

Lessons provided by
labor history for
unions and trade
unionists in the
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From the onset, it is necessary to define a labor union as a group or band of workers who come together (unite) so as to lend a collective voice to the cause of championing for improved levels of their wages, working conditions, or even the working hours themselves. Initially, membership of such unions was a preserve of male, blue collar workers in various sectors, a situation that has significantly changed over the years to include those in white collar jobs, regardless of race, sex or profession. The roots of labor unions can be traced back to the 1700s and 1800s, whence workers came to the realization that oppressive working conditions were doing them in, and that, by synergizing their individual efforts, they could lend voice to the fight for the improvement of their general welfare, if only to assure their security and safety at the workplace.

Worth noting is that the uprising of the industrial revolution emerged as a sort of double-edged sword; on the one hand, prosperity was fostered in the lives of the workers, what, with their having higher incomes to make use of, while on the flipside, hardship standards rose in near-equal measure, characterized by the afore-mentioned poor working conditions and periodic unemployment during recession phases. Resultantly, two major types of unions materialized, namely, the craft unions, encompassing workers in specific disciplines, and also, industrial unions, made up of employees in an industry, regardless of their job description (Heron, 1990). Of major note in the Canadian context was the formation of the Knights of Labor, an all inclusive labor organization founded in 1869 in Philadelphia (United States). Its activities centered on, among others, advocating for equal pay for women, a reasonable taxation system, a situation whereby convict and child

labor was illegalized and also, motion towards a scenario where mines and factories were to be under the ownership of both employers and employees alike. Amongst their endeavors was the utilization of boycotts and strikes as a way of advancing their message across, especially to employers who were themselves not members of the Union.

The Knights of labor, infamously known as the KOL, had quite an impact in the larger part of Quebec and Ontario, successfully bringing together a large cross-section of workers, united across divides of race, skill or gender, which strategically favored its expansion. A pivotal point was the creation of the Trades and Labor Congress of Canada, along with other prominent parliamentary lobbying campaigns, mostly during the 1880-1890f decade in time. Membership numbers were tremendous, which ironically reversed later on, accredited to frequent disagreements between the above-mentioned factions of craft and rival industrial unions, coupled with mismanagement issues and a series of unsuccessful strikes. Yet another landmark occurrence in the evolution of labor movements was the Winnipeg General Strike in 1919.

This served as the stepping stone for future labor initiatives in Canada, and was formulated by delegates (representatives) from the western region of the country (Heron, 1990). The significant contribution of this strike is that it paved the way for subsequent reforms and assorted future disputes to be settled by employment of striking measures, following the success of this first chapter, which saw the fired striking workers laid off and later reinstated, with increased wages to boot. An important consequence of the strike was the defeat of the Conservative faction of government in the 1921 <https://assignbuster.com/lessons-provided-by-labor-history-for-unions-and-trade-unionists-in-the-twenty-first-century/>

election, as it had played an active role in downplaying the strike. Thus, the desired labor reforms ended up being looked into by the incumbent Liberal government. From the above examples, it is fairly evident that labor history has played a vital role in shaping the state of affairs in today's society, more so as relates to labor reforms and workings.

For instance, in the political arena, various parties over the recent past have been formulated along the ideologies some of the labor unions of the day, such as the British Labor Party or even the Democratic arm of government in the United States. Political activism, especially in the election cycles in some of these countries is also influenced by the prevailing labor organizations, as the aspirants are wary and quick to address the plight of the labor force so as to amass the necessary support to take up the realms of leadership. In the same breath, it is worth appreciating that employers over time have come to anticipate the operations of such unions, thanks to the historical perspective, in a bid to thwart unionized initiatives and their influence at the workplace. This include measures such as the employment of a diverse array of human resource management techniques geared towards extinguishing the desire to form unions, relocative mechanisms, anti-union publicity campaigns in both the community and workplace, and even the introduction of employee schemes and ' in-house unions" to act in a substitutive capacity to the actual labor organizations. However, history has taught various trade unionists a valuable lesson as regards the practices exercised by employers to undermine the existence of unions and other forms of organized labor bodies.

A case in point is the tendency of management authorities to enlist the use of a phenomena referred to as the “ shelf-life” effect, whereby they capitalize on fostering the participation of employees in the workplace against a backdrop of labor shortages and high turnover of the same workforce. Once this endeavor has served its immediate purpose, it is quickly done away with (Heron, 1990). The history books have revealed that employers are usually in the practice of concocting a number of ideas with different messages, such as the participation of employees in a venture at the workplace, coupled with the notion of scientific management, all with the objective of improving their public relations. Similarly, another strategy that has been found to be enacted severally by employers is ‘ organizational amnesia’, where researchers have deciphered that management re-packages the same regulations and policies that had previously failed miserably at the workplace.

This renders any attempts to correct situations or initiate reforms in a sector utterly futile. In the same light, union leaders may also be prone to suffer from the same ailment by way of their ignoring, or rather remaining oblivious to, any form of past innovations that may be re-introduced in current times to address a cause for concern. Therefore, historical deliberations play the role of facilitating the acquisition of ample knowledge as to the reasons why certain measures may have either succeeded or failed in the past, not to mention the application of these in present scenarios (Victoria, 1993). Also, from the historical perspective, trade unionists have become conversant with the limitations inherent in the organization of unions, as may relate to size,

geographic boundaries, or even the prevailing economic situation in a country.

A negative factor that has been observed when it comes to the issue of the smooth operation of a labor union is the prevalence of inner wrangling factions, which tend to undermine collective efforts that may be undertaken. Competitive unionism has also been weeded out as a major contributant to the lack of effectiveness of attempts to achieve any meaningful progress in advocacy causes, as different trade unions battle to gain more members than their ' competition', disregarding the fact that they may be addressing a similar concern. In conclusion, it is only right to acknowledge that indeed, history does make a significant contribution to the understanding of the labor process, especially as may relate to the strategies that can be made use of by present generations in the formulation and subsequent operation of unions (Victoria, 1993). Further, labor historians provide insights into the methodologies that may be put to play by employers so as to frustrate the various initiatives of trade and labor bodies, while at the same time pointing out the key fact that trade unions themselves are the main determinants of their own destiny, as it were, depending on the principles and values that they uphold in their day to day workings.