

WHY A UNION?

Why Would University Workers Join a Union?

A University is a Site of Higher Learning, Not a Factory. Do Unions Belong Here?

Any employment relationship implies the possibility of differing interests between the employer (which aims to minimize labour costs and maximize output) and employees (who want to balance those goals against the need for decent incomes, good benefits, healthy working conditions, and economic security). Even when work takes place in a more collegial and professional environment, those differing interests can still come to the fore. Even office and professional employees benefit when they have a capable and active union to monitor working conditions, address concerns with the employer, and bargain collectively for improvements.

In fact, universities are becoming more like businesses every day. Canada is witnessing a gradual corporatization of higher learning. Highly regarded post secondary educational institutions target their operations increasingly at corporate sponsors and business-oriented research and educational projects. University administrators are becoming increasingly like business managers in their efforts to “improve output”, “enhance brand identity”, and-of-course-cut costs. University employees, even relatively well-educated ones, can easily get lost in this corporate shuffle. In the rush to reduce costs, transform education, and project a more corporate identify, the rights of university workers will suffer unless we have a union to look out for our interests.

It's Important, in a University Environment, to Maintain Good Working Relationships.

Will Unionization Mean More Conflict?

No employer is ever thrilled about the idea of its workers forming a union. Unionization means that employers can no longer be arbitrary or unilateral in important decisions about hiring, transfers, compensation, and working conditions. They must consult with the union over many of these changes. And if the changes are adverse to the interests of the workforce, the employer

may face opposition through the union in contrast to the “divide and conquer” mentality that prevails in non-union environments.

But forming a union doesn’t necessarily mean constant conflict between the two sides. So long as the university administration recognizes the legitimacy of the union as a representative of its workforce and bargains in good faith toward mutually agreeable solutions on issues, the working relationship can be a productive and healthy one. Indeed, by forcing employers to take account of the legitimate interests of its employees as people, rather than treating workings like so many poker chips to be shuffled around as need be, unionization can actually promote a more mature relationship between workers and their employer. Joining a union hardly means you are opposing your employer or your workplace. You can actually be making your workplace a more effective and fair place to work in the long run.

The CAW has healthy, productive, and constructive relationships with most of the employers we deal with. To be clear, we challenge when needed the employer’s responsibility to treat its workforce with fairness and dignity, and this is a normal part of the bargaining relationship. But we also recognize the need to get down to work and help make our workplaces productive and successful enterprises. For example, even though the CAW is seen as more “militant” than the U.S. autoworkers’ union, Canada’s auto industry is now seen as more productive and efficient than the U.S. industry. Much of this is thanks to the CAW: we bargain hard and responsibly for our members, but once the deal is done we get to work to make our workplaces as healthy and productive as they can be.

Isn’t the CAW a Union for Manufacturing Workers?

Since it was founded as an independent Canadian union in 1985, the CAW has branched far beyond its automotive roots, into numerous other economic sectors. At the present time, over fifteen percent of the CAW’s total membership, or close to 35,000 members, work in the broader public sector – including universities, health care and public transit. What the CAW brings to each group is focused central resources (including a large team of research, legal, pension, and health-and-safety specialists), a strong public profile, vast experience in collective bargaining in all settings, and a unique style, which emphasizes maximum membership education and participation. These are great assets no matter what sector of the economy you work in.

Why do Well-Educated and Professional Workers need a Union?

Doctors and dentists have done very well indeed with their own “unions”, which are called professional associations and have bargained for decades for better incomes and policies. University professors rely on their faculty associations to do the same for them. No matter how well educated you are, you will always do better when you bargain together with your peers for better incomes, benefits, and workplace policies. One person confronting a large employer has little bargaining strength, regardless of their individual skills. A whole workplace approaching the employer together, with one voice, carries much more influence.

The CAW has represented important groups of highly-skilled and salaried workers for decades-including scientific and engineering staff in the auto, aerospace, and telecommunications industries; air traffic controllers and other transportation specialists; and skilled trade workers in a variety of classifications. In every case, these workers command a good salary and benefits thanks to their skills and experience but they get even better salaries and benefits thanks to their union.

CAW and Canadian Universities

Today, the CAW represents university workers in diverse professional occupations at seven different Canadian universities. As post secondary educational institutions become increasing ‘corporate minded’, workers at universities need a union that understands the special circumstances and challenges of their workplace. With the CAW’s proven record of progressive and innovative bargaining and creative organizing strategies the rights of university workers across Canada are being protected and advanced.

John Aman

Director Of Organizing

cope343/jjb