Unions Essay, Research Paper

Unions All manner of working people today belong to trade unions, whether employed or unemployed, from doctors to trash collectors, schoolteachers to secretaries, pilots to printers. Unions act as the voice of the workers. The sole existence of any union is to benefit its workers. Many people in the work force today belong to some form of a union. A union is therefore a group of workers who join together to make their workers’ lives better. Sometimes unions are referred to as associations, federations, brotherhoods, societies, alliances, leagues or simply workers. Unions have been in existence longer than most people realize. In fact, the first organized workers groups in Canada appeared more than three years hundred ago. In 1657, Jean Levasseur, a master carpenter in Quebec, founded what was known as a “confrerie” or “brotherhood,” a club for carpenters and workers. The main goal of this club was for members to help other members in times of accident, sickness, and poverty as well as to oppose the injustices of employers. By the 1850’s, when cities like Montreal and Toronto were just being built and industries were just beginning, unions were also beginning to form. With the increase in shipbuilding, fishing, mining, small factories and business, unions became a necessity for the safety and security of workers.Towards the end of the 1800’s an estimated five thousand people belong to unions. All the members were highly skilled men in a trade or a craft. The unions they formed were called “craft unions.” The term “union” was not used until the early 1900’s. Unions were developed out of intolerable conditions, poverty, and squalor. During this time period employers enacted a working day of up to eighteen hours and wages were barely enough for survival. Children, as soon as they were able to walk, were being forced to work. Few working men -and no women- could vote, therefore they had no say in how things were run. The ruling class and the employers who elected the government showed little concern for the lives of manual workers. Since the Employment Act of 1980, when legal procedures for union’s recognition were scrapped, workers must negotiate or use industrial action or conciliation procedures if an employer will not recognize their organization.Unions are of different sizes. The biggest union in Canada is the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), with more than 300 000 members. The smallest union in Canada is the International Association of Siderographers with four members. Although Unions are of different sizes and are found in different places, the goal of unions is universal. Unions protect workers from employer’s exploitation. The creation of unions set specific standards and regulations that employers must follow. With the use of Labour laws and Human Rights documents unions have legal authority to force employers to comply with the outlined regulations. The union is run and paid for by its members to protect and promote their interest. Through the process of collective bargaining the voice of the workers can be heard as a united point of view. If the boss ignores this voice, the groups can tale collective action to back up their claims. The role of trade unions has been in dispute since they have being established. The people that support unions say that they are the only defense that the average worker has against the power of the state and employers to cut wages sack workers or impose harsh conditions. Trade unions claim to put people before profit, keeping human values alive in an increasingly cruel and competitive world. They claim to stand for freedom, democracy and social justice. The unions claim to represent ‘human values’ in protecting the interest of their members – like their right to jobs for a fair wage. Some unionists believe they should have say in major decisions and strategies like cuts in the work force, investments and corporate planning. Those who argue against trade unions say that they abuse their powers to demand unfairly high wages and they hold their employers – and the general public – to ransom with the threat of strikes. They also argue that unions are undemocratic and they do not stay in touch with their members. With the enormous power that the unions have, industries perceive that they are in a “stranglehold.” It is believed that unions keep non-union people out of work and that they use their power to bring about social changes, the fall of governments, or even revolutions. Unions are often blamed for unemployment. It is said that strikes in the UK have not only damaged productivity, but have alienated foreign investors and buyers who can’t rely on our output. Unions have also been blamed for causing stagnation by resisting new technology in order to protect existing jobs. Employers and the media often complain about the ‘closed shop’ system, which prohibits non-union members from taking certain jobs. Unions are accused of demanding such high wages that employers can’t afford to take on more workers. Critics say that the demands of unions hamper industry with unacceptable restraints, distorting prices and so creating further unemployment. They point to the comparatively low productivity of the British workers: some people, they suggest, would rather dig a hole then work. Unionists are also concerned with the wider ecological and environment aspects of health and safety. A series of major industrial accidents in recent years – like those at Three Mile Island nuclear power station in USA in 1979 and the Bhopal chemical plant in India in 1984 – devastated whole communities. Evidence that multinational firms are less concerned for the safety of their workers in the Third World than for those in the West outraged international opinion. As a result many unions in the UK today see their role as contributing to the greater cleanliness of the environment, and protection of the community from pollution. The voice of many is more likely to be listening to, than that of one person. With the solidarity of unions, the employer collectively hears workers voices. With this form of consolidated organization employers have no choice but to listen to what the union have to say. The employees usually express their individual concern to the union board. If the issues are of major concern, it is then revealed to the employer. If the union – behind the worker- can not come to an agreement with the employer the union then use all legal path to break down the employer’s case. If the issue is of concern to a vast majority of the workers, the union then organized a meeting to let the worker know all possible paths that should be taken. The workers then vote on the path they feel is best for their situation. The verdict is then assorted and displayed by the union to the members. The solution they chose is debated for a second time, and if the majority workers think they are on the right route, they then proceed to expose it to the employers. Trade unionists traditionally see the right as the most important of fundamental union rights – even of human rights. In Britain this right was built up slowly against centuries of opposition from government and employers. Most strikes are over wages; others are caused by a variety of issues such as working conditions. An ‘official’ strike is one called by a union executive, while one without executive backing is unofficial.

Trade unions say the right to strike is an essential weapon to be used in the last resort when bargaining or arbitration has broken down. However, argument still rages over whether some strikes are normally unjustifiable. Some people – unionists amongst them – believe that the right of patients to medical care should take absolute priority over the right of health workers to strike. Some unionists, however, argue that unless workers in these services strike for improvements, patient care and education will suffer more. There is disagreement too over whether unions have the right to strike to force elected government to change their economic policies – or whether strikes should be illegal in wartime. During World War I & II there were legal restrictions on the right to strike. Currently, the armed forces and police are forbidden to go on strike, and some would extend the ban to members of essential services such as firemen, water workers and nurses. When strikes affect the public – through stoppages of post or transport for instance unions are often accused of selfishly ’strike happy’. Yet unionists claim they would always prefer to avoid such action. It damages both members’ incomes and union funds when strike pay has to be paid out. Strikes have been occurring in Canada from very early years. The first strike in Canada may have been as early as 1652. It was a tough year for the fur trade. The fur merchants ordered their voyageurs to travel father and paddle faster for the same pay. The men refused, saying life was too short, and they were right, most of them were dead before they were thirty-five. The voyageurs carried loads of 68 kg (150 pounds) over tricky portages, some of which were 72 km (45 miles) long. One wrong step could bring death. His daily supply of food was sometimes only a few ounces of fish and a handful of corn. He slept in a blanket full of fleas. He had to put up with clouds of black flies and mosquitoes, and crowds of irritated Iroquois. If was obvious that working conditions were not the greatest. Although the Voyageurs did not have a contract like that of Local 007, they did have an agreement with the merchants about matters such as the distances traveled, the price per pelts, and rest stops during the longer portages. They felt the merchants had broken this agreement. They threw sown their paddles and would not pick them up again until the merchants backed off. These days, a strike occurs when the old contract has expired and the employer and workers can not agree on a new contract; or when the union has been certified but the employer refuses to bargain for a first contract. After a time set out by law, the workers can go on strike. A vote is held, and, if a majority of workers chooses a strike, the union executive orders the members to walk out. Picket lines – workers caring signs informing the public that a strike is progress – are set up around the work place. If the union can afford it, the strikers get pay for as long as the strike lasts. The strike is the last resort. Nobody wants a strike, and nobody likes a strike, especially the strikers. But if workers and employers can’t agree on wages and working conditions, the only weapon workers have is to withhold the only thing they can sell: their labour. Without the right to strike, working people have no power at all. Unions’ primary goal is to protect the workers from the employers and as far as it stands these days they are doing a fine job. There as been some concerns express about future jobs and unions. By the year 2010, when your children are your age, the world will be quite a different place. Canada will change, work will change, and unions will change. Nobody knows exactly what those changes will be, but people called “futurists” have made some predictions based on what’s happening right now. One futurist says that Canada will have millions of unemployed; another says that millions of new jobs will be created. It has already been address that the biggest unions in Canada are the public service unions, and they are growing fast. These big unions have captured workers in the resource and manufacturing industries and are now looking beyond their boundaries for members. Workers in a library and a funeral home now belong to the United Food and Commercial workers. Small unions are joining big unions, and weak unions are joining strong unions. Airline employees are now part of the AutoWorkers, the restaurant workers merged with the Bartenders Unions, and it will not be surprising to see on big union of all the workers in the printing industry. Some observers believe that fifty years from now there will be only a few Canadian unions, each with many hundreds of thousands of members. Canadian unions must turn to the rest of the service industries if they want to grow. This project is well on it way in banks (the VISA workers) and insurance companies, department stores (Eaton’s, Sears, Zeller’s), and the new information industries. It will be the main target of union activity in the twenty-first century. Many white-collar workers who never wanted to join a union before are finding that a union contract might stop a computer from stealing their jobs. Unions now put job security at the top of their bargaining list, followed by protection against “technological unemployment.” Management and Unions are certainly not always in conflict. Managers these days generally recognize that employee involvement in the affairs of a firm improve its competitive and raise profits. Workers for their part recognize that successful management can mean job security and better pay. The number of incentive schemes, which offer profit sharing and share ownership to employees, has doubled in the last five years. Most disputes are settled without strikes, which are at their lowest level for many years. The union has played an important role in the making of Canada. Without unions, we would still be working long hours for low pay, with no protection against losing our jobs, or getting hurt, or sick, or old. Unions have given Canadian workers, which is most of us, a voice in the work place and some power to shape our lives. Chances are that one-day no matter what your job is in Canada you will belong to a union. It may not be the kind of union your father or grandmother or great-grandfather belongs to. It may be ACE, the Alliance of Cosmic Explorers. Or UFAT, the Union of Fitness and Athletics Trainers. Or perhaps you will organize CAMPS, the Computer Artists, Musicians, and Performers Society. But it will be some form of a union.The times will change, and change again. But some things never change, most people will always be workers. Most workers will always work for somebody else. And most workers will always need to be a part of a union. Bibliography Pay cheques and picket lines: All about unions in Canada, Claire Mackay, page 6The role of trade unions, Brigid McConville, page 6.The role of trade unions, Brigid McConville, page 4.The role of trade unions, Brigid McConville, page 4.Pay Cheques and Picket lines, by Claire Mackay, 60.Pay Cheques and Picket lines, by Claire Mackay, 90.