

Handout #4a: Trade unions and social justice

Unions are organizations of social justice. Where there are no unions, employers unilaterally decide the terms and conditions of employment. Management rights and common law master-servant relations prevail. With unions, workers gain the legal right to bargain collectively, to democratically participate in the negotiating of wage rates, hours, job placement, benefits, and grievance procedures. Individual workers gain the right to due process on the job. Where a worker has been unfairly disciplined, passed over for promotion, been laid-off out of order, had his or her hours increased or decreased, has been asked to do work that is unsafe, or has been denied eligibility for benefits, he or she has legal recourse to grievance representation and to arbitration if required.

Unions are critical to social justice more broadly defined. Unions provided much of the mass support for the reform movements that established freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and for the right to vote. Unions led campaigns for employment standards and hours of work legislation, for workers compensation, pensions, social assistance, unemployment insurance, and public health-care.

The earliest unions were organized by trades, by weavers, teamsters, steam engineers, spinners, seafarers, printers, pipe-fitters, painters, miners, machinists, iron-molders, electricians, carpenters, bricklayers, and others. In the 1930s and 1940s industrial unions in mass production industries began winning the wage increases, shorter working hours, and benefits that provided many wage workers with “middle class” living standards.

Fifty years ago, nearly all union members were white, male blue collar workers. Today, a third of union members are women^{*}; most are municipal, provincial and federal public employees, hospital workers, nurses, and teachers. In the private and public sectors unions have negotiated clauses in collective agreements prohibiting discrimination based on gender, race, ethnicity, national origin, and sexual orientation. Unions initiated and have pursued campaigns for equal pay for work of equal value.

However, less than one third of wage and salary workers now have collective bargaining rights. In Canada’s private sector, only sixteen per cent of employees are union members. (In the U.S. less than 10 percent are.) In the 1950s nearly half of workers in both countries were union members. Labour saving technologies have reduced employment in many manufacturing processes. The deregulation of international capital movements allowed transnational corporations to move jobs in basic steel, auto parts, clothing, computer electronics, and footwear to lower wage countries. Meanwhile employment expanded in business and personal services, where few workers have collective bargaining rights. Does this mean that unions are becoming obsolete?

This is not the first time that union membership has fallen. During the 1920s and early 1930s, union membership in Canada and the US fell to barely one in ten workers. Traditional craft-based enterprises, where trade unions were strongest, were less and less able to successfully compete with assembly-line manufacturing. Assembly-line workers in mass production industries did not usually require trade qualifications. Most were migrants from farming

* According to Statistics Canada, in fact the membership of women has increased and now surpassed men “ For the seventh year in a row, the unionization rate for women in 2010 surpassed that of men (30.8% versus 28.2%). The gap widened slightly by 0.1 percentage points, as compared to that in 2009.” This is due globalization and the decline of traditionally ‘male’ union jobs and the presence of women in public sector unions such as education and healthcare.
<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/75-001-x/2011004/article/11579-eng.htm#a3> (Labour History Project 2013)

communities and other countries who had little experience with collective bargaining. Grateful for any paid employment, many did not believe they were entitled to better wages or conditions. Early organizing efforts did fail. Still, by the late 1930s unions were winning representation votes in steel, automobile, and rubber plants. In the next decade, union membership grew more rapidly than ever before.

Unions would be getting obsolete if workers in current growth industries—in business and personal services—had little or nothing to gain from collective bargaining. Is that the case? In finance and information technology, a minority of highly skilled technical specialists are well paid and can sometimes negotiate favourable terms and conditions for their own employment. However, highly educated IT employees now find their jobs outsourced to places where pay is much lower.

Most employees in Canada, especially the women and men engaged in information storage and retrieval and front line customer services, are poorly paid. In non-union restaurants, fast-food outlets, hotels, bars, and retail sales pay is low; hours are irregular, job security is tenuous, while skills, stresses, dangers, and physical difficulties are unrecognized.

Like workers in early mass production industries, workers in business and personal services may not believe that they are entitled to better pay or to a democratic say in the conditions of their employment. They may think they are just temporarily passing through, waiting for something better. However if current employment trends and business practices continue, they will spend most or all their working lives in service industries. Without unions and collective bargaining gains, a majority of wage and salary workers will be in a permanent underclass.

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Reading Guide: Trade Unions and Social Justice

1. How do unions protect individual workers?
2. What do they do for society?
3. What jobs tend to be unionized?
4. According to the article, what changes is the labour movement facing?
5. What is the significance for women workers in the labour movement?
6. According to the article, are unions 'obsolete'? Explain.
7. What are the problems current and future workers are facing?
8. What does Engler mean by “Without unions and collective bargaining gains, a majority of wage and salary workers will be in a permanent underclass.”?
9. Record any terms, concepts you wish clarification of, or questions you have for our discussion.