

# Comment Columnists / Edward Greenspan

## Unions almost useless in Canada

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I'll never understand the appeal of unions, especially in Canada. Without ever joining a union, Canadian workers are entitled to health care coverage, severance pay if dismissed without cause, and Canada Pension participation. What do Canadians gain by joining a union?

Most union members I've spoken to don't feel they get much from their union. When these members do have a grievance, they find their union representatives poorly prepared to help them or simply uninterested. They find their union representatives are too busy trying to organize new members to help the ones already in the fold.

But if union members aren't fond of their unions, how do you think the employers feel?

We know how Wal-Mart feels about unions. When Wal-Mart's workers at its Jonquiere, Que. store gained union certification, Wal-Mart simply closed the store and left town. I applaud this move. The tail should not wag the dog, and if Wal-Mart would rather run its business unfettered by the considerable hassle and expense of negotiating and implementing a union contract, they should be allowed to do so.

The Supreme Court of Canada will decide early next year whether Wal-Mart's decision to close its store was legal. It is simply unfathomable to me that an employer doesn't have the right to close its doors rather than negotiate with a union.

Wal-Mart is one of the biggest retailers in the world and it has gotten that way because it keeps out unions, something that hasn't seemed to have kept millions of people (surely including many, many unionized customers) from shopping there.

If you don't want to work for Wal-Mart, don't apply to work there. If you work for Wal-Mart and don't like how you are treated, go ahead and quit and look for another job.

And don't tell me a union would protect their workers from getting exploited. That may be true in some parts of the world, but in Canada we have many employment laws that protect employees. We have laws that govern minimum wage, unemployment insurance, workplace safety and compensation, pensions, benefits, severance pay, overtime pay, holiday pay, vacation pay, parental leave, discrimination, sexual harassment, pay equity, and even a law that guarantees a smoke-free workplace.

And all those laws apply to you without ever joining a union.

What I find particularly odd is unions are so weak in the U.S., even though American workers have no guaranteed health coverage and can be fired at a moment's notice without any severance pay.

Unionized workers in the U.S. gain job protection from unjust dismissal and many unions there have good health plans for their members.

One thing some members' dues are used for is political lobbying. Some unions, including the Canadian Postal Workers Union, have recently seen fit to spend their members' dues on campaigns to protest or boycott Israel. When a union has the resources to take up absurd, anti-Semitic campaigns, it either has too much of its members' money or no longer is necessary. Or both.

Unionized public employees wield too much power when they have the right to strike. Most notably our public transportation systems have been held hostage by striking workers. But their irresponsible actions are too often rewarded with pay increases. Unions had their place many years ago, but in the Canadian labour market I think their time has come and gone.