

**Jenifer Norwell: John Belcarz & Dan Zeidler Memorial Scholarship 2018 - Why I believe the Labour movement is important to Canadians in this day and age.**

Word Count: 999

As the Canadian Media Guild secretary and treasurer for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's B.C. bureaus, I see on a daily basis the benefit that having a union makes to the workers of CBC. It helps provide agreed upon wages, rules around overtime, and rights and responsibilities that help make the workplace safer. It also benefits people when they are going through some of the most challenging times of their career. When I was laid off in 2015, it was the union that helped support me through the process and advocated for my current position. This experience is true for many unions and workplaces across the country. Individually, this means unions help to make people's lives better and more secure, but there is also a collective responsibility of the Labour movement to keep pushing for a better overall labour market.

While wealth is becoming more concentrated in the hands of the few, the middle-class is shrinking. Statistics Canada's 2015 report found that the wealthiest 20 percent of families had their average wealth increase by 80 percent between 1999 and 2012 while families in the lowest 20 percent increased their wealth by just 38 percent in the same time period (Statistics Canada, 2015). Contract, casual, and other transitory jobs are becoming the norm rather than the exception. In Ontario, the provincial labour minister is calling the increasing trend of hiring temporary worker "alarming" and is promising to bring legislative changes (Rushowy, 2017). While some politicians are working to shift this tide, there are other players in the political arena

pushing for individuals to be valued over the collective. In Kamloops, laundry services at the local hospital have been privatized to save money but instead it has led to complaints over cleanliness and concerns over a lack of laundry. The Hospital Employees Union has been a vocal critic against this change and has been pushing for the restoration of the 19 jobs that were lost in the shift (Proskiw, 2018). This makes the Labour movement in Canada more important now than nearly any time in the country's history because of the capacity it has to advocate for the rights of workers.

The Canadian Labour movement was founded in similar setting where the power to dictate working conditions was limited in the hands of employers. In March of 1872, printers walked off the job after their employers rejected a proposal by the Toronto Typographical Union to limit work days to nine hours. This marked the start of a movement that has led to many of the advantages workers take for granted today – employment insurance, the right to safe work, and parental benefits (Canadian Labour Congress, 2015a). In today's setting, there is a power imbalance in our country. In the private sector, unions are declining (The Canadian Press, 2012) and despite the post-union rhetoric, the change seems to have led to more instability. This means unions need to be more vocal on the benefits they bring to changing political and employment environments.

With a shrinking middle-class, the Labour movement plays an important role in helping to bargain for higher wages and better benefits. Housing is more expensive than it has even been according to economists in a 2017 RBC report (Wright & Hogue, 2017) and yet, people are still expected to be able to find housing, pay off their mortgages, and put money into long-term savings – a tough ask when housing can eat up more than two-thirds of paycheck in certain larger centres. This is where workers need unions more than ever. With the collective ability to

advocate for wages that keep pace with the cost of living, unionized workers are more likely to achieve a fair deal than if they were advocating for themselves individually.

Another place where unions are needed is in advocating for the rights of temporary or contract employees. In the past, unions have been perceived as compromising the rights of these less permanent workers to bolster agreements for full-time employees. That can't be the reality in this labour market. There is a growing discussion about the role of unions when it comes to mobilizing low-wage temporary workers (CBC Radio, 2018). A large push came earlier in 2018 when a number of Ontario Tim Hortons franchisees cut worker benefits apparently in an effort to offset an increase in the minimum wage. Not only was there a pushback from customers, but unions stepped up to voice their concerns (Harris, 2018). This is the reason why the Labour movement continues to be essential to Canadian workers and the economy. They ensure that employers are not making profits off of the backs of their workers. The Canadian Media Guild has also worked to support temporary workers within the CBC by making sure they know of their rights and bargain for better working conditions including benefits for temporary workers who are employed for more than 13 weeks straight. Having these kind of worker rights are essential to the new face of the Labour movement. As a former temporary employee and a current contract employee, these are issues that affect me directly. I believe I am better off for being part of a union and the research backs me up. According to the Canadian Labour Congress, workers in a union on average earned \$5.28 more than non-union workers and women make even more, averaging \$7.10 more (Canadian Labour Congress, 2015b).

More important than the individual benefits are the collective benefits. By having more workers who are paid more and work in a safe environment with health benefits, we as Canadians are more likely to have a healthier society. This means when we help individuals in

the right way, we can help the collective as well. The Labour movement continues to be relevant in this day and age because it helps to make sure employees aren't left behind by the shifting trends of the labour market. That's why I will be continuing to mobilize my members and increase knowledge about how the union benefits us individually and collectively.

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