

CUPE 1169

Rh'ena Oake Scholarship Essay

What Unions mean to me

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Labour organizations and unions were established in Canada during the Industrial Revolution in the 1800s but were legalized in 1872 when the Trade Union Act was passed by John A. Macdonald (GPMC, 2023). This was a pivotal moment in Canadian history and a huge event for labour rights and the labour movement. Today, “unions in Canada are regulated by federal and provincial legislation” (UFCW, 2020) and about a third of Canadian workers are part of a union (Canadian Labour Congress, 2019).

But what exactly is a union and what do they do?

Unions are formed by workers themselves that join together to negotiate terms such as “wages, benefits, pensions, vacations, workplace health and safety, job training and other work-related issues” (AFSCME, 2024). They are democratic organizations, where leaders are elected by members (AFSCME, 2024). By joining together, worker's voices are stronger to stand up to mistreatment or unfair and unjust treatment, and poor working conditions. We have a union that is always there for us, working behind the scenes, fighting for better wages, benefits, health and safety, and more and all of this work is later laid out in the collective agreement established by our union, employers and employees.

Unions help establish and promote a strong 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). Some of the benefits unions fight for later become Canadian law that benefits all Canadians. 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). We can stand up for ourselves and others by challenging disrespectful, unfair, or unjust behaviour from employees and employers without fear of being reprimanded or fired. 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” which effects law making, regulations, and democracy on a societal level (Walters and Mishel, 2003).

My job at the Calgary Public Library is the first job I have had where I am part of a union and there is a stark difference in the way workers are treated at the library compared to many of the retail and restaurant jobs I have had in the past. I have had instances where I was not treated fairly at work or wrongly let go. I've been challenged with sexist rules and discrimination. I had to be careful of the grievances I voiced in fear of losing my job. In each situation, I had no one to turn to, so I simply had to accept the unfair behaviour or stand by and watch as things operated neglectfully or unfairly. Unions are important to me because they ensure that me and my fellow coworkers are protected. Unions are an essential part of a positive, well-functioning, and connected community and work to improve working conditions for all people, which expands and deepens our human rights. Human rights belong to everyone, no matter your status and unions are made up of activists fighting for rights that eventually become human rights. Many of the benefits and standards fought for and won for union 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). Knowing I have a union to support me is an immense relief and weight off my shoulders that stays with me when I am at work performing my various work duties. I

have a deep sense of job security, knowing that if something goes wrong, I can approach my union for help.

The CUPE 1169 Union is one I am proud to be part of. I have seen first-hand how union meetings work and how all employees, regardless of position, are encouraged to participate and voice our thoughts and opinions, and our voices are heard. It gives us an opportunity to meet as a group and exchange ideas. It is a safe space where everyone is included and everyone is encouraged to speak, express themselves, and bring forth their doubts, uncertainties, and queries. We are also included in the decision-making process. The union updates us on the progress they have made with collective bargaining negotiations, and we can vote on terms. All the hard work that is being done is stated clearly in the meetings and all work is transparent, while also effectively handling individual grievances, concerns, and other member's various situations and scenarios privately.

The strength of our CUPE 1169 Union was seen best during the Covid-19 pandemic when our union rose to the challenge to ensure enhanced safe working conditions, negotiating sick leaves, negotiating temporary layoffs, and making sure all staff had a job to come back to when workers in other industries were permanently laid off. It was a scary and stressful time, but my worries were at ease knowing my union was fighting for me. Last year, the union bargained fair terms and a livable wage when an impasse was reached. They requested mediation and held on firmly, when demanding a yearly livable wage increase. It was because of the union that a fair deal was reached. Our union is always fighting and bargaining on our behalf, to get us the best results possible.

Unions are essential to democracy and human rights. Behind every labour movement and step towards abolishing racism, sexism, hate towards LGBTQ+ people, hate towards Indigenous people, etc. is a union that supports minorities at work and stands with them. With our collective voice, we protect those that need protecting, move progressively towards justice, and equal rights for everyone, and living a life with compassion and respect towards everyone. By keeping people safe at work, monitoring working conditions, and providing support, unions ensure that workers are seen and heard as equals and treated fairly at work. We depend on our unions to do the good work they do and defend us when needed. I am grateful for my union and the honest and transparent work that they do, and I intend to support my union by continuing to participate in union meetings. I am grateful for the peace of mind and confidence I have at work each day knowing my union is always there for me and supporting me and my fellow employees. Thank you CUPE 1169 for the work that you do.

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