MYTHS ABOUT UNIONS

“Why are people forced to join unions and pay dues?”

A union is created in a workplace when a majority of workers in a particular workplace express their desire to be represented by a union, by signing membership cards. Here in Saskatchewan if at least 45% of workers have signed union cards, there will be a board supervised, secret ballot vote to determine whether the majority of people in that workplace want the union to represent them or not.

Despite employer opposition, unions exist because the majority of workers believe very strongly that the introduction of a union at their workplace will help to better their lives through better working conditions, wages and benefits.

People who oppose unions are not forced to join the union or sign membership cards. They are required, however, to pay dues. If every worker in a workplace benefits from a union contract, everyone should pay dues. If a union wins a wage increase, it goes to every worker, not only those who are members. People pay municipal, provincial and federal taxes whether or not they voted for the person or political party in office. You get your street cleaned, the protection of fire and police department, the protection of federal laws and agencies because you pay for them. You cannot opt out.

It’s the same in a workplace. Every worker is protected by the union. Every worker gets the benefits of a union contract.

“Unions are always making unreasonable demands.”

What is a reasonable wage demand? One that meets the workers’ needs? One based on the employer’s ability to pay? One that is tied to productivity? Or one that the media thinks is responsible? When unions make up their wage demands, they usually try to catch up to the cost of living. Most wages don’t keep up with the cost of living. Unions also know that they must give and take and compromise in bargaining, and this affects the level of wage demands too. Most importantly though, unions try to get their members a wage that gives them a fair standard of living.

The fact is that nobody has yet devised a workable formula for determining wage increases that would be considered reasonable by the workers, by their employer, by the public, by the press and by the government. One group or another will always be unhappy. Union members, through their hard work, contribute to the financial success of their employer. Unions promote the idea that members should also receive some benefit from the companies’ success.

Besides, most employers, except occasionally when in genuine financial stress, still refuse to open their books to union negotiators. Unions are therefore denied access to the data on profits, productivity, and labour costs that might influence their demands. The only alternative in our bargaining system is for unions to go for as much as they think their members are entitled to. To some parts of our society, anything unions try to negotiate is too much.

“Unions are only interested in money.”

Wages are important but unions have always been concerned about more than just wages. Some of the first goals of organized labour were better working conditions: eliminating child sweat shops, expanding public education and reducing the number of working hours. Over the years, labour has led the fight for Medicare, workers’ compensation, occupational health and safety laws, stronger human rights laws, and pay and employment equity.
“Unions are strike happy.”

Unions negotiate for agreements - not strikes. No union wants a strike. Strikes develop when both sides cannot reach an agreement. To union members, a strike means a sacrifice for themselves and their families. Workers won’t go on strike unless the issues involved are so important that they are worth the sacrifice. Workers would not walk a picket line in all kinds of weather, sometimes having confrontations with police and strikebreakers, and living on strike pay (which is only a fraction of their normal income), if they did not see it as their only option. Unions always conduct membership votes before taking strike action and a strike occurs only when it has been approved by a clear majority.

The fact is that 97 out of 100 collective agreements are negotiated by unions without a strike. But strikes are controversial and controversy makes the news. This, no doubt, is why many people think strikes are the rule rather than the exception.

The right to strike is crucial to maintaining democracy. In countries with dictatorships, the right to strike is prohibited along with all other freedoms. The right to strike is a matter of freedom, and a democracy cannot function without freedom.

“Aren’t unions too big and powerful?”

“Big” and “powerful” are relative terms. In actual fact, most Canadian unions are quite small and together they represent less than 40% of the country’s workforce.

Even the largest unions, in terms of size and resources, pale by comparison with multinational corporations such as McDonald’s or General Motors.

In Canada, few politicians ever dare interfere with “free enterprise.” Businesses can set their prices, sell their products and throw their money into anything from advertising to expense accounts without supervision or restraint. Governments will usually give them money or tax breaks to do this. Politicians feel differently about unions. They have required legal certification, formal backing from a majority of the workers they wish to represent, and a long, complicated legal process before they can call a strike.

Governments can intervene in strikes, force workers back to the job and impose a settlement. They can fine or jail workers who refuse to work. Do you ever see governments trying those tactics on companies?

Unions, unlike most companies, are governed by a democratic decision-making process, where the members of the union elect their leaders and make decisions on what directions the union should take. Unions are first formed by their members and remain accountable to them. Corporations and some governments do not have this level of democracy or accountability for their shareholders or electors.

“Unions were good at one time but haven’t they outlived their usefulness?”

The Toronto Globe and Mail made this argument on May 6, 1886. Over 110 years have passed and unions continue to grow and become a more acceptable part of Canadian life. The simple truth is that unions will always be needed so long as some people control the lives of others by determining how much they earn or work or what kind of job they can do.
Since the time of the *Globe and Mail* editorial, thanks almost wholly to unions, Canadian workers have made impressive progress. Historians admit that union bargaining power, not government or corporate charity, has helped move millions of Canadians out of poverty. Unions have also given workers the purchasing power that has kept our economy functioning.

Thanks to the wage levels established by the labour movement, even workers who don’t have a union or support unions have benefits. And, awareness of workers’ rights and workers’ safety are heightened.

*“The public is not represented - and is the innocent victim of - strikes by workers in the public sector.”*

Unions in the public sector have to bargain directly with government officials or their agents. Who are these officials representing if not the public?

Public sector workers take their responsibilities to provide service to the public very seriously. A strike is always a last resort and is only used when services are threatened or bargaining completely breaks down. If the service provided by hospital workers, by postal workers, by garbage collectors, by workers in transportation and other key industries are truly essential, why are such workers so often among the lowest paid? If their jobs are so indispensable, why are they not treated accordingly?

*“Unions protect the lazy... the people who should be fired.”*

No union contract requires an employer to keep a worker who is lazy, incompetent or constantly absent or late. What the union does is make sure dismissals are for ‘just cause.’

It’s true that older employees who have a union can’t be fired when they’re considered “too old” and not useful by their employer anymore. Women, workers of colour, aboriginal workers, workers with disabilities, and gay and lesbian workers who have a union can’t be unfairly treated because of their gender, race, disability or sexual orientation. In that way, unions do protect people’s jobs. That’s the purpose of a union.

*“Unions only care about themselves.”*

If you look back at Canada’s history you’ll observe that many of the rights and benefits we all enjoy were initially fought for and won by unions. The labour movement was in the forefront of the struggles for public health care, public education, minimum wages and employment conditions. We work 40 hours a week or less instead of 60 or more because unions periodically went on strike for a shorter work week, despite the warnings of employers that they’d never be able to afford it.

Many of us will receive pensions from our employers when we retire because unions went on strike for that benefit too. And pay equity provisions have been added to many workers’ benefits, largely because their unions fought for it. No matter where you look, unions are involved in things that make the community better. Unions have always lobbied to pass on to others the benefits unions have won in bargaining: Medicare, prepaid dental insurance, sick pay and pensions.

Unions inspired and worked in the human and civil rights movements in Canada. Far from caring only about themselves, unions worked for the public interest and have always fought for social gains that would help all people.
“If unions’ wage demands weren’t so high and if they accepted more concessions, more jobs would stay in Canada.”

It is a myth that by accepting concessions, workers can save their jobs. Often, even after workers have given concessions to their employer, the business closes or moves. Or, the work is contracted out anyway.

Unions help workers resist this power grab by fighting the employer’s demand for concessions and ensuring that workers are paid fairly for their labour.

The financial problems faced by most employers are a result of the restructuring of the global economy; labour is only one of many factors in the equation. Employers often use the argument that they must have lower wages in order to compete with lower wage levels in other companies, at home and in other countries. This argument must be taken head on. Most employers are making a profit in their current situation or they wouldn’t still be in business. The wages in other countries, particularly where they are very low, are usually substandard even in the context of their own economies. How can Canadian workers compete with these low wage levels and why should they compete against workers in other countries when the corporations are happy to play one off against the other?

Workers don’t join unions so they can negotiate lower wages and benefits. Concession demands are part of the employers’ bargaining agenda and unions work to make sure their bargaining actions move the union’s goals forward, not backwards, at the bargaining table.

“Why do these myths about unions exist?”

Unions are not loved by CEOs, big business and the media. Time and time again labour is presented by newspapers, radio and television as the most unreliable and disruptive part of our national economy. Not all media reporting of the labour movement is negative; but whatever journalists have to say about the achievements of trade unions seems to get drowned out in the continual clamour of unfavourable coverage.

Unions make people face unpleasant realities. There really is unfairness in the workplace. Many people don’t earn enough money to live on. Many people must work at jobs that are beneath their dignity or make them unhappy. Yet the reality is that when people feel a sense of powerlessness or helplessness at their jobs or in their workplaces, many form unions to help resolve their problems. Unfortunately, it is only when this happens that workers begin to believe the myths they once believed about unions are exactly that, myths.

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