

The Most Significant Gain from Union Activism in Canada: The Forty-Hour Work Week

When looking back at Canadian history, it is clear that unions have played a huge role in shaping the lives of working people. Before the Trade Union Act of 1872, workers had very few rights and could even be arrested just for organizing to ask for better treatment. Since then, workers have gained many protections and improvements, from minimum wages to health and safety standards. But in my opinion, the most significant gain that workers across Canada have received because of union activism is the standard forty-hour work week. This achievement has not only improved working conditions but has also shaped Canadian society, family life, and our sense of fairness at work.

To understand why the forty-hour work week is so important, it helps to imagine what life was like before it existed. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, workers often had to work twelve hours a day, six or seven days a week. This meant people spent almost all of their time at their jobs, leaving very little time for rest, family, or personal growth. Many workers were exhausted, unhealthy, and sometimes even injured on the job because they were pushed beyond their limits. Children also had to work long hours in factories to help support their families. This was not sustainable, and unions recognized that fighting for shorter working hours was one of the most important steps toward improving life for all workers.

Unions pushed back against employers and governments, often at great risk. Early strikes and protests sometimes led to arrests, job loss, or even violence. But workers kept pushing, and eventually, the idea that people deserved a reasonable work-life balance became widely accepted. By the mid-20th century, the forty-hour work week became a legal standard in most of Canada. Without union activism, it is very unlikely that employers would have ever voluntarily reduced working hours, since longer hours meant more production and more profit.

The forty-hour work week is significant because it laid the foundation for so many other improvements in workers' lives. For one thing, it created the concept of "time off" as a right, not a privilege. This means weekends, evenings, and vacations became part of normal life. Families could actually spend time together, and people had the freedom to rest, socialize, or participate in their communities. In Edmonton, for example, I can see how my own parents' ability to have evenings and weekends off has shaped my life. We can go to Oilers games, volunteer, or even just have a family dinner together. These things might seem ordinary now, but they are only possible because unions fought for shorter working hours over a century ago.

Another reason the forty-hour work week is so significant is its connection to fairness. Unions argued that workers deserved not just better pay, but also better quality of life. Limiting working hours meant that people weren't treated like machines. It recognized that workers are human beings who need rest and balance. This idea spread beyond unionized workplaces into society as a whole. Even people who are not in unions today benefit from the forty-hour work week because it became a national standard.

Of course, some people might argue that other gains, such as health and safety laws or the right to a minimum wage, are even more important. These are definitely very significant as well. But I believe that the forty-hour work week is the most universal gain. Not every job is equally dangerous, so safety laws affect some workers more than others. Wages also vary depending on the industry and province. However, the forty-hour work week affects almost everyone in Canada, no matter

their job. It is something that all workers can count on as a basic right, and it influences how we organize our entire lives around work, school, and family.

The importance of this gain is also clear when we look at what happens when it is threatened. In recent years, many workers have faced “overtime creep,” where they are expected to answer emails or do extra tasks outside of regular work hours. This shows that even though unions won the forty-hour week decades ago, it still requires protection. The fact that workers today continue to defend this right proves how important it is. Without it, Canadians would once again face the risk of being overworked and exploited.

In conclusion, union activism since the Trade Union Act of 1872 has brought many important improvements for Canadian workers. But in my opinion, the most significant gain is the forty-hour work week. It transformed the daily lives of workers by ensuring time for rest, family, and personal fulfillment. It also set a standard of fairness that continues to benefit Canadians today. As a high school student in Edmonton, I see this gain reflected in my own family’s life and in the culture of balance that Canadians value. While unions continue to fight for new rights and protections, the achievement of the forty-hour work week will always stand out as one of the most important victories in Canadian labour history.