

Trade Unionism

by Aiden Swartz

As a young person progressing through post-secondary education in the hopes of finding a satisfying career, I have found myself becoming much more socially and politically aware. This journey began four years ago when I set out on a six-month volunteering opportunity that took me to rural Nova Scotia and Borneo, Indonesia. I followed with 7 months of independent travel throughout South East Asia. Together these experiences exposed me to the plight of millions of people in the world who still do not benefit from the ability to earn a living wage and do not have the employment protections afforded to Canadians, which are a direct result of over 200 years of trade union activism. The movement began in Britain in the 18th Century during the Industrial Revolution and there are records that indicate that in Canada, skilled tradesmen in the Maritimes were organizing as early as 1812 (during the war between the United States and Britain).

The idea of uniting with other wage earners to bring about improved working conditions and fair wages for everyone was a powerful strategy. By joining forces and organizing themselves into trade unions, workers could make their voices heard and mass refusals to work or work stoppages (strike action) became a common way to force employers to make changes. The first historic record of strike action dates back as far as 1153 BC when artisans in Egypt walked off the job because they hadn't been paid. By uniting and organizing, workers could take some of the power that was, until then, in the hands of the factory owners. It's not too surprising that in most countries strike action quickly became illegal. In one of the earliest records of union organization in Canada in 1816, legislation was introduced in Nova Scotia that made it difficult for workers to organize trade unions.

Luckily this didn't stop the movement; it likely made people even more determined. In Canada, during the first half of the 19th century groups of workers including shoemakers, shipwrights, printers, carpenters and many others started forming organizations and gradually they gained strength and confidence. It was sometimes a violent and dangerous road but in 1872 the Trade Unions Act was passed and today we can thank that movement for many things including weekends, an eight hour work day, child labour laws, paid vacation, work safety standards, lunch breaks at work, social security and many other workplace rights and practices that we take for granted. Union workers also make more money, spend more money and create more jobs with that spending.

There are many countries in the world however, including Cambodia which I visited, where workers do not have the most basic rights and where union activists fighting for something as fundamental as a living wage, can be imprisoned or killed.

And although by comparison we are very lucky in Canada, unions still have work to do and are still relevant. For the past few years unions here have been coping with growing pressure from employers and governments to accept wage freezes, reduce benefits and erode worker's rights. Unions have a difficult time ahead of them and have to continue to fight to protect jobs and rights in more flexible and innovative ways to ensure we don't go backwards.