

Issue Sheet 2

Want the Straight Goods on Unions? Check the Facts: Uncovering Union Myths

Despite facing ceaseless opposition, unions and their members have made a positive difference in the lives of Canadian working families and their communities. It was the labour unions that fought for - and won - numerous rights and benefits employees enjoy today. They were in the forefront of the struggles for public health care, public education, minimum wages (and minimum wage increases), human & civil rights, and better employment conditions. In fact, it was the labour movement that helped to develop maternity/parental leave, Employment Insurance (E.I.), overtime pay premiums, bereavement leave, the 40-hour work week, work accommodation arrangements, and the Canadian Pension Plan.

In addition, unions have worked to establish equality measures in both society, and the workplace. Through legislation, anti-harassment and anti-discrimination policies, and collective bargaining these progressive changes that have helped women, racialized persons, Aboriginals, youth, and those with disabilities to be viewed, and treated, as equals.

It is clear that unionized employment offers many benefits to its affiliates; however, negative stereotypes and misconceptions abound, peddled in many cases by corporations and the media.

Want the straight goods on Unions? Keep reading below to uncover the truth behind some of today's most common misconceptions about the labour movement.

❖ **Myth 1: Unions push into workplaces and use coercion or intimidation to gain new members.**

Fact: In any unionization campaign, workers have an choice to sign, or not sign a card, or exercising a vote for, or against joining a union. As with any democratic organization, the decision made by the majority prevails.

When a majority decides to join a union, the law requires the union to represent all workers in that workplace – even those who opposed the union. It is important to note that those who oppose the union are *not* forced to join the union. They are however, required to pay union dues. This issue is discussed below in further detail.

Statistics and independent studies clearly indicate that when it comes to joining a union, employer (not union) intimidation, threats, and coercion is frequently a problem. Often, employees are afraid of their employers and feel that they will be negatively affected whether the union wins, or loses. This is because employers have been known to threaten employees with wages-cuts, the loss of promotional opportunities, or even permanent dismissal if the employee supports the union's bid to organize.

❖ **Myth 2: Unions force everyone to pay fees.**

Fact: While people who work in a unionized environment and oppose unions are *not* forced to join the union, they are required to pay union dues. This is because every worker in a workplace that benefit from a

union contract should contribute financially to these advantages. For example, if a union negotiates wage and benefit increases, they go to all employees in the workplace, not just to those who chose to be union members. Union's also represent and protect the rights of all workers in a unionized workplace regardless if they have a union card.

Canadians pay municipal, provincial, and federal taxes whether or not they voted for the person or political party in office. It is because of these fees that we all receive essential services such as garbage pick-up or healthcare. You cannot simply choose to opt-out.

It's the same concept in a unionized workplace. Regardless of membership, every worker is protected and equally receives the benefits of a union contract.

❖ **Myth 3: Unions always make unreasonable demands and only want more money!**

Fact: While money and wage increases are important, unions are also concerned with other important aspects of employment. Some examples include non-wage benefits, workplace safety, job security, employment conditions, and equality within the workplace.

What is a reasonable wage demand? Unfortunately, no one has yet devised a workable formula for determining wage increases that would be considered reasonable by all parties involved. In contract negotiations, unions base their demands on the needs indicated by their membership.

Another bargaining issue stems from the fact that most employers refuse to open their financial records to union negotiators. Unions are therefore denied access to the data on profits, productivity, and labour costs that might influence their demands. Unfortunately, too many employers resist *any* type of improvements unions try to negotiate.

❖ **Myth 4: Unions are strike happy.**

Fact: Unions negotiate for agreements - not strikes. Strikes develop when a contract is expired and both sides of bargaining table cannot reach an agreement. Unions must always conduct membership votes before taking any action towards a strike; and strikes only occur when a clear majority has voted in its favour.

Interestingly enough, 97% of collective agreements in Canada are negotiated without a strike. In fact, more working days are lost each year to workplace accidents and injuries than are lost to striking employees. However, strikes are controversial, and controversy makes the headlines.

To union members, a strike means a sacrifice for themselves and their families. For this reason, strikes are only used as a method of last resort.

❖ **Myth 5: Unions only protect lazy people who should be fired.**

Fact: No collective agreement requires an employer to keep a worker who is incompetent - nor does a union shelter a worker who is deliberately absent or always late.

Conversely, what a union *does* do is ensure that proper and equal procedures are followed when disciplining or dismissing an employee. Unions make sure that discipline or dismissals are always for a just cause. A union contract is simply job insurance for good employees.

Unions also ensure safe working conditions and set limits on the number of hours that can be worked without breaks. This is for public safety.

❖ **Myth 6:** Unions may have been relevant in the past, but today, they have outlived their usefulness.

Fact: Interestingly enough, the Toronto Globe and Mail made this argument on May 6, 1886. Yet, unions went on to negotiate pension plans, medical coverage, disability protection, equal pay for equal work provisions, pay equity legislation, and health and safety programs.

Today, corporations are stronger and larger than ever before. Workers need unions to do what would be the next to impossible on their own: counterbalance the power of employers, protect member's rights, and work together for further employment improvements.

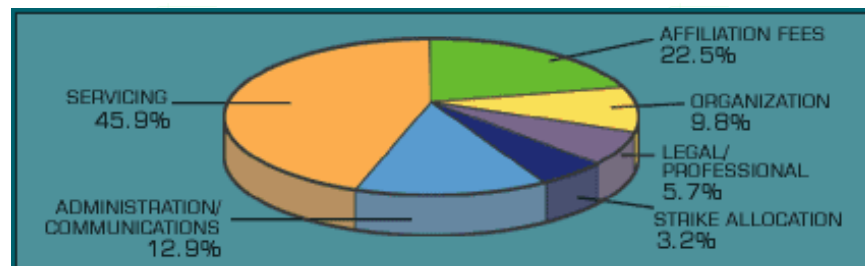
Wage inequality has never been greater in Canada as growing numbers of workers find themselves working in low-wage jobs with few benefits. A stronger union voice would improve wages so everyone could contribute to a better economy.

❖ **Myth 7:** Unions spend their money on political causes and agendas that do not represent the views of their members.

Fact: The vast majority of union dues pay for direct services to members. These include costs associated with bargaining, legal grievances, health and safety, strike funds, and organizing non-unionized workers. A small portion of union dues also pays for membership fees to larger labour organizations such as the Ontario Federation of Labour or the Canadian Labour Congress, where unions work together on issues and causes they share.

Unions will also contribute small donations to groups or activists promoting causes that the labour movement supports or believes are essential to improving worker's rights. These could include issues such as equality campaigns or pressuring the government to raise the minimum wage. A small portion of union dues may also go to good causes such as non-profit/charity organizations or educational scholarships.

The following graph, provided by the Canadian Labour Congress, sets out the use of union expenditures.



❖ **Myth 8: Unions are too big and too powerful.**

Fact: The terms “big” and “powerful” are relative. In reality, most Canadian unions are quite small. In fact, Canadian unions only represent about 34% of the total workforce. Even the country's largest unions pale in comparison to powerful corporations such as Wal-Mart, and Imperial Oil.

In addition, unions are heavily regulated in Canada. They require legal certification and formal backing from a majority of the workers they wish to represent. There are also legal processes before a union, or its members, may call a strike. For this reason, a union's “power” is not always as great as the media would have us believe. The real strength of unions is in the power of solidarity and working together towards a cause.

❖ **Myth 9: If unions' wage demands weren't so high, and if they accepted more concession, more jobs would stay in Canada.**

Fact: It is a myth that by accepting concessions, workers could potentially save their jobs. Often, even after workers have given concessions to their employer, the business still closes or moves. Unions help workers resist this by fighting the employer's demand for concessions and ensuring that workers are paid fairly for their labour. Unions work to make sure their bargaining actions move the worker's goal forward, not backwards, at the bargaining table.

Employers often use the argument that they must have lower wages in order to compete with lower wage levels in other companies, at home and in other countries. This argument must be tackled head on. The wages in other countries, particularly where they are very low, are usually substandard even in the context of their own economies while those same corporations make super-profits. Unions fight for fair and livable income levels here, and around the world. Low wages anywhere put downward pressure on wages everywhere- that's why we need to stand together for living wages and decent jobs.

Why Do These Union Myths Exist?

Time and time again, the labour movement is presented by newspapers, radio, and television as an unreliable and disruptive part of our national economy; though not all media reporting of the labour movement is negative. But, when the media focuses on the positive achievements of trade unions, the accomplishments seem to be drowned out by the continual clamour of unfavourable coverage.

Unions make people face unpleasant realities. Women, racialized persons, Aboriginals, youth, and workers with disabilities are not treated as equals in the workplace. In addition, many workers do not earn enough money to support themselves- nevermind their families. Many times, it is at this low-point where employees seek out unions to step in and negotiate fair and equal contracts. But by working together through a union, many workers begin to understand that the misconceptions and myths they once believed to be true are exactly that- myths.