

Benefits of Unions

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For more than 100 years, unions have been a staple piece of the Canadian workforce. Since their inception, they have proven themselves to be highly influential groups. Though facing opposition along the way, they have enacted significant progress throughout the years and still strive for it to this day. Unions have helped to make life better for workers by fighting for issues such as wages, safety standards, and benefits.

Workplace safety in Canada was a virtually non-existent conversation prior to 1960, when a disastrous accident in a tunnel took the lives of 5 workers. This accident was due primarily to the lack of any safety regulation at the time, and unions subsequently led a fight for the Federal government to seriously consider workplace safety. This then led to the passing of the Industrial Safety Act. This act was the base for the Canada Labour Code, which set clear regulations and laws regarding the safety of Canadian workers. Canadian workers were now free to refuse unsafe work without losing their job, and this right along with other parts of the code would significantly change work environments for the better. Labour unions have also played a major role in fair wages for Canadian workers, fighting

for minimum wage, overtime pay, and vacation pay. These are all things that we may take for granted today but have improved the lives of the working class, dramatically helping to prevent the exploitation of low-income workers.

Throughout the years unions have raised the quality of living not only through wages but with the many benefits they provide to members and their families. Some of these benefits have not only helped union members but non-union workers as-well. Paid maternity leave didn't exist in Canada until 1971, and was introduced by the federal government with only 15 weeks' leave and at just 2/3 of the mothers' previous salary. Unions then negotiated for longer maternity leave with more benefits, job security, and paternity leave. This, in particular, has benefited the lives of millions of Canadians and allows parents to focus more on their child rather than worrying about getting back to work as soon as possible. Union member-specific benefits vary between unions, but some of these can include pensions, dental care, better apprenticeship, and healthcare benefits. Having a father in the union has shown me the value of this firsthand. Dental care benefits, for example, have saved us thousands of dollars over the years due to the extensive work that I have needed personally. Healthcare benefits from a union help families tremendously who otherwise may not have been able to afford certain aspects of healthcare. Workplace pensions are another benefit of union membership, with more than 70% of unionized workers having access to workplace

pensions compared to only 30% of non-unionized workers. Apprenticeship through a union is another aspect that provides many benefits. Union apprentices can find work easier and have the opportunity to work on a wide variety of projects. Working conditions and wages are clear, and if a union apprentice is laid off from lack of work they don't face the risk of having their apprenticeship cancelled. They also receive a cash bursary while attending school. Unions have consistently fought for workers' rights and have pushed tremendous changes, and have made life for the Canadian worker better at all stages.

Whether bargaining for better wages or for working-class rights, unions are always striving for progress and are a meaningful part of Canada's history. There are countless advantages to being a part of a union ranging from job security to education assistance. Not only have labour unions benefited their members, but also the lives of every Canadian worker. Many of the rights we enjoy today such as safety standards, vacation pay and parental leave, and minimum wage may not exist if not for the actions taken by unions.

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Blair Rawlings (My father / union member)