



Union Myths & Realities

Myth #1: “Unions are too big and powerful.”

Facts: Canadian unions are run by people like you and their resources come from members' dues. Comparing “big unions” to big corporations is a trick that corporations and the media they own love to use. In actual fact, *most Canadian unions are quite small*, and together they represent *less than 40% of the country's workforce*. Unions consist of everyday working people whose elected representatives try to get the best deal for them, Elected union officers are accountable to the membership and have to run for election, unlike corporate CEOs. Even the largest unions, in terms of size and resources, pale by comparison with multinational corporations such as Teck, Wal-mart, CN Rail or General Motors.

In Canada, few politicians ever dare interfere with "free enterprise". Business can set their prices, sell their products and throw their money into anything from advertising to a new executive washroom *without supervision or restraint*. Governments will usually give them money or tax breaks to do this.

Politicians feel differently about unions. They have required legal certification, formal backing from a majority of the workers they wish to represent and a long, complicated legal process before they can call a strike. Governments can intervene in strikes, force workers back to the job and impose a settlement. They can fine or jail workers who refuse to work. Do you ever see governments try those tactics on companies?

Myth #2: “Unions always want to strike.”

Facts: Unions negotiate for agreements - not strikes. No union wants a strike. Strikes develop when both sides can in no other way reach an agreement. To union members, a strike means sacrifice to themselves and their families. Workers won't go on strike unless they think that other remedies won't work and the issues involved are so great they are worth the sacrifice.

Unions conduct membership votes before taking strike action and a strike occurs only after the approval of a clear majority of workers. No union wants a strike and one will only take place after the majority of members vote to do so. More working days are lost in a year to workplace accidents and illnesses than are lost to strikes.

Most unions measure their success by the extent to which they can avoid strikes, and they do manage to settle 97 percent of contract negotiations without a strike. Despite that record, strikes are controversial and controversy makes news. This, no doubt, is why many people

think strikes are the rule rather than the exception.

Myth 3: "Unions are only interested in money."

Facts: Only people with enough money not to worry about lay-offs, job security or on-the-job injuries don't have these worries. But unions have always been concerned about more than just wages. They have fought to eliminate sweat shops, reduce the number of working hours, and improve health and safety conditions.

Unions also fight to preserve and enhance social programs like Medicare, public education, and pensions. Job security, retraining, and eliminating racism are also high on the list of union priorities. Over the years, labour has led the fight for workers' compensation, for occupational health laws, tougher human rights codes and equal pay for work of equal value.

Unions have also supported all serious attempts to make jobs less boring and more safe. Productivity increases when work has more meaning, absenteeism falls and the economy and community are improved. Some of the first goals of organized labour were better working conditions, it should come as no surprise that union demands reflect these concerns.

You'll find unions working with the United Way, providing scholarships for young people to go to university, providing unemployment counseling and promoting sports for children. No matter where you look, unions are involved in things that make the community better.

Myth 4: "Unions make unreasonable demands."

Facts: What is a reasonable wage demand? One that meets the workers' needs? One based on the employer's ability to pay? One that's tied to productivity? Or one that the media thinks is responsible?

The fact is that nobody has yet devised a workable formula for determining wage increases that would be considered reasonable by the workers, by their employer, by the public, by the press and by the government. One group or another will always be unhappy. To some people in Canada, any demand by workers is too much.

Besides, most employers - except occasionally when in genuine financial stress - still refuse to open their books to union negotiators. Unions are thus denied access to the data on profits, productivity and labour costs that they must have in order to formulate "reasonable" demands. The best alternative for you and other workers in our private enterprise society is to go for as much as they think their members are entitled to.

In contract negotiations, unions base their demands on the needs of the membership. The members themselves state what their needs are during meetings to set bargaining proposals. Unions also take into account the financial circumstances of the employer. Negotiations are like any other part of life: we always try to get the best deal we can.