

**CUPE Rick Malcolm Education Scholarship Essay**

**Why unions are just as important today**

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## Why unions are just as important today

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This is a personal essay which will reflect upon my personal feelings, experiences and reasons why I feel unions are still relevant today. I will share my personal views on why youth today should become more involved as well as why CUPE is such a great union to be a part of in Alberta.

Unions are important because they ensure equality for all union members and stand up for those who are being discriminated against or treated unfairly. Unions contribute towards labour movements which help to strengthen labour laws within our country, ensuring fair treatment of all Canadians, not just union members. Anyone who gets to enjoy having two days off a week, maternity leave, vacation pay and 40-hour work weeks with overtime pay have unions to thank for that! Unions lead to safer workplaces, improve wages and benefits. Unions provide members the ability to have a united voice and provide the sense of community by letting you know that you are not alone. This creates a sense of empowerment and a duty to improve the workforce for others. CUPE specifically has contributed towards various human rights efforts such as the decriminalization of abortion, equal welfare payments for men and women, and preventing privatization of public sector jobs.

Being a Union member is very important to me because I know that have a I have a stronger voice that will be heard. Our Local has a very amicable relationship with our employer and is effective in helping members when issues arise in terms of labour law or collective agreement disputes. I feel that our Local is also great at identifying when language requires adjusting so that it is more direct and easier for the members and employer to understand, which strengthens our relationship and ensures rights are respected. Our local is also doing great work in terms of workplace safety, especially in terms of violence in the workplace. I hope this will lead to changes across the province as well as country. As a shop steward, I truly appreciate the numerous training opportunities that help us to become more understanding and compassionate. Being a member gives us an opportunity to discuss how things are going in other Locals and learn ways we can help support others. When the forest fires affected

members in Fort MacMurray last year our Local was quick to contribute funds to help rebuild. When we come together it feels like a community of caring.

There is a dangerous shift in the economy for the employed of today, which could have a negative impact on the youth of today and tomorrow. Employers, especially in the service and retail sectors, are moving towards hiring part-time only in order to keep wages low and avoid providing group benefits to their employees. As my own personal experience working in retail as a manager, I was informed to do what I can to either get rid of my current full-time employees or convince them to step down to part-time for these very reasons. We were also provided a full day seminar to train us on signs your employees are planning to unionize, why unions are bad, and how to keep them from happening. As a result, many of the new comers to Canada who were supporting families both in Canada and overseas had to pick up 1 or 2 more part-time jobs and did not have necessary benefits for themselves and their children. This was disheartening for me to be a part of, but I myself was worried about what I would do without my full-time pay. Part-time jobs are no longer for teenagers but have become common place for single mothers, women, and immigrants to Canada. As a result, this shift will keep them in poverty and prevent them from getting necessary medical care that is often in benefit plans of full-time employees. They will not be privy to having an EAP, dental care, eye care or even sick leave entitlement. How are people to be contributing members of society if they can't see? Without pharma care people will continue to get sicker. Corporations have been launching "educational" attacks against unions, to prevent employees from unionizing which is a form of silencing. It is important for youth today to become more involved in unions than they ever were before, to fight against this economic change that only benefits the large bonuses for the few elite, over the wellbeing of the average Canadian. I think it is important for Unions to modernize in a way that is enticing to the youth of today. Some ideas for Unions to modernize would be: becoming more involved in social media, and communicating important points in exciting and summarized ways in the new culture of TLDR (too long

didn't read) and twitter with character limits people are used to reading less but absorbing more information. Unions can diversify by using technology, apps, notifications, and social influencers in creative ways. Unions can also work on new ways for people to attend their union meetings through their phones, tablets and computers that are user friendly and more interactive. I believe these ideas would lead to increased interest and engagement as well as communicating with younger generations in a way that will keep them into the fold and keep them connected. Communicating effectively and education are the ways to keep relevant in the ever changing future of technology.

CUPE has been a key player in ensuring human rights were protected in Alberta. In fact, in 1995 CUPE hospital workers in Calgary went on strike, protesting against the privatization of healthcare in Alberta. Privatization of these industries would be detrimental to the health of all Albertans as the importance would become the profit margins of the organization, which would increase out of pocket expenses as well as threaten the level of care being provided to Albertans. In part due to the decline of manufacturing work in Canada, exportation of these jobs overseas, and the lack of diversity in some unions, union membership has been declining. Despite these decreasing membership numbers for Unions across Canada, CUPE's membership has grown, which shows the strength of our union.

Overall, I believe that Unions are just as important today as they were in formulating the employment standards of our past. Through increased youth engagement by modernizing our Unions, we can help to educate everyone on the causes of today. The economic shift towards part time employment of Canadians is detrimental to our social determinants of health. I look forward to my continued many years supporting CUPE members of my Local, and I am committed to continue to grow and learn more in my role as shop steward as well as a member of CUPE.