

# Let's Give the Labour Movement Its Due

## Unions are society's builders, not strike-happy wreckers

*by Ed Finn, CCPA's Senior Editor*

Given a word-association test, the response of most Canadians to the word "union" would be "strikes."

How else could they be expected to react? The only time they read about unions in the newspapers or hear about them on TV or radio is when their members are walking the picket lines. The understandable assumption is that all unions ever do is go on strike.

In fact, the average union member is on the job 96.4% of his or her working life. Since unions negotiate 97 out of every 100 collective agreements at the bargaining table, a strike is an exceptional event.

If unions and their members received even one-tenth as much publicity for their achievements in helping keep our society together as they do for the occasional strike they conduct, their public image might reflect something closer to reality.

As someone who worked for and with labour organizations for more than 30 years, I never think of strikes when I hear their names.

I think of the grievance procedure that helps members unjustly treated by their employers to regain their jobs, get their back pay, or have their vacation or sick leave credits reinstated.

I think of the union programs that help rehabilitate workers with alcohol and drug addictions, depression, and other personal problems.

I think of the unions' campaigns against racism and discrimination.

I think of the union locals that "adopt" needy children in developing countries and compete with one another to raise the most money for the United Way and other charitable agencies.

I think of unions' exposé of the shocking conditions in private nursing homes; of their public inquiry into the mistreatment of the mentally ill and handicapped.

I think of the unions' ongoing efforts to improve workplace health and safety and reduce the carnage of job-related deaths, injuries, and disease.

I think of the high priority so many unions have given to the elimination of pay and hiring discrimination against women, Aboriginal people, and other minorities.

These are just a few examples of what unions are really all about. Bargaining with employers on pay and benefits, of course, is a central responsibility, but far from an all-inclusive one. Most of their activities, unheralded and unsung, have nothing to do with

strikes. They have to do with helping workers – and not just their own members – cope with life's hardships and uncertainties, on the job and off.

Follow most union representatives around for a few months, and you would probably never see them involved with a strike. You'd see them assisting a union local's officers in processing grievances. You'd see them helping workers file their claims for unemployment insurance or workers' compensation. You'd see them spending many nights at meetings in union halls or hotel rooms, instead of being where they'd prefer – at home with their families.

Certainly, strikes do happen. But few deserve the bad press they get. Most are forced on unions when management refuses to negotiate in good faith. The right to strike is an integral part of the free collective bargaining system and in most plants and offices is the only leverage the unions have to counter a powerful and aggressive employer.

All Canadians, whether they know it or not (and most don't), live better lives because of the efforts of the labour movement.

If you look back at Canada's history, you'll find that many of the basic rights and benefits we all enjoy were initially fought for and won by unions. Organized labour was in the forefront of the struggles for public health care, for public education, for minimum levels of pay and employment conditions.

We all work 40 hours or less a week, instead of 60 or more, because railroad unions went on strike for a shorter work week with the same pay in the 1950s – despite the claims by the rail companies that they'd never be able to afford it. This victory led within a few years to the adoption of the 40-hour-week as a standard schedule.

The relatively recent provision of year-long legislated paid parental leave was sparked by a breakthrough at the bargaining table by the Canadian Union of Postal Workers, which made it a bargaining priority. This, too, like the 40-hour work week, soon became a universal benefit.

Some of the other major gains in social programs were similarly pioneered by the Steelworkers, the CAW, and other industrial unions.

Without the unions, working strenuously and constructively in so many ways, in so many cities and towns from coast to coast, the strands that hold our nation together would not be nearly so strong.

Unlike most Canadians, who lack the insights I have into what unions actually do, I don't think of them in terms of the infrequent strikes that get all the media coverage. I think of the unions' ongoing commitment to the protection and advancement of the interests of working people – including those outside union ranks.

You'll never see or hear the mainstream media give the unions the credit they deserve. But it's a fact that, among the forces that have shaped Canadian society, the labour movement has done the most to make this country a great place to live.

They're now doing as much as they can to stop the corporate and political élites from tearing it down.