

Labour's contribution to the Community

We often do not realize it, but the labour movement in Canada has contributed immensely to the community and improved the lives of workers – unions, men, women, youth, etc. – across Canada. Canada's labour movement has an exciting history with lessons learned about how many things have changed in Canada over the years. Our labour movement is part of what makes Canada so great today. As society has continued to evolve, we, as labourers and as part of the labour movement, have thankfully had the opportunity to fight and win many battles – minimum wages, overtime compensation, workplace safety, vacation leave, sick leave, anti-discrimination, maternity leave and parental leave, to name a few.

One issue that the labour movement has changed, and one that is quite important to me personally, is gender equity. In 1921, leave for new mothers was first introduced in Canada when British Columbia introduced the Maternity Protection Act. This legislation allowed women to take an unpaid leave of absence before and after giving birth, while also making it unlawful for the employer to dismiss them. If their employers were not abiding by the legislation, they were subject to hefty fines.

Twenty years after the Maternity Protection Act came into effect, the Unemployment Insurance Act was enacted in Canada in 1941. This Act did not cover paid maternity leave, as paid maternity leave was not presented in concept until 1966. In 1971, the Unemployment Insurance Act was amended so that mothers with at least 20 weeks of insurable income could claim up to 15 weeks of benefits through the Unemployment Insurance system. Following this amendment, unions began to push to make maternity leave more accessible. Negotiations were made with employers for longer leave times, with higher benefits, with employers agreeing to top up the portion of the salary paid by unemployment benefits. Unions won the guarantees that women could return to the jobs they held before their maternity leave, but they were not done there.

As the unions continued to push for change, so did the workers themselves. In 1980, clerical workers led the most massive strike in Canadian history, demanding paid maternity leave and fair wages. The following year postal workers also went on strike; part of their demands included expanding maternity benefits. At the conclusion of the 42-day strike in 1981, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers won 17 weeks of paid maternity leave for its members across Canada. Soon, the concept of more extended periods of paid maternity leave, that was made available through unemployment insurance benefits, became mainstream and expanded across the country. The unions, and the labour movement as a whole, did not stop at maternity leave. The unions also negotiated and won adoption

leave and parental leave that was available to either parent. The federal government has since continued to improve the maternity and parental benefits offered through its employment insurance program. The continued improvements for leaves, and the results from these strikes, had such amazing results for women in the '80s and continues to make strives for my current generation. The fight for maternity, adoption, and parental leave is such a powerful example of how the labour movement has contributed to the Canadian community of workers.

As a young worker, PSAC and CEIU member and a woman, the work that the union has done and continues to do has a powerful impact on my life. Knowing that today's union continues to advocate for improved access to parental benefits through expanded access to employment insurance benefits overall and better access to quality and affordable childcare for all workers is critical to me. Access to childcare and early childhood education provide economic benefits beyond families with young children. Knowing that my union Brothers, Sisters and Comrades may want to start a family soon or already have young children makes this a vital issue for my generation. With the help of labour unions contributions, parents can return to the workforce while still having full benefits.

Canada's labour movement has an extensive history of improving workers' everyday lives. As an active union member, I know the hard work put in every day to protect the rights that have been hard won and the fight to continue to protect and enhance worker's rights. Unions are focused not just on the gains in bargaining, but the benefits for all. There are still so many fights that need to be won such as ending child labour, winning workers' compensation, having better public pensions and social programs like health care and childcare to name a few, and so much more. Labour's contribution to the community has gone far, but I know it will continue to go farther.