A Brief Introduction to Unions

Unions are groups of working people organized to protect their rights in the workplace.

First Unions
The first unions were formed in the 19th century. They protected members against financial disaster in times of illness or unemployment. Unions were opposed by employers, and sometimes were formed in secrecy.

In 1872 the federal government passed the Trades Union Act, making unions legal. Still, many employers would not allow them. Many bitter strikes were fought before unions won wide recognition.

Today, union members make up about 34% of the non-agricultural workforce; 4 million Canadians belong to unions. Membership is greatest in British Columbia and Newfoundland, where about 50% of the workforce belongs to unions.

Most early unions were craft unions, that is, they joined all the skilled workers in a particular craft or trade. In the late 1930s, industrial unions began to grow in Canada. Industrial unions join all workers in a single industry, whatever their skill. Today the most rapidly expanding section of the union movement consists of public-service unions, made up of government employees (for example, teachers, postal workers, and nurses) at the federal, provincial, and municipal levels of government.

Early in this century, most Canadian workers belonged to unions based in the United States. After World War II, Canadian-based unions became stronger. In 1997, 65% of all union members belonged to Canadian unions.

Unions are mainly interested in the wages and working conditions of their members. But they also become involved in political action. The Canadian labour movement as a whole supports the New Democratic Party, but many union members vote for other parties. In order to explain their position on various issues, unions also organize educational and public-relations activities.