

The history of the canadian labor movement history essay



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Labor movement is a conglomeration of workers. They come together to agitate for their common interest. This is towards humane treatment by their employers whether in private or public organizations. These movements rely on certain laws that govern their labor relations. Within these movements are trade unions, which represent the interests of workers in a particular organization or industry.

During pre-industrial Canada, there existed very few trade unions. This by contemporary standards could not be termed as labor movements. It is in later years that workers started realizing their common interests as working class. It is after this realization that workers formed greater groupings that pursued their common political and economic interests going beyond their limiting work places.

The historical origin of the labor movement in Canada can not be discussed overwhelmingly without touching on some events that occurred in the United States of America. This coincides with the emergence of the Knights of Labor in 1875. The Knights of Labor had been founded in Philadelphia in 1869 with the aim of facilitating the improvement of pay and better working conditions. Its aim also extended to promoting educational and political sensitization among its members. This was perceived as a way of transforming the general public to comprehending the issues bedeviling the working class.

It was in Ontario and Quebec that the Knights were first successful. They recruited new members who were or were not skilled. They did not segregate on gender thus increasing their success rate. The success of the Knights of Labor only lasted until around 1880s during the economic

downturn. This was exacerbated by the internal wrangling within the Knights of Labor itself. Its failure and eventual downfall was witnessed in both Canada and the United States of America. It was then that the Labor Congress of Canada took over to become Canada's key Trade Union.

Labor Congress of Canada started as a unifying entity to independent national unions and international unions with links to the American Federation of Labor and Knights of labor. It held annual common forums which had as agenda their common concerns. From hence, they would indulge in agitation and lobbying for the enactment of legislations that would improve the lives of the workers. Labor Congress of Canada managed to go beyond political parties' partisanship by acting neutral. This was based on the fact that the financial might of the Labor Congress of Canada was realized due to the limited skilled trade people. With this financial potency in place, the Labor Congress of Canada did not see the need to seek socio-political help to achieve its economic justice aims.

It was the American Federation of Labor that saved the Canadian exploitation by the Americans targeting cheap labor. The federation led an organizing drive in Canada at the end of which many locals joined thus almost transformed the Labor Congress of Canada into a branch of American Federation of labor. An American, John Flett, led the movement and was elected its president at the Berlin Convention. With this " new dispensation" of power, dual unionism was abolished. This led to almost quarter of the members being expelled from the Labor Congress of Canada. This did not exempt the Knights of Labor assemblies. Despite all these, there was still conflict as the Labor Congress of Canada was only a voice for the Canadian
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workers to the government while the American Federation of Labor took the Labor Congress of Canada just like an international branch. This for along time inhibited the actual and independent growth of the Canadian Labor Movements Even at an early stage, including the time of the Berlin Convention, more than 90% of Canadian workers belonged to international trade unions. This would only change much later. This change occurred as a result of constant challenge by the Canadian workers on why their movement was so focused internationally and always held a weak political approach.

During the time of its emergence, the Canadian Labor Movement was faced with more other challenges. The movement had to overcome these challenges which related to ideological differences, legal hindrances, anti-union employers, unequal regional progress, and Canada's bi-national character when it came to trade unions.

Positive impacts on Canadian workers

In its early days, the Canadian Labor Movement was involved more in fighting battles abroad. After the World War I, and forced by the existing economic repression, the movement gained confidence among the working class. The organization gained momentum in agitating for the rights of the unemployed, women workers, and unskilled laborers. After the Second World War, there was general industrial growth which eliminated unemployment to a great percentage. This necessitated reforms in the socio-economic arena driven by the then hugely employed Canadians. The labor movement fought ferociously against anti-union employers. This led to acceptance of many

employers to allow their workers to join unions or the general labor movement. This aided the workers to achieve collective bargaining power to gain the necessary reforms on their welfare. This has become synonymous with contemporary labor movement set-up as through them individual unions come together for a more gainful force against their opponents – the anti-unionism.

The Canadian labor movement has constantly managed to help its members especially the public service where the federal government had planned to cut public services. It has also fought the federal government in its pension plans targeted to be used to foot its deficits. This has been repeated recently where the president of Canada's Labor Movement came out strongly against such measures by the federal government in a news conference.

The movement has also managed to have an increased number of members thus making more and more people reaching their help. Between 1997 and 2007, its membership grew by 19 percent. This is a positive growth reflecting on continued confidence by employees on the ability of the movement to agitate for their rights. But more effort still needs to be made acknowledging the fact that the employment rate is about 23 percent. This is what has led to the reduced density of the movement. Albeit this, the movement has managed to reach the traditionally unorganized employees working in the private sector. This new breed of members includes workers in the retail trades, food service, part-time workers and the general women populace. Though an achievement, it is still at a very low rate.

It is through the movement that housework has received recognition as a key contributor to Gross National product of Canada. The domestic workers, mostly women, have received worthwhile compensation as a result of efforts made by the Canadian Labor Movement. Most house workers being women makes it a possibility that they may also be members of a work force outside their homes. This made the labor movement agitate for changes in recognition of situations where a woman may just be a domestic worker. The laws have been changed to reflect this latter situation where the house worker's efforts have been perceived to contribute to familial well-being hence should be recognized in pension and divorce proceedings.

Lastly, the movement has managed to agitate for the rights of women to reach employment ranks some decades ago they could not have achieved. The labor movement has also helped in realization of equal pay for equal work. This has been mostly in relation to gender disparities when it came to remuneration. Women with equal qualifications as men can nowadays receive similar packages. This was evidently achieved by the implementation of the 1987 Ontario's Pay Equity Act. This helped in decreasing the disparity ratio in both genders pay. The movement put in the welfare of its minority and disabled workers when agitating for the implementation of this Act.

Remedy to the lack of knowledge

The Canadian Labor Movement needs to organize itself on how to implement training and public education on what labor movements are. It should be in the fore front in negotiating educational programs which it should run

directly. For every new employee, the movement should endeavor to reach them and make sensitization on the significance of joining it.

Another remedy is active participation by the movement in all political negotiations. This is a call for political activism. Since politics affect most areas of social and financial spectrums, the labor movement should ensure that as national decisions are being made, their voice of contribution is also heard and hearkened to. This makes the majority of the adult populace to realize the thin line between politics and the workers. In a sense this will send the message that if there is a wrong political move, then it will affect all workers directly or indirectly. This will help raise the status of the labor movement almost at par or above that of human rights activism.

The labor movement should work harder in making itself seen as working on behalf of the members and not for its own. This can be done by actively engaging in active collective bargaining when some of its members are involved in pay rows. Even where employers portray it as a money-consuming organization, the movement should involve itself where it has members positively in such a manner that those opposing it would not have anything negative to tell their employees. They can do this by negotiating better pays whenever such chances arise thus motivate the employees of anti-union organizations to see the dire need to join the movement. When employees realize the need, the employer would be left with limited option, if any, but to agree.

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