

Rick Malcolm Education Scholarship Essay

Submitted by Cedar Albus

Why unions?

My name is Chen. I am a seven-year-old girl and was born in Beijing, China, I do not go to school. Every day I wake up at five in the morning and go to work at a clothing factory where I cut cloth for twelve hours, seven days a week. I do not get breaks but I am given rice and water to eat and drink once a day. My mother, sisters and brother work at the factory with me.

My name is Changpu, I am a seventeen-year-old male and was born in the Chinese province of Guangdong. I was hired to work on the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway in British Columbia in 1880. I work for sixteen hours, seven days a week for \$1.00 a day constructing the more difficult segments of the projected railway, the area that goes through the Fraser Canyon. I live in a canvas tent that does not provide adequate protection against falling rocks or severe weather. My co-workers of non-Asian decent make three times what I make a day and are housed in sleeping cars and railway-built houses.

My name is Cedar, I am an eighteen year old female and was born in Calgary, Alberta. I started my first job, by choice, when I was fourteen. When I was sixteen, by choice, I changed jobs. When I turned eighteen, by choice, I work two jobs: one in a unionized environment and one in a non-unionized environment. Some people say that as a white female, I have privilege, I say that if it weren't for the exploitation of workers before me and the subsequent fight of these workers, I would have nothing.

Approximately fifteen years ago, having achieved the goal of universal primary education child labour in China is largely banned. However, it is hard to measure because it is hidden in

sweatshops and factories owned by large corporations. Today, the bigger issue is with the exploitation of workers in China both adults and young adults (16 – 20 years old).

When the railway was completed and the Chinese workers were no longer seen as useful, the Government of Canada passed *The Chinese Immigration Act, 1885* which levied a “*Head Tax*” of \$50 on any Chinese coming to Canada. This tax was increased in 1900 to \$100, and in 1903 further increased to \$500.

Throughout history unions have played an integral role in the establishment of basic workers’ rights; from a forty-hour work week to overtime pay to general holiday pay to maternity leave. The fight for worker’s rights that began centuries ago laid the foundation that has consistently been built upon over the years.

Unions were originally formed to protect and support employees from capitalist employers during the industrial revolution and I don’t believe that this purpose has changed at all over the years. The method of the employer fundamentally remains the same but the response from the unions have become more sophisticated. Although when necessary, union members will still strike both legally and illegally and rally and lobby, the days of fist pounding and the “old boys” clubs are primarily a thing of the past. Union leaders now, in addition to collective agreements, use legislation such as Human Rights, Labour Boards and Employment Standards to help support our members.

However, there appears to be a never ending attack on unions from the public at large and all levels of government. The public seems to selectively forget that were it not for the fight and sacrifice of worker’s decades ago, they would not enjoy the basic rights that Canadians now take for granted whether they work in a unionized environment or not. Couple that with the federal government’s attempt to cast unions as corrupt and inefficient by tabling

legislation like Bill C525 which would make union finances open to the general public, a requirement that would never be suggested for the non-unionized private sector, and in provincial governments by attacking the modest public sector pension plans by labelling them as “gold plated” plans whose liability falls on the backs of taxpayers. In addition, unions have lost bargaining power due to deregulation and the lingering effects of the last recession.

Figures from Statistics Canada suggested in 2012 that the labour movement in Canada is in a 30 year decline. While numbers have stabilized in recent years, organized labour is simply surviving not thriving and is anchored disproportionately in the public sector. With the current status of Canadian and global economies and with Alberta specifically having the highest unemployment rates in 40 years due to the price of oil, growth in unions whether public or private, in my opinion, is not likely to improve until there is a positive, long term turn around in the world economy.

The need for unions is a question that has often been debated. While early in the formation of unions it was clear that changes in working conditions were absolutely necessary over the years the stigma that unionized workers are now simply greedy individuals who always want more and who are never satisfied has grown and cast an ugly shadow on the labour movement. For me, the labour movement today still means protection, although unions are not perfect, I am optimistic that the day will never come where workers are not protected by anything more than government legislation which we know can and has been erased with the swipe of a pen. As long as unions continue on the path of increasing labour productivity, success and growth their existence is not in jeopardy.