

What unions mean to me

First, the union means I have a safe space to voice concerns. The union executive is very approachable, and I have often emailed them with questions that I either do not feel comfortable asking management or did not feel were adequately answered by management. For example, when I recently applied for a job within the organization, I lost out to someone with a teaching degree. I felt discouraged because this was the second time I had lost out on a job to someone with teaching experience. While I had met with the hiring manager for feedback, I did not feel I received an adequate answer as to why I was not the successful candidate. So, I communicated the situation to the union president and asked what was going on. The president did not have the answer right away, but eventually found the answer and got back to me. The answer was not something I knew about the hiring process up until that point, so thanks to the union, I have information that will help me better prepare for future job applications. The follow-through of the president in taking the time to listen to my question and get a full answer for me helped me feel heard and supported, and improved my mental outlook for my career prospects in the future.

The union is also helpful for me because the meetings help me catch details in organizational policies that could be problematic for employee welfare, even if the policy itself was created with the best of intentions. I often hear concerns from others that I realize I share but had not thought of on my own. For example, Calgary Public Library (CPL) recently piloted “affinity groups” for staff of marginalized identities, to improve commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI). At first, it sounded like a great idea because they were meant to be a safe space for people to meet and connect, but also to provide information to the organization on how to improve their EDI policy for staff. However, it was also meant to be unpaid work, and I did not realize the implications of this until it was discussed at the next union meeting.

During the union meeting, several people voiced a concern that the affinity groups would reinforce the societal norm of unpaid work of marginalized groups, who are often already chronically underemployed or underpaid. This is an issue I would not have realized without the union meeting, and it became a concern that I shared once I knew about it. The possibility of unpaid work highlighted that the affinity groups were not as well-defined as they initially appeared. My affinity group lead fought for paid meetings, and came up against management resistance that eventually meant the group did not survive the pilot. As unfortunate as that was, it ensured that we were not required to do unpaid work or be part of a poorly-defined concept that could in the long run provide less support to its members than intended.

The union is also important to me because it is a much more effective advocate for staff than individual employees speaking directly to management. My experience is that when speaking directly to management, it is easier for management to brush something off; however, when the union is speaking to management, it has more clout in a negotiation because it is advocating on behalf of all workers. In a recent town hall, I asked management whether CPL was considering employing social workers, due to the rise of vulnerable patrons using libraries, and often asking for social services we are not trained to give. I figured it would help to decrease employee stress; however, I was told that CPL was not considering implementing this. In contrast, when the union advocated on behalf of staff who had had their wages cut, they were able to go much further in the negotiation process than one individual employee would have done, even though they were unsuccessful in the end.

Since the union represents the interests of employees, it is important that as many employees as possible are involved. This is why I became an information steward for my branch. Getting more people involved matters because then the union can more accurately represent the

desires and concerns of all employees. As information steward, I can act as a conduit for staff to the union by passing on their concerns, and keeping staff connected and informed of the content of the union meetings if they are unable to attend. I can also, crucially, encourage people to attend meetings when they can, because no amount of note-taking on my part can convey the feeling one gets from having their concerns heard and knowing that others share the same concerns.

The end result of having a union, I believe, is improved mental health for employees. Feeling like one's concerns are heard and that others have the same concerns is so helpful when facing challenges, because we know we are not facing challenges alone. I regret not being more active in my union during the COVID pandemic, because I feel I would have felt more supported and had improved mental health at a time that was challenging for a lot of people and I did not feel very supported by my management, especially regarding what health and safety rules needed to be in place on reopening, before we had the vaccines we have now against COVID-19.

My experience during that time highlights the union motto of, "My local works because I participate." Union members were asked by the union president what needed to be in place for us to feel comfortable returning to work. I said that we could require masks on patrons, and if patrons did not wear masks, we could have the right to refuse service (or provide alternative modes of service, like curbside). We did not get this policy, even though other library systems had implemented it successfully, because management wanted to minimize potential clashing with patrons. I remember feeling let down that we did not get that policy in the end, because it felt like pleasing the patrons was coming at the expense of the health and safety of the employees. Looking back, if I had been more active in the union before that point, I would have had more of an appreciation of just how hard our union works even in times when they don't

succeed in getting what members want. It sometimes feels that management's main priority is the patrons and not the staff, whereas the union advocates only for staff. That means that even if we don't always get the outcome we want, we can process the outcome together and support each other, and try to move forward.

Feeling supported ensures that we have the best working conditions for employees, which helps retain great workers who love what they do, and that in turn helps us provide the best service to patrons that is possible.

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