

CUPE 1169

Rh'ena Oake Scholarship Essay

What Unions mean to me

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This is the first time, in my 18 years of a working life, that I am part of a Union. I have worked many minimum wage retail and café jobs, but for the purpose of this essay, I will refer back mostly to my “career” as a waitress as I have an abundance of waitressing experience. I have worked at many restaurants and bars, from tiny small-business breakfast boutiques, to giant chain restaurants including Red Lobster and Chili’s, to cocktail bars and dive bars and pubs namely O’ Sullivan’s late into the night.

Working in the industry for so many years gave me a clear understanding of the truth of what happens behind those “Employees Only” swinging doors. Comparing the working conditions, rules and regulations, and overall working attitudes of my fellow staff members and superiors is in stark contrast with my work today at the Calgary Public Library (CPL).

A big misconception of waitressing is that waitresses make amazing amounts of money, which isn’t usually true. Contrary to what people think, tips often get divvied up between many of the staff. After “tipping out” to the bartender, the kitchen staff, and your management, you’re usually allowed to keep about half of your tip. The theory behind tip sharing is that all working staff contributed to the dining experience and should share in the reward. I never minded sharing my tips as I believed in that mantra, however, the amount of “tip out” varied from place to place, was never mentioned in writing and I have yet to find out whether “mandatory tip sharing” is legal.

At the library, I know exactly how much I am getting paid, and what I am entitled to. I know that my union has “the bargaining power to negotiate better wages, benefits, pensions, and vacations” (UFCW Canada, 2020) on my behalf to a lot me a fair and living wage that includes benefits for my health and wellbeing. I know that my wage will increase as my seniority does and that if there are opportunities for advancement, I will be given consideration above those not yet employed at the library, giving me a fighting advantage.

Another significant difference I noticed after starting at the library is the mandatory breaks we are entitled to. It was made very clear to me on my first day at the library that regardless of how

busy I felt, I had to stop and make sure to take all of my paid and unpaid breaks. As a waitress, there was *never* any mention of breaks. While studying at SAIT, I worked about 20 hours a week at a pub. One of those shifts involved a 10-11 hour shift every Friday, starting at 4pm and ending at 2-3am in the morning. Asking for a break would have been completely taboo. The only employees that ever got any sort of “break” were those that smoked cigarettes as that was common and accepted in the industry. At CPL, not only do I feel that I can take a break without judgement, I am actually empowered to feel that I earned my break and that “all employees are contractually entitled to set breaks according to the Employment Standards Act (ESA)” (Stam, 2017).

Safety was something that was commonly ignored in the restaurant workplace. The degree to which it was ignored and neglectful varied from restaurant to restaurant. Working at restaurants, I have burned myself at work on baking pans, cut myself with shattered glass (once even needing stitches), forced to pick up giant trays piled with plates when I did not feel comfortable, forced to carry loads heavier than I could handle, told to ignore hazards that could cause a slip or fall, and there was always an ongoing joke of who could handle picking up the hottest plates without gloves or protection. One of the biggest hazards in a restaurant are the slippery, wet, and greasy floors of the kitchen where there is constant foot traffic. Working at Red Lobster, they took this hazard quite seriously, making employees buy and wear specific slip-resistant shoes. I was therefore utterly shocked, when later on I was hired to work at the steakhouse Chop. Their mandatory uniform included high heels! And, they had a heel height *minimum* of one inch. I was in disbelief. Not only did I find this incredibly sexist, but extremely unsafe. To impose such a rule would only lead to more accidents in the kitchen! Not to mention the blisters, aches and pains of running around in high heels all night. Clearly, health and safety were not the priority. And later, the heel height minimum rule was imposed. I was told that I could not wear my pair of small heels to work anymore, as they were not high enough. This was one of several times I felt powerless and let down by my workplace, and found rules like this to be sexist and discriminatory.

Safety at the library seems the complete opposite of what I was accustomed to as a waitress and, there is an overall sense among staff that safety actually comes first. Staff know what we are and

aren't allowed to carry, we're properly equipped to do our jobs, we're often reminded of safety guidelines, and I never feel pressured to take on more than I can handle physically and mentally. Beyond the union's role of "initiating and advocating of safety laws and regulations, unions have also played an important role in enforcing workplace regulations... they have been a voice for workers identifying where laws and regulations are needed" (Walters and Mishel, 2003). This is apparent at CPL, where safety is viewed as an essential element of a properly functioning workplace and if we have ideas on how to make our workplace safer, we are encouraged by our leaders to share and are taken seriously. The organization of equipment in our workrooms, standards of weightlifting allowances, and new strategies on tackling work procedures are constantly evolving because workers and our superiors are consciously paying attention to safety. The energy in our department is not overwhelmingly stressful as it can be in a restaurant kitchen. You do not get yelled at as you do when tensions are running high during a lunch or dinner rush. We are treated with respect and expected to perform at a sensible level. We're encouraged to dress professionally yet comfortably, and I never feel discriminated against because of my gender.

Another obstacle with working at restaurants and bars was always knowing in the back of your mind how transient these jobs were. Seeing staff come and go, you were always reminded that your job could come to a crashing end at any moment. You could get fired or let go without any warning. You might find yourself in an uncomfortable position or discriminated against and decide to quit. Everywhere I worked, I saw staff wrongfully let go, and a couple of times, I was the unfortunate victim of termination without notice and without reason.

Working at CPL, there is a strong sense of job security that you can in truth see and feel in yourself and your co-workers, and a sense of trust in your superiors. According to Economic Policy Institute, Unions "have encouraged their member to exercise workplace rights and participate in programs by reducing fear of employer retribution." (Walters and Mishel, 2003). I no longer feel like I can lose my job without cause and I feel empowered to speak up if I ever witness an injustice occurring. Knowing that my worker's rights are supported in writing and "are regulated by federal and provincial legislation" (Canadian Labour Congress, 2019) enforces that those rights will actually be upheld. When reading the Collective Agreement, I can't help

but be reminded that these are not just clauses in an agreement. These are the worker's rights that activists have fought for and stood for; so that I may be treated fairly and feel a sense of physical safety and mental security when I arrive at work each day. All of these rights that we have inherited, gives workers an overall sense of wellbeing and allows us feel safe and respected as individuals.

It is a privilege to be part of a Union but it also feels like a right that all workers in all fields should be entitled to. No one should be treated unjustly at work or have to lose their job without cause. No one should feel unsafe at work. No one should be discriminated against. Not only does a Union help keep us safe, negotiate on our behalf's, and fight for workers, it expands and deepens our rights as human beings. It pushes the boundaries of our human rights, including physical, mental and emotional by keeping our workplace a place where employees can thrive, express themselves and perform at an optimal yet safe level. Unions help establish and promote democracy and according to the Economic Policy Institute, "a strong labor movement is essential to a thriving democracy... [and] unions not only improve worker's benefits, they also contribute to due process and provide a democratic voice for workers at the workplace and in the larger society" (Walters and Mishel, 2003). Many of the benefits and standards fought for and won for members in the past are enjoyed by all workers today; "minimum wages, overtime pay, workplace safety standards, maternity and parental leave, vacation pay, and protection from discrimination and harassment" (Canadian Labour Congress, 2019).

Attending Union meetings is enlightening, empowering, and transparent. Our Union representatives inform us on all the vital work that they do, the goals they are currently fighting for on our behalf, and how we can participate. Beyond all of the benefits of Union membership outlined in this essay, a Union meeting is a space of inclusivity and non-judgement. All members are encouraged to attend, ask our questions, and voice our thoughts and opinions; and our voices are heard. Unions are necessary now more than ever, especially with the Covid-19 pandemic. In these uncertain times when others have been permanently laid off, I have a sense of ease knowing that my job is still secure and that the Union and Health and Safety at CPL are doing everything they can to make sure we are safe at work. I can't help but wonder, how would the world look if we had more Unions for people to turn to and depend on. Knowing and appreciating so clearly what my union means to me, what could it mean for others?

References

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