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FAST FACTS

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How Unions Protect Our Human Rights

Unions are usually thought of as being about higher wages. It's true. Unions do produce higher wages for their members (and often, as a result of knock-on effects, for other workers as well). As of April 2011, for example, the 200,000 Manitoba workers covered by collective agreements earned an average hourly wage of \$24.57, 30 percent above the \$19.00 earned by workers not covered by collective agreements. Unionized workers also get better benefits.

Many people, including trade union members, see that as the end of the story. But unions do much more than this, and while wages and benefits are important, the other things unions do may be even more so.

Perhaps of greater importance is that unions bring the rule of law and the rights that go with it into the workplace. Without a union, management can treat employees arbitrarily. With a union they cannot. They are constrained in their actions by the legal contract---the collective agreement---agreed to by the union (on behalf of its members) and the employer. That contract, the product of negotiations between union and employer, places limits on the potentially arbitrary exercise of power by employers, and empowers union members to defend themselves against abuses in the workplace.

A good example of how important such rights can be is the recent case of Dominique Strauss-Kahn, head of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and potential candidate for the Presidency of France, and a New York hotel worker.

The initial focus of the media's coverage of the alleged sexual assault charge brought against Strauss-Kahn was on the implications for him, and on his arrest and treatment by the New York police and justice system. Subsequently, questions were raised about the implications for the IMF. The media were largely silent about the situation of the New York hotel worker and the circumstances that motivated her to report the sexual assault.

A piece posted on Alternet, May 19, 2011 (see: <http://www.alternet.org/story/151022>), titled "Accusing DSK of Sexual Assault Took Guts - But Union Protection is Essential", reports that the victim of the alleged assault is an African woman from a former French colony who works as a housemaid in the Sofitel Hotel. It is, of course, a story far from over. But the author observes that there would be no story at all if the housemaid were not protected by her union contract. "There's a reason why most rapes go unreported. But there was one thing the housekeeper knew could not be done to her for reporting her account. She could not be fired for having done so, because of the



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contract between her union, the New York Hotel Trades Council and the Sofitel Hotel at which she works.”

An editorial in the New York Hotel and Motel Trades paper also stresses the importance of union membership. “In the worldwide hotel industry, New York City has the highest proportion of unionization (75%), and hotel employees here have the strongest union with the best contract. They enjoy the highest wages in the industry, excellent benefits, strong job security, good working conditions, and powerful grievance rights. They also have a militant union - their own organization, governed and funded not by wealthy donors but by themselves - that aggressively enforces those rights.”

The burden of both the Alternet article and the union editorial is that “the union does make us strong,” both collectively and individually, by creating the conditions that allow workers who suffer abuse in the workplace to retain their dignity and seek redress and justice for the harm done them.

A Dirty Little Secret

It is generally believed that employers don't like unions because they raise wages and improve benefits and working conditions. However, experience in the USA since the Second World War and in Canada in recent decades suggests that the decisive motivating force in employers' animosity to unions is that they lose the right to treat employees in an arbitrary fashion. Unions empower workers to protect themselves from abuse (unfair dismissal, discrimination, etc.) by employers and, as in this case, sexual assaults by powerful patrons of hotels. And so businesses, and many governments over-friendly to businesses, work to undermine unions.

The drive to destroy unions in North America has progressed furthest in the USA. Steven Greenhouse reports in the January 21, 2011 *New York Times* that union membership in 2010 was down to 10.9 percent, the lowest rate in more than 70 years. “The percentage of private sector workers in unions fell to 6.9%, the lowest rate for private sector unions in more than a century.”

The situation is especially grim in the 22 so-called Right-to-Work (and Employment-at-Will) states, which started after 1947 in the old slave states, and then spread to agrarian and oil states. Union rates in 20 of these states are less than the U.S. rate of 10.9 percent. North Carolina is at the bottom with a rate of 3.2 percent, less than 1/10 the current rate of 36 percent in Manitoba.

The union movement is stronger in Canada than the USA. However, in recent decades both the overall rate and the private-sector unionization rates have been declining. For Canada, the rate has dropped from an average 35.7 percent in 1980-89, to 34.4 percent in 1990-99, to 30.9 percent in 2000-06. The 2010 rate was 29.6 percent.

While the Manitoba labour movement has managed to sustain its strength in recent years, labour bodies must remain vigilant and intensify efforts to expand the movement in order to prevent the decline experience in the USA.

What is at stake is not just higher wages and benefits, but also, as revealed by the case of the powerful man who is alleged to have sexually assaulted a female worker, the defence of fundamental human rights in the workplace. Unions protect these rights, and for this reason alone deserve vigorous public support in a free and democratic society.

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