

# Youth Involvement In Today's Unions:

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Overcoming The Challenges

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## Youth Involvement in Today's Unions: Overcoming the Challenges

### Introduction

In choosing this topic for my essay, I have decided to write a combination of a personal essay and a traditional research paper. This way, I will be able to express my own thoughts and discuss my experiences in the paper.

### History, Issues and Challenges

Simply put, unions are organized groups of workers who come together to achieve common goals for working people. Some of these goals include job protection, better wages and benefits, and health and safety regulations. It is clear that unions improve working conditions for all workers. This includes non-unionized workers as union gains over the years have translated into laws that apply for all workers. Some examples of these gains include parental benefits, overtime rules and regulations, workplace safety standards and the '40 hour' work week.

Unions have existed since the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Great Britain although they did not become an organized movement until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Those early unions and the workers who made up the unions were often persecuted and faced prosecution in both Great Britain and in the United States.

In Canada, the first trade unions were active in the 1800s. An example of early union activity in Canada is the Toronto Typographical Union strike in 1872. That labour dispute, initially over the issue of a shorter workweek, led to the passing of The Trade Unions Act by Parliament later that year. That Act legalized unions.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Media Planet Unionized Labour  
A History of Unions in Canada

Canada has a proud history of union involvement. Unfortunately, union membership is on the decline in both the United States and Canada. We haven't experienced the same degree of union busting in Canada that has been experienced in the United States, but it is definitely occurring here.<sup>2</sup> Some people suggest that unions have outlived their purpose and are no longer relevant in today's society. That sentiment is especially true with some younger workers who see unions as repressive, irrelevant, and a thing of the past.

### **My Experience**

I grew up in a union family. My mother has been a proud union member for most of my life. I grew up debating workers' issues with my mother and with other members of my extended family. I have not yet worked in a unionized environment I am looking forward to the day when I will get a union card.

I thought I understood workers' issues and the benefits of union membership, but in 2014 I discovered that there was so much that I did not understand.

In May 2014, there was a strike by the workers who provide support services for the residents of my housing co-operative. It was a unique situation. The caregivers, who were employed by the subsidiary company of the co-operative, organized in late 2012. They attempted to negotiate a first contract but bargaining broke down. I knew a strike was imminent, but did not fully understand the issues until the workers were out on strike. The picket line was set up in front of my house and I spent a great deal of time speaking with the workers and the union officials. I learned that the workers were not paid the same rate as other workers in their industry and did not receive benefits. I also learned that Alberta did not have first-contract binding arbitration to help newly unionized workplaces get that first collective agreement.

Over the course of several months, things became very ugly. Attempts to get back to the bargaining table failed. My neighbours grew increasingly intolerant of the labour dispute and

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<sup>2</sup> WHY UNIONS MATTER

by Elaine Bernard, Executive Director, Harvard Trade Union Program

launched a war of its own on the union (AUPE), the locked out workers and anyone who supported them. My mother and I stood in solidarity with the workers. We were the only ones who did that even though there were many union members living in the co-operative and crossed the picket line, something we would not do.

That experience gave me the opportunity to understand – first hand – the issues and how some people feel about unions. I have used my personal experiences and the knowledge gained from that labour dispute to debate the issue of union relevance with my friends, acquaintances and other students at Concordia University

### **The Solutions**

In discussing unions with other youth, I have discovered that many do not understand the issues or why unions are relevant in 2016. When I took the time to explain what I've learned to other youth, that seemed to make a difference in how unions were perceived. One-on-one conversations may not connect with the masses but sometimes changing opinions comes down to a simple conversation. An exchange can truly go a long way in shifting the way people think about unions.

It is a fact that older workers are retiring. It is imperative that unions reach out to engage young workers sooner rather than later. I think it is important to engage youth in worker-to-worker conversations. Having another young worker explain the importance of unions and what's in it for them will encourage greater participation. Sending out materials alone will not engage youth. Young workers need to be encouraged to seek elected positions within the union. Young workers need to be encouraged to serve as union stewards in the workplace. Young workers need to work alongside current union leadership to make the union a place that is inviting and relevant for all workers.

### **Conclusion**

Based on my own experiences, I believe there is a way to get young workers engaged in the work of the union. Young workers need to reach out to other young workers and share their experiences and present the facts in a relevant manner. Young people know what is important to young people and they need to assist with both the messaging and implementation of any engagement strategies. Young workers need to know that unions are there for them and will help with any workplace issues that may arise. They need to understand the value of a collective agreement and why working in a unionized environment is preferable to a non-union workplace.

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