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AUPE Local 012 Scholarship

Topic: The Relevancy of Unions in Today’s Workforce: The Coronavirus Pandemic

Even though events taking place in the workplace may seem routine and persistent, the world outside the workplace is unpredictable. These unknowns can oftentimes displace natural work order causing employers and workers to become astray in terms of management and policies. Unions allow workers and employers to navigate such unknowns ensuring the workplace stays just during events that may challenge the continuation of previously established order. One can see the need and relevancy of labour unions through the recent challenges employers and workers have faced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Throughout the pandemic, a common issue that was prevalent within the workplace was that of job insecurity. During the pandemic, more than half (58%) of Canadians have felt concerned about their financial situation due to fears related to job insecurity, according to an article by *Benefits Canada*. Many of these fears did not stem without reason as employment fell by 200,000 while the unemployment rate rose to 6.5% in the beginning of 2022 according to *Statistics Canada.* The pandemic had also posed a threat to many basic rights of a worker for those who continued to work. Amidst the Coronavirus pandemic, essential workers received a heightened sense of responsibility as many essential workers are employed in healthcare services. Due to their demand, essential workers were often required to work in conditions that put their own health and safety at risk. Many of these employees were “forced to work without protective gear (PPE) [and had] no access to paid sick leave” (McNicholas, et al.) According to an article published in *Time*, workers, such as those for Cash-Wa, a regional food distributer in Fargo, North Dakota, had reported feeling unsafe in the workplace. For months during the pandemic, Cash-Wa employees had faced unsafe conditions due to the company’s disregard in “social distancing rules or otherwise screen[ing] employees” (Abrams). Due to the rapidly changing work environment accelerated by the pandemic, many institutions were left unprepared in providing safe working conditions for their employees. Consequently, it affected those who needed their services. “Many nursing homes have reported shortages of PPE,” according to a report presented in *Health Affairs*, which had led to the use of lower-grade grade equipment and even the reuse of them. Such practices proved to be detrimental not only to workers but to residents as well due to their vulnerability to the virus. As a result of speaking up about these workplace hazards and their unjust treatment, many essential workers have been fired, leading to a greater sense of job insecurity. An event such as this took place in an Amazon warehouse in Staten Island where two user experience designers, Emily Cunningham and Maren Costa, have been fired after “internally circulating a petition about health risks for Amazon warehouse workers during the Covid-19 crisis” (Paul.) Even though the pandemic has imposed disadvantages to all employees alike, a report presented by *Economic Policy Institute* states that certain racial groups, such as Black and Hispanic people, have been disproportionately put at a disadvantage within the workplace (McNicholas, et al.) Racial segregation has led to occupational segregation, where these racial groups are often subject to “systematic barriers to quality jobs” resulting in “lower pay, poorer benefits, and greater job instability” (Weller). The Coronavirus pandemic posed a threat especially to low-wage workers as low-wage jobs often entail higher social contact (such as brick-and-mortar salespersons, food and personal services, and event attendants). A common notion that had been raised during the pandemic was that of “working from home,” or “teleworking” which was not possible in many of these low-wage jobs (McNicholas, et al.). As a result, many of these workers were forced into choosing between their health and safety or the ability to provide for their families.

The relevancy of unions in today’s workplace environment became apparent as a result of the consequences of the Coronavirus pandemic. With the rise of unjust workplace practices and job instability, employees and employers alike may find the role of unions useful in addressing unfavourable outcomes due to the unknowns brought about during the outbreak. Unions are organized in such a way to bring awareness to such issues and, thus, create effective change to address them. According to an article by *Economic Policy Institute*, workers under a union have “negotiated additional pay, health and safety measures, paid sick leave, and job preservation” (McNicholas, et al.) With the addition of stronger job protections, employees may be able to exercise more of their basic rights within their workplace. For example, Donte Martin, a front-end manager of Giant, a grocery store in Maryland, highlighted the importance of unions during his time working during the pandemic. In an essay for *The Washington Post*, Martin highlighted shortcomings he had experienced during the health and safety crisis. In an article by *Huffpost*, Martin reported that “if I didn’t have a union, I probably wouldn’t have spoken up” (Jamieson.) As a member of a union, Martin did not have to fear losing his job by exercising his basic right to speak up against workplace violations he had faced. Along with the ability to speak up about injustices in the workplace, unionized workers have access to many other benefits. According to a McMaster study reported by the *Workers Health and Safety Centre*, “unionized workers were more likely to report protective workplace measures were in place during COVID.” Measures included were an allowance to work from home, employer-provided enhanced cleaning staff, and access to personal protective equipment (63.4% for unionized workers versus 53.8% for non-unionized). With increased access to PPE, unionized workers are not only able to ensure the safety of themselves, but those that they serve as well. In a study co-authored by Adam Dean, it was shown that “unionized nursing homes were associated with a 30% relative decrease in mortality rate at the height of the first coronavirus surge compared to nursing homes without unions” as they had a greater access to PPE (Abrams.) Unions have also shown to be beneficial to low-wage workers with poor benefits who have been placed at even more of a disadvantage after the pandemic. According to an article by *Economic Policy Institute*, “more than nine in 10 workers covered by a union contract (94%) have access to employer-sponsored health benefits” as union employers contribute more to their health care benefits (McNicholas, et al.) Many of these low-wage workers are part of racial groups, prominently Black and Hispanic, who have faced occupational segregation before and ever increasingly during the pandemic. Through collective bargaining, Black and Hispanic workers are able to lift wages. Black and Hispanic workers under a union have been able to lift wages up to 13-20% more than their nonunionized coworkers lessening the racial wage gap (McNicholas, et al.)

Before the pandemic, the idea of unionization may not have crossed my mind. From my perspective, the workplace seemed relatively stable. Employers seemed to be accustomed to the day-to-day routine of the work environment and, thus, were able to create policies to address predictable matters that rose. After the outbreak, my perspective had changed as I was able to see how the incalculable nature of the Coronavirus had left employers and employees astray within the workplace. I now believe that unionization would be an important factor for me in dealings with the workplace. I would like to be able to exercise my rights as a worker no matter the circumstance without fear of backlash from employers and the workplace. Not only would it be important for me in today’s work environment, but, also, for unforeseeable events in the future that may influence my rights as the pandemic had done for countless employees and institutions.

In the past, we have seen the role of unions as an important factor that has established the policies we see as norms today within the workplace. Since then, policies within the workplace have remained relatively the same, thus making the work environment seem routine. However, such means of comfort can be put under risk by unforeseen events that may threaten the rights we have strived to establish. When such events occur, the role of unionizations becomes much more relevant in today’s workforce in order to protect worker rights and hold institutions accountable. The relevance of unions can be seen in the recent events unfolding during the Coronavirus pandemic. Employees had faced an immense sense of fear regarding the stability of their job and employment had fallen drastically. Rights of workers were infringed as their health and safety were put at risk while being forced to work in unsafe conditions. By speaking up against the unjust nature of the workplace, many faced threats of losing their job furthering fears of weakening job security. Those who were left at a disadvantage before the pandemic, faced even more turmoil as they were forced to work in high social contact jobs that posed risks to their safety. To those who have been affected by the unpredictable nature of the pandemic within their workplace, unionization may play an important role in addressing such issues in order to establish balance and guarantee rights to workers that were once promised when they had entered the workforce. Based on these recent events, unionization proves to be relevant in today’s workforce and will undoubtedly play a key role in future events to come now that we have seen the possibilities of risks both employees and institutions can face during uncertainty.

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