

In 1909, a young American labour activist named Clara Lemlich wrote a scathing opinion piece on the conditions at the factory where she worked, noting that “the girls to [the supervisors] are part of the machines they are running.” Her indignation is echoed over a hundred years later in a newspaper article by Sara Mojtehedzadeh, a Toronto Star reporter who, in 2017, went undercover in an industrial bakery in Toronto. After a stressful, hectic day, during which employees endured constant shouting from supervisors, Mojtehedzadeh overheard a colleague muttering, “I am a human being. Not a robot.” Separated by a century, the words of these two women illustrate the outrage and indignation that humans have always felt when facing disrespect and mistreatment—conditions that the Canadian labour movement has been fighting to change since its formation.

Sadly, not only do these two women share the same outrage, they also share strikingly similar reasons for their anger. Although Lemlich was American, the conditions in which she worked were much the same as those in Canada at the time. And despite impressive advancements in labour laws and conditions that came about due to the Canadian labour movement, workplace conditions in Canada today often eerily parallel those of a hundred years ago.

As a young, unionized worker interested both in the history of the labour movement and the labour movement today, I’ve noticed that many people, particularly young people my own age, believe that unions and the Canadian labour movement are obsolete. There is a widespread feeling that all necessary battles have been fought and that unions are no longer needed. Some of my colleagues do not realize they belong to a union; others resent the union for collecting union dues, even as they benefit from union representation. Although the labour movement has achieved a lot in Canada, there are still battles to be fought, and many of these are ongoing battles, born over a hundred years ago.

In the past, many workers endured long hours, low pay, and miserable, unsafe conditions. Although some provinces, like Ontario and Manitoba, implemented factory legislation in the 1880s, it was minimal, poorly enforced, and riddled with loopholes.

Workers' rights were also limited by the Criminal Code and the Industrial Disputes Investigation Act (IDIA). Child labour was rampant, workers were exploited, and injury or death by machinery or workplace fires was all too common.

Clearly, Canada has advanced significantly since this time. Thanks to the labour movement, there are now federal, provincial and municipal regulations in place that regulate hours of work, minimum wage, age of employees, and the right to refuse unsafe work. But on a basic level, the issues facing many workers today are the same as they were long ago. Many governments are still less than friendly toward the labour movement, and loopholes in the legislation undermine workers' rights. In Ontario, for instance, provincial regulations, requiring that temporary and permanent employees be given equal pay for equal work, were repealed in early 2019. This allows companies to use temporary workers as a cheap alternative to full-time employees. Companies can also pass on responsibility for many workplace rights to the temporary workers' agency that provides the workers, particularly when workers are needed for risky work.

Even in the twenty-first century, Canadian workers are at risk of death on the job due to unsafe working conditions. Sara Mojtahedzadeh, the undercover Star reporter, writes that she received "about five minutes of training in a factory packed with industrial equipment." At the same factory in 2016, a new Canadian woman was strangled when her hijab caught in a machine. Her death bears frightening similarities to the death of my own great-uncle, who died in 1959 when a machine caught on the leg of his pants and pulled him inside.

A century ago, workers with the lowest pay and the worst conditions were often "unskilled" workers with no union representation. These workers were vulnerable because they were easily replaced. There were always other people looking for work; if a company was dissatisfied with an unskilled and non-unionized worker, it was easy to hire someone to take his or her place. This led to many workers remaining silent, accepting exploitation rather than risk losing their jobs. The most vulnerable also tended to be immigrants, those who were new to Canada, did not yet understand the language, and were often struggling socially and financially.

The same workers who were most vulnerable a century ago are still the most vulnerable today. Mojtehdzadeh notes that in the factory in which she worked, most of the workers in the low-paying, temporary jobs are recent refugees and immigrants to Canada. These workers face all the problems of immigrants a hundred years ago: language barriers, easily replacement, little education on their rights, and a constant threat of being fired with no justification.

It is clear that the labour movement is vitally important to Canadians in this day and age. Despite the many accomplishments of unions and labour activists throughout the history of Canada, there is still much work to be done. There are also reasons for hope and optimism. Millions of Canadian workers are unionized, union drives continue throughout the country, and unions persistently work to protect and increase workers' rights. Sara Mojtehdzadeh follows in the footsteps of other courageous labour activists exposing the conditions inside factories, including Eva Valesh, an 1880s journalist who visited workplaces to report on conditions faced by young female workers, and Lewis Hine, an early-twentieth century photographer who went undercover to document child labour. Stories of labour activists throughout the decades continue to inspire us, and the similarities between current and historical labour conditions continue to show why the labour movement is important to Canadians in this day and age.