

What Being a Member of a Union Family Means to Me

According to the Merriam-Webster's dictionary, "a Union is the act or instance of uniting or joining two or more things into one". In labor unions, workers are joined together as a force to make changes and work as a collective towards employees' common interests. In a sense, a union is a family, and a base of support. Being the son and grandson of union members has had a big impact on my life in many different ways, the greatest being its impact on my family's health and job security.

Union activity has been helpful to my family in so many ways. Many people in my family are union members, including my dad and grandparents. When my grandmothers (who are both nurses) went on strike, we could see the power of their group in negotiating fair working conditions that would lead to better patient care. When my father's company was sold, he told me that it was because he was unionized that his benefits and pension were carried over to the next business. Being a union member has led to enhanced healthcare benefits that have deeply impacted me. We have a great healthcare system in Canada, but it doesn't cover all the necessities. My family relies heavily on the health insurance that my father receives through his union. It was because of my father's healthcare benefits that I was able to receive orthodontic care and athletic therapy.

Union activity is not confined to helping people on an individual or family level, but can have a profound impact on a national level as well. I live in Winnipeg, and our city has a rich legacy of supporting workers. The Winnipeg General Strike of 1919 led to more than 30,000 strikers petitioning for better working conditions. It helped to unite the working class and some of its participants were so inspired that they formed a major Canadian political group, that of the New Democratic Party.

Union activity helps build healthy families and communities. Importantly, it was union activity that caused Canadians everywhere to be entitled to maternity leave. My mom said that her time off work to look after me and my 3 sisters after we were born helped her enjoy some of the most special moments of her life. Union activity helped us to bond as a family and helped us to build happy family memories.

I've seen the devastating effects of not having a union. I was employed part-time last summer at a restaurant, and all was going well until the start of the school year when I was suddenly dropped from the electronic schedule. No phone call, no goodbye, no paperwork – my shift was simply deleted. As I reflect on it now, had I been in a union, maybe things would have turned out differently. However, I've always followed the mindset of making lemonade from lemons, so I used my newly found time to put energy towards supporting my fellow students as the elected Student Council President.

Being School President this year helped me to live out what I understand unions do all the time - interface with the bosses (teachers and principals) to improve the conditions of the working class (the students). I acted as a liaison to bring up important student issues, such as minimizing discrimination (for example, supporting free Advanced Placement exams), welcoming new immigrants to school (especially those from war-torn countries), and increasing exposure to various cultures (expanding the single Culture Day to a whole week of activities). I was most proud in my advocacy of eco-friendly initiatives, such as substituting wood for plastic cutlery, expanding recycling programs, leading an Eco-Rally, and petitioning for solar panels on the roof of my school. I also understood the critical importance of also relaying information from the bosses to the workers, and passed on the message of the need for general decency in behavior among the students (for example, respectful actions in the hallways and in the bathrooms).

The impact of union activity is like the tide that lifts all boats; it has the potential to help all workers, and not just its direct members. Union activity continues to be important. When workers rally together to support worthy causes, they help ensure safe working conditions and protect the rights of employees. The union today continues to be a force with individual, family, and national impact. I certainly hope that I'll be able to find a job in the future that includes a union in order to help protect the interests of my family and all workers. I also plan to use union negotiation principles in my future leadership activities in university and beyond to help build a just, respectful, and healthy community.