

My Union Membership: An Expression of My Beliefs and a Foundation for My Future

Last winter I decided that I should become more actively engaged with my union, so I became a member in good standing and began attending meetings. When reflecting on my reasons for doing so, I realized that union membership is a reflection of a lot of different aspects of my life. It represents the lessons my parents taught me about advocating for my rights and the rights of others in the workplace and understanding that I can never be complacent about these rights. The union's role to protect workers who have a variety of different backgrounds, religious beliefs, sexual orientations, etc., also very much aligns with the feminist beliefs that I have developed during my education. Lastly, my union membership contributes to my role as a library worker, and when I complete my Masters of Library and Information Science degree, may one day far in the future inform any leadership position I might hold. Union membership is both an expression of my belief system, as well as an opportunity to be better informed about my workplace and be empowered in the work I do there.

When I first entered the workforce as a teenager, it was important to my parents that I do so with full awareness of not only my responsibilities in whatever job I was hired for, but also the responsibilities my employer had to me. My parents educated me on Alberta labour law and made it clear to me that I had to be aware of my rights, because not every employer that I would encounter during my life would seek to treat me fairly. When you are young, you often make the assumption that people placed in authority will use that power responsibly, but as you grow older you learn that this is not always the case. I am grateful that I learned these lessons from my parents when I first started working, because many of my jobs have not involved the luxury of having a union and I believe the sense of awareness instilled in me lead me to advocate for my rights and leave places of employment where I felt I was not respected.

My parents encountered problematic treatment in their own work lives and made sure to stand up for their rights when these abuses took place. For instance, my mom, in a restaurant job she worked at earlier in her life, took issue with the fact that as a new employee she was expected to work for her first two weeks without pay as this was her "training period". By pointing out that this went against labour laws, my mom was able to advocate for herself and be

paid for this work. Fair treatment of workers was also important to my dad, who was actively involved in his union, and for a period of time was his location's union representative. My father took this responsibility very seriously and made sure to educate fellow employees on their rights and current workplace issues. He also made his coworkers aware of their right to have their union representative sit in on meetings with supervisors. My dad supported many of his coworkers by sitting in on meetings with them and giving them advice afterwards about their rights and potential methods for addressing issues in their workplace. Taking on this role in his workplace sometimes meant that my father's relationship with his supervisors could be tense or strained, but my father did this work and supported his fellow employees because he knew the value of this work.

My parents are no longer part of the workforce, but when I think of the ways they advocated for themselves and for others in the places they worked I feel a great deal of pride. Many of us who come from places of privilege take our rights and freedoms for granted, but when we become complacent, we put at risk all of the advancements that those before us worked so hard for. I remember calling my dad after attending my first union meeting to share with him what the experience was like for me, how it made me feel more informed and empowered. My dad remarked that he was proud to see me getting involved with the union at my workplace just as he had done with his, it was a clear indicator to him that the lessons he and my mother had worked to instill in me had taken root.

The values my parents taught me formed a strong foundation for me as I entered post-secondary education. It was during my first degree, a Bachelor of Arts in English, that I came to identify with the concepts of feminism and incorporate them into the framework with which I viewed the world. I was exposed to the work of strong women who made their mark on the world. One of these women appeared to me in the creative work of my first English professor, Dr. Birk Sproxton. Dr. Sproxton wrote a novel called *The Red-Headed Woman with the Black, Black Heart* about Mabel "Mickey" Marlow, a nineteen year-old woman dedicated to the work of unions and labour activism. The book's dedication and opening quotes cheekily hint at the origin of the story: Mabel is based on the author's own mother and her labour activism. Sproxton tells the story as though it were a folktale, exaggerating where it suits him, but he draws on history

too. He offers up a section in his mother's own words of her activism to support the labour rights of miners in Flin Flon, Manitoba: "It was a Saturday, I think, when there was going to be a vote against the union. We went down to the community hall and all us women went up on the steps and blocked the doorway. I had two eggs in my pocket and I waited until a bunch of strike breakers was trying to get through and I threw my eggs — they made a lovely mess". In his portrayal of his mother, Sproxton describes her not only having a mischievous streak, but also being a powerful public speaker, who stands before the miners of Flin Flon, encouraging them to stand up for their labour rights and form a union.

The first time I encountered *The Red-Headed Woman with the Black, Black Heart* was at the first of several readings in honour of Dr. Sproxton. Sadly, he died part-way through my first year of college when I had him as my first English professor. A number of female professors gathered together to read the various roles of the women in *The Red-Headed Woman with the Black, Black Heart*, with my poetry professor, Joan Crate, taking the role of the infamous Mickey. Watching these women read from the novel was not only entertaining, due to the book's tongue-in-cheek tone, but for myself, and I'm sure a great deal of others in the audience, it was a reminder of the power of women when they stand together to advocate for rights.

I've felt this power in person too. On January 21st of this year, I took part in the Women's March, an activist event that began in America in reaction to Trump's election as president, and spread throughout the world. I heard that more than 5000 people packed City Hall and Olympic Plaza in Calgary, both women, and also men, who support women's rights. I had multiple reasons for marching. I was marching to show my investment in protecting women's rights, but I was also marching for anyone whose rights either have been, or currently are at risk: members of the LGBTQ2 community, visible minorities, Indigenous people, Muslims and any others who are discriminated against for practicing their religion. I see my feminism as being intersectional, it is not just about women's rights, it is about working to make sure that all feel equal and valued by the society they live in. Walking in the Women's March was a powerful act of solidarity to be a part of and a reminder of my commitment to be a good ally to anyone who may need my support. I see my choice to become more involved in my union as yet another expression of my feminist beliefs. In working to support the rights of employees of both the Calgary and Cochrane Public

Libraries, CUPE 1169 espouses many of my own beliefs. At the beginning of each meeting a statement of inclusivity is read to ensure that all feel welcomed and valued in the space, and this statement aligns with my notions of intersectional feminism. Attending union meetings has been important to me not only because of what I have learned about social justice during my previous academic pursuits, but also in my current pursuit of my MLIS degree.

I started doing library work during my Bachelor of Arts degree. I worked part-time as shelver for another library system and my work there was a good foundation for my future library work. When I worked there I did not see libraries as being part of my future career, but that changed when I began working for the Calgary Public Library (CPL) while pursuing my MA in English. I thought I was studying to become an English professor, but I found my work with CPL to be very fulfilling, and after completing my MA, I decided to start my MLIS. I feel as though my time spent as a shelver gave me a perspective not only of the work done by that role, but also of the ways in which power structures can sometimes operate in organizations.

Shelving books is an essential task for any library. Without shelvees the organizational system of the library would fall apart. Unfortunately, some view library work as a hierarchy, with the position of shelver as one of the lower-ranking roles. While there were many reference assistants and librarians who were friendly to me at the other library system I worked for, I remember staff members who bought into this sense of hierarchy and, even though I worked with them regularly, never knew my name, or bothered to converse with me. I noticed similar behaviour directed towards other shelvees I worked with, and that was how I concluded it was simply our rank in the hierarchy and nothing personal. I still found it irritating and hurtful though. When I began working as a reference assistant at CPL I swore that I would not be influenced by this notion of hierarchy. I do not see myself as better than a shelver, nor my work more valuable than theirs, I am simply working in a different role now. While I can sometimes be a shy person, I make an effort to engage with all of my fellow employees no matter what role they have within the library. Something that is stressed within the union is the notion that “My Local works because I participate”. In my opinion, participation can be enacted in a variety of ways. It means paying your union fees and regularly attending meetings, but it can also take other forms. Since I am the only member of my department who regularly attends union

meetings, I see it as my duty to pass on information from the meetings to my coworkers so that they can be informed. Respecting and engaging with my fellow coworkers no matter what their position within the organization is also a form of participation. Workplaces that are not only healthy, but also beneficial to employees are places where communication is established between people, and I believe actions as simple as greeting a coworker, and asking them how they spent their weekend go a long way toward building the camaraderie and trust that is so essential in a workplace.

Last semester I took a class in management for my MLIS degree. When I began my degree I knew that management was one potential aspect of librarianship, but I did not believe it was one that I had any particular interest or skill in. I had always believed that people were either suited for leadership or not, but through this course I learned that this is not the case. I'm not sure if my future career as a librarian will involve a managerial role, but if it does, I feel that my time attending union meetings will be a part of what informs my leadership style. One of the aspects I appreciate about the union meetings I have attended is that they are a gathering of employees who do a variety of different kinds of work for the library. Through attending these meetings I have learned a bit about the perspectives of workers in roles very different from mine. For instance, a few meetings ago, one of the drivers who does deliveries for the library talked about how they had changed their routes to better suite the needs of the drivers. Hearing about the experiences of library drivers was very valuable to me because I have absolutely no familiarity with their work. My involvement with the union has made it clear to me that if I ever do have any kind of leadership position within the library, it will be important for me to learn about the role that each member of my team plays. This knowledge will be further informed by the collective agreement that I have learned more about by attending meetings and this information will help me to assist coworkers when needed and also ensure that the tasks they are asked to engage in are not only appropriate for their role, but also safe to carry out.

Engaging more with my union has impacted my life in a number of ways. Being a more active union member is a continuation of the lessons I learned from my parents about advocating for my labour rights, and lessons I learned as I became a feminist in college, noting the way women through work in unions, and other forms of activism, can ensure that all members of

society are considered equal and treated with dignity. In addition, attending union meetings has made me a more empowered library worker, who shares union information with coworkers and seeks to support them whenever possible. Next spring I will be completing my Masters of Library Science degree and hopefully shortly after that I will be moving into a new role in my library career. Wherever my library science degree leads me though, the lessons I have learned as a union member will be ones I take with me. They will inform my approach to working with others, or perhaps one day even managing a team, and these lessons will ensure that I shall work my hardest to create a safe and positive working environment for myself and those around me.

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