

# A history of unions in Canada

## 1872 THE TORONTO TYPOGRAPHICAL UNION STRIKE AND THE TRADE UNIONS ACT

**The Toronto Typographical Union** takes up the cause of the "Nine-Hour Movement" and goes out on strike March 25, 1872, its demands for a shorter work week are ignored. A few weeks later, on April 14, a parade is organized in Toronto to show support for the striking workers. Ten thousand people participate. George Brown, politician and editor of the Toronto Globe, hits back by launching legal action against the striking workers. At the time, union activity is still a criminal act under Canadian law. Brown has police arrest and jail 24 members of the strike committee for conspiracy. The arrests are much protested, and the Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, promises to repeal the "barbarous" anti-union laws. The Trade Unions Act is passed by Parliament on June 14, 1872, legalizing unions. In the years following, parades are organized in honour of the Toronto demonstration. The celebration is officially recognized on July 23, 1894 when the federal government, under Prime Minister John Thompson, makes Labour Day a national holiday.



## 1889 ROYAL COMMISSION ON THE RELATIONS OF LABOUR AND CAPITAL

**The federal government** establishes the Royal Commission on the Relations of Labour and Capital. In its report, the commission notes that many workers were being hurt on the job. It condemns oppressive working conditions in many industries. The commission makes a string of recommendations to improve working conditions - but the federal government does not act on them, saying to do so would infringe on provincial authority.

## 1900 FEDERAL DEPARTMENT OF LABOUR ESTABLISHED

**The Conciliation Act of 1900** establishes voluntary conciliation of a labour dispute and results in the creation of the Labour Department. The office is meant to assist in the prevention and settlement of trade disputes. Previously, labour matters were handled by the Postmaster General. William Lyon MacKenzie King is appointed the department's first deputy minister and later becomes the first minister of Labour after his election to parliament in 1909.



## 1919 THE WINNIPEG GENERAL STRIKE

**In the years following** the First World War, high unemployment rates and inflation contribute to growing unrest amongst members of the labour movement. In May 1919, after talks break down between workers in the building and metal trades and their employers, the Winnipeg Trades and Labour Council call for a general strike. More than 30,000 workers from different occupations, both public and private sector, across the city walk off their jobs, crippling the city. The strike ends June 25, but not before "Bloody Saturday" when the RCMP charge a group of strikers, resulting in 30 casualties and one death.

## 1914 WORKMEN'S COMPENSATION ACT, ONTARIO



**Ontario becomes the first province in Canada** to introduce a state social insurance plan with the Workmen's Compensation Act. Prior to this legislation, the only recourse for employees injured on the job is to sue their employers for damages, but as lawsuits increase, employers turn to the government seeking an insurance plan for industrial accidents. The government issues a Royal Commission to be led by Sir William Meredith. In his final report, released in 1913, Meredith suggests a trade-off where workers give up their right to sue in exchange for compensation. He advocates for no-fault insurance. The Act is modeled after his recommendations.

## 1944 WAR-TIME LABOUR RELATIONS REGULATIONS, ORDER-IN-COUNCIL P.C. 1003

**Labour relations fall under provincial jurisdiction**, but during the Second World War the federal government, exercising its emergency wartime powers, establishes a national system of labour-relations law. From the privy council order comes the introduction of a labour relations board, but P.C. 1003 also establishes provisions on the certification of unions, the legal obligation for both parties to enter into good-faith collective bargaining, and prohibitions on unfair labour practices. The order is abolished at the close of the war, but similar provincial legislation is enacted across the country in 1948.

## 1967 FEDERAL PUBLIC SERVICE STAFF RELATIONS ACT

**In 1965**, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers defies government policies and stages an illegal, country-wide strike. At issue is the right to bargain collectively, the right to strike, higher wages and better management. The strike lasts two weeks and is one of the largest "wildcat" strikes in Canadian history. As a result of the labour dispute, the government extends collective bargaining rights to the public service, although some workers, like the RCMP and the military, are excluded.

## 1972 COMMON FRONT, QUEBEC

**After years of unrest between the labour movement** and the Quebec provincial government, three public service unions unite in 1972 in the Common Front to negotiate with the government for higher wages and better working conditions. On the province's refusal, over 200,000 union members from government, education and social services hit the picket lines. The general strike lasts 10 days. It ends with the imprisonment of the three union presidents and legislation ordering employees back to work.

## 2007 SUPREME COURT OF CANADA'S RULING ON BILL 29

**The Supreme Court of Canada** rules that the British Columbia government violated Charter rights when it introduced legislation that would unfairly affect its unionized health-care and social services employees. The provincial legislation would have taken away a number of protections provided for by previous collective agreements. The court's decision reverses 20 years of Charter jurisprudence on workplace association rights.



## 1976 DAY OF PROTEST

**A year after the federal government** introduces wage and price control legislation, the Canadian Labour Congress sponsors a national Day of Protest to mark the anniversary. Over a million workers are estimated to have participated in demonstrations across the country.

## 2013 CANADA'S LARGEST PRIVATE-SECTOR UNION IS BORN

**Canada's largest private-sector union** was created with the merging of the Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW) and the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada (CEP). Unifor now represents more than 300,000 unionized workers in every Canadian province and territory.

