

Here's why union support is so high right now

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Over 65,000 teachers in Québec [could remain on strike until Christmas](#) if a deal isn't reached, their union said on Sunday. The warning comes amid widespread labor unrest in the province, including nearly [570,000 workers on strike at the same time](#) last week.

These collective actions are on the heels of the recent "[summer of strikes](#)," that saw a number of labor actions take place, including the Hollywood writers' and actors' strikes, the United Auto Workers' [strike](#) and [a number of Starbucks strikes](#). In Canada, port workers in British Columbia, [workers from Ontario's public broadcaster](#), and [city workers in Saint John](#) also held strikes.

One of the reasons strikes seem to have increased in popularity and publicity is the record high support for workers' unions. According to a [recent Gallup poll](#), 71% of Americans are supportive of labor unions—the highest rate since 1965. A recent [Angus Reid survey](#) found three in five Canadians believe unions have had a positive impact for workers.

Why is this support so high now? [Some have argued](#) that worsening working conditions, wages falling out of step with inflation and the increasing use of artificial intelligence across industries are contributing to workers' collective action.

However, this is only part of the picture. More important than these conditions are the workers' perceptions of these conditions. The rise in union support may be better explained by the general rise in people's acknowledgement of their own disadvantages, and their negative emotional reactions to that disadvantage.

Importance of perception

Research shows that recognizing one's disadvantage, coupled with experiencing an emotional reaction to it—usually anger—is an important predictor of taking part in collective actions like protesting, striking or joining a union. This is true [even when accounting for objective measures of disadvantage](#), like social class, income and education.

When it comes to support for unions specifically, a [1991 study found](#) people's feelings about their perceived social status were more important in predicting union support than their objective social standing, which is determined by factors like income, education and class. In other words, people's perceptions determined union support.

This perspective also explains why union support hasn't risen in times when working conditions have worsened. The years following the 2008 recession, for example, brought about many labor issues, including [widespread unemployment](#), [declining household wages](#) and [increased levels of temporary and precarious work](#).

Despite this, [union support among Americans was at a historical low](#) around that time. While no statistics exist for the Canadian context, [evidence suggests](#) unions were equally unpopular in Canada after the Great Recession.

The COVID-19 pandemic's role

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly impacted how we view our lives. Recent studies suggest people are now [more aware of the inequalities present in our societies](#) and are [more willing to do something about it](#), compared to the pre-COVID era.

An awareness of the unjust systems that influence our behaviors has been shown to [be a prerequisite for the anger](#) that drives collective action. Essentially, the more we recognize injustice, the [more likely we are to engage in collective action](#).

The height of the COVID-19 pandemic coincided with several [union strikes](#) that reveal this pattern. For instance, the [2020 Dominion grocery store workers' strikes in Newfoundland](#) were driven by a growing awareness of the disparities between top executives, who earned millions

during the pandemic, and front-line workers who saw little to no wage increases.

Although this divide [had been widening for years](#), the pandemic accentuated it. [Union statements during the strikes](#) emphasized that the issues faced by workers were exposed by the pandemic, rather than being created by it.

The pandemic has helped create an environment where workers are more likely to feel disadvantaged and angry. Until public perception and awareness of inequality changes, we will likely continue to see an increased number of strikes and other forms of collective action.

What should employers do?

Employers have a crucial role to play in all this. If they wish to avoid their workers taking collective action against them, they should demonstrate their support of their employees by attending to their needs. Issues like [work-life balance](#), mental health support and diversity and inclusion are top of mind for employees.

When employees' needs are met, they are less likely to perceive disadvantages in the workplace and harbor resentment. A [recent study found](#) that employees who believed they were being fairly paid for positive workplace behaviors—like co-operating with others and coming in to work early—felt less resentment towards those they considered more advantaged.

Effective communication with workers, fostering participative leadership and encouraging co-operation between [workers](#) have also been shown to [reduce angry feelings](#) stemming from an employee's negative workplace comparisons.

These approaches work because they encourage constructive solutions to employee issues. In the end, the link between people's perceptions of their own lives and their [support](#) for unions highlights just how important it is for employers to take their employees' needs into account.

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