

Unions Matter

- a reader -

Volume Two / March 2015



THE
NEXT



VERY
GOOD
REASONS

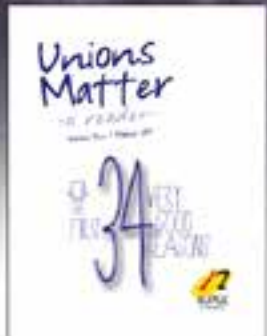


NUPGE
CANADA

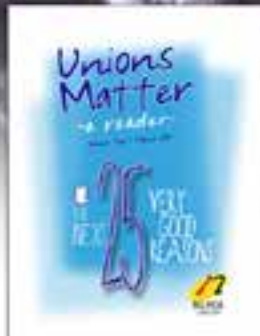
BETTER TOGETHER

There are
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Unions Matter -a reader-

Volume Two/ March 2015

The next 25 very good reasons

The National Union of Public and General Employees
2015

Most
people
have
jobs too
small
for
their
spirit.

Studs Terkel

WHY unions matter should be stunningly obvious. And it is, when you stop to think about it.

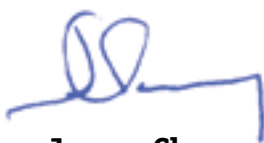
This little booklet gives us all still more reasons to do that.

Way beyond the obvious

It is a great and resounding truth that unions make life better for millions upon millions of people in very concrete ways every day. But this is too narrow a truth. Unions give us more. Something less tangible, yet more enduring. They give us an idea: the idea that our lives matter, that the things that we value matter and that all of it, all of life, should always matter. It is an idea that changes everything.

It is an idea that drives out darkness. It gives us hope and courage, welcomes difference, prizes dignity, fosters friendship, brings us joy. It is an idea that liberates us to pursue happiness, however we may choose to define it. It is an idea that can, and has, changed the world.

Unions keep that idea alive.
It's why they matter so much—and
always will.



James Clancy

National President

National Union of Public and General Employees



One strong voice

Unions have been the only powerful and effective voice working people have ever had in the history of this country.

Bruce Springsteen



Welcome to the new discount Canada

I was very happy to read that Air Canada has announced they're creating 1,100 new jobs. This is good news for our country. Because let's face it, everyone knows that a job at Air Canada, that's a good job.

In fact, some people would say too good. After all, the Conservative government twice had to table back-to-work legislation to keep the employees over there in line. Apparently, they're a little bit greedy. But it worked. Once the union was put in their place, lo and behold,

prosperity! Eleven hundred new jobs!

And then a buddy of mine who lives in Ottawa and who's looking for work sent me the job listing. Turns out they're not full-time jobs. They're permanent part-time jobs—minimum 20 hours a week, maximum 32 hours a week, no more. And, yes, you have to work sliding shifts, on weekends and holidays, and you have to be able to lift 70 pounds over and over again and preference is given to bilingual candidates.

But hey, union job, 32 hours a week—someone has hit the jackpot. And have they ever. The pay is \$10.80 an hour 10.80—a whopping 55 cents above minimum wage.

Now, when I worked for minimum wage, I was a dishwasher at the Continental Cafe. The difference is I operated a Maytag; these people, they will be operating the trucks that drag the \$200 million airplanes around. And when I was a dishwasher, I got a piece of the tips. When was the last time anyone got tipped out on the tarmac in 32 below?

This is a fundamental shift in our country. Welcome to the new discount Canada. Where people who work hard for a living can't make a living at all.

Rick Mercer
Comedian
Rick's Rant





Taxes and patriotism

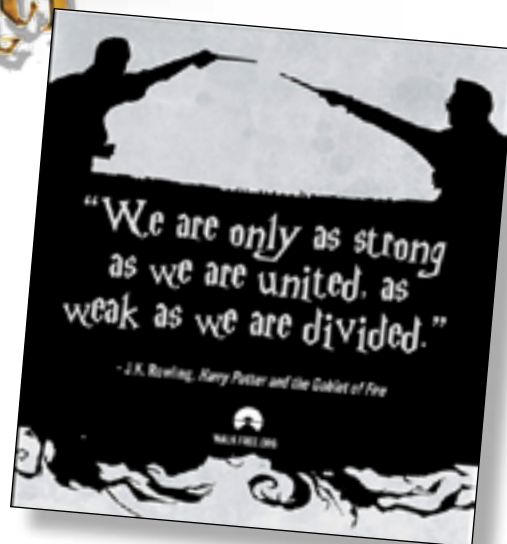
I am indebted to the British welfare state; the very one that Mr. Cameron would like to replace with charity handouts. When my life hit rock bottom, that safety net, threadbare though it had become under John Major's Government, was there to break the fall. I cannot help feeling, therefore, that it would have been contemptible to scarp for the West Indies at the first sniff of a seven-figure royalty cheque. This, if you like, is my notion of patriotism.

J.K. Rowling

Author

Harry Potter books

Harry Potter





Be happy

When I went to school they asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I wrote down "happy." They told me I didn't understand the assignment. I told them they didn't understand life.

John Lennon



Man at the Crossroads

A fresco by Diego Rivera, 1933

Man at the Crossroads was a fresco painted by Diego Rivera in the Rockefeller Center, New York, in 1933. The painting included an image of Lenin and a Soviet Russian May Day parade. Nelson Rockefeller ordered its destruction before it was completed.

Rivera repainted the mural (pictured above) in Mexico under the variant title *Man, Controller of the Universe*.

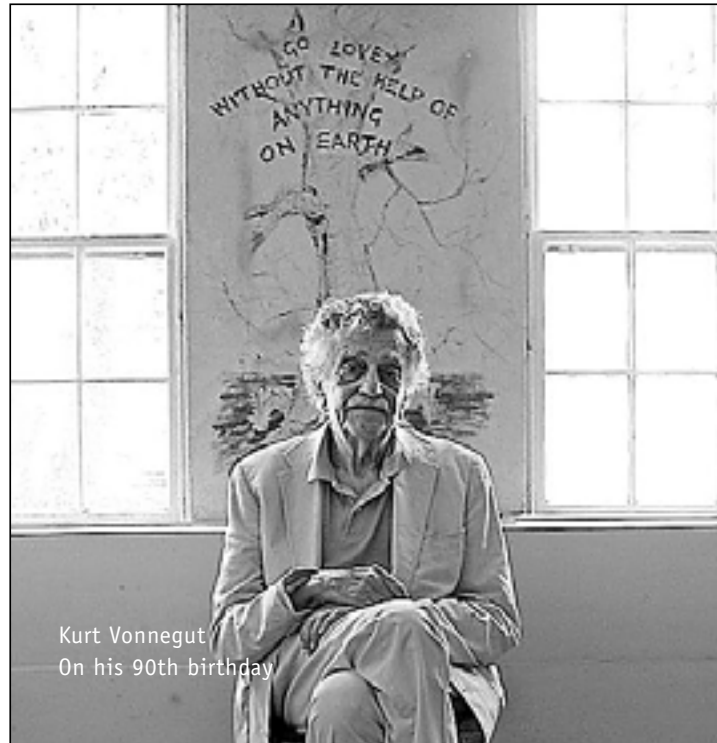


Make the world bend a bit

You see, idealism detached from action is just a dream. But idealism allied with pragmatism, with rolling up your sleeves and making the world bend a bit, is very exciting. It's very real. It's very strong.

Bono
Lead singer
U2





Kurt Vonnegut
On his 90th birthday

I've got enough

Joseph Heller, an important and funny writer and I were at a party given by a billionaire on Shelter Island. I said, "Joe, how does it make you feel to know that our host only yesterday may have made more money than your novel *Catch-22* has earned in its entire history?" And Joe said, "I've got something he can never have." And I said, "What on earth could that be, Joe?" And Joe said, "The knowledge that I've got enough."

Kurt Vonnegut



YOUR UNION HELPED SAVE MY LIFE

By Mike Pond



MY NAME IS Mike Pond. I'm five years sober this week and your union helped save my life.

When I received my Masters in Social Work in 1995, I thought my days as a psychiatric nurse were behind me. But life has a way of throwing us curve balls. After two decades of successfully helping clients battle addictions, I succumbed to one myself. In a catastrophic freefall, I lost everything: my practice, my home and my family. What made it worse: as a therapist I was ably positioned to watch myself fall and powerless to prevent it.

By November of 2008, I was homeless, penniless and passed out on White Rock Beach with only a bottle of Glenfiddich swiped from The Boathouse Restaurant to keep me warm. I woke up in the White Rock drunk tank and thought, "this must be rock bottom."

IF ANYONE TRULY
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Not by a long shot. Released from the drunk tank with nowhere to go and no one to call, I attended a 7am AA meeting at a local shelter and from there, boarded a minibus to a down-and-out recovery home. So began my two-year journey to sobriety, with stops in abandoned sheds, back-alley dumpsters, ditches, emergency wards, intensive care and finally, prison.

The Couch of Willingness, the title of my new book, is a real couch in that recovery home, where I was forced to detox and sleep until I surrendered and admitted my powerlessness over alcohol. If anyone truly "recovered" there, it was a miracle. A rat fell from the ceiling on me as I shaved. A drugged-out crack addict woke me in the middle of the night ... the cold blade of a knife into my throat. A fellow client hanged himself. A house staff member and I cut him down and desperately tried to revive him. But failed. That was the second suicide in the house in less than two months.

I knew I wouldn't get sober here. So mired in misery and despair, I too tried suicide. I did this because I had no "sense of a future self." As a trained practitioner I had unique insight into my plight. I know it's in that absence of a "future self," that many contemplate killing themselves.

My only hope: find work. My license to practice social work had been suspended, but the BC College of Registered Psychiatric

Nurses would allow me to work, with conditions. I applied for a job as a psychiatric nurse at Surrey Memorial Hospital and to my astonishment, got the position. With a job, I could get out of the rundown rat-infested recovery home, pay my debts and rebuild my life.

My first week on the job, I relapsed. Filled with self-loathing, I was convinced I was done. But to my disbelief, the Fraser Health Authority contacted me. There was to be a hearing to see whether I could come back to work. I would be represented by my union—the Health Sciences Association of British Columbia. I was humbled, blown away. A union, of which I had not been a member for 22 years, was going to fight for me.

The day of the hearing, I got up early. I had to look my best for the most important meeting of my life. A small circle of fellow addicts met me downstairs. I sat propped on cushions in the kitchen while one cut my hair. Then men who basically had nothing, quite literally gave me the clothes of their back. I fought tears of gratitude.

At the hospital, I sat waiting for the meeting to begin. I repeatedly rubbed my sweaty palms on my jeans and prayed for a miracle to walk in. And she did. Maureen Ashfield greeted me with a warm smile. I could see the empathy in her eyes. She explained the union's strategy. I hung on every word.

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The meeting was successful. The union and the Fraser Health Authority drew up a plan to keep me sober and patients safe. Yet I relapsed one more time. Again, both agreed to a medical monitoring program and allowed me a gradual return to work. It is because the enlightened and progressive mental health attitudes of both the Fraser Health Authority and the union, that I am alive today. By allowing me to return to work, I began to have that "future sense of self." I came to believe I would flourish one day and my sons would be back in my life. I imagined us snowboarding together again. How many other employers have this approach?

Today, my life and my practice are all about paying it forward. I believe respect, kindness and compassion like that shown me by the HSA should form the bedrock of all addiction treatment. Scaffolded upon that, should be a wide array of evidence-based treatment. We have a long way to go to make that a reality.

I have been snowboarding with my three sons again. Thank you, HSA for fighting for me.

*This excerpt from Michael Pond's book, **The Couch of Willingness**, was reprinted with permission from October 2014 edition of The Report, the members 'magazine published by the Health Sciences Association of British Columbia.*



My favourite word? It's "act."

If you don't act, the danger becomes stronger.

I call on people to be "obsessed citizens," forever questioning and asking for accountability. That's the only chance we have today of a happy and healthy life.

I want people to see their own power.

Tips on surviving the regime: Respect yourself and speak for others. Do one small thing every day to prove the existence of justice.

Ai Weiwei

Ai Weiwei is a Chinese contemporary artist and democracy activist who collaborated on the design of Beijing's National Stadium, also called the Birds Nest, built for the 2008 summer Olympics. And yet, for his outspokenness, he was beaten to near death by Chinese police and jailed for 80 days.



Man is very useful

General, your tank is a powerful vehicle it smashes down forests and crushes a hundred men. But it has one defect: It needs a driver.

General, your bomber is powerful it flies faster than a storm and carries more than an elephant. But it has one defect: It needs a mechanic.

General, man is very useful. He can fly and he can kill. But he has one defect: He can think.

Bertolt Brecht

In Germany, the Nazis first came for the Communists, and I did not speak up because I was not a communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak up because I was not a Jew. Then they came for the trade



unionists and I did not speak up because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics and I did not speak up because I was a protestant. Then they came for me... by that time there was no one to speak for anyone.

Martin Niemöller
German clergyman



The right to not be afraid

My job is covering the city government in Bakersfield, Calif. On January 16 2008 I covered a city council meeting in which the hot topic was proposed cuts to city employees' health benefits. The employees packed the chamber, taking every seat, and there was an overflow crowd in the lobby. Some wore their bright orange safety vests, others the red or purple shirts of their union. But when it came time to testify, to tell the city council what it would mean, not one active employee stood up ... and I think I know the reason why, they were afraid.

It was the same when I went to cover a county union contract election. Many of the workers were afraid to speak, afraid to be quoted by name, because their supervisor might not like what they said.

I'm relatively new to this union thing, but as far as I can tell, all the union protections we value collective bargaining, protection from the pernicious whims of crazy bosses, equality come down to one thing: the right to not be afraid; the freedom from fear.

James Geluso
Bakersfield Newspaper Guild

Can't eat money

Only when the last tree has died and the last river been poisoned and the last fish been caught will we realise we cannot eat money.

Cree proverb

Just a great feeling

I'm proud to say that this has been a union show. I have never worked with a more professional group of people in my life. They get paid good money and they do a good job. When the staff on this show would show me their new car or home I felt I played a big roll in their success, as they had in mine. That was just a great feeling.

Jay Leno

Host of The Tonight Show



Wealth and hard work

If wealth was the inevitable result of hard work and enterprise, every woman in Africa would be a millionaire.

George Monbiot



Tiananmen Square
Beijing, China
June 5, 1989

People power

The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any.

Alice Walker



Neighbours help rescue a tub full of children in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, August 29, 2005

The social bond in every heart

Finally, when the State, on the eve of ruin, maintains only a vain, illusory and formal existence, when in every heart the social bond is broken, and the meanest interest brazenly lays hold of the sacred name of “public good,” the general will becomes mute: all men, guided by secret motives, no more give their views as citizens than if the State had never been; and iniquitous decrees directed solely to private interest get passed under the name of laws.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau
The Social Contract, 1762





Seems fair to Cher

If you're not worrying about how to put food on your table, you [could be] worrying about why other people don't have food on their table.

Cher

Vanity Fair interview, 2010



WHO'S GOT HIS EYE ON YOUR SLICE?

By Linda McQuaig

THERE'S AN OLD TALE about an employer and a worker who order a pizza together. When the pizza arrives, the employer immediately reaches in and takes eleven of the twelve slices. He then puts his arm around the worker and whispers in his ear: "Watch out for that union guy over there. He's got his eye on your slice."

The little fable nicely captures the way employers vilify unions, trying to make workers fear unions will cheat them out of their share of the last pizza slice.

Of course, it also captures something else. If workers focus on divvying up that last slice, they can be diverted from the real problem they face: that employers have gobbled up the *other eleven slices*.

Let's deal with that first.

It's not surprising that workers are feeling mistrustful. Overall, working people have lost considerable ground in recent years. In the last three decades, there's been a massive transfer of income and wealth from ordinary Canadians to those at the very top. Indeed, all the income gains of the last thirty years have gone to the top 10 percent, but particularly to the top 1 percent. The higher up the income ladder, the bigger the gains have been. The top 1 percent has doubled its share of Canada's national income over the past three decades, while the top .1 percent has tripled its share, and the top .01 percent has quintupled its share. Fully 63 percent of all the income



TODAY'S STUDENTS NOT ONLY GRADUATE WITH HEAVY DEBTS, BUT ENTER A BLEAK JOB MARKET WHERE THEY ARE OFTEN EXPECTED TO APPRENTICE FOR FREE.

gains have ended up in the hands of the top 1 percent. The number of Canadian billionaires has jumped from 3 to 69.

Meanwhile, things have been tough for ordinary Canadians, whose wages have stagnated. Once inflation is factored out, the median family income has actually declined slightly over the past thirty years. The only way working people have been able to hold on to middle class status is by working much harder. While the single-earner family was the norm in the early postwar years, most Canadian middle class families now require two earners, and those earners generally work longer hours. So Canadians are having to work much harder to keep up to where they were.

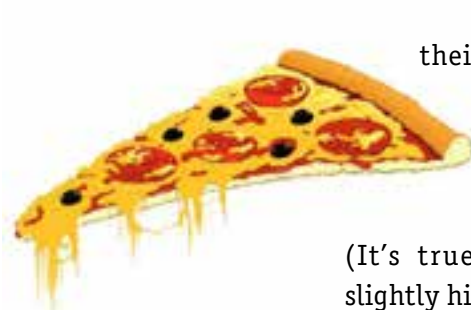
I'm reminded of how tough things have become when I hear stories of students graduating today with debts of ten, twenty and thirty thousand dollars. It's striking how much things have changed since I was a university student in the 1970s. Of course, jobs were much more plentiful back then, so I was able to get summer jobs (at newspapers, no less!), as well as part-time work during the academic year. That was enough to allow me to cover my tuition and living expenses—I lived communally with a group of friends—and graduate from the University of Toronto without any debt. It wasn't that I was particularly competent or resourceful. In fact, my situation was typical of my friends. I don't recall ever hearing of anyone doing an unpaid internship. The thought would have shocked us.

Clearly, those days are gone. Today's students not only graduate with heavy debts, but enter a bleak job market where they are often expected to apprentice for free, only to end up with a low-paid job with little or no security or benefits.

But who should they blame for their predicament? Business commentators and politicians insist that workers have lost ground due to factors like "globalization" and technological change. But there's actually little evidence to support this. Other countries—notably the nations of northern Europe, particularly Scandinavia—are also subject to the effects of globalization and technological change, yet they have retained a much more egalitarian distribution of income (and strong economies). What really explains the dramatic redistribution of income towards the rich in Canada (and in the United States and Britain) is the set of policy changes enacted in recent years—tax cuts for the rich, deregulation, privatization, and reduction in labour protections. The business elite has relentlessly promoted these policies, and managed to get their conservative allies in government to implement them. Sometimes called Thatcherism, Reaganism or neoliberalism, these policies amount to an agenda that favours the rich over the rest of society. The success of the rich in enacting this agenda is the main reason that working people have fallen behind.

But, of course, if working people understood that, they would almost certainly be angry, and would likely not vote for political parties that supported such an agenda. Hence the importance of encouraging workers to believe that their sad fate is due to circumstances beyond anyone's control—such as the anonymous forces of globalization and technological change.

Along with anonymous forces, the business elite has presented unions as the villain, as the enemy of working people. Thus, business commentators depict unions as elitist institutions that advance the interests of their own members at the expense of other workers. Particularly, the business press tries to stoke resentment towards public sector unions, noting that they've won higher wages for



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their members and that this means higher taxes for private sector workers, most of whom are not unionized.

(It's true that public sector wages are slightly higher—that's what collective action achieves—but the difference is mostly due to higher public sector wages for women and minorities in low-paid jobs. These higher wages are offset by generally lower pay for public sector professionals and managers, compared to their private sector counterparts.)

In any event, knocking down public sector workers and their unions won't help private sector workers. It will only weaken public sector unions, which have been stronger and better able to withstand anti-union attacks in recent years. With considerably higher unionization rates—75 percent in the public sector compared to 16 percent in the private sector—public sector unions are now the backbone of the labour movement. Breaking them is key to plans by business and conservatives to smash labour power in Canada. But that would leave all workers even more vulnerable than they are today.

Certainly, if the right can get workers to blame each other—pitting private sector against public sector, unionized against non-unionized, temporary against full-time—it will have succeeded in getting them to fight over the last pizza slice and ignore the eleven pieces being carted off by employers.

The anti-union narrative spun by the business press is actually highly misleading. Rather than being the enemy of working people, unions are almost certainly their best friend, often their only friend. Certainly, unions have played an extraordinary role in championing the interests of working people. It is difficult to imagine the vast improvement in the lives of working people over the last two centuries without unions.

Although much maligned these days, union activists are, as the old saying notes, “the people who brought you the weekend.” If you’re in the middle class today, a union likely helped you or your ancestors get there. In the 19th century, workers typically toiled 10 to 16 hour days, six or seven days a week. Unions fought and, with great sacrifice, managed to change that. In the decades that followed the Great Depression, unions won higher wages and better working conditions for their members, setting a standard with ripple effects that led to a better deal for all workers. Unions have also been instrumental in pushing governments to bring in legislation regulating conditions in the workplace as well as championing social programs, from public health care to pensions, that have played a huge role in improving the lives of all citizens.

It’s not an exaggeration to say that unions played a significant role in creating what has been called “the Golden Age of Capitalism.” That era, from 1940 to 1980, was based broadly on a “social contract” — an implicit pact between capital and labour which salvaged capitalism from the throes of the Depression, but modified it to serve the interests of workers as well as business. Thus important changes were made—laws were put in place ensuring the rights of workers to form unions and take collective action, including strikes. In addition, business and finance were subjected to greater regulation and to higher taxes, which helped pay for expanding public services that benefited the entire population. It’s worth noting that these higher taxes did nothing to discourage economic growth—as today’s economic dogma suggests. In fact, the four decades of the Golden Age of Capitalism recorded the highest rates of economic growth, as



WHAT'S WRONG WITH
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all as the highest level of income equality, Canadian history.

It members of the business elite grew armed at the steady march towards greater equality, which threatened their traditional dominance. By the 1970s and early 80s, they began pushing back aggressively and taking control of the political culture and apparatus of power. Since then, they've been astonishingly successful in implementing their agenda of tax cuts, social spending rollbacks, deregulation and privatization. The result has been the huge transfer of wealth and power to those at the top.

Almost all the advances won by workers over the years—from wages and benefits to social legislation—are under attack today as the business elite continues its relentless drive to increase its own wealth and power.

Take, for instance, the assault on one of the most important gains won by workers—job security. Toronto mayor Rob Ford, as part of his campaign to privatize city garbage collection, stirred up hostility towards unionized public sector garbage collectors by ridiculing the notion that they should have “jobs for life.” Most media commentators went along with Ford’s pitch that the workers were enjoying some sort of “gravy train.”

But hold on! What’s wrong with a job for life? That used to be the basis of the middle

class dream—you work hard all your life and in exchange you get fair wages and a decent pension at the end. That's not *welfare* for life; it's not about a "gravy train." On the contrary, it's about hard work and the dignity of labour—a concept that used to be respected. There's nothing about globalization or technological change that requires us to abandon respect for the dignity of labour and to hand a unionized job over to a worker with no union protection. What's changed is the political culture, and the rise of an aggressive business elite wanting to free itself from a "social contract" that obliged it to recognize the rights of others in society.

Given the relentless nature of this business attack—backed by a fiercely anti-labour government in Ottawa—unions are needed more than ever. When it comes right down to it, unions are about protecting the rights of working people. Indeed, they are the only organized institution in society dedicated to that task, the only real line of defence against the broad rightwing assault—on workers and a broad range of social programs and government regulations aimed at checking corporate power.

Some commentators suggest unions are out of sync with today's culture. They argue that unions are part of an old class-based politics that has no role in the postmodern, internet age. Who needs unions when we have social media?

But the corporate elite hasn't given up on class-based politics. It understands the nature of class interests, and relentlessly organizes to advance its own. It also realizes that in recent years it has made stunning gains, managing to take eleven of the twelve pizza slices. But it's still not satisfied; it wants more. As it ramps up its class warfare—with the full resources of the state backing it up—workers better have more in their arsenal than Facebook and Twitter.

The Golden Age is in us

If men have always been concerned with only one task—how to create a society fit to live in—the forces which inspired our distant ancestors are also present in us. Nothing is settled; everything can still be altered. What was done, but turned out wrong, can be done again. The Golden Age, which blind superstition had placed behind (or ahead of) us, is in us.

Claude Levi-Strauss

Quoted by Alexander Cockburn in his book *The Golden Age Is in Us*

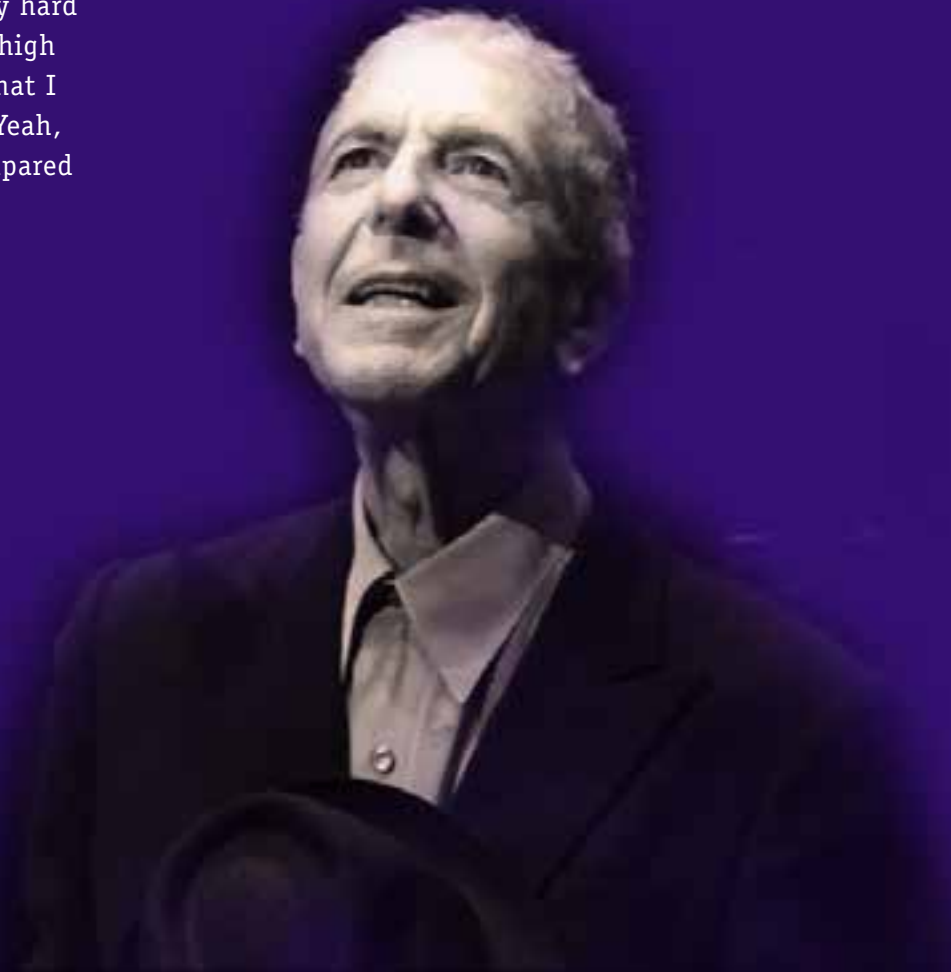




Compared to what

We're in a world where there's famine and hunger and people are dodging bullets and having their nails pulled out in dungeons so it's very hard for me to place any high value on the work that I do to write a song. Yeah, I work hard but compared to what?

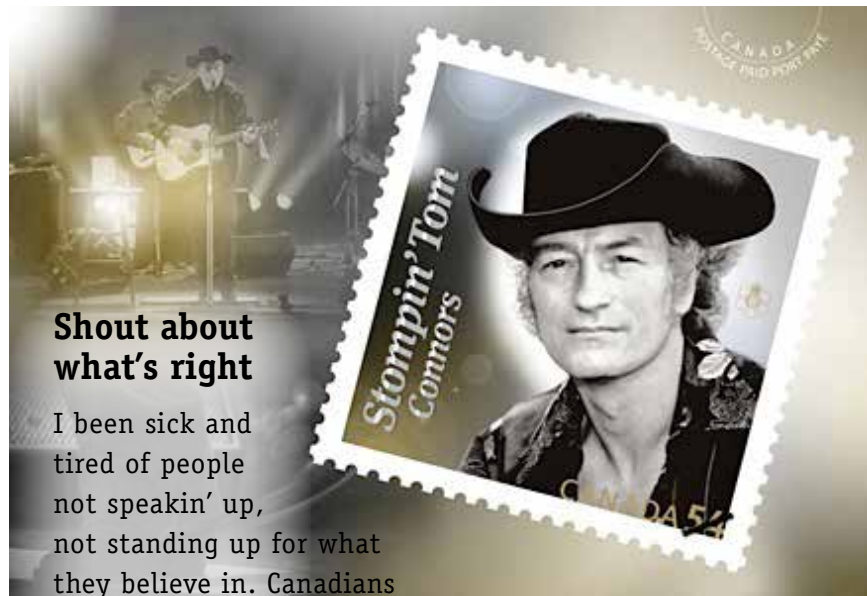
Leonard Cohen



I refuse

I refuse to live in a world that spawns murder and corruption without raising my hand against them. I refuse to condone, by passivity, or by default, the wars which greedy men make against others.

Dr. Norman Bethune



Shout about what's right

I been sick and tired of people not speakin' up, not standing up for what they believe in. Canadians got to get up on their own two feet and shout about what's right.

Stompin' Tom Connors

If not us, who

If I am not for
myself, who will be
for me?

And when I am for
myself, what am I?
And if not now,
when?

Hillel, the Elder

ca. 60 BCE–10 CE

The Newfie Bullet

Is the Newfie Bullet a fundamental
right?

As sure as there were seas on Mars
And will be again if we wish it,
It is.

Anything the bourgeoisie tries to
take from us

Or succeeds; becomes a
fundamental right.

If it wasn't one before

It is now.

Milton Acorn



\$1000 Winner!



Union Style

Videomaker wins hearts and minds plus \$1000

Ottawa filmmaker Corinne Baumgarten gathered friends and family together to make a dynamic pro-union video to the tune of the hit song Gangnam Style. She calls it Union Style.

She won one of NUPGE's Why Unions Matter \$1,000 prizes for her efforts. You can see the winning video at www.nupge.ca/unionsmatter

Become a winner

Submit videos, songs, poetry and essays about Why Unions Matter for your own chance to win \$1,000. Visit us at www.nupge.ca for contest rules. Send entries to whyunionsmatter@nupge.ca.

Winning entries are posted on the All Together Now! website alltogethernow.nupge.ca



Hooray
for all
of us!

Send us your favourite items for the next
volume of our *Unions Matter* Reader.

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