

Political Action

Unions Matter

Unions are under siege in the face of corporate interests intent on exploiting the spinoffs of the 2008 economic recession that include a significant job loss in the manufacturing sector, falling tax revenue, and a budget deficit. At the same time, Ontario, as most other Canadian provinces, continues to experience a widening income gap, low corporate investment in jobs, and reduction in the number of unionized employees. Public sector employees are being targeted by right-wing think tanks and governments that contend taxpayers can no longer afford to support their pensions, benefits, or inflation-protected wages.

Labour movement gains

“No country has achieved widespread prosperity and created a large middle class without strong unions.” (CCPA, Oct.2011)

Over decades of union struggle, Canadians now benefit from:

- the eight-hour day and the weekend
- workplace health and safety legislation
- unemployment insurance and employment standards
- public pensions
- national medicare
- income supports for new parents
- training for unemployed workers
- minimum wages
- protections for injured workers
- equal pay for equal work

Fairness and representation

Through their union, employees benefit from such things as seniority and the grievance process as well as other provisions of their collective agreement that promote fairness in the workplace. The union also ensures these employees have a voice on issues that affect their working life and on important social justice issues in society at large.

Unions contribute to economic stability

Union collective bargaining has ensured a more equal distribution of wages and benefits than would have been the case otherwise. A recent study of 20 OECD countries “found that a 1% increase in union density is associated with a 1.5% reduction in incidence of low-wage employment.” (CCPA, Oct. 2011) “As middle- and working-class living standards are squeezed and society becomes more unequal, the economy becomes much more unstable and crisis-prone.” (Broadbent Institute).

Unions contribute to broader social good

Canadian unions have been on the front lines in the fight for greater economic equality, income support programs, and quality public services, including education, child care, health care and social services. They have been at the forefront of campaigns to enhance women’s rights and end racial discrimination. Unions have been taken the lead in pushing forward human rights cases on gender equality, sexual orientation, gender identity, and the rights of religious employees.

Examples of ETFO’s involvement in broader social justice issues include its participation in the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, the Ontario Health Coalition, the anti-poverty organization Campaign 2000, and the Coalition for Social Justice.

Union members are more engaged citizens and committed to democratic principles and institutions. The fight waged by ETFO members against Bill 115, the *Putting Students First Act, 2012*, is a case in point.

Unions stand up for issues that extend beyond their own self-interest and that promote the broader social good.

Sources:

Bruce Campbell and Armine Yalnizyan, (October 3, 2011), “Why Unions Matter”, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. (<http://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/commentary/why-unions-matter>)

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Errol Black and Jim Silver, (September 2011), “It’s Not Just About Wages: “Unions also protect human rights in Canadian workplaces”, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. (<http://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/commentary/fast-facts-how-unions-protect-our-human-rights>)

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