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By Gil McGowan

Labour Day is a holiday to celebrate the accomplishments of working people and unions.

The first part of that equation is a relatively easy sell.

Even here in politically conservative Alberta, almost everyone would agree with the sentiment expressed in the old union song, “Solidarity Forever,” which points out that without the “brains and muscle” of ordinary working people “not a single wheel would turn.”

So, it’s not difficult to convince people they should applaud the hard work of nurses, teachers, electricians, heavy-duty mechanics, rig hands and the multitude of other people who make up Alberta’s labour force and who, collectively, keep our economy running.

But unions? That’s a different story.

For decades now, politicians, business people and conservative media pundits have been feeding Albertans a constant stream of negative messages about unions.

If you listen to some of these often self-interested critics, unions are a blight on the landscape akin to the hordes of locusts described in the Bible.

But are the naysayers right?

In order to appreciate the true value of unions, I’d like to engage in a thought experiment. Put simply, imagine there were no unions in Alberta.

Right now, Alberta’s 420,000 unionized workers make an average of 18 percent more per hour than their non-unionized counterparts. Economists agree that union contracts have the effect of pulling wages up for all workers in a given sector, not just those who belong to unions. So, if there were no unions, what do you think would happen to family incomes in the province?

If that doesn’t convince you, consider things like pensions, drug and dental benefits and workplace safety. If there were no unions to establish benchmarks for benefits and pensions or to fight for safer work places, do you think employers would improve upon the status quo, or would they backslide?

In addition, unions have traditionally played important political and social roles in Canadian society. As economist Paul Krugman has written, unions have become one of “the only effective counterbalances to the power of corporations” and the elite policies pushed by conservative politicians.

If there had been no unions engaging in advocacy work over generations, do you think governments would ever have agreed to introduce things like Medicare, the Canada Pension Plan (CPP) or occupational health and safety legislation?

If there had been no unions to say “no way!” to Ralph Klein’s so-called “Third Way” in health care, do you think that Medicare would have survived intact?

More recently, if there were no unions to lead protests against the irresponsible use of the Temporary Foreign Worker program, do you think the Harper government would have ever considered the rollbacks to the program it announced this summer?

The final question I’d like to pose to you as part of my thought experiment looks to the future, not the past and has to do with an issue that is raising concerns around the world: income inequality.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) recently released a report saying growing income inequality is threatening global economic security. Countries with high levels of income inequality are more prone to recessions because their citizens have weak or declining purchasing power. At the same time, they face higher crime rates, lower educational scores, and shorter life expectancies.

Growing inequality is also problematic because increasing concentration of economic power invariably leads to increasing political power for the rich – which, in turn, subverts real democracy.

What does any of this have to do with Alberta or with unions? Well, it probably comes as no surprise to anyone that Alberta is, by far, Canada’s most unequal province.

According to the U of A’s Parkland Institute, almost all of Alberta’s robust economic growth over the past 30 years has been gobbled up by a small sliver of people at the top of our province’s economic ladder.

For example, after adjusting for inflation, the average incomes of the bottom 99 percent of Albertans increased by a modest 13 percent between 1982 and 2011. During the same period, incomes for the top 1 percent increased by 99 percent and incomes for the top 0.1 percent increased by 149 percent.

One of the most striking features of Alberta’s economic story is that the rise of incomes for the top 1 percent has been almost exactly inversely proportional to the decline in union coverage in the province, brought about by anti-union labour laws.

To put it another way, the harder it became for unions to organize, the easier it became for those at the top of the pyramid to grab the fruits of economic growth for themselves, rather than sharing them with everyone else.

That's why Labour Day should be a day to contemplate the role of unions, not just the role of workers.

For more than 100 years, unions have helped improve wages, benefits and working Canadians for all working Canadians, not just their members.

They've also played an important role in standing up to powerful corporations whose interests don't always align with the public's and championing policies, like Medicare, that benefit middle-income families.

Rising income inequality is the latest challenge faced by working Albertans. It's a challenge that threatens the very foundations of our middle class society – even our democracy. And it's a challenge that unions – and perhaps only unions – can overcome.

In that way, this Labour Day, let's celebrate unions: because they're still needed in Alberta today. Perhaps more than ever.

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