

UNIONIZEDLABOUR.CA

# FACES OF CANADIAN LABOUR

— Standing in solidarity to build a better Canada —

**W**hen Daniel Bastien took a job as a hotel waiter he had no idea how poorly he would be treated. Bastien quickly got involved with a union and encouraged his co-workers to do the same. The union stepped in and the harassment stopped.

Bastien's ordeal seems like it could have taken place a hundred years ago. But, it was just a few years back *The Globe and Mail* picked up the story, making it clear that unions are as important today as they were when Ottawa declared Labour Day a national holiday in 1894.

Canadians celebrate the holiday as the end of summer — one last day to take advantage of warm weather — while Labour Day's true meaning often goes unrecognized. However, the very foundation of the day is a recognition of the historical achievements of both the Canadian worker and the representative unions supporting them.

In the past century unions have fought to secure many of the benefits that Canadians now take for granted. Among those are minimum wage, health and safety regulations, as well as leave for sickness, vacation, and maternity. "Today, we carry the baton brought forward to us by our brothers and sisters who sacrificed so much for the betterment of future labourers," says Joseph Mancinelli LiUNA International Vice President.

Unions are continuously working to improve the lives of workers, and to better Canadian society as a whole.

## Continuing to take a stand

They're pushing for minimum wage that represents a living wage — the minimum income necessary to cover basic needs based on cost of living. They're taking steps to improve the mental health of those in the workplace. Unions are encouraging the federal government and employers to invest more in job training and better employment opportunities for young people, most of whom face high rates of unemployment or under-employment and carry huge student debt.

Unions are also dedicated to the well-being of newcomers. Concerned that the government's Temporary Foreign Worker program is exploitative, they are pressuring Ottawa to give migrant workers access to permanent immigration status, the Canada Pension Plan, and Employment Insurance benefits.

"Workers' rights are embedded in our charter of rights and freedoms," says Mancinelli. "There can be no greater achievement than knowing that the right to collective bargaining, worker safety, and fairness are protected and enshrined as the supreme law of the land."

The unions' motivation and mission is to give every individual in this country a reason to celebrate Labour Day. **🇨🇦**

*Randi Druzin*

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Laborers'  
International  
Union of  
North America

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*Feel the Power*

# Representing all Canadians



**Josianne Job**  
Assistant to the Vice-Chair Ontario Labour Relations Board, President OPSEU Local 527

**What issues are most important to your industry, and how have your leaders pushed for your rights as a worker?**

**Public service workers face the** challenges of funding cuts and the increasing privatization of public services, which threaten the quality of critical services.

Funding cuts to departments increase the load on full-time workers, as unfilled positions lead to mounting workloads and overtime pressures. Things are even worse for the contract workers, seen as a way of meeting budget targets. These workers are treated as cheap sources of labour and live under a constant external threat, unsure each night if they will have a job when they arrive the next day at work.

As a member of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU), I'm fortunate enough to have a union that takes these threats seriously, and is working to protect members and public services. Through their work to address the gender wage gap and improve labour standards for all workers, as well as their new *We Own It!* campaign, OPSEU is challenging this attack on services the public relies on.



**Larry Cann**  
Administrative Assistant to the General President, United Association of Journeymen and Apprentices of the Plumbing and Pipe Fitting Industry, Canada

**Why do Canada's representative unions matter to all Canadians not just union members?**

**In a truly civilized and democratic society** that cares for everyone and where everyone matters you must have organized labour unions. They provide the balance between working people and corporations. You must always have balance.

Organized labour helps to ensure equality, fair treatment, and economic security for their members, their families, and in turn all Canadians.

Their support for better political action and their work with other groups for better social, environmental, and economic policies again benefit all Canadians. It is not just luck that in countries where there is a healthy union movement we have better governments. They are more democratic, transparent, and do a better job of providing the balance a caring society requires.



**Terrilyn St. Amour**  
Continuing Care Assistant, SEIU-West, member

**What's something you find most Canadians don't know about unions, or have a misconception about?**

**From what I can see,** most people think a union is about paying dues and having a collective bargaining agreement (CBA). My union is so much more than our CBA. The Service Employees' International Union-West is a big family. We are a community — people who share common struggles and work together to build a better future for ourselves and all workers.

I don't think people understand that unions are the strongest voice for workers and that historically, many of the labour or health and safety standards we enjoy today were fought for and won by working people. What people don't realize is that these laws are not written in stone and can be taken away by any political party in power.

Unions are and will continue to be the strongest advocates and protectors of working people — unionized or not. Together, we raise the collective voice on social justice issues as we work to create a fair society. My co-workers and I are our union.

## Our Union It's a Community of Working People



**Barbara Cape,**  
President,  
SEIU-West

**Contemplating the relevance of unions** reminds me of a young worker, in the midst of an organizing drive, who was abruptly terminated for questionable reason. It should surprise no one that they were a lead supporter of the organizing campaign.

Real lives and families are affected. People are fired, demoted, have shifts removed, are working without pay, have no benefits, and certainly no pension. I say to those people: You deserve better and a

union is the best vehicle to get it!

I have worked in low-paying awful restaurant jobs, hustling for tips so I didn't have to eat Kraft dinner again. Or, so I could take the bus to work instead of walking on a frigid day. Back then I knew I needed a union — not only to get a better wage — but because I did not want to go alone if the boss pulled me into their office.

**So what are unions doing today?**

They are fighting for legislation requiring workplaces to be healthy and safe; they're ensuring constitutional rights that protect all workers are respected. And, they're striving to achieve a living wage for all working people.

Unions are adapting to our rapidly changing world. As we embrace new

means of communication, more technologically advanced than a bulletin board, we are also facing new and rising attacks on working people. If it is okay for businesses to make a profit, why is it not okay for workers to make a fair wage?

Let's appreciate the fundamentals of what unions are about — people. People coming together to help each other when times are tough. People standing up for each other and demanding to be treated fairly by employers. People joining together in unions leads to improved health and prosperity for all working people, their families, and their communities. ○

Union contributions to society include:

Rise of the middle class



Paid vacation and weekends



Ending child labour



Supporting Partner





# The Risks of Putting Privatization Before Policy

In Canada and around the world, employment is trending away from full-time permanent work with benefits and towards precarious part-time contract work. The public sector has long been one of the last bastions of good stable jobs, but as the Ontario government continues to pursue a privatization agenda, that is under threat.

The potential consequences should concern everyone, not just those in the public sector themselves. The implications of the eroding security of government jobs can affect the job market as a whole. “There was a time where you could look at public sector jobs as the gold standard,” says Co-Founder of the Urban Worker Project and former NDP Member of Parliament Andrew Cash. “A lot of other jobs were measured against that standard. It’s important to have a model employer that other companies and workers can compare themselves against.”

When that model employer is eliminated, the employers that step in to fill the void are not always motivated to hold themselves to the same

standards when it comes to either their employees or their services. And, as several prominent recent cases have shown, the costs to the taxpayers can sometimes end up being higher rather than lower. “The net effect of privatization is that it kills decent jobs and results in two people doing the job one person used to do,” says Warren (Smokey) Thomas, President of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union. “It’s the get less for more plan. Accountability is out the window — it doesn’t save money and it doesn’t make things better.”

Government should take care to ensure that attempts to privatize services do not irreparably harm the labour market or the services Ontarians depend on. “Selling public assets is the wrong way to go, but regardless of whether you are a private sector or public sector worker, our labour laws and policies are stuck in an era when the labour market looked entirely different,” says Cash. “Just about all of our social safety net is predicated on a traditional employer-employee relationship.”

This disconnect is especially worrying when you consider that the public sector is one of the province’s leading employers of women, as well as other groups in particular need of employment protections. The equal pay and equal opportunity practices of the government are still far from ubiquitous in the private sector. “Premier Wynne has talked about how her infrastructure investments are creating jobs,” says Thomas. “But, she’s creating jobs in a still male-dominated society, and she’s funding it by cutting public sector jobs, one of the few industries that is predominantly women.”

It would be extremely short-sighted to simply believe we can turn these jobs over to the private sector and count on the market to provide efficiency without adversely impacting services or jobs. We as a society should instead have a serious conversation about how we are going to protect those jobs and services going forward. ●

*D.F. McCourt*

**We own it!**  
Don't privatize what belongs to us all.





# NINE THOUSAND KILOMETERS AND ONE GOAL

How one man is fighting to end youth homelessness with support from Canada's unions.

On the worst day of Joe Roberts' life he was homeless and barefoot under a bridge in Vancouver, having just sold the boots off his feet to fuel his heroin addiction. That was almost 30 years ago.

Unlike far too many of Canada's estimated 35,000 homeless youth, Joe was able to find a path out of that world and went on to achieve great success in the business world. But, far from being a pulled-up-by-his-own-bootstraps story, Roberts is adamant that without a robust support network his climb would have been impossible. "Possibility is this thing that exists inside all of us," says Roberts. "All of the time that I was lost and making these poor choices, I had this possibility, but I couldn't access it on my own. I'm really a community investment gone right. I was supported by youth agencies, I was supported by the Salvation Army, by shelters, and by soup kitchens. All of these resources I needed to survive on a daily basis came from goodwill and charity."

After hitting rock bottom, Roberts rebuilt his

life with the help of his mother and a number of other heroes in the outreach, health care, police, and education communities. He got clean, went to school for sales and marketing, landed a job and excelled. In a short time, he was CEO of a successful multimedia company, Mindware Design Communications, which he led to an 800 percent increase in business. "I achieved everything I'd ever wanted to before I was 35," says Roberts. "My bucket list was ticked, but I wasn't any happier or more fulfilled inside. That's when I started asking myself what my legacy was going to be."

### Rags to riches to advocacy

Since then, Roberts has thrown himself whole-heartedly into the Herculean task of trying to make life better for Canada's homeless population. He travels the country and the

world sharing his story, working to prevent drug addiction in Canada's youth, and running events to raise awareness for these issues. And, his newest project is his most ambitious yet. On the first of May this year, Roberts began pushing a shopping cart, a symbol of his past life on the streets, in St. John's, Newfoundland, and he's not going to stop until he has pushed that cart all the way to Vancouver, British Columbia. A trek he projects will take him 17 months. This bold charity initiative is called *The Push for Change* and is working to end youth homelessness.

Roberts was in Fredericton, almost 2,000 kilometers into his 9,000 kilometer journey when I spoke with him. "Terry Fox gave us this tremendous template," he says. "He showed us that when you take on a massive challenge like this, Canadians will rise up and meet you."



Joe Roberts' *The Push for Change* started in Newfoundland and will take him all across Canada. Photo: *The Push for Change*

**"When you take on a massive challenge like this, Canadians will rise up and meet you."**

And, union leadership recognizes that working to solve issues like youth homelessness is not just the right thing to do, it's the smart thing to do for their members and for all Canadians. "As taxpayers in this country, the issue of homelessness costs us about \$7 billion each year," says Roberts. "The more we invest upstream in prevention, the better we will do."

If there's one thing tradespeople understand it's the concept that doing good work up front saves you from having to do more work later. Maybe that's why they are so keen on advocating for lasting social change that not only addresses the problems we have now, but also provides a strong foundation for a better future. "If you came home and found your basement was full of water, you wouldn't spend the next month mopping up that water," says Roberts. "You'd identify where the leak is, mend the pipe, and only then do you clean-up. That's not how we're tackling the problem of homelessness right now in this country. We're expending a lot of energy trying to mop up the water while the pipe continues to leak."

By supporting *The Push for Change* UA Canada is hoping to fix more than pipes and leaks — they are taking on challenges that benefit the greater good of all Canadians. Through Joe's efforts and the support of UA Canada, the way society thinks about homelessness is being shifted, as is the way unions are viewed in Canada. And, there's one thing Joe is certain of. "You don't need to convince people to do good," he tells me with confidence. "You just have to give them a doorway and people will step up." 🇨🇦

D.F. McCourt

And, rise up to meet him Canadians have. In every city and town he passes through, Roberts says he is blown away by the welcome and support he receives from local officials, from the general public, and particularly from the unions. The United Association of Journeymen and Apprentices of the Plumbing and Pipe Fitting Industry (UA Canada) has been the biggest partner in getting *The Push for Change* off the ground, and it all started almost by accident. "Last August I had the opportunity to speak at the UA Annual General Meeting," explains Roberts. "I was just there to tell my story and talk about possibility. And, at the end, I said 'Oh, and I'm doing this walk across Canada to try to create a better future for young Canadians.' I didn't go to that meeting thinking I was there to pitch them, but they were so inspired that they put a motion on the floor then and there to support *The Push for Change*."

Within 90 days of that first meeting, UA locals from across the country had come to the table in a really big way to support Roberts' trek. And, every dollar that a local contributed to the cause, the UA Canada office matched. Joe was floored. "I was like

'what's going on?' because I was entirely foreign to how unions work," admits Roberts. "As an entrepreneur and die-hard capitalist, I was just totally ignorant as to how they operated and how much good they do in their communities."

### The silent givers

UA Canada's support of *The Push for Change* is hardly an outlier. Though it's little known, Canada's unions are at the forefront of community giving. "Our members are always there to give a helping hand when somebody needs it," says Bruce Myles, Business Manager of UA Local 325 in Fredericton. "When we join these unions, it's a brotherhood and sisterhood. And, we try to look after everybody. We support a lot of charities, but we don't really advertise it."

Now that Roberts has had an opportunity for an inside look at the way union giving operates, his opinion of them is forever changed. "I've learned about how unions strengthen our communities," says Roberts. "They are the backbone of the middle class and they are deeply involved in philanthropy. It's one of the greatest secrets never told."



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BUILDING COMMUNITIES.  
BUILDING CANADA.**



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