

THE USGE AND THE GREATER COMMUNITY

The Canadian labour movement has been a pioneer in almost every major social, political and economic advance in this country. Major gains won by unions like the USGE and the PSAC are shared today by all Canadians. Often, the role of organized labour has been taken for granted or quite simply ignored in our standard history books.

Furthermore, powerful and privileged interests that control the media give the labour movement consistently bad press, day in and day out. Yet, we have played a key role in the following matters: reduced work hours, the five-day workweek and a minimum wage. A century ago, we fought for and won these advances through the same time-honoured means still necessary for today's unions – collective bargaining and political action.

Gains made at the bargaining table were sooner or later passed into law by governments faced with pressure from workers lacking these benefits. Unions that negotiated these breakthroughs in the first place also added their voice to those demanding a fairer deal for all working Canadians.

Labour in Canada has always had a strong social conscience. While wages and working conditions were and will always remain key concerns, unions have also gone beyond the workplace into the community to better the environment in which we live. Many of the universal social programs that Canadians now enjoy were fought for and won first by organized labour. A partial list of labour's victories would have to include:

- Medicare;
- Workers' compensation;
- Old age pensions;
- Unemployment insurance; and
- Human rights legislation.

Union activists know that these and other breakthroughs haven't come without a lot of commitment, effort and sacrifice.

Labour's thirst for positive change can also be seen in the many battles for a fairer and more progressive Canada. The increasing role and influence played by women in the labour movement has assured that gender equality will continue to be a major preoccupation for Canadian unions.

Internally, labour has done much to sensitize our male members to the problems faced by their union sisters. Unions are also pressing employers and governments for action on pay equity, affirmative action and child care.

In the same vein, the labour movement places a high value on the issues facing Canadian seniors. We have called for increased recognition of the role of seniors in our

society, as well as for income support and pension plans that will allow them to lead a full and active life.

Long before the environment became a major public issue, the labour movement had been working with conservation groups to help ensure that economic progress was not made at the expense of the environment. This commitment grew out of years of struggle to have employers and governments recognize the rights of workers to a safe and secure working environment.

Labour mounted a successful push in the 1970s for legislation to address the health and safety of Canadian workers in the workplace. In the 1980s, unions opened a number of worker-controlled occupational health and safety clinics. Special training courses have graduated hundreds of local union experts in health and safety matters.

Likewise, while politicians regard childcare as a minor concern, the labour movement has brought together unions, teachers, social planners and child care workers into a vast coalition to take our message to the public and politicians.

Workers first turned to unions because of the discrimination they themselves faced in the workplace. However, we still confront unacceptable and deplorable examples of subtle and not-so-subtle racism. Again, at a time when many governments preferred to duck this explosive issue, the labour movement devoted time, energy and money to fighting this social scourge with internal and public education.

The labour movement is involved in the life of the community because USGE and PSAC members are part of that community! Unions will continue to stand in the forefront of the struggle for economic justice and social dignity for all Canadians. For that is what we are all about.

(March 2006)