

UNIONS: A BRIEF OUTLINE

Unions are people grouping together to further their mutual interests.

The strength of numbers has been used effectively by many segments of society. Groups of people acting with a common purpose have played a dynamic role in shaping our society and continue to play an important part in our democratic structure.

If any democratically organized group of people is to be effective, a spirit of co-operation is essential. Through co-operation, many things can be achieved that could never be accomplished by a single person.

The essential difference that separates trade unions from other types of unions in society, is that trade unions are primarily concerned with employer-employee relations. Trade unions are workers who bargain collectively with their employer.

Trade unions are known as organized labour. Organized labour has been a part of Canadian life since the early 1800's. The first unions began as mainly defensive organizations dedicated to improving the working and living conditions of their members.

Individually, workers were powerless to change deplorable conditions under which they were forced to work and live. But, by combining their efforts they found they could bargain from a position of relative strength. Gradually, their conditions improved.

Today, trade unions' most basic function is still collective bargaining. Unions bargain for wages, hours, pensions, vacations, safety protection, equal rights, and many other working conditions. They also bargain for a grievance procedure.

The grievance procedure is a systematic method of settling labour-management disputes during the term of a collective agreement. The purpose of a grievance procedure is to create and maintain an industrial relations climate where some measure of harmony is possible when disagreements and disputes arise.

The worker's grievance may have to do with a great number of matters. The worker may feel that the proper rate of pay for a specific job is not being paid; that the entitled vacation is not being allowed; that overtime is not being paid; or, that something is wrong with the conditions under which a job has to be done. If the complaint is valid, a grievance can be filed. The collective agreement sets forth the course to be followed in processing the grievance.

The collective agreement is a contract between union and employer. When, through discussions and negotiations, the terms and conditions of employment are agreed upon between the employer and the union, a written contract governing wages, hours, and other conditions of employment is signed by the employer and the union representatives. This contract is valid for a specified period of time – usually one, two, or three years.

Before negotiations begin, the members decide what the union will ask for in all contract matters. Most unions elect a committee to negotiate with the employer but final proposals must be approved by the members before an agreement is signed.

While concentrating on their primary objective – collective bargaining, unions were also involved in issues of wider social concern. Labour has been instrumental in helping to bring about vast improvements for all Canadians: free compulsory education, widows' allowances, family allowances, pensions, health insurance, workers' compensation, unemployment insurance, safety regulations, laws covering hours of work and vacations, minimum wages... the list is almost endless.

Moreover, the wages, hours of work and working conditions won by the unions through collective bargaining became a pattern for all workers.

But, with the increasing complexities of modern life, new challenges have arisen and some old problems have become more acute. Areas of concern include the poor and minority groups, community health centres, housing and urban affairs, pollution and conservation, human rights, civic liberties, regional disparities, broadcasting and bilingualism.

Labour organizations across Canada are identifying social problems that exist in their communities and working actively to correct them. As always, the trade union movement relies on the tremendous potential inherent in its members to make Canada a better place to live.