

## Labour's Contribution to the Community

Many of the job "perks" we now take for granted can be attributed to the hard work of our union member forbearers. Safer working conditions, shorter workdays, better wages (including vacation and overtime pay) and programs such as Employment Insurance, Workers Compensation and public pensions are all here today because of others' work. Canadians can even thank union workers for human rights issues such as protection from harassment and discrimination. Labour's contribution to the community is huge.

Canadians can thank the Toronto Typographical Union for the shorter workday. In 1872, the typical workday for these print workers was 10 hours or longer. When they asked their employers to implement a nine-hour workday and were refused, the workers went on strike, which, at this time, was still a criminal act. A parade was organized and 10,000 people participated to show their support. As a result of this action, Prime Minister John A. Macdonald...introduced the Trade Union Act on April 18, 1872, legalizing and protecting unions. The strike in Toronto evolved into the Nine-Hour Movement<sup>1</sup>. The celebrations that resulted from this success led to what is now annually celebrated as Labour Day. This was the beginning of the Labour Movement in Canada.

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<sup>1</sup> History of Labour in Canada", Canadian Labor Congress

The Winnipeg General Strike of 1919 was Canada's largest strike. "Strikers included both the private and public sectors, and ranged from garment workers to police officers."<sup>2</sup> They were asking for fair wages in a time of economic woe following World War I. Although the more than 30,000 striking workers did not see immediate success, "the strike...routed the seeds of the modern union movement, many labour laws and workers' rights, health and safety legislation and collective bargaining."<sup>3</sup>

Employment Insurance (EI) which is extremely helpful to Canadians during poor economic times, was implemented in 1940 after a group of young, unemployed men had to work in terrible government camps for very low wages. They decided that these conditions were unjust so they went on strike and when that was not successful took their cause to Ottawa which became known as the "On to Ottawa Trek." "This epic strike and trip captured the hearts and minds of Canadians and gave birth to unemployment insurance in 1940."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> ibid

<sup>3</sup> Darren Bernhardt "Winnipeg General Strike was 'large and difficult defeat in 1919 but benefits workers today". CBC News, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/winnipeg-general-strike-legacy-1.5131684>, July. 22, 2019

Safer work conditions can also, be credited to the Labour Movement, As a result of a tragic workplace accident in Toronto on March 17, 1960, during which five workers died after being trapped *in* an unsafe tunnel, health and safety became a priority. "Unions led the fight to get the Ontario government to take workplace health and safety seriously, leading to the passing of the Industrial Safety Act. The act was the foundation of the Canada Labour (Safety) Code that passed later that decade. It clearly set out laws and regulations for the safety of workers in Canada.<sup>4</sup> The Province of Saskatchewan, later, in 1972, passed the Occupational Health Act which made safety a responsibility of both management and workers and outlined three vital rights for workers that still hold strong today:

- The right to know about hazards and dangers in the workplace.
- The right to participate in health and safety issues through a workplace committee.
- The right to refuse unsafe work.<sup>5</sup>

Maternity and parental benefits are also here today as a result of the hard work by union members. Before 1971, new mothers would have to quit their jobs or return to work very soon after giving birth if their income was needed by their families. In 1971, the federal government did offer 15 weeks of paid maternity

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Partie Phillipa, 1-highlights in Canadian History", CBC News, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/kendai-highlights-in-canadian-labour-history-1.850282> [July. 22, 2019]

leave. However, unions began to bargain for longer paid leave, and guarantees that their jobs would still be there upon their return to the workforce. In addition, unions also negotiated for paternity leave and leave for parents who adopted their children. As a result of these gains, many more women are now in the workforce: "At the beginning of the 1960s just over 30% of women aged 20 to 30 participated in the Canadian labour force. By the end of the 1970s it had doubled to just over 60%, and in 2012 over 70% of young women were participating in the labour force. And today, 70% of mothers with children under five years of age are working."<sup>6</sup>

Labour has made major contributions to the community in the part. Today, unions still continue to ensure that Canadian workers are given what they deserve.

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<sup>6</sup> History of Labour in Canada, Canadian Labor Congress