

RIGHT TO WORK IS WRONG

Over the last two centuries, those who came to Toronto from around the world have discovered the hope of prosperity. But each generation has also found that to get a fair share of that prosperity they needed to have unions. Union organizing has taken place in every sector of the economy, as working people learned that the only way to balance the power of employers was through collective action.

Most jobs which today provide “middle class” incomes were once poverty level jobs. That is true not just in manufacturing, but also in occupations as diverse as teaching, healthcare, construction and social work. The ability of workers in each of those sectors to improve income standards and working condition is the true legacy of the labour movement. So too are social benefits that our movement bargained with various levels of government – healthcare, public pensions, unemployment insurance, workers compensation, paid holidays, maternity leave and a minimum wage.

Business has never been happy with the fact that workers were able to get a bigger slice of the economic pie. Starting with the Reagan Revolution in the 1980's, the corporate elites spared no expense to roll back many of these gains. Laws were changed that allowed employers to smash union construction in Alberta, outsource healthcare jobs in B.C., and move entire operations from Ontario to the U.S. or Mexico. Through deregulation, globalization and privatization, the elites have succeeded in weakening the strength of working people and imposing new norms on the rest of society.

CEO's have now decided that the next generation of Canadians are worth less than those who came before. Young people are offered two-tier wage structures, lower benefits, and no hope of a secure pension. What is remarkable is that many older workers have sacrificed to oppose these measures. They stood firm on picket lines opposing the dictates of VALE Inco, Hydro ONE or Canada Post that new hires would receive less. The determination of Canadian workers to stand up for the next generation is something we should all be proud of.

In the U.S. though, powerful corporate forces have severely damaged the strength of the labour movement. There have been ruthless tactics applied in thousands of workplaces, while laws have been weakened at both the state and federal level. Almost every organizing drive sees vicious reprisals and workers fired. Companies can easily escape their obligations to bargain fairly, while in many states so-called “right-to-work” laws undermine union membership.

Billionaires routinely fund anti-union think tanks and political groups, setting the stage for legislative change that strengthens employer control and weakens unions. The passage of right-to-work in Michigan, the birthplace of industrial unionism, has sent shockwaves across both sides of our border. Conservative MP's are talking about doing the same here, and Tory leader Tim Hudak has made it part of his election platform.

Canadians are about to experience a new level of aggression against the very foundations of collective bargaining. Anti-labour groups such as the Fraser Institute and National Citizens Coalition

will be well resourced by millionaire funders, hoping to replicate the success of Republican victories across the U.S.

Is the labour movement ready to defend itself and its members? That's a difficult question to answer. Most union members never joined a union – they got a job where someone built a union many years before. In many cases, their introduction to the union is a brief description of the contract and the local union structure. Few attend union meetings, and not many have walked a picket line. Many take the level of wages and benefits for granted, believing that the company gives these things as part of normal practice, rather than the result of past struggle. In some places, workers speak a dozen different languages and don't feel connected with the mainstream union culture.

We have a rich legacy of struggle for social justice and equity, but the dominant message in our society is that the individual is more important than collective rights. The key task for unions is to re-affirm the role of collective action in upholding the values of a just society.

There needs to be a massive history lesson undertaken across greater Toronto, explaining how collective rights have been essential in raising the standard of living for all. It would require every tool at our disposal - newsletters, social media, videos, special meetings and lunch-and-learn sessions in every workplace. From school presentations to new member orientation, the story of working people needs to be told and re-told so that the next generation understands why unions are necessary.

It's often said that you need to know where you came from in order to understand where you are going. Today, there are people working in public sector workplaces and non-union manufacturing plants making barely more than minimum wage – just like in the bad old days. That's what the elites mean by "right-to-work": their right to have more people working for poverty wages. Without the collective strength to resist the immense power of global corporations, this will become the first generation of Canadians to be worse off than those who came before. The entire labour movement must dedicate itself to reversing this direction.

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