

Labour's contribution to our society.

In Canada, the majority of the population lives as a member of the working class. There have been significant strides to improve the lives of such people, mostly championed by unions, and that fight continues every day. However, it can be useful to reflect on how far we have come, to inspire more improvements, and as a marker of why unions exist. Organized labour and unions are responsible for so many improvements in our society, a role that cannot be overlooked.

Marginalized people, including women, those belonging to the LGBTQ+ community, as well as children, have gone through much more undue hardship when it comes to existing as a member of the middle class. For centuries, women were expected to stay home, while their husbands earned a wage, or to work in jobs designated as 'women's work'. This included jobs such as secretary, receptionist, nurses, etc. Women had to withstand an immense amount of social pressure throughout the 20th century, as the percentage of women in the workforce rose (Heathfield, 2020). Women were continuously expected to accept long work hours and a general lack of benefits, which made it almost impossible for women to do it all.

Other groups also had difficulty during this time as there was no proper advocate for them. For example, less than 25 years ago, it was legal for employers to discriminate against someone for their sexual orientation (Canada, 2018). Children were expected "to contribute to their family economy from about the age of seven" (Barman, 2015). Child labour was not prohibited until the 20th century. Millions of people were at a disadvantage because of their identity. The corporations that employed these people

found it extremely easy to ignore their desires for better wages, more compassionate benefits, and an ameliorated work-life balance.

Enter unions. Since the late 1800s, unions have been fighting to improve worker's rights. At that time, the typical worker was not marginalized as described above. However, social justice allowed more freedom for these peoples, and unions include them in their advocacy accordingly. Unions were and are a force to be reckoned with, as they place extreme pressure on both companies and the government to elicit change. As the world progressed, unions fought for modern values. From fighting for a livable minimum wage, to shorter work weeks, to the creation of employment insurance, organized labour demanded that workers are compensated in a just and fair way (CLC, 2015).

Not only did unions facilitate an improved standard of living, but they also allowed for higher standards of workplace safety. As recently as 1960 the exploitation of worker's physical health was still very common (CLC, 2015). As with many movements, it took several years of tragedies occurring at work before real change happened. Eventually, however, unions were able to campaign for the successful implementation of the Canada Labour (Safety) Code (CLC, 2015). This piece of legislation, along with other similar passed legislation has protected the physical, and more recently, the mental well-being of the working class.

Unions have helped to improve the lives of the working class of Canada. When you compare what life was like for laborers 100 years ago, it is clear how far we have come. Even for those most privileged, they faced horrifically long workdays, very little pay, and hardly any benefits. The situation was worse for any minority group. Unions

have had to fight long and hard to achieve anything, but the fights have been worthwhile. As a whole, members of the working class have experienced extreme improvements in quality of life; due to the creation of social safety nets, a better work-life balance, and preventative safety measures, all of which would be impossible without the work of unions.

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