

Transcript for Are Labour Unions Making a Comeback in North America Video

Retail workers at Starbucks, Amazon, and other outlets have been making headlines for organizing in their workplaces, but are these small victories signs of a resurgent labour movement in North America? One Canadian union, UFCW, says it's getting more calls from workers who want to organize. We've never been busier, and I think it has to do with workers realizing that going to work every day they were unsafe, or they wanted to voice something and no one was listening. Prior to the pandemic, Canada and the U.S. had for decades reported a decline in the percentage of workers who were part of a union. Data shows unionized workers often have higher wages and greater job security, but over the past decade many workers have shifted out of industries with high union coverage, like manufacturing, and into jobs that are much less likely to be unionized like retail. At the same time, companies like Starbucks argue that unions are bad for their bottom line and could send stock values plummeting. They've rewarded workers who choose not to unionize with raises and better benefits. While some who have joined union efforts report being fired without cause. Despite this a recent Gallup poll found U.S. support for labor unions is the highest it has been since 1965.

Jacob Dickenscheid has worked at Starbucks for over a decade. His shop was the first in Alberta to unionize and he says the pandemic was a big contributor. Not only did it impact workers unevenly, with many in retail and hospitality laid off during lockdowns, but essential workers like him who kept their jobs were exposed to unsafe work environments. Starbucks made sure that we protected our customers, as they should, by wearing masks and putting safety protocols in place there, but there was no mandatory safety protocols in place for customers to make sure that they were protecting us, who were serving them. Bea Bruske, president of the Canadian Labor Congress, says that rising inflation in the wake of the pandemic and health and safety concerns are a priority for younger workers. She says these workers feel they are falling further behind and are forced to remain in jobs that traditionally might have been a steppingstone. During the pandemic we've seen that those workers who are often service sector workers, working in restaurants, retail locations, have had to deal with the public, have not necessarily had access to personal protective equipment during the pandemic. Have not had access to things like paid sick time and quite frankly their wages are not anywhere near keeping up to inflation.

Between 2020 and 2021, the retail and food services sectors saw a slight bump in their unionization rates. Although, the rate continued to decline across the wider private sector. Professor Steven Tufts, a labor geographer at York university, says millions would need to organize to return union coverage to the level it was at after the great depression. Now, the Starbucks case is important but when we talk about thousands and thousands and thousands of Starbucks franchises all across North America it's actually a relatively small proportion. He says Canada's labour laws would likely need updating if any movement is to flourish in order to remove roadblocks to union membership. For Dickenscheid, the biggest hurdle was the weight between signing union cards and holding a vote. The actual process of getting a card, getting

them out to people, signing them, not that difficult just hard to do. When initially you don't want to bring attention to upper management of what's going on because obviously the sooner you do that the sooner they start disseminating their information. Which, like I said, was partial truths at best. Some provinces, like BC, have changed their laws to make it easier for workers to organize, and ultimately Tufts says any real momentum will be accompanied by strikes and work stoppages. The cost of militancy has to drive up the cost of doing business so that employers sit down and do a calculation that says it is better and cheaper for us to deal with the union than to deal with labor disruption every week.

It's still early to say where this will go but Dickenscheid believes we'll come to see this moment as the beginning of something big.

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