



Youth in unions
Engaging youth to
make a difference



Education and training
Larry Slaney on
apprenticeships

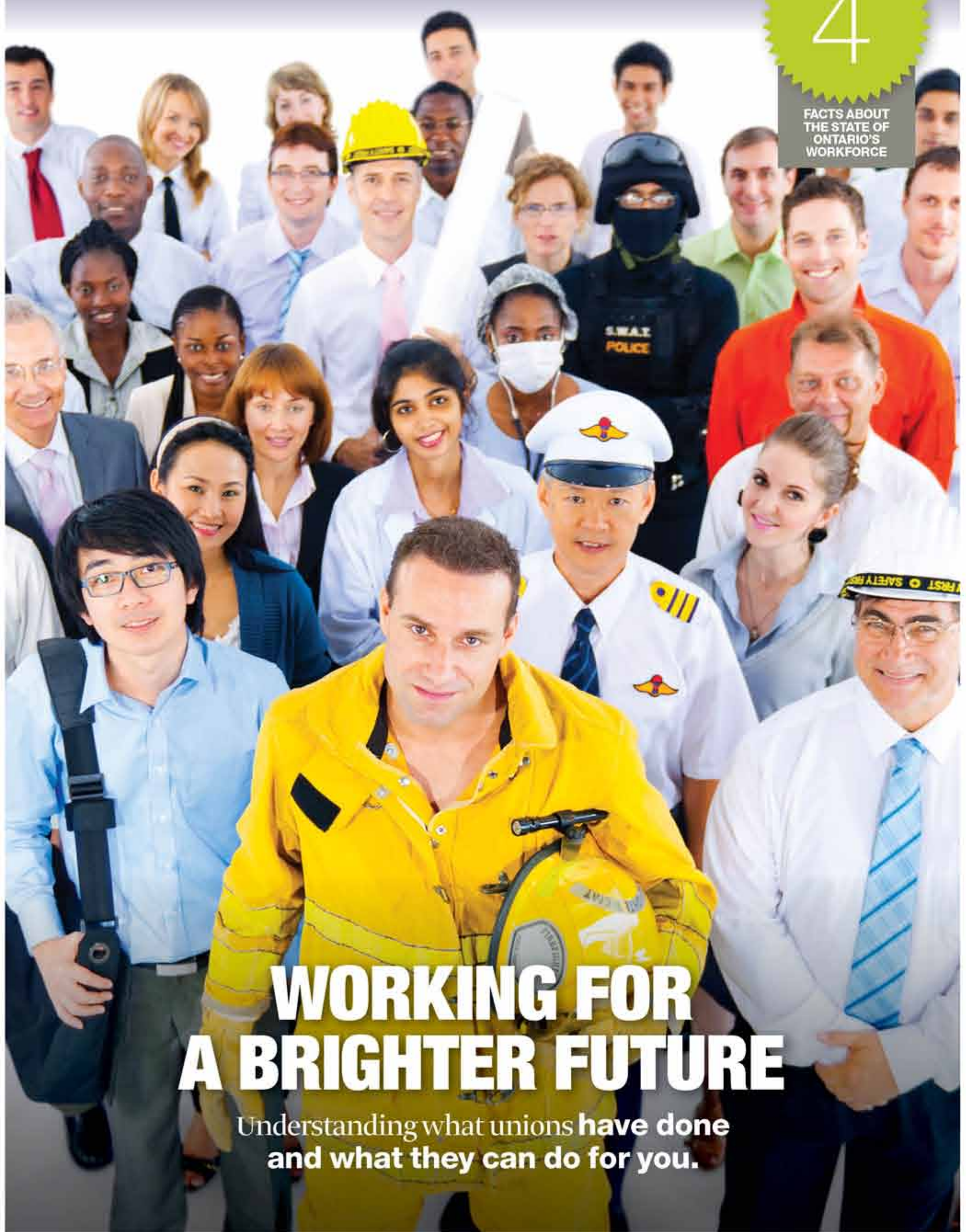
**MEDIA
PLANET**

February 2013

UNIONIZED LABOUR IN ONTARIO

4

FACTS ABOUT
THE STATE OF
ONTARIO'S
WORKFORCE



WORKING FOR A BRIGHTER FUTURE

Understanding what unions have done
and what they can do for you.



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CHALLENGES

FACT

1

1.6 MILLION
ONTARIANS
BELONG TO
A UNION

Unions not only raise the standard of living for their members but society as a whole. Understanding the impact of the labour movement will **help us move forward with greater equality for all.**

Unions lead to the rising of us all

For decades, Ontarians have prided themselves on a living standard that was among the highest in the world. Our cities have consistently ranked among the world's most livable. Our public education system has produced a citizenry that has boasted the highest educational attainment rates in the country. Our public health care system has not only removed financial barriers between patients and the health care they need, but also saved billions in private health care costs for our businesses. We have also been proud stewards of bountiful natural resources and shared vibrant cultures and a thriving arts community.

Improvements for working people

It took a century-and-a-half to win the rights and protections that Ontario workers now rely upon to improve and uphold our standard of living. Throughout that time, unions have championed improvements for all

working people, from our efforts in the late 19th century to stop child labour and establish minimum wages — to 20th century campaigns to prevent workplace deaths and injuries, secure public health care and establish public pensions — and, more recently, in the struggle for equal pay for women.

In fact, there are few social programs and benefits in our society that unions did not have a hand in creating. We have worked — both at the bargaining table with individual companies and by working with governments to change the laws of the land — to improve the lives of the middle and working classes, the poor, and marginalized groups across our society.

Maintaining equality

Today, no Ontarian can afford to take these gains for granted and much of what we have been proud of is currently in danger. Aggressive government cuts to public services will not only cost hundreds of thousands of jobs, they will hurt every family that relies on these services to get by.



Sid Ryan
President,
Ontario Federation of Labour

Meanwhile, the wages of every worker are under threat from proposed American-style laws that aim to dismantle unions and drive wages down across the board by forcing corporations to compete with the lowest wage jurisdictions. It is a race to the bottom and it has already started.

Compared to 17 other countries evaluated in a recent report, Canada

recently earned a “D” grade in poverty and a “C” grade in inequality. Within Canada’s borders, cuts to social programs have caused Ontarians to fall behind every other province. Over 40 percent of Ontario families have seen their wages stagnate or decline over the past ten years while the richest 10 percent saw their income leap by 50 percent.

Ensuring prosperity

As Ontarians chart our society’s path through the difficult fiscal terrain ahead, we must recognize that in today’s globalized world, negative competitiveness won’t buy prosperity for most of us. It will simply drive down living standards that took centuries to build.

Strong unions are needed now, more than ever, as a balance to the greed of the corporate elite and as a voice for all working people. In the words of Martin Luther King Jr., “the simple truth is that the rising of the unions is the rising of us all.”

SID RYAN
editorial@mediaplanet.com

Strong unions mean a prosperous Canada

There is a clear correlation between collective bargaining rights and a healthy, stable middle class in Canada.

In fact, both the International Monetary Fund and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development now say that access to broadly-based collective bargaining is the only way to build a healthy middle class in the developing world.

Unions have been able to ensure that workers share, at least to some extent, in the success of the companies they work for. The Canadian Labour Congress released a research study in 2012 showing that, on average, unionized workers in Ontario earn \$6.19 an hour more than comparable non-union jobs. Obviously this is important for union members who negotiate for a fair family supporting wage that allows them to pay their mortgages and put their children through school. This extra money in the pockets of in-



Ken Georgetti
President,
Canadian Labour Congress

dividual workers means the union advantage is worth a cumulative \$343 million per week, which contributes significantly to the Ontario economy. Union members spend most of their earnings directly in their communities here in Ontario.

Benefits for all

So, the benefits of free collective bargaining are felt far beyond union households. Our research shows that those communities with more union members enjoy relatively higher incomes overall and support a richer mix of businesses and services, small and large — dentists, chiropractors, therapists, health specialists and family lawyers. These services benefit everyone.

In short, communities with a higher density of union workers are better places to work and live. Think of all the community and neighbourhood businesses that have sprouted up, and thrived since unions first negotiated dental, vision care and other benefits into our collective agreements.

Raising the bar

Historically, we know that the labour movement played a key role in winning pensions for work-

ers, the 40 hour week, the weekend, safer workplaces and benefit packages that often include dental and prescription drug plans. Many of these benefits were won not just for union members but for all workers — think of Employment Insurance or worker’s compensation and many more.

The same thing is true today. Unions and their members want a fair and prosperous Canada for everyone and not just the one per cent of people at the top. When unions stand up and win fair deals for working Canadians, they raise the bar for everyone.

Free collective bargaining really does work for the common good. A healthy middle class means working Canadians get their fair share too.

KEN GEORGETTI
editorial@mediaplanet.com



WE RECOMMEND



Trish Hennessey
The Ontario Director of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives debunks the biggest myths about unions

PAGE 5

“The main demand of unions is to bargain freely and collectively, and to do so together with the employer...”

Protecting workers rights p. 8
How unions are raising the standards for human rights

Health and safety p. 9
Ensuring the best possible work environment

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3

MYTHS ABOUT UNIONS

1 Union dues are forced on workers

Fact: A majority of workers in any work place must vote to form a union. Dues are collected from everyone in the workplace because everyone benefits from the union protection and the union has an obligation to represent every worker.

2 Union wages threaten productivity

Fact: By elevating the living standards of working people, unions helped to create Canada’s middle class. They pay taxes and spend money on services and small businesses that help communities thrive. The World Bank found that by every meaningful economic indicator, countries with higher rates of unionization have lower unemployment and inflation, higher productivity and speedier adjustments to economic shocks.

3 Unions only care about their members

Fact: The gains made by unions at the bargaining table often set the standard for the law of the land. Paid maternity leave, public pensions and the minimum wage came about because of the work of unions. Without the standards set by unions, negative competition between increasingly global corporations would drive wages down.

BEN FALLINGBROOK
editorial@mediaplanet.com

LAUNCHING
Monday, February 25

THE PEOPLE'S BUDGET.CA

YOUR
PROVINCE
YOUR
VOICE

WE NEED
YOUR IDEAS
TO MAKE ONTARIO
BETTER FOR EVERYONE

AN INVITATION FROM SID RYAN

Ontario has a new Premier, but we have the same challenges.

Cuts to jobs and services have hurt communities just like yours and more than 40 percent of Ontario families are falling behind.

We need to change the conversation on Austerity and make Ontario better for everyone.

I'm inviting you to join with community groups, small businesses, trade unions and your friends and neighbours to share your ideas for a "People's Budget" for Ontario.

Visit our website at www.ThePeoplesBudget.ca to share your ideas and to make yourself heard.

We will compile all of the submissions into a "People's Budget for Ontario" that we will present to the government.

After all, this province belongs to all of us!

Thanks,

Sid

Sid Ryan
President of the Ontario Federation of Labour

Here are MY IDEAS for the next provincial budget
that will make Ontario better for everyone...

*I'm a single mother and a
child care program would help
me get back into the workforce.*

My name is: Jane Smith

My address is: 1234 Main Street

Ajax, Ontario L1S 0A1

My email is: JaneSmith@emailaddress.ca

MAIL: The People's Budget c/o The Ontario Federation of Labour,
15 Gervais Drive, Suite 202, Toronto ON M3C 1Y8
FAX: 416 441-1893 EMAIL: Ideas@ThePeoplesBudget.ca
www.ThePeoplesBudget.ca

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READ our "Green Paper" Towards a People's Budget for Ontario.

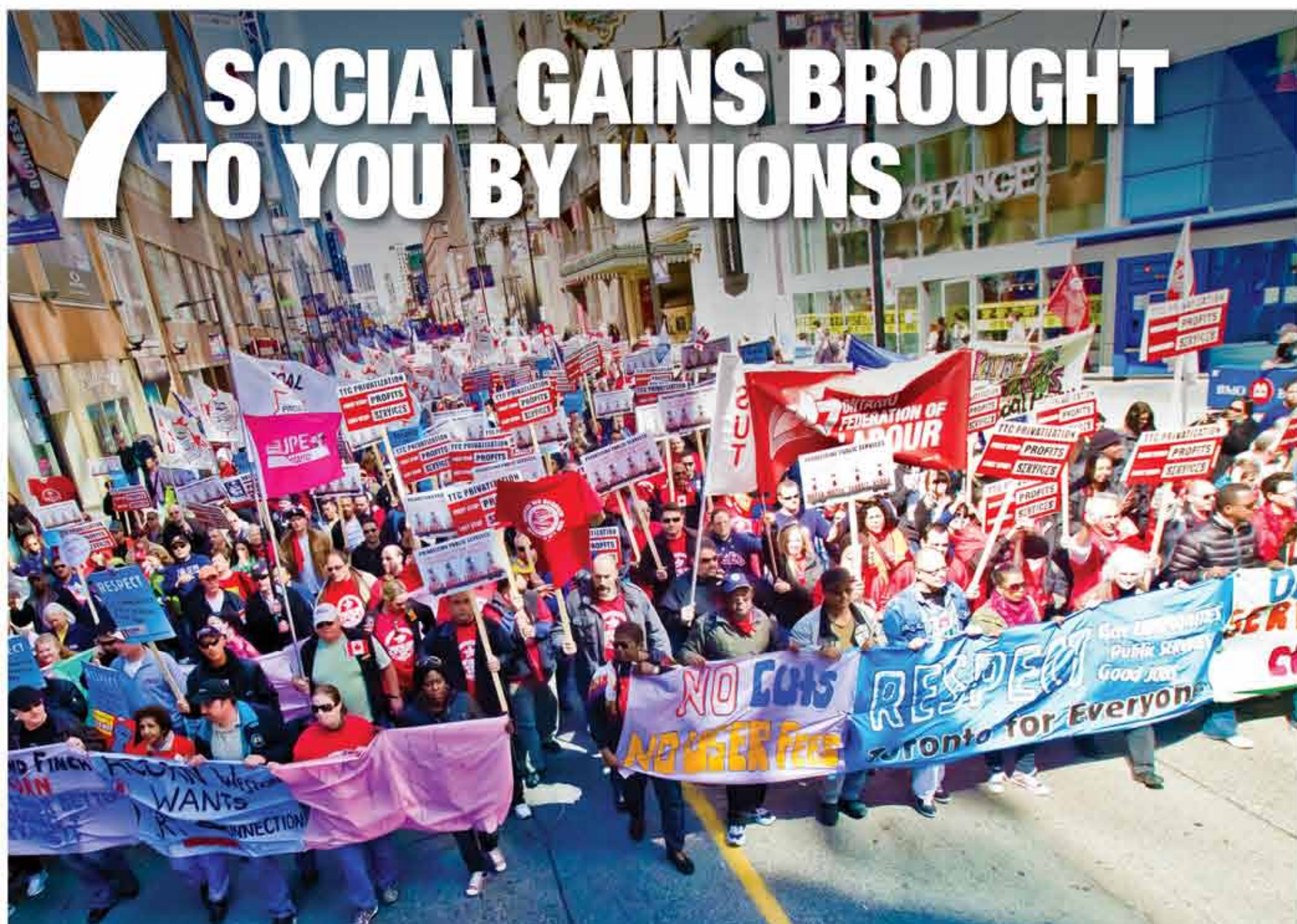
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LONDON, OTTAWA, SUDBURY, THUNDER BAY, TORONTO, WINDSOR.

SUBMIT your ideas today!



INSIGHT

7 SOCIAL GAINS BROUGHT TO YOU BY UNIONS



Unions don't just fight for their members, they work to change the law to **improve the lives of everyone.** Here are seven social gains that were brought to you by unions:

1. An end to child labour
2. The 40-hour work week
3. Unemployment insurance
4. Paid maternity leave
5. Public pensions
6. The minimum wage
7. Pay equity for women

BEN FALLINGBROOK
editorial@mediaplanet.com



Many of the good things we take for granted start at the bargaining table.

- ✓ FAIR WAGES
- ✓ PARENTAL LEAVE
- ✓ CAREGIVER'S LEAVE
- ✓ WORKPLACE SAFETY STANDARDS
- ✓ PENSION AND RETIREMENT BENEFITS

We can't let any government take bargaining rights away.

When workers and employers negotiate fair contracts they set standards that improve both union and non-union workplaces and help all Canadian families keep up.

Collective bargaining works.

CUPE / Canadian Union of Public Employees



FACT

3

COUNTRIES WITH HIGHER RATES OF UNIONIZATION HAVE LOWER UNEMPLOYMENT AND INFLATION

Apprenticeship: The key to Canada's success

A MODEL OF SUCCESS

You may not be aware of this, but Canada's apprenticeship system is a model of success. For decades, skilled tradespeople who've been trained through our apprenticeship system have used their knowledge, tools, and raw materials to create Canada's infrastructure.

Today, there are over 500,000 Canadians serving as apprentices. They will become the plumbers, welders, electricians, and carpenters that build the refineries, hospitals, power plants, schools, houses, and malls where we spend our days living and working.

Partnership and collaboration

Canada's Interprovincial Red Seal program has allowed qualified tradespeople to practice their trade in any province or territory of this nation. This wonderful model of labour mobility, not present anywhere else in the Americas, is a source of pride for Canadians working in the building trades.

In partnership with labour and industry, our provincial and territorial governments operate apprenticeship programs in ten provinces and three territories. Building and construction trades unions, vocational schools and colleges and institutes across Canada educate and train people to work in

the trades throughout the Red Seal. The health of Canada's apprenticeship system is based on partnership and collaboration and this model is one that works.

Growing industries

Today, more than ever, there is an immediate need to promote and prepare young Canadians and new Canadians to work in the trades through apprenticeship. With new work projects in the majority of our provinces and territories, building, construction and work opportunities are unparalleled in our history.

The Construction Sector Council anticipates the need for approximately 360,000 additional tradespeople in the next ten years. For young Canadians and families thinking about the future, at a time when youth unemployment is at 15 percent and underemployment is at 25 percent, apprenticeship is the real answer.

Creating opportunity

Unfortunately, at a time when it is needed the most, Canada is failing its apprenticeship system. Today, there are tens of thousands of Canadians who cannot complete their apprenticeships because they cannot fulfill their work requirements.

In Canada today, there are some financial support programs and incentives for employers looking to hire apprentices. However there are no requirements for employers

to actually hire apprentices. Our governments' response to the lack of jobs for apprentices is to raise the ratio that can work with a Journey person, but we still find ourselves with fewer apprenticeship opportunities from industry.



"Today, more than ever, there is an immediate need to promote and prepare young Canadians and new Canadians to work in the trades through apprenticeship."

Larry Slaney
Executive Director, National Association of Union Schools and Colleges

Addressing the skills shortage

Business and governments are consistently pointing to the lack of supply of skilled tradespeople as one of Canada's major economic challenges. In response to this shortage, governments are developing programs that will accelerate the immigration of skilled workers to Canada. While immigration is one part of the solution, a healthy Canadian apprenticeship system is the best solution — more

employed apprentices will lead to more skilled tradespeople.

If we want to address the skills shortage, Canadian employers need to support hiring of apprentices and there has to be real legislation drafted from the fed-

lies. If we hired more Apprentices and kept them working, in just a few short years there would be more Journey persons and the shortage would not be an issue any longer. We need to employ our youth first and give them the opportunity to have a career in the trades.

Invest in our future

We are strong supporters and believers of the time proven Canadian Apprenticeship model and our vision of a renewed apprenticeship system is one where it's easy for apprentices to get hired and where they are not the first workers laid off, and where they have many options for work opportunity across our great country, with true mobility. This will ensure the stay in their chosen trade and work to build the future of Canada for the next generation and beyond.

Lets not take our apprenticeship system for granted; let's invest in our future by employing apprentices. We need to make change now for the betterment of our system without downgrading the system we have in place for short term gain. Our future depends on it.

LARRY SLANEY
editorial@mediaplanet.com



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INSPIRATION



What is union raiding?

- 1
- “Union raiding” refers to the act of union representatives visiting job sites and soliciting members of other unions in the hopes of filling their ranks with new membership.
- Raiding period
- 2
- Ontario law dictates that all contracts within the construction sector are to be renewed every three-years. During the last three months before a contract expires a Union’s membership can be raided. This year the Raiding Period is from February 1st to April 30th, 2013.
- Organization practices
- 3
- The act of raiding is done by union representatives visiting rival job sites and soliciting union members to sign a ballot which

has their existing union and the raiding unions name on it. These representatives often make false promises and misrepresent facts in order to secure new signatures. This process is often disruptive and confrontational as it interrupts union workers on the job site.

Act of raiding

4

By law, if the raiding party wins more votes it is then certified and the previous union’s collective agreement is automatically ended. The new union must now negotiate a new collective agreement with its new members and until an agreement is met, they are without any collective agreement rights.

BEN FALLINGBROOK
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Standing up for the rights of workers

In the golden age of social justice and civil rights – from the sixties to the early eighties – unions played a vital role in shaping debates on tax policy, social spending, spreading political democracy and fine-tuning economic policy.

Michael Lynk — a human rights/ labour lawyer and professor at Western University — was fortunate enough to be born in the midst of that era, helping to cultivate a life long interest in the labour movement and its greater role in protecting people.

Change over the years

“(During that time) unions had roughly 33-35 percent of the Canadian workforce represented by them,” says Lynk.

With that support base, unions created the social pressure to push liberal policies forward; policies that brought about a rise in income, wealth and equality in the country.


Since the late 1980s, Lynk — who has worked as a lawyer both for unions and in private practice and as an arbitrator — has watched the ascension of conservative politics in Canada and along with them a slow fizzling out of labour law reform.

But there is a silver lining, he says. “(One of) the greatest success stories that unions have had in the last 25 years is they played a contributory role in the growth of human rights in society generally — and the workplace in particular,” says Lynk.

Protecting the workforce

From pushing forward human rights cases on gender equality, rights of religious employees in the workplace, sexual orientation, age discrimination, racial discrimination

“Unions have played a very important role in pushing the law forward”



Michael Lynk
Associate
Professor of Law,
Western University

tion and in more recent times, issues involving family status and ability of parents to balance work demands with home life — unions have often played a tireless role in protecting the workforce. “Almost all of those cases have union fingerprints on them,” he adds.

Despite a tempering of union influence and power over the past 30 years, says Lynk, one of their greatest contributions has been devoting a fair amount of their resources to litigating important human rights

issues in the courts and in front of human rights tribunals and labour arbitrators.

“We now have in Canada probably the best human rights legal system anywhere in the globe and unions have played a very important role in pushing the law forward on all those issues,” says Lynk.

Future steps

The next big challenge facing unions in protecting its membership, he suspects, is finding a way to give a voice to an increasingly temporary workforce filled with part-time workers.

“Unions were built in the 1940s and 1950s on the assumption that people would have that job for life,” says Lynk admitting that that’s not the case anymore. “The rise of the temporary workforce means a devaluing of jobs, a decline in wages and benefits and a spreading of economic equality with all the ills that attend to that.”

The next step is finding a way to heighten job and social security in this ever-changing workplace.

“The law keeps on changing, the demands of our society keep on changing,” he says.

But Lynk is up to the challenge brought on by the changing paradigm. “It’s intensely fascinating to see how the law and social justice can be married in productive ways,” he adds.

ANDREW SEALE
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WE ARE THE UNITY COALITION

The Unity Coalition is a groundbreaking partnership of building trade unions committed to positive growth in the Greater Toronto Area residential sector. By making the most effective use of our collective assets, the Unity Coalition will draw on the most creative and dynamic strategies in organizing, supply the highest skilled trades people working under the fairest collective agreements, guarantee harmony and cooperation with contractors and clients, and tirelessly work towards safe and productive worksites each and every day. The foundation of the Unity Coalition is the understanding that in unity lies unparalleled strength, and that the dedication of its members to working together in a coalition will deliver highly valued results to all employer partners in the residential sector.



The Unity Coalition is 15 construction unions representing over 100,000 residential construction workers in the GTA.



Contact a Unity Coalition representative
1-800-416-3594
info@theunitycoalition.ca

On the job health and safety

LiUNA Ontario Provincial District Council
1315 North Service Road E., Suite 701
Oakville, ON L6H 1A7
Tel: (289) 291-3678 Fax: (289) 291-1120

Passing the torch: Youth involvement in unions

When Amanda Atwell decided to speak up about the way other employees were being treated at her workplace, she didn't realize she was aligning her goals with the entire labour movement.

A decade later, Atwell — a United Food and Commercial Workers Canada Local 1000A member — sits on the executive board of the Ontario Federation of Labour as Vice-President of Workers Under 30. Juggling a full-time job at supermarket chain Loblaws and her role as an ambassador to young people interested in unions is time consuming but well worth it.

“Sometimes people say we don't need unions any more, people aren't dying on the job,” says Atwell. “But it happens, and there are bad employers out there that try to take advantage of people.” She points out that young people should be able to “make improvements to their workplace” without fear of being fired or reprimanded.

Empowering youth

Kate Walsh, strategic coordinator for the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) NextGen Initiative, says it's that very sense of empowerment that has been drawing young people into the movement.

“I think it's important for young workers to learn how to get involved within their locals — it's such a unique situation in a career where you actually have a voice and vote on the conditions of your employment,” adds Walsh. “In many other non-union environments you don't get that.”



YOUTH IN UNIONS
1. Zacary Tait gains experience as an automotive mechanic apprentice. PHOTO: ACCESS
2. Engaging youth in workplace issues gives them a stake in the wellbeing of the organization.
3. Unions help to represent gender equality in the workforce.

Motivating engagement

As Canada's aging demographics take hold and current skilled trades workforce retires, it will be up to a new generation to carry the torch and continue the struggle for workers right.

“I think young people are already

conscientious,” says Atwell pointing to a heightened political understanding driven by social media and the Internet. “Getting involved requires a certain amount of initiative on a young person's part but it is up to the union to make the labour movement more inclusive,” she adds.



movement it's kind of at a cool time - there's a really old school traditional environment that's evolving.”

And it goes beyond workers rights. The new generation is looking for a greater social aspect — that sense of camaraderie and solidarity that often flows through a movement like this.

Walsh says although the social aspect is seeing a resurgence, that sense of camaraderie hasn't wavered. She remembers a story about a young electrician from the East Coast who had just started a new job out in Alberta and within a week of being there found out about a family emergency back home.

He hadn't received his first pay, so he couldn't afford to travel home. “The guys from the union put a collection together to help pay his way,” says Walsh. “It didn't matter that they had just met him - he was IBEW and he needed to get home so they made it happen.”

ANDREW SEALE
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PANEL OF EXPERTS

	Question 1: What is the biggest misconception about unions?	Question 2: Why does Ontario need unions?	Question 3: Why did you join a union?
 <p>Paul Moist National President, Canadian Union of Public Employees</p>	<p>Unions are seen by many as institutions run for their own self-interest by union bosses. In fact, labour unions are the expression of a movement of workers acting collectively to achieve better wages, working conditions and social justice. Unions in Canada are democratic collective organizations that are run by their members — the workers. While I lead CUPE, I am not CUPE. CUPE is the health care worker in your local hospital, the care aide in your mother’s nursing home, the city water worker, the employment counsellor, the librarian, the school bus driver, the janitor in your child’s school. Those and the many, many more public sector workers in your community are the union and it is they that determine our priorities and our actions, because workers know what is best for workers.</p>	<p>Income equality is growing at an alarming rate. That is bad for the economy and bad for society. 82 percent of Canada’s GDP is consumer spending and public spending. Our economic recovery needs a strong and vibrant middle class. That means good wages, benefits, and strong public services. The gains we make through collective bargaining and our political action like improved working conditions, maternity leave benefits and workplace pensions make a huge difference in the lives of all workers in Ontario, not just union members.</p>	<p>I have been a CUPE member since 1975 when I went to work at the City of Winnipeg. My union membership came with my job. City workers in Winnipeg have a pension plan, safe workplaces and decent wages among many other workplace standards and benefits achieved through the years of collective bargaining. The City of Winnipeg, like all communities with unionized workforces, benefit from the achievements that CUPE has negotiated into our collective agreement. The City of Winnipeg is a clear example of why mandatory dues collected through the Rand formula is so important — and why we should all be concerned about the pending attacks on the Rand formula by Harper and Hudak.</p>
 <p>Sharon DeSousa Regional Executive Vice-President for Ontario, Public Service Alliance of Canada</p>	<p>One myth is that unions act like corporations. Unlike corporations, unions are made up of workers who democratically vote on how the union runs and elect leaders to represent them. Corporations are driven by profit, unions on the other hand are non-profit and work to improve the lives of workers. Unions also work on social justice issues that help all Canadians. From anti-poverty projects, advocating for environmental protection and promoting human rights, unions do much more than negotiate contracts.</p>	<p>It's getting harder and harder to find good jobs. Workers need benefits, pensions and security that only unions can provide. When a large segment of the population is unionized the economy does better. It's no coincidence that as unions have been attacked, our economy has suffered. Unions provide the balance between corporate power and a good quality of life for families. Corporations care about making profits, unions care about protecting people.</p>	<p>I joined a union to protect my rights at work. As a young contract worker, I was looking for full-time stability. For years I was promised by my boss that my job would become a permanent, full-time job. When I realized my boss wasn't going to fulfill that promise, I was left feeling powerless. A friend told me I needed the support of a union to hold my boss accountable. The union helped me face my boss and I became full-time. My situation made me understand that unions give workers power, which workers need to create healthy workplaces.</p>
 <p>Mark McKinnon President, Ontario Professional Fire Fighters Association</p>	<p>Too often, people only hear about unions when there is controversy, such as a strike that impacts services or in the skewed context that unionized workers' wages, benefits and pensions are somehow the root of current economic problems. They don't think about the millions of workers and working families who benefit every day from safer workplaces, living wages and workplace protections, and about people able to retire with dignity because they have a reliable pension. The misconception is that unions exist only to generate conflict.</p>	<p>It's a cliché to say that unions give workers a voice, but it's true. Employers have associations that look out for their interests, and so do banks, insurance companies and corporations, so why not workers? Certain political elements are talking about "wage suppression" and stripping away workers' hard-earned rights. Without unions, it would happen in a heartbeat, and wages, workplace rights and health and safety would diminish for all workers. And remember, if average wages decrease, workers have less money to inject into the economy.</p>	<p>I consciously chose a career in a unionized profession because I was fortunate to understand from an early age that unionized workers have better workplace protections. Our working conditions are protected by a legally-binding agreement which prevents management from acting arbitrarily or making decisions about raises, promotions or terminations based on favoritism or discrimination. Workers pay the freight in this country through our income taxes, and working families are the backbone of society. I truly believe that all workers should have these kinds of protections.</p>
 <p>Brigida Ruiz 20 year member, UNITE HERE Canada Room Attendant, Sheraton Centre Toronto</p>	<p>Unions are disappearing along with manufacturing jobs, because the service sector is "precarious" and can't be organized. We are strong and we are growing — last year, in the GTA alone, we organized five hotels and one food service shop. It's not easy — employers have far too much power over workers' decision to unionize — but among people working in my industry, the desire and the need for unions is alive and well.</p>	<p>There are many reasons, but here are three: without unions, you lose the middle class. We know the gap between the rich and poor is getting wider every year in Ontario, especially Toronto. This has a lot to do with the shrinking number of good, union jobs. Secondly, through political participation, unions help us achieve benefits that help everyone, like strong public health care and pensions. Thirdly, unions reduce differences in wages and benefits between men and women, immigrants and Canadian-born workers — making a more equal society.</p>	<p>For me, being a union member has a lot to do with respect. By joining a union, you are demanding that you be treated like an adult and an equal, not a child. We've won really significant things during my time in the union — for example, safer work, better family benefits, better pensions, a subsidized metropass. And by accomplishing these things together, we've also won respect — self-respect, respect for our co-workers, respect from our management.</p>

A GLOBAL LEADER

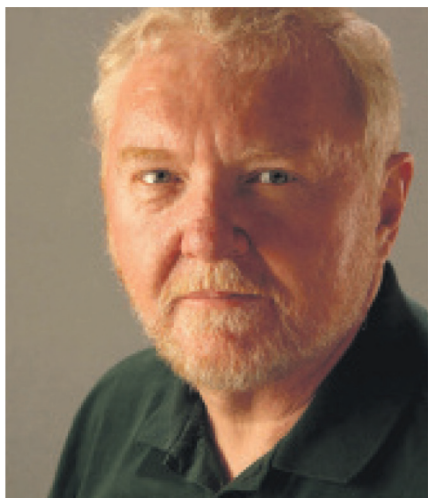
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MEDIA PLANET

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What Have Trade Unions Done For You Lately?



By Don MacKinnon
President
Power Workers' Union

Sometimes we get so used to our institutions we forget how important they are to us. We take democracy for granted in Canada, but a moment's thought about life in countries without it should be enough to convince you of the importance of a democratic political system. Absent democracy, "might makes right" – tyranny and inequality prevail. If our democratic institutions aren't preserved, we risk falling back into a state of affairs where people live politically impoverished lives.

Trade unions have been around longer than representative democracy in this country. It's easy to take them for granted and, particularly now when they are under persistent public attack, to forget why they are important for all of us. Here's a reminder.

First, trade unions transformed workplaces for the better. Before trade unions, working conditions were often deplorable and workplaces dangerous, and this in the most prosperous countries in the world. Twelve or even sixteen hour workdays without breaks in workplaces that were literally a threat to the lives of workers were not unusual. There was no minimum wage, medical coverage, insurance, or workers' compensation. A worker could have wages

cut, be laid off or fired without warning or explanation. Women were paid less than men doing the same job and children were put to work in dangerous conditions.

Once working people formed trade unions, however, workplace conditions improved. Unions struggling to achieve these gains, which we now take for granted, had to fight against many employers and governments, who claimed that any improvement to the lives of workers was unaffordable and would render industry uncompetitive. Unions perse-

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vered, however, to the point where people came to see their benefits for everyone and governments decided to acknowledge and regulate their existence by legislation. Unions, traditionally democratic organizations, were now required to be democratic by law and to represent all workers fairly. By the same token, all workers in the workplace were required to pay dues to the democratically selected trade union because they all got the equal benefit of the union's representation (the "Rand formula"). But

the benefits of union activities went beyond the workers they represented to all workers: minimum wage rules, health and safety laws, eight hour workdays, mandated breaks and paid time off are all the direct or indirect result of the union movement and its commitment to better the lives of all working people, whether or not they are union members.

Even more, the union movement benefited the economy as a whole. One reason for the establishment of labour laws in the early part of the 20th century was to promote economic expansion by increasing the purchasing power of workers. What ensued was a long period of great prosperity through to the late 20th century in which the middle class expanded, sharing in the wealth it helped create, but also spending its new income and so driving economic expansion. The expansion of unionization parallels the expansion of the middle class and the reduction of income inequality, the improvement in private pension and benefits plans, and the better treatment of women and minorities in the workplace.

The last 20 years or so have seen a rapid increase in the income of the wealthiest people in the country and a decline of the middle class. It's not a coincidence that this has been a period of sustained attack on trade unions, culminating in "right to work" laws in many U.S. states. Unions tend to equalize wages among workers and ensure that fewer people are left in low paying jobs. They protect the vulnerable and ensure that workplaces are safe and that workers are treated fairly. As long as there is unionization in an industry, non-unionized employ-

ers can't afford to fall too far behind in the treatment of their workers. In the short run, some might believe that reducing wages and benefits will increase profits, but this ignores the long run: lower paid workers have no money to spend in the economy and as the middle class disappears, so does prosperity for everyone, including business.

Those who live through a period of history often don't reflect on it while it's happening, and don't realize what they've got until it's gone. This is why it is important to look back and understand.

We are again hearing that business can't afford good wages and working conditions, pensions and benefits. It wasn't true a century ago and it's not true now. "Right to work" laws do not create jobs – they diminish the quality of existing jobs by stripping workers of the benefit of trade union representation. In a race to the bottom, the worker and society as a whole always lose – and income inequality returns. Just as a country that attacks its democratic institutions courts political poverty, one that attacks the democratic institution of trade unionism courts economic poverty.

So what have trade unions done for you lately? They've protected good jobs, wages, benefits and working conditions for you and your children. They've ensured that all people, including women, minorities and the disabled – you, your friends and family, are treated fairly in the workplace. They've fought against growing income inequality and for the preservation of the middle class – the only sure way of guaranteeing economic prosperity for all of us in the future.

