**Early Labour Movement:**

**The Role of the Federal and Provincial Governments in the Workplace:**

The twentieth century was a time of rapid change. The rapid rise of industry and new technologies brought our world closer together in some ways and further apart in others. Throughout this period of change, governments and the courts took on an increasingly greater role in the lives of individuals and society as a whole.

**Labour and the Early Industrial Period in Canada:**

By the mid-nineteenth century, Canada felt the effects of the Industrial Revolution that transformed Great Britain in the previous century. The Industrial Revolution created many political, social, and economic changes that would drastically re-shape Canada. Large factories opened up across the country and people flocked from rural to urban areas with the hope of obtaining jobs. The advent of machines changed the way people worked in these new industrial jobs. New machines threatened many skilled craft workers, but at the same time provided jobs for large numbers of unskilled workers. The work in these new industries demanded long hours, and offered dangerous working conditions and poor wages. Strict rules and regulations (with harsh punishments for any infraction of these rules) often became the norm for workers. The factories often employed women and even very young children for wages far below those of the average male worker. Families who needed the wages had little say over the hardships of factory life, as they sought to survive in the rapidly changing industrial world.

Workers often found themselves at the mercy of their employers and worldwide economic fluctuations. During good economic times, workers usually experienced better wages (or at least steady wages) and decent living conditions. However, during times of economic decline, workers struggled to survive. They often faced joblessness or drastically cut wages. Employers had total control over the workplace. No protection for workers existed and employers had the right to hire and fire workers on a whim. There were always unemployed men and women, desperate for a wage, ready to take the place of a worker who was ill, or who attempted to rally fellow workers against the employer in order to gain better pay or working conditions.

Skilled workers sought to protect their jobs and improve working conditions and wages. Trade associations and guilds provided members with some benefits, such as helping the family of an injured worker, but they did not act as bargaining units with employers. During the early 1870s, skilled workers in particular, began to form local organizations, but unions  continued to be illegal in Canada until the passage of the Trade Union Act in 1872.

**Research and Analysis Questions:**

1. Research and reflect on the history of workers in the 20th century. Comment of how important events such as World War I, the Depression, World War II, and the post economic boom influenced the labour movement.
2. Historically, businesses have felt threatened by the labour movement. Are unions still viewed as a threat today? Using the internet, investigate the position of the business community on unionization, in particular the attitudes of big box stores, such as Wal-Mart, towards unionization.
3. In light of the various federal and provincial legislation, do you think unions are still needed today? Justify your answer.
4. Using the Internet, research the events surrounding the death of Sean Kells. How did this tragedy promote change in the workplace?
5. The *Employment Standards Act* is constantly undergoing changes. Review two recent changes and comment on whether these changes benefit workers or employers. Be sure to justify your answer.