

“Union Members” in an Information Economy

The idea of having a legal structure called a “Union” or a “Trade Union” is a relatively new concept. The idea of people coming together to share their skills and to contribute those skills to creating successful communities is not new.

This practice goes back to Medieval Times and the Guilds. In the micro economies of those times people found ways of working together to leverage on success. This is what we do as people. We build Civil and Social Society. The concept of a “Union” or a “trade union” is an evolution of building a Civil (legal) Society around Social Values.

The History of workers in Canada is filled with labour unrest and violence. The British writer and economist Adam Smith introduced the concept of the “Invisible Hand of the Market” in the late 1700’s. His idea was that economic development is driven by the Law of Supply and Demand. Only the “Market” could determine what was being produced and the price that we would be willing to pay for it. In his perfect world there



would be no need for laws or rules to regulate these so called “naturally occurring” controls over the allocation of “scarce resources”. This concept of supply and demand applied in the same way to the people that were involved in the production of the goods and services. The “Market” determined what skills were in demand at any given time. In this economic model there would be no need for laws or rules to balance out the relationship between work and those who performed it. In theory, workplace issues come into balance as market pressures bear down on

the demand for Labour.

Economic development in Canada in the late 1800’s showed the flaws in this theory. Mining and other high risk industries emerged in Canada in response to demands from Europe and Britain. Corporations controlled the market for labour as the immigrating population looked to feed themselves and their families. Corporations used their economic power to impose long hours, low wages and unsafe workplaces. Workers had no recourse to counter these condi-

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tions. A review of Labour history between 1880 and late 1930's reveals decades of violent clashes as workers fought with both public and private police forces to bring balance to the workplace relationship. Over time, Civil Society began to take hold in Canada and to implement the rules and regulations that we have come to take for granted today.

The theory of the “Invisible Hand of the Market” prevails as we move forward into the 21st Century. On this front nothing has changed. Unions that emerged in response to the behaviour of the unscrupulous employers of the 19th and 20th Centuries are considered by some as a restriction on the ability to stimulate the “Market” and create growth. Federal and Provincial governments are calling for the removal of the rules and regulations

that created the workplace balance during the 20th Century. We are being told that “free market capitalism” is the answer to creating growth and jobs and that workers need to support these policies and not interfere. The mantra of “Right to Work” has emerged as a cry from the Corporations that are seeking to satisfy their quest for profit. As workers and union members we know better than this.

The battles of the 20th Century have been fought and we need to learn from our experience. As recently as 1969 we were still forced to resort to “wildcat strikes” to resolve workplace issues. This is not a part of History that needs to be repeated. There is however a part of History that needs to be continued. As we move forward into the New Economy we will need to continue the quest of build-

ing a Civil and Social Society. As workers we can make a meaningful contribution to this quest by coming together to share our knowledge and skills with each other and by contributing those skills to creating safe and productive workplaces within successful communities.

Unions in the 21st Century will need to change. It is time to move forward to the next phase in our evolution. The concept of the Knowledge worker participating in a Knowledge economy includes a role for a 21st Century Union. Embrace it.

Quote from Charles Darwin:

“It is not the strongest or the most intelligent who will survive but those who can best manage change.”

– Joe Mulhall