

Youth in Unions: The Struggle and Importance of Reaching Out to the Younger Generations

Introduction

Unions are organized groups of workers who join in the effort to influence their labor environment and conditions. They evolved as a way for workers to join together and as a group to influence the inequality in bargaining power between an employee and an employer. Unions have impacted issues such as wages, work hours, health and safety regulations and benefits, in so doing ensuring that there is fair treatment in the workplace and representing the best interests of their members.

Many attribute unions to be the cause of the rise of Canada's middle class, and the general prosperity of the country. Unionized workers generally receive higher wages, meaning that people can afford to spend, which drives economic growth and creates more jobs. Unionized workers are also more likely to enjoy benefits such as health care plans, and have greater accessibility to dispute settlement, which serves as protection against exploitation or abuse by their employer. It is no surprise that nearly 30% of workers in Canada belong to a union.

The Disconnect

Unfortunately, unions seem to be less important to youth entering the workforce today than it did to their parents and grandparents. Born into a world where legislation to protect workers already exists, young people aren't as cognizant of the origins of worker's rights compared to their parents. Younger generations take for granted the benefits that were fought for by unions, such as fair wages, stable work hours, and health benefits. Interest in unions has been further buffeted by today's economy. While in the past, youth entering the workforce might have expected to stay within a single company for life, that is no longer the case. A report from the Broadbent Institute found that 52% of Canadians between the ages of 20 and 30 expected that their careers would consist of a mix of full-time and part-time positions at different companies and organizations; in contrast, only 14% of their parents reported the same expectation (4).

As such, many youth feel disconnected from unionized environments. This is especially true of youth looking for fast growth opportunities within a company, who feel that unions limit their ability to quickly progress due to rules regarding seniority, meaning that older workers get a significantly better chance of attaining a position when one becomes available. This issue is further complicated by the fact that more and more people are obtaining diplomas and degrees at

post-secondary institutions, but due to the economy find it difficult to find positions appropriate for their level of education. As such, growth opportunities are of a high priority to many youth entering the workforce.

The Issue of Communication

It seems that one of the issues surrounding educating youth about the benefits of unionized work environments is a breakdown of communication. Youth entering unionized work environments may not know very much about them, and may not be educated on the benefits that they receive by the employer or fellow union members. What they know is that a portion of their hard-earned money gets withdrawn for union dues, and many remain unaware of the advantages and security that gives them. Furthermore, in a cultural evolution of communication, which over the past number of years has skyrocketed with the use of social media, the in-person meetings held by many unions make them, so to speak, inaccessible to many youth who have become accustomed to the digital age.

Another issue with involving youth in unions is the assumption that as younger workers they are apathetic and uninterested in participating in a union, and as such are often not approached or treated as equal partners in the movement. However, labor activist Pablo Godoy states that in fact, when opportunities to get involved are opened up to youth (especially when they have a say in how they would like to participate), it becomes much easier to engage them. To Godoy, unions need more social media campaigns, and having youth representatives interacting with youth workers **(3)**.

The Breakdown of Rights

One of the challenges facing unions today is that the fastest growing sector is the retail/service sector, accounting for about 11.5 percent of employment in Canada in 2011 **(2)**. Most jobs offered in the sector are precarious and not unionized, and there is speculation that employers intentionally hire young workers who aren't informed about unions and workplace rights. These positions often pay minimum wage, lack stable hours, and offer no benefits to the employee. The working conditions also mean that there is a high turnover rate with employees, which makes it even more difficult to unionize these workers.

Interestingly, many youth have actually started their own organizations and employee associations in attempt to improve working conditions. The problem is that unlike unions, organizations such as these do not have legal status and the results from these efforts are limited.

Unions, however, could achieve better scheduling, higher wages, and advocate for workers' rights.

The Importance of Youth and Strategies for the Future

Unions in Canada have been shrinking: in 1997, more than 21% of private sector workers belonged to a union; by 2011 this number dropped to 17% **(1)**. This drop has been partially attributed to the failure to pull in young workers into unions. However, reaching out and engaging young workers is critical for both the wellbeing of Canadian workers and the long-term sustainability of unions.

Unions must recognize that to involve younger generations, they must try different and novel strategies to engage youth, and to allow them to take on a variety of roles in all aspects of the union, whether they are organizing drives, participating in negotiations, being on advisory or executive boards, or taking on staff positions. The biggest challenge, however, is that due to the changes in the economy and the culture surrounding the labor market, unions may need to consider evolving to reflect the evolving needs of workers around them. For instance, to accommodate the needs of younger workers who migrate between corporations and look for growth opportunities, but feel stymied by the hierarchical system of unions, unions could consider adopting a seniority-sharing clause between different Locals: that is, if a worker moves organizations, they have the opportunity to retain some of their seniority, so that they don't feel that they have to start from square one. Another suggestion would be to integrate more widespread use of social media and technology into unions – that is, offering members the option to attend meetings remotely through video chat, and keeping connected with members through social media. Unions could also look at offering more benefits tailored specifically to youth, such as adopting educational leaves of absence, helping students with tuition in the form of scholarships and bursaries, and adopting policies such as freedom with dress codes and hairstyles.

Conclusion

Unions are, and will continue to be an integral part of Canadian work environments, offering their members protection from abuse and maltreatment, fighting for better pay, and offering benefits. While many unions struggle with the issue of youth involvement due to reasons such as cultural and communicational barriers, they must explore new ways to increase youth involvement, both for the benefit of the youth and for the continuation of the unions. While the

challenge is great and the path to success is unclear, “unions must begin to reflect the workforce they’re looking to organize” **(Bako, 2)**.

Works Cited

1. Akyeampong, Ernest B. "The Union Movement in Transition." Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/75-001-x/10804/7011-eng.htm> on August 3, 2015.
2. Bako, Gabriel. "Youth Voices – Youth and Unions Need to Work Together." Retrieved from <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/commentary/work-life-youth-voices-youth-and-unions-need-work-together> on August 3, 2015.
3. Carter, Adam. "Do Unions Still Matter to Young People?" Retrieved from http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/hamilton/news/do-unions-still-matter-to-young-people-1.1395676#pd_a_7037718 on August 3, 2015.
4. Lee, Adrian. "Why Youth and Unions Can't Seem to See Eye to Eye." Retrieved from <http://www.macleans.ca/work/trendswork/young-and-unorganized/> on August 3, 2015.