



HOW UNIONS WORK

AND HOW GOVERNMENT CAN SUPPORT THEM

Labour unions give working people a voice in their workplace and in the broader community. We are how working people exercise their Charter right to organize and bargain collectively.

Democracy is core to who we are. Our leaders are **elected by workers**, and our members play an active day-to-day role in the decisions and functions of their union: resolving workplace conflicts, addressing health and safety issues, setting bargaining priorities, lobbying government and more.

Our governing principle is that **we're stronger together than we are apart**. We know that gains for workers in one sector can help all of us get ahead. We also **advocate for workers who aren't union members**, promoting measures like a higher minimum wage, paid sick leave, and stronger employment standards and protection for gig platform workers.

We represent workers from the public and private sectors, in every industry and region in BC. We're a **critical pillar of civil society and Canadian democracy**. And unions contribute to BC's economic stability and growth by bringing clarity to the most important relationship in the economy: that between employer and employee.

To work effectively, we rely on a number of legal and regulatory frameworks along with the work of several government agencies. The most important of these are:

For collective bargaining:

- **The Labour Relations Code** governs collective labour relations including union organizing, collective bargaining and dispute resolution.
- **The Labour Relations Board (LRB)** administers the code, overseeing new union certifications, resolving complaints and settling disputes over collective bargaining (including strikes and lockouts).

For basic employment protection:

- **Employment Standards Act:** This law sets the ground rules and minimum standards around employment, including hiring, wages, hours, leaves and termination.
- **Employment Standards Branch (ESB):** This government branch administers and enforces the act. It investigates complaints, orders compensation or fines, and helps everyone understand their workplace rights and responsibilities.

UNIONS AT A GLANCE

A union is a group of workers who join together to protect their rights and improve their working conditions.

Through collective bargaining, they negotiate a contract (called a collective bargaining agreement) that sets out their rights and entitlements, including pay and benefits.

A wide range of workplaces in BC are unionized, most of them under provincial law although some (such as postal workers, flight attendants and longshore workers) are covered by federal labour law. Unions are part of life in every sector of the economy and every region of BC.

The great majority of BC's public sector is unionized, but private sector union density has fallen since the 1980s. Levels have stabilized in recent years, though, and single-step certification has helped workers in several non-traditional sectors unionize for the first time.



MAJOR CHALLENGES UNIONS AND WORKERS ARE FACING:

Workers in many sectors find it hard to organize, including workplaces where workers are isolated in many small, scattered workplaces, where there's a lot of turnover or where employers have an even more powerful position than usual. The growing shift toward gig and precarious work makes it even harder.

The Employment Standards Branch has been severely backlogged for years. Worker complaints may languish for well over a year before being addressed. Because these often involve low-income workers, these delays can mean severe economic hardship.

The Labour Relations Board also faces a serious backlog. The board has been understaffed for years, and delays in reaching timely decisions have increased along with its workload. Employers and unions alike have raised the importance of ensuring more timely decisions from the board.

WHAT WE'VE ACHIEVED TOGETHER:

Unions working together with progressive governments toward shared goals are a powerful force. We help the BC government understand the most pressing issues facing working people — and work to create the political room to address them.

That's how we've won important victories for working people, including:

- **Restoring single-step certification:** The old system was open to employer abuse and intimidation. By certifying a new union when 55% of workers sign cards, the province has allowed thousands of BC workers to access their right to organize for the first time.
- **Increasing the minimum wage:** After trailing the rest of the country under the BC Liberal government, BC now leads on the provincial minimum wage, indexed to inflation.
- **Paid sick leave:** Ensuring workers have a minimum of five days of paid sick leave was a major victory for BC workers.

WHAT'S NEXT:

BC workers and our unions need action from your government in these key areas:

- **A reimagined Employment Standards Branch:** The ESB would be far more effective with a new, expanded mandate and budget to match to prevent violations through education, along with proactive inspection, and enforcement targeting problem sectors. The standards the branch enforces must be tighter, too, eliminating exemptions and carve-outs.
- **A renewed Labour Relations Code** that reflects BC's changing workplaces: There's an urgent need for stronger protections for workers during contract flips. Greater access to sectoral certification and bargaining would allow workers across a sector to organize and bargain together. And the Code should include provisions making it easier to achieve a first collective agreement.

THE BC FEDERATION OF LABOUR

The BC Federation of Labour (BCFED) is the voice for working people in British Columbia. With more than 357 affiliated unions and locals, we speak for over 500,000 union members, and we advocate for workers who don't have union representation as well.

We lobby for workers' rights and interests — union and non-union — at all levels of government and take part in consultations around crucial issues for working people—both single-purpose ad hoc consultations, and ongoing processes such as the Workers' Compensation Board's consultations on regulatory reform.

In challenging times, **unions** are a crucial part of the solution to many of the problems BC is facing. Whether it's affordability and the economy, health and safety, equity or building the infrastructure we need, **unions help make our province and our communities stronger.**

