

Since 1872, with the passage of the Trade Union Act, workers in Canada began to gain rights they did not previously have. Before this law, employees worked excessively long hours, were poorly paid, and had no protection. Life was therefore very difficult, with very little balance between work and family. Thanks to union activism, things finally began to change.

In my opinion, the most significant gain that unions have achieved since then is the eight-hour workday. This change has had a huge impact on workers' lives, as it has allowed for a better balance between personal life and work. In addition, it has improved employees' health. Finally, this victory paved the way for several other rights that emerged later.

Before 1872, working conditions were extremely difficult. Workers had to work 12- to 16-hour days, with almost no breaks. There was no paid leave or sick pay, and even children had to work in factories. It was a situation of exploitation.

In 1872, the Toronto printers' strike marked a turning point. These workers were demanding a nine-hour day, which was already an improvement over the usual 12 or 14 hours. But the bosses refused to give in and tried to break the movement. It was at this point that the government passed the Trade Union Act, making unions legal in Canada. From then on, workers could unite to defend their rights without being considered criminals. From this point on, the union struggle really began to bring about concrete change.

The greatest achievement remains the reduction in working hours. Thanks to the unions, the eight-hour day became the norm, even if it took time to be implemented everywhere. Instead of working themselves to exhaustion, employees could finally have time for their families, to rest, or even to participate in social life.

This achievement had a direct effect on physical and mental health. Workers were less tired, less sick, and better able to perform their tasks properly. It also had a positive impact on productivity, as overworked employees could not work efficiently. Bosses feared that reducing hours would lead to financial losses, but in reality, it was found that well-rested workers are more efficient. In the end, everyone benefited, not just the employees.

The eight-hour workday served as a starting point. When the unions won this battle, they proved that it was possible to change things. This victory gave strength to the movement to demand other rights: paid leave, pensions, health insurance, workplace safety, etc.

Without this first major victory, the union struggle would have been much more difficult. Employers would not have taken the unions seriously. But thanks to this achievement, workers gained confidence in their collective power. It can therefore be said that the eight-hour day was not only an essential right, but also the foundation on which everything else was built.

Of course, there have been other important achievements thanks to unions: minimum wage, employment insurance, protection against harassment, and paid vacation. All of these rights have improved the lives of Canadians. But I believe that the eight-hour day is even more significant, because it affects everyone. No matter what job you do, everyone benefits. Whereas, for example, unemployment insurance only affects those who lose their jobs, and retirement pensions only affect the elderly, working hours are universal. That is why I consider this right to be the greatest achievement of trade unionism.

Even today, more than 150 years later, the issue of working hours remains central. Debates about the four-day week or teleworking show that this issue remains essential. Workers want a better quality of life, not just to work incessantly. This stems directly from the original idea of trade unionism: workers have the right to a life outside work.

In conclusion, since the Trade Union Act of 1872, workers in Canada have gained many rights. But, in my opinion, the most important is the eight-hour workday. This change transformed the daily lives of millions of people, improved health and productivity, and paved the way for other union victories. Even today, this right continues to influence debates about modern work. Without this achievement, other gains would have taken much longer to achieve, if not been impossible. That is why I consider the eight-hour workday to be the greatest and most important achievement of Canadian unionism.