

PRESIDENT'S REPORT

December 2004

About a year or so ago a comment made to me by a fellow union member gave me pause. This individual was frustrated and was questioning "What has the Union ever done for me?" I was taken aback, realized that it was rhetorical and we moved on to other things. However, since that time I have given it much thought as I was curious by the differences in our point of view. I began to look at our different life experiences, and realized that I have worked in both unionized and non-unionized environments. My work life has spanned a period of time that has seen many changes (changes in our society, changes in labour laws, changes in working conditions, changes in social funding and changes in expectancies). Whereas the individual who has worked in only one environment, an environment with an already longstanding union and with a negotiated collective agreement, where processes and systems are in place that appear to have no comprehensible relevance to someone beginning their career and where they do not perceive to have any input, would have an entirely different point of view. So I can understand how without something to compare to, or without some historical information someone might not appreciate the impact and the importance of unions. They might not understand the significant contribution that unions have made to work life in Canada, nor the impact the unions have had on social reform. Unions are an integral part of our culture and have helped to shape the society that we live in today. It has been shown that countries that are highly unionized have a higher standard of living.

As I have been mulling this over I have had many conversations with people in as many different roles, centering around the question "What has the Union ever done for me?" I had remembered that when Mr. Gauthier first joined St. Boniface Hospital as President and CEO he shared a story with



us at the Joint Union Management Council. Upon his arrival here in Winnipeg, someone asked him how he

liked working in a facility that was unionized. His response was that he preferred it and went on to explain why. In a recent conversation with him I asked him his views explaining that I had been pondering the question, "what has the union done for me?" Mr. Gauthier shared with me that "a unionized environment provides us with structure, if we didn't have this organizational set up, what would we have? We would need to organize something, as a manager we could not talk to 4000 employees individually; we could not negotiate with them individually. As managers and unions we are both here with union representatives to see that the job gets done while taking into account working conditions."

A friend of mine, a retired Organizational Development Consultant for the Federal Government, commented that when he enters a manufacturing firm that is unionized versus one that is non-unionized, the differences are readily apparent, that it is as basic and as vital as the quality of air. He went on to say that he is thankful to be living in a country and a society that has had such a strong union influence.

Another point of view came from a fellow board member who grew up in a family where being a union member was the norm, and in a time when there was no national health care coverage. Half of the family income went to providing the medical needs of one family member, and the family experienced tremendous relief when her father's union successfully negotiated health care coverage.

"What has the Union ever done for me?" I have come to realize that the answer to this question is complex, spans generations, and that to attempt to answer it

here in any sort of comprehensive way would not be possible. I believe that many, many things that we take for granted in our workplaces are there because of unions. When I begin to look through any collective agreement and see the benefits that are there, knowing that there are people in the world who don't enjoy those same benefits, I begin to know "what the union has done for me": pension plans, hours of work, salaries, paid breaks, maternity leaves, overtime rates, call back pay, standby pay, income protection, bereavement and compassionate leave, pre-retirement leave, annual vacation, occupational classifications, and so much more.

Pondering this question has reinforced my belief in our need for education: education about unions for our membership, staff representatives, board of directors, and for the people that we interact with and have dealings with. It is one of my objectives in the next two years to look at and to develop more union-oriented educational opportunities for staff and membership.

In future issues I am hoping to include some historical information, to provide background and to increase general knowledge and understanding of the union, its mandate and its processes.

Wishing each and everyone a safe, healthy and happy holiday season and all the best for each of you in the New Year.

Warmest regards,
Wendy Despina, President