

Rh'ena Oake Scholarship Essay

"What Unions Mean to Me"

Lisa Shin

As a high school senior this year, through the Alberta social studies 30-1 curriculum and as an IB history student, I had the pleasure of being able to experience and learn in depth of about the creation of unions and how they became established and prevalent in today's society. Luckily, I was also able to compare my personal experiences with my union through the job I have through the Calgary Public Library and was able to have both factual knowledge as well as real-life and first –hand experience as a union member.

At school, I first became aware of the concept of unions after learning about liberalism and the power and ability of people to be able to think and express one's thoughts on their own behalf. Through liberalism, everyone was granted their own rights and responsibilities, civil liberties, as well as basic individual rights and freedoms. As liberalism progressed in societies through time, the concept of unions and collective rights and responsibilities also became prevalent. Being able to provide workers with a safe work environment and guarantee compensation for the work that they do was an important part in the fight for rights in the earlier years of liberalism.

Unions were first established near the First World War as workers could not suppress themselves anymore from demanding better and fair wages and working conditions that were safe enough to work in. Learning about the struggles labourers faced while trying to win rights at their workplace as a result of the resistance of employers made me think about my own union, and how grateful I should be in that I am able to have an organization that guarantees that my workplace is safe and that I will continue to have fair wages.

A case study that I was able to learn about during class was the Triangle Factory Fire incident. This event particularly resonated with me because through the impacts of this event, I was able to see the impacts and the necessity of unions, and how much I should be grateful for the community that I am part of. The fire occurred on March 25, 1911, and resulted in more than a hundred deaths of sweatshop factory workers who were mostly young women immigrants. This particular event struck me because I was able to relate to their situation myself, being a young immigrant woman. However, the differences between our workplaces were severe. The women in these factories fought for unionization before the fire occurred and even went on strikes when their employers would not agree to better wages and safer working conditions. The fire occurred as a result of employer negligence and failure to uphold the safety of their employees by not having a proper fire exit nor an escape route resulting in so many unfortunate deaths. Learning about this event's impact on unionization in the early 20th century was also very important. This fire and the deaths of so many workers allowed for the creation of a women's union for sweatshop workers and this event remains in the educational system to remind everyone of the history and the significance of unions in our own lives.

To me, unions provide a safe boundary for myself to be a library worker. I am able to express my concerns and problems that I have knowing that I won't be faced with any judgement or criticism. I am very glad that this platform exists because I am able to bring up anything that concerns me while working at the union meeting or be able to easily email a union representative, knowing that I will receive a prompt response and guaranteed back-up. It also allows me to have a support system for when I do encounter problems at the workplace that I cannot address to a direct senior employee. The union also provides a service for me to access if I need any additional or external support regarding any sort of problems that I have in my life with full anonymity included with being part of the union.

Through attending union meetings, I became aware of the supportive community of library workers that are established through the union. Everyone at the union meetings is so friendly and easy to talk to as well as share any concerns or issues that I may be facing. By attending the meetings, I also became aware of the issues that other library workers and branches are facing and tried to adapt them in my own life. For instance, learning about the various security forces at library branches near the c-train stations, allowed me to be aware of my surroundings and to keep my security as a priority whenever I was working. Being able to have the exposure to the variety of problems or concerns that fellow library workers had has allowed me to become a better library worker myself by enriching myself with more information and being more aware of my surroundings. Attendance at meetings has also taught me the necessary tasks that unions do such as providing support for workers who are unfairly treated or those who aren't able to stand up for themselves. Knowing this, I am able to work at my workplace without any worries and am able to do my job freely.

This year, I was so grateful to have had the opportunity to experience what being in a union is like as well as learn in depth of its history and presence in our history. Through both being a student and a library worker, I was able to have first-hand experience on the materials I was learning in class and the importance of unions and it helped me tremendously in acknowledging and recognizing the prevalence of unions in my life. I have also become aware of an inclusive community where I am able to bring any issues or problems that I face in the workplace and I am able to bravely voice my concerns without any fear, thanks to being a part of a union.