



Analysis

Unions Help Strengthen Democracy

June 2018



Unions help strengthen democracy

Unions have been, and continue to be, an important force for democracy—locally, nationally, and globally—not just in the workplace, but in the broader community.

There are many factors that contribute to a healthy democracy. A democracy is strong when citizens

- **rule themselves** directly, or consent to be governed by representatives;
- **have the right to organize** and participate equally in politics and in their workplaces;
- **have freedom to dissent, to oppose** their governments, and to express themselves;
- **have legal equality and economic justice**, like equal access to public services.

A democracy is healthy and strong when all this exists within the rule of law, with constitutional limits on the power of the majority.

Unions work for the entire society

Unions have a role in the democracy of a province or country because unions have a wider vision than just the workplace. That is, the causes unions represent and defend for their own workers are also needed in the larger community. Unions do far more than negotiate decent wages and benefits for their members. They play a broader role in society to ensure greater economic and social justice, as well as a stronger democracy.

By exercising their democratic rights to organize and to participate in elections, and when necessary, by expressing themselves by dissenting and opposing their governments, and by fighting for public services and the environment, unions are keeping our democracy strong.

Political action and coalition work

Unions strengthen democracy by demanding better social, economic, and environmental policies. They do this through various forms of political action, in social movements and in coalition with others across North America and around the world who have common aims.

By working in coalitions, unions help build civic engagement. Their coalitions provide a democratic counterweight to the growing power of corporations and the super-wealthy, and to their influence over public policy.

An example of this kind of coalition work is evident in the campaigns of the Trade Justice Network (TJN). The TJN can effectively challenge the scope and secret

negotiating process of free trade agreements because it's comprised of organizations focused on

- environment
- civil society
- students
- Indigenous peoples
- culture
- farming
- labour
- social justice

The union movement, through the TJN, creates a united voice when calling for a new trade model rooted in

- principles of equity
- the primacy of human rights
- social and ecological justice

And human rights include the rights of Indigenous peoples, of women and girls, of workers, migrants, farmers, and of communities. The TJN has fought against the potential for trade agreements, like NAFTA, to restrict Canada's ability to enforce its own environmental regulations, maintain labour standards, and stop profitable companies from moving to countries with cheaper labour and weaker standards.

Political accountability

Unions strengthen democracy by fighting for greater political accountability. It is no coincidence that in countries where there are free and active trade union movements, there are more democratic, transparent, and representative forms of government. It is also no coincidence that pro-democracy movements succeed where there are strong labour movements.

Let's consider 2 examples: the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), and the Ontario labour resistance to the extreme right-wing austerity government of Mike Harris.

The first example of the role that unions play in creating and strengthening democracy is evident in the work of the Congress of South African Trade Unions. This trade union federation in South Africa helped bring an end to apartheid. Launched December 1, 1985, at the height of the struggle against apartheid, it went on to spearhead a campaign of sustained action against the despotic regimes of P.W. Botha and F.W. de Klerk.

Working with liberation organizations such as the African National Congress and the United Democratic Front, as well as with student organizations, churches, and other civil

society organizations, COSATU helped lead the most sustained challenge to apartheid governance in the history of the country. COSATU led the rebellion with marches, protests, and general strikes. Through these actions COSATU played a central role in ending decades of white supremacy, and in bringing democracy to South Africa.

The second example of labour's pro-democracy activism happened in Ontario in the 1990s against a vicious right-wing government. Between late 1995 and 1998, in response to a government assault on workers and the poor, Ontario unions called for 11 *Days of Action* against the provincial Conservative government of Mike Harris.

The Days of Action were a series of massive, rolling, 1-day general strikes in different towns and cities. They involved not only unions but also many social movements and community organizations. Eventually Ontario's unions called hundreds of thousands of workers into the streets, shutting down many private businesses and public agencies, while also holding mass demonstrations and rallies throughout the province. While the unions did not succeed in bringing down the Conservative government, the strikes did challenge the Conservatives' anti-worker onslaught, and they helped develop a new group of labour and community activists.

Reducing inequality, promoting equal rights

Unions strengthen democracy by opposing and reducing all forms of inequality. The ways they do this include supporting poverty reduction strategies and gender equality. They combat racism and advance human rights for equality-seeking groups. And they advocate for healthy communities.

Studies show that union strength leads to greater economic equality, which is another important ingredient for a healthy and strong democracy. In those countries where there is no independent union movement, or where the movement is vulnerable, the vast majority of citizens continue to be trapped in poverty. It is in these conditions that instability and extremism thrive at the expense of democracy.

The essential role that unions play in promoting economic equality is supported by a major 2008 International Labour Organization (ILO) study, which found that higher rates of union density resulted in reduced inequality. This same ILO study, *World of Work Report 2008: Income Inequalities in the Age of Financial Globalization*, also found that “the countries in which union density rates are higher are also the ones in which the welfare state is more developed,” and “taxation levels [are] more progressive. (86)”

Strengthening legislative/parliamentary democracy

Unions strengthen democracy by participating in elections. Many studies show that unions have a direct positive effect on elections. Where there are strong unions, voter

turnout is greater, especially among vulnerable and marginalized groups, such as those living in poverty, visible minorities and racialized groups, and the working class. Unions also have a positive impact on the creation of electable worker-friendly political parties, in fundraising for those parties, and in electing working-class candidates to office.

A new research paper by the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) in the US entitled “From the Bargaining Table to the Ballot Box: Political Effects of Right to Work Laws,” further supports these conclusions. The findings show the remarkable impact that unions have on legislative democracy. The study found that unions have a direct impact on elections. But this also means that where union rights have been gutted, anti-union political parties more often win. And this leads to a vicious cycle wherein the political right uses that power to gerrymander legislatures, and further suppress votes.

This new study supports previous social science research indicating that following the passage of anti-union laws, it becomes more difficult for unions to get-out-the-vote. The result is an overall reduction in voter turnout by 2%–3% and a reduction in blue-collar worker turnout by 11% (“From the Bargaining Table to the Ballot Box”).

The NBER study shows that anti-union laws also reduce campaign contributions by 1%–2%, and reduce fundraising by progressive candidates in American state and local races.

More broadly, anti-union laws impact the progressive movement, because working-class candidates, who are more likely to be progressive on economic issues, are less likely to win elected office. Anti-union states have between 1% and 3% fewer working-class elected officials.

The NBER study also further confirms the findings of other international studies on the redistributive impacts of unions: the decline of unions correlates with the dramatic rise of wealth captured by the top 1% of earners. By contrast, union strength leads to greater economic equality.

These studies also show that unions reduce the racial wage gaps and increase wages among racialized communities. Unions enhance fair hiring and promotion standards, leading to less discrimination in the workplace. They allow racialized workers greater access to employer-sponsored retirement plans, increase voter turnout among workers of colour, and improve cross-racial working-class solidarity.

Unions: Protection from rich & powerful individuals and corporations

There’s another deeply disturbing finding: the passage of anti-union laws doesn’t just undermine the ability of progressive political parties to win government, it also undermines a check on corporate power and greed. This NBER research strongly suggests that anti-union laws reap big rewards for wealthy and powerful individuals and for corporations that own capital.

The consequences are grim: without unions there will be no political institution that promotes policies benefiting those who don't own capital. Even worse, without strong unions, the working class could abandon social democracy altogether and embrace xenophobia and authoritarianism.

In summary, unions have a positive, measurable effect on

- Voting patterns
- Voter turnout among blue-collar workers and racialized workers
- Campaign fundraising for worker-friendly political parties
- Election of working-class candidates
- Income equality/equitable distribution of income
- Reduction of wealth inequality, and of corporate greed and power
- Fair hiring and promotion standards, leading to less discrimination
- Access to employer-sponsored retirement plans
- Cross-racial and intercultural solidarity
- Creation of strong, electable social democratic political parties
- Political parties addressing issues related to jobs
- Eradication of xenophobia and authoritarianism

Conclusion

There are many ingredients that contribute to a healthy democracy, and unions play a significant role by making democracy work better in a lot of ways.

A just and democratic society depends on a healthy and free labour movement. It is no surprise that, globally, countries with strong democratic traditions have strong and active unions. This is because unions stand for democracy and human rights both within the workplace and in society as a whole.

Employees who are protected at work with a decent standard of living are able to participate in the wider society. Companies that are held accountable by their unions are better corporate citizens. The practice of democracy in the union influences the broader democratic process. The expansion and protection of human rights, including labour rights, improves the quality of life for everyone. Citizens are more able to participate in the important decisions impacting their lives and their society.

For these reasons unions are often the first under attack by right-wing or authoritarian governments. They know that the union movement is best able to defend the rights of workers, as well as the rights of poor, impoverished, and disadvantaged people.



NATIONAL UNION OF PUBLIC AND GENERAL EMPLOYEES

- B. C. Government and Service Employees' Union (BCGEU)
- Health Sciences Association of British Columbia (HSABC)
- Health Sciences Association of Alberta (HSAA)
- Saskatchewan Government and General Employees' Union (SGEU)
- Manitoba Government and General Employees' Union (MGEU)
- Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU)
- Canadian Union of Brewery and General Workers (CUBGW)
- New Brunswick Union of Public and Private Employees (NBU)
- Nova Scotia Government and General Employees Union (NSGEU)
- PEI Union of Public Sector Employees (PEI UPSE)
- Newfoundland & Labrador Association of Public and Private Employees (NAPE)

The National Union of Public and General Employees is an affiliate of the Canadian Labour Congress and a member of Public Services International.

15 AURIGA DRIVE
NEPEAN, ONTARIO
CANADA / K2E 1B7

[613] 228-9800
FAX [613] 228-9801

www.nupge.ca

national@nupge.ca

