



Workers need to have a fair outlet to voice concerns and the right to ask for safe working conditions. Employers have the obligation to hear these concerns and address them accordingly. The fundamental success of any organization is the fair treatment of each other and open lines of communication. People on both sides need to be heard and understood, and when this communication breaks down, there has to be a system in place to bring the two parties together to negotiate a resolution. It is when these negotiations fail that the right for employees to strike becomes an opportunity to invoke change.

Never can there be change when working within a dictatorship. But after all the right steps have been taken, and all the rules have been followed in an effort to properly effect change fairly, the right to strike becomes a valuable tool to force change and has been a huge part of organized labour in the past. There have been many significant strikes in Canada as workers fought for better wages, pensions, working conditions, and job security. Some of these strikes were settled quickly and peacefully, but others last for several months and/or were filled with violence.

The right of unionized workers to strike is a powerful tool which gives them the power to fight for better working conditions, benefits, and wages without penalty. It does however, come at a cost and not just to the employer. Unionized workers who strike are only paid a small stipend compared to their salaries, which causes financial hardship for many. A vote to strike is not taken lightly, but most times employees don't feel like there is another option. The rights and benefits they are striking for, far outweigh the financial loss for the striking time.

Arguably the most famous Canadian strike of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the strike of the printers in Toronto in 1872. In an attempt to get better working hours and wages, this strike also brought about demonstrations and political debates which eventually caused Parliament to adopt a Trade Union Act. This was the first Act in Canada that recognized the right of employees to strike. A monumental win for employees rights!



One of the most notable strikes in Canadian history was the Winnipeg General Strike. Labourers yearning for fair wages and better working conditions went on strike after negotiations broke down with management. A lack of proper communication with all the right parties can be attributed to what has come to be known as “Bloody Saturday”. The day the RCMP charged the crowd of strikers and beat them with clubs and weapons resulting in many injured and one death. While a sad day for strikers in Canada, it serves as a reminder of how far we have come in both our understanding and rights.

The history of organized labour over the years have been numerous and far reaching. As Industry and technology changes, the rights, demands, and equalities of workers also changes. No longer are strikes reserved for Industry workers demanding better working conditions but history shows doctors, teachers, nurses, effectively any profession using the right to strike as a tool to effect change. Equality and fair compensation for services provided has become a right in Canada won on the backs of history. This right was solidified in 2015, when the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that the right to strike is a fundamental right protected under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. A landmark decision in Canadian history that has a lasting impact on the future of labour relations.

The act of striking unifies employees together in a front against their employer but it also quickly unifies all unionized employees. It is not uncommon for unions to join forces in support; both monetary and physically, when one union goes on strike. Other unions will volunteer their support on the picket lines, marching with their union brothers and sisters. They may also support a striking union financially, effectively boosting the stipend that striking workers receive. The brother/sister hood formed in support of each other is far reaching and very effective in the quest for change.

It should be said that not all aspects of strikes are positive. The desire for money is contagious and it has happened where one union gets benefits, another union will not be satisfied until they do too. The financial loss of a strike is not only felt by the employer, but the employee and his/her family also suffer. Long term, employers could potentially lose support in their business which causes sales to drop therefore forcing



the employer to make cuts to cover those losses. In effect and striking employee could inadvertently force the employer to them lay off in an effort to recoup losses.

Historically strikes have not been without loss and challenges. Workers have fought a long hard battle to improve working conditions and lay the framework for today's labour relations foundation. By raising awareness to the issues at hand and influencing the creation of new policies to address inefficiencies, labour relations are an effective tool for employees. Awareness, communication, and a system of redress are the foundation to good business.

Looking toward the future, the role of labour relations appears to be losing its stronghold with membership declining and an increase in non-union industries. The advancement of large industries such as financial and business services which are non-unionized significantly affects the overall effect of unions. Overall, membership controls the potential 'clout' a union has and with significantly lower numbers over time will impact any force or benefit a union could enforce.

Combine these effects with the fact that labour disputes are also in decline gives the perception that unions have lost their reputation as being a forceful power in the workplace. Without this perception, it opens the doors to thoughts that maybe unions are a thing of the past and no longer required. A real threat to the effectiveness of unions and striking ability of employees. Many of the benefits that employees fought for through aggressive bargaining and striking, have become more commonplace; such as health benefits, therefore leaving a void in the union duties. Non-unionized wages are catching up as fast or quicker than union wages making them a soon to be obsolete negotiation factor. Perhaps the swing factor in unions today is the ability for unions to affect the 'perception' or 'audience' which in effect devalues the service or business. One of the newest more powerful tools a union can leverage is product or service perception. Rather than using strikes as a tool to leverage benefits, unions can affect how the public sees a company, its products, or services. With the speed at which social media spreads information; good or bad, organized labour presents a new threat to employers.



As times change, so does organized labour. The needs and wants of employees change with the advancement of technology and industry. If unions don't seek to change at the same rate or faster, they could become obsolete at a time when they may become critical. If the cycle of history shows us anything it will be that once the value of unions is lost and membership declines enough that there are no more unions, industry will be waiting, ready to seek the advantages of free-reign. If we have learned anything from history, it is that we have not learned from History!