

INTRODUCTION

I recently participated in the PSAC's 2017 Social Justice Fund's delegation to Guatemala. Upon my return, I was asked to write an article about why the union should be involved in social activism. Prior to my departure, I heard from PSAC members that they were excited for me to experience this opportunity but they didn't feel any union dues should be going towards the cost of the project. Upon my return, I discussed this a bit deeper with them and with my fellow delegates and this is what I would like to say to anyone wondering why the union should get involved in issues other than collective bargaining.

SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT

Sometimes when people hear about the union's involvement in social activism, they get annoyed. Why are my dues going to (insert cause) when they could go towards improving conditions at *my* workplace? Who made that decision? Why don't I have a say in this?

In the PSAC, each local elects a president. It's the president's job to represent the interests of the local within the broader union context. It's often the local presidents who attend regional and national conventions to push forward the union's agenda. All union members can work with their local or sit on regional committees like the women's group, human rights group, etc., to put forward resolutions about what the union should focus on. For example, one of the resolutions at the 2017 Prairie Convention was about pressuring the government to increase protections for temporary foreign workers. The resolutions are prioritized by regional councils and voted on at regional conventions. Those that pass are brought to the national convention to be voted on. This is just one example of how the locals and individual members can influence the union's social activism agenda.

WHY SOCIAL ACTIVISM?

Unions developed out of the need to protect workers and to fight for their rights. The employee-employer contract exists everywhere in the world, no matter the structure of a country's economy. There are always workers who report to a boss. Some countries, such as Canada, have a long history of protecting and fighting for worker's rights. As such, it has developed important legislation such as provincial/territorial employment standards and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Other countries are in the early stages of developing protections for workers' rights. Unions in Canada have the unique ability to share the lessons they've learned and the best practices that have worked for them.

That being said, over the past number of years, workers' rights are diminishing in Canada. One example of this is the right to strike. The previous government brought in a series of back-to-work legislation, denying workers their right to strike. This is an

inherent element of the capitalist society we live in. CUPE's International Solidarity Policy Statement says it best: "A small and privileged group of people in turn receive the largest share of the world's wealth. In today's global economy the need to exert our rights and redistribute the world's wealth is urgent. As has always been the case, to protect and expand the rights of workers at home we must do so around the world." Why social activism? Because there is strength in numbers.

CANADA AS A POWER BROKER

Why do Canadians have to shoulder the responsibility of helping workers in other nations? "In many of these emerging economies, only a small percentage of the citizens would have the resources to come to Canada to share their best practices for the workers' movement and how that could help us here. Canadian workers have the luxury to choose to help others improve their working conditions. We have the ability to go to these places and share our knowledge, while taking the opportunity to learn about the struggles and successes of fighting for workers' rights in those locations."¹

Canada is also a major trading partner with developing nations. Let's use Guatemala as an example. In Guatemala, four out of the five mines are Canadian-owned or Canadian-affiliated. That means we, as Canadians, have some measure of influence over 80% of the mining industry in a foreign nation. Canadian businesses hire locals. Guatemala doesn't enjoy the robust employment standards or their enforcement as we do in Canada. For example, in Guatemala there is a minimum wage, but nobody is paid it. If you complain, you risk losing your job. Malnutrition is rampant in Guatemala, so if you lose your job, that makes it very difficult to feed your family and provide the basic necessities for your children. A difficult situation made all the more challenging given that in this patriarchal society many women do not work at all. These societal norms, government corruption and lack of laws as well as enforcement make it extremely challenging for workers to fight for their rights. Given that Canada has influence roughly 80% of the mining industry in Guatemala (in addition to all the other industries it is involved in there), what we say has a lot of clout. If we stand in solidarity with workers in other countries, we can hold Canadian companies accountable and demand that workers in countries, like Guatemala, be provided the same rights as any Canadian working at their Canadian facilities.

SOLIDARITY VS. SUPERIORITY

Recently, I was talking to a friend about how we could support a women's group in Guatemala with their quest to organize and learn about their rights. My friend asked if this women's group had a website that he could share. This spoke volumes to me about our privilege as Canadians. We take it for granted that our union has an online presence:

¹ Quote from Colin Langille, fellow delegate on the 2017 Social Justice Fund delegation to Guatemala

website, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc., to keep us updated on how they are working for us. In many countries where workers' rights are only beginning to develop, people generally don't have the resources to stage the same presence. If it's already a challenge to feed your family properly, where will you find the extra resources to pay for a website domain? Thankfully, many cell phone plans offer free Facebook access in Guatemala. This allows groups like the Comité Campesino del Altiplano (CCDA) in Guatemala to share information on Facebook about workers' rights, government abuse of workers, etc., that is then circulated amongst the population.

This leads me to my second point regarding solidarity vs. superiority. Unions have a long history of solidarity; of standing side-by-side with one another to work as a collective. Offering moral support where we can. As individuals, it's very easy to go to a country and say "this is how you should do things...", "let me show you how this is done...", etc. History has taught us that there is no one-size-fits all solution to a problem. Countries, economies and cultures are complex and unique. What worked well in Canada may not work elsewhere. This is where a union has strength. Our history of solidarity with other unions across Canada has given us the skills to collaborate and build together. Because we've already developed the mindset of solidarity, we can send delegations to work on social activism projects and meet with labour movements in other countries and within Canada. We can exchange ideas. "This worked well for us...", "What do you guys do in this situation...?"

For example, in Guatemala, access to water is an important issue. Mines, hydroelectric dams and other environmental projects in the country are jeopardizing the population's access to clean drinking water and water for crops. In Canada, many First Nations' reserves are under boil water advisories. In PEI, the province is wholly dependent on ground water. There is controversy surrounding the potato industry's desire to build more deep water wells. It's believed that the existing wells and the nitrates, pesticides and soil run-off are killing local fish populations and generating low water tables tapped for municipal use. Guatemalans are good at never giving up. They are always looking for ways to get their message out. They don't just share it with their local population and their own government. They want to share their struggle and story with whomever will listen. They don't become complacent. We could learn from them, not just as a union, but as individuals as well. In return, we could share our experiences of fighting for transparent governments, employment standards, enforcement of workers' rights, our own legal battles, etc.

Given our shared fights against inequality, whether they be privatization of the public sector, climate change or big business, we need to build alliances. This establishes and strengthens our solidarity rather than "be divided by the right-wing forces promoting privatization, austerity, racism, islamophobia, migration, violence, and war."²

² Quote from Kelti Cameron, fellow delegate on the 2017 Social Justice Fund delegation to Guatemala

POWER OF THE COLLECTIVE

Did you know that the CPP is partially funded through investments? Did you know that one of the CPP's investments is in Tahoe Resources, a Canadian company operating a mine in Guatemala? Or that Tahoe Resources and its associates are accused of murdering 16-year-old Marilyn Topacio Reynoso Pacheco and wounding Edwin Alexander Reynoso, two of the many locals peacefully protesting the mine because of concerns over water contamination and environmental degradation. As a union, we have a responsibility to stand with our fellow workers in Guatemala and to declare that this isn't acceptable. We shouldn't be profiting from crime. We need to support workers' rights not just because we believe in workers' rights around the world, but also because we don't want to profit from atrocities caused by Canadian businesses.

It should be noted that Guatemala isn't the only developing country whose citizens are standing up to big business, saying no to large-scale industrialization and yes to development on their own terms, based on their own traditions and beliefs. It is, however, the example I am most familiar with internationally.

CONCLUSION

In many developing countries, where locals are fighting for workers' rights, the citizen experience is one of oppression by their government and big business. In Canada, our social safety net affords us more choice. Our employment laws and standards and public institutions such as unions offer us protection from workplace abuses and predatory employers. Sadly, this often leaves us complacent. What do we need to fight for when we have it so good? When unions get involved in social activism, it doesn't just help improve workers' rights elsewhere: it inspires us to keep striving forward in our own environments. To improve our workplaces, and, by extension, our living conditions. While it's easy to see how union involvement in social activism helps others, it's much harder to see how it helps us help ourselves. So get out there, get involved with your union. Suggest ways to be socially active and stand side-by-side in solidarity with your fellow workers around the globe.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- PSAC's Social Justice Fund: <http://psac-sjf.org>
- CCDA: <https://www.facebook.com/ccda.guatemala>
- Rights Action (A Canadian-US nonprofit that deals with issues in Honduras and Guatemala): <http://rightsaction.org>
- CUPE's National Global Justice Committee: <https://cupe.ca/global-justice>