community is therefore undeniable, and it will be exciting to see what the labour movement does next to improve the working and living standards of Canadians across the country.

References

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