

Policy on Human Rights, Workers' Rights

November 2014

Trade unionists believe in human rights and workers' rights for all, not just for some. We believe that across this wide world each human life is of equal value. We believe that decent jobs, a steady income, housing and food security, safety, dignity and self-determination are basic needs and basic rights. We know that without collective rights and collective action, individual rights are fragile and we cannot build or sustain strong caring communities.

The world we live in, and the workplaces where we labour, do not reflect these core values. We live in a world where each human life is not valued equally – where differences in class, race, gender, sexuality, disability, language, religion, identity, and age directly, and unfairly, translate into differences in access to jobs, income, housing and food, safety and security - a world where some groups are advantaged at the expense of other groups. The world we live in today bears the markings of colonialism, genocide, the slave trade, policies of institutionalization, direct discrimination and segregation.

As workers we didn't create injustice in society, but we inherited patterns of discrimination that persist and pollute our thinking. Divisions created in the past continue to be the tools of exploitation most often used by employers (and their friends in government) to create pools of cheap labour and to keep workers divided. These divisions often intensify during hard economic times – and can result in workers turning against one another instead of building the strong alliances that we so desperately need if we are to take on injustice and build a world that is more true to our core values of social and economic justice.

Unifor is in a unique position to challenge inequality, to demand redress for past wrongs, and to push forward to a better future. We have the tools, we have the people power, and we have the democratic structures in place.

When we organize low-wage workers and negotiate decent, well paid jobs with benefits we are advancing human rights. When we bargain for better wages, job security and better benefits, and we negotiate fair pay scales and seniority provisions that limit the employer's ability to discriminate, we are advancing human rights. When we enforce our collective agreements through the grievance procedure, harassment policies, and workplace action, we are advancing human rights. Bread and butter issues that make real differences in the lives of all workers are especially important in the lives of women, workers of colour, Aboriginal workers, workers with disabilities, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans workers. The single greatest determining factor in workplace equality is the presence of a union. This is

true at the individual level and at the broader, societal level. The evidence is in: there is greater economic and social equality in countries with higher rates of unionization.

We often hear “Workers’ rights are human rights”, and we also hear “human rights are workers’ rights”. Both are true – a broad gain for workers can have specific and important consequences for members of equity-seeking groups. Likewise, a win for an equity group nearly always strengthens the rights of all workers, whether that’s negotiating access to job training, extending family care leave provisions, creating meaningful support for workers with disabilities, flexible holiday schedules, or ergonomic changes that reduce physical workplace strain and risk of injury.

Beyond the bargaining table, Unifor is proud of the role we have played in campaigning for social programs and legislative equality. We have been a key part in campaigns for extended paid maternity and parental leave, equal marriage, a national child care program, fair immigration policies, the right to self-determination for Aboriginal peoples, the legislated right to accommodation for people with disabilities, employment equity and pay equity legislation, and so much more. We have formed strong partnerships with social action and community groups demanding social and economic justice, joining campaigns, lobbying efforts and direct action demanding meaningful, progressive change from all levels of government. At the same time, we recognize that the road is long. Gains that we have made are under attack, and in some areas we have lost ground. Governments and corporations are still winning their fear-mongering campaigns about employment equity – legislation that can actually ensure qualified workers can get access to jobs, and legislation that gives unions a critical tool to take on management rights and build a more united working class. We have joined campaigns that have forced governments in many jurisdictions to raise the minimum wage, and we are committed to continuing this fight. Raising the minimum wage to a living wage is the single-most important measure that would raise the standard of living for the working poor in Canada – by far the majority of whom are women, people of colour, Aboriginal people, people with disabilities, new immigrants, and youth. We have taken on some formidable fights around pay equity, but we have yet to capture the full benefit of the legislation and millions of dollars owed to working women today remains uncollected.

As a union we have made a commitment to building human rights into our structure.

We are committed to further strengthening and broadening our own skills, abilities and commitment to human rights issues. Our leadership participate in mandatory 40-hour Human Rights training, and along with our activists, attend Unifor workshops, conferences and courses on equality issues. We are proud of the programs we have developed for workers of diversity, LGBT members and women (courses designed to increase full participation by all in the overall life of the union). To truly ensure that our union leadership at all levels of decision-making reflects the full diversity of our membership (from stewards, to health and safety reps, to local union Presidents) more active steps need to be taken. It is time to share power and to open ourselves up to new models of leadership.

Our Community Chapters create a new form of union membership that will reach groups of workers that are generally excluded from union membership. Temporary workers, precarious workers, the majority of whom are people of colour, women, people with disabilities, immigrants, people whose first

language is other than English or French, Aboriginal peoples, and/or those whose international credentials are not recognized in Canada.

We can build on the advances we have made on human rights issues. We can take our cues from those who have opted to do the right thing, not the politically expedient thing. We can expand on our efforts to run meetings and campaigns in the many languages of our members. We can be motivated by the courage of the women in our union who take on not only sexist employers and lawmakers, but also some of their union brothers. We can draw on the knowledge of our members - immigrants, refugees and temporary migrant workers - many of whom were engaged in workplace struggles in their own countries. We can be inspired by the gains of LGBTQ members, who have countered hostility and isolation by building vibrant communities. We can learn from workers with disabilities who don't stop at seeking accommodation but also demand full accessibility, equal opportunity and mutual respect.

In many ways everything we do as a union requires a human rights lens – from bargaining, to grievance handling, to campaigns. We are ALL involved in human rights issues because it must be the daily work of the union. At the same time, specific responsibility is given to our local union human rights standing committees and to our regional equity committees – this ensures that leadership on human rights issues is prioritized and directed by people who come from equity-seeking groups.

Unions are an incredibly important vehicle for human rights. We will use our collective power to bring about positive change. While our record isn't perfect, the labour movement continues to be critical to moving forward on human rights struggles. As we continue to build Unifor, we bring forward the best of our histories, our most inclusive practices, and the momentum of change to ensure that human rights continue to be prioritized as workers' rights.

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