

# Forming a Local Union Women's Committee



**unifor**  
women | femmes



## A message from the Women's Department Director



Women need unions today more than ever and unions need women more than ever. Despite gender advancements and increasing understanding, women continue to face challenges in the workplace and in communities across Canada that disproportionately impact their work, their safety, and their well-being.

Unions are only as strong as the involvement and determination of their members. In Unifor, we are 115,000 women strong and raising our voices on issues that impact our lives daily.

Local Union Women's Committees are a key part of building our union. Together, Unifor sisters advocate for each other and for workplace programs and initiatives that create better working conditions and support women in their unique struggles.

Thank you for your interest in forming a Local Union Women's Committee and deepening your involvement with your union. I want you to know the union is full of dynamic sisters ready to support your journey.

When we work together, we are unstoppable.

In sisterhood and solidarity,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tracey Ramsey". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of "Tracey" and "Ramsey" being capitalized and prominent.

**Tracey Ramsey**

Unifor Women's Department Director

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## **Women's Committees are part of the union**

Section D of Article 15 of the Unifor Constitution states that all Local Unions should establish the following Standing Committees:

- Human Rights;
- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans (LGBT);
- Black, Indigenous and Workers of Colour (BIWOC);
- Young Workers;
- Workers with disAbilities;
- and Women's Committees.

A local union may decide to consolidate committees or establish additional committees. Local Union Standing Committees may be elected or appointed by the Local Union Executive Board.

Local Union Bylaws will further define the role of the Women's Committee including any potential funding the local wishes to provide.

### **Women's Committees can:**

- Encourage more women to participate in union activities as well as seeking out and supporting women to run for elected positions.
- Ensure that pay equity, employment equity, anti-harassment policies and the duty to accommodate are union priorities, and ensure that members, activists and leaders understand their importance and the basics of how they work.
- Participate in all National Union women's and human rights campaigns.
- Provide support to existing leadership by offering information on equity issues and opportunities to learn and do more.
- Actively support the development of new leaders from equity-seeking groups. Women's Committees can be a great place for workers to build the confidence and skills necessary to become active in their local unions and communities, develop relationships with other activists, work with community groups and other union committees, and be part of making meaningful change.



- Work with other standing committees and equity caucuses to support one another's issues.
- Work with local labour groups and women's organizations to coordinate and support events and campaigns in your area.
- Ensure all members have access to some form of anti-harassment training. Work with the leadership, the Education Committee, and the Human Rights Department to identify gaps/needs and fill them.
- Connect with community groups, by sharing our experience bringing a trade union and working-class perspective on issues like poverty reduction, child care, shelter services, ending GBV etc.
- Be creative in working to ensure that the diversity of the membership is reflected in the overall composition of the leadership and steward base of the union.
- Put an 'equity lens' on all issues within the local union, and actively support changes to collective agreements, by-laws, local union practices, and union 'culture', that will lead to greater inclusion of all members.

These goals can be reached through establishing regular monthly meetings. Sub-committees can be set up on issues such as: education, bargaining, community involvement or women's health.

## Responsibilities of Women's Committees

Being part of a committee carries with it some responsibilities.

- ☐ Keep your Local Union leadership in the loop - maintain good communication around ongoing activities and ideas for potential activities. Seek leadership support early.
- ☐ Hold committee meetings on a regular basis.
- ☐ Promote Women's Courses at the Unifor Family Education Centre and the annual Women's Conference.
- ☐ Post meeting notices in advance and circulate an agenda. Decide things democratically.
- ☐ Tell other members about the work of the committee - make reports at membership meetings and provide written updates to members using established channels (e.g.: workplace message boards, Local newsletter, Local website, email, etc.).
- ☐ Actively seek out women to become committee members and to continue to grow activism of women in the workplace.

All Locals develop their own traditions and practices. Check with your Local leadership and your Local union by-laws to determine if your Women's Committee has additional responsibilities.

## First Steps in Forming a Local Union Women's Committee

### Gauge Interest

Setting up a new Women's Committee will involve talking to other women in your workplace and other workplaces in your local union to determine interest in the committee and finding select individuals to join.

A Local Union Women's Committee is a place for women to gain leadership skills, to raise issues and organize for change within their local union. Unifor's commitment to equity can only be realized if we have people who are dedicated to seizing opportunities, building allies, explaining the issues, and making connections with and between our members and our various communities. This is what much of the work of the Women's Committee members will be.

## **Speak to Your Local Executive**

Once interest is confirmed, approach your Local Executive to get permission and support to establish a Local Union Women's Committee. Local bylaws may need to be confirmed or amended and the Executive should be aware of expenses related to supporting the committee and its work.

## **Set a Date for a First Meeting**

After the Local Executive has approved the formation of a Local Union Women's Committee it's time to plan your first meeting!

## **Promote Your Meeting**

Share the date and time of your meeting through the established channels your Local uses to communicate with members, and don't forget to use word-of-mouth! Speaking directly to women in your workplace and extending a personal invite always produces better results than relying on a sign or email alone.

## **Before Your First Meeting**

### **Prepare an agenda**

Meetings are most effective and enjoyable when there is a plan in place. Take the time to outline a few key items for your first meeting so attendees will know what to expect and so you can make good use of everyone's time.

You can reach out to other Local Women's Committees in your area, contact the Women's Department at the National Union or request assistance from your Local Executive.

You may also find the sample agenda at the end of this booklet helpful. Adjust the agenda to suit your goals and your workplace's needs.

### **Secure a venue or meeting space**

Ensure the time of your meeting does not conflict with the use of union hall space. If you do not have access to a union hall, ask your Local Executive for suggested spaces or reach out to staff at the Unifor Regional Office nearest you.

You will be responsible for any drinks or snacks provided and for ensuring the meeting space is set up beforehand and cleaned up after.

## Getting your Committee off the Ground

Let's face it - the work we could do on issues important to women is endless, and we can't take it all on.

Women's Committees need to make strategic decisions on where to apply their energy and resources. Women's Committees tend to bring together people who are passionate and committed to issues.

**It's important that community work is connected to established organizations that can advise your Committee on what is needed to best support their initiatives. Charity work can become donor-centric by giving what feels good instead of what is helpful. Un-needed or unwanted donations can overwhelm or burden organizations like women's shelters that often rely on volunteers and very few staff. Meeting with organizations to determine their needs should always be our first step.**

With so many pressing issues for women, it can be tough to make decisions on what to work on first. Having a fair process will help create priorities for your committee and ensure that everyone is on the same page. The process will help to guide the work you decide to do, ensuring it is strategic and balances priorities. Here are some things to think about when planning your work:

### Balancing Workplace and Community Activism

There is a tendency for some committees to do only community work, and not get involved in workplace issues. The workplace needs to be part of the focus.

Workplace issues could involve things like identifying and supporting women to run for Local leadership positions, making sure bargaining a Women's Advocate is a priority, and looking for other concerns women in your workplace want addressed.

Community work complements the advocacy in the workplace and helps members engage with organizations and causes important to them. This work could involve projects like supporting a local women's shelter, attending an International Women's Day rally, or gathering period products for those in need.



## Setting Priorities and Responsibilities of the Committee

Work on an agreement within your committee as to how much of the committee's energy is going toward workplace and community issues. Is it 50/50? Is it 70/30? Is it 30/70? It can be a good idea to decide on a ratio for this work for the first year and adjust it as necessary or as the needs of the membership changes.

### Balancing Reactive and Proactive Work

Your plan for the year should include proactive work, plotted out ahead of time, and leave room for opportunities that arise based on issues in your workplace, or in the broader community.

For ideas on proactive plans, there are days during each year when it makes sense for the Local Union Women's Committee to plan an event, presentation or other action. These include, but are not limited to:

- International Women's Day, March 8
- Equal Pay Day, varies
- Gender Equality Week, fourth week of September
- Women's History Month, October
- National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women, December 6

Your committee should take note of these days and look for opportunities to raise awareness through your workplace using resources from the National Union and to connect with other Local Union Women's Committees, community groups and organizations.

Reactive work happens when an issue becomes a popular or urgent subject of discussion. If everyone in our workplaces is suddenly talking about migrant workers, can the committee organize a speaker on the topic, or circulate a petition demanding full labour, citizenship, and immigration rights for migrant workers? Engaging members at time of high interest will help keep the committee fresh and active.

### Pushing for negotiation and legislation

Unifor has a proud history of not only negotiating equity, but demanding that it be legislated too, so that all workers benefit whether they belong to a union or not. When we have a breakthrough in negotiations, join the call to have it included in legislation, provincially and federally.

Partnering with your Local Union Political Action Committee is a great way to build community and make important changes happen.

### **Focusing on Education and Action**

Well, as we like to say, eduACTION! If your committee is taking a stand on something, make sure your members understand what the issues are, and why we're involved. If we don't educate, any gains we make are fragile. If we just educate, well, that's a very, very slow road to change. Ask yourselves when you're taking on an issue or campaign - what are we doing to educate, and what's our action?

And, as far as action goes, action happens at many levels. Wearing a button is an action, so is signing a petition. So is joining a First Nations' blockade, or getting on a bus to go to Ottawa in support of the right to choose, or marching in Take Back the Night. People on your committee will have different comfort levels around action; talk these through and decide if you're going to agree on a diversity of tactics, with everyone participating up to their comfort level, or whether you're going to go with a tactic that everyone agrees with.

### **Including Charity and Solidarity**

Are you collecting for the women's shelter, or fighting to end Gender Based Violence? Aim to include both charitable projects and building solidarity around issues important to women.

- If you're raising money for a women's shelter, can you also show a film where the issue is politicized?
- If your Local is sponsoring a toy drive, avoid buying toys made under unfair or unsafe working conditions. And don't fall into the trap of gender-labeling the toys - putting all the sports equipment, puzzles and science kits in a 'boy pile' and all of the stuffed animals and dolls in a 'girl pile'. Be consistent in your politics, wherever possible!

Where you can, choose projects/activities and social partners/ community groups that are focused more on solidarity than charity. Charity helps, but tackling the root causes of poverty, inequality and insecurity can be far more powerful. Help members connect the dots between the issues, and from the immediate issues to broader issues of political, economic and social justice.

## Set yourselves up for success

When you're planning your first few events and actions, it's important to ask yourselves a few key questions.

- Do we have the people to pull this campaign/program off?
- Is this a campaign or issue that will attract new people and grow our committee? If so, that may be reason enough for taking it on. In any case, make sure your objectives and tasks are in line with a realistic assessment of your people power.
- Will this campaign/issue give us energy? Do a go-around at your meeting and ask: do you have energy for this? Will it give you energy? If the answer is not a resounding "YES!", pick something else and come back to this at a different time, or only ask those who declare they have the energy to get involved (and set your goals accordingly).

## Be Realistic: The Option of No

When you hear about an issue or campaign, do you automatically think: "our committee should do something about this!"?

Maybe you should - maybe it will give you energy; maybe it will be an opportunity to connect with others - which is important in the long run; maybe your contribution will 'tip the balance' to making the campaign successful; maybe your credibility in the union or the community hinges on getting involved; maybe your committee has something unique to contribute.



Or maybe this is a moment where you can publicly endorse the campaign, find one small key thing that is useful to do, but trust that others are doing a solid job of it and keep your eyes on the priorities you've already set. You could just pick up the phone, call the group leading the campaign, acknowledge the importance of the work they're doing, and ask if there's one tangible thing you can do to support them. Maybe they want you to send an email out to your mailing list? Maybe they want to come and talk at a local union meeting - that could be something you could work through your executive (and easier than building your own campaign on the issue). The group most closely connected to the issue should be leading it - providing access to your members isn't hard but is a significant contribution.

It's impossible to get directly involved in everything that comes along - sometimes your role is to cheer others on, share or re-print their articles (you don't always have to write your own), and stay focused on issues that are getting less attention so that they too will have their day. Remember to recognize your resources - and find a way to use them wisely.

## Sample Projects

Women's Committees will function slightly different across the union depending on the local and workplace structures and needs of the membership. Here are some sample projects that Women's Committees have focused on in the past:

- Workplace Fact Sheets: some committees have worked in coordination with the National Union to develop and/or distribute fact sheets to the members on large issues such as emergency leave rights, health & safety rights at work connected to pregnancy, breastfeeding accommodation rights and anti-harassment;
- Equity audit of collective agreement and employer policies;
- Increasing members' International Women's Day participation in local events;
- Development of a Local Women's Committee Handbook with terms of reference and evaluation tools;
- Highlighting education opportunities within Unifor including gathering sufficient interest to request 1- or 3-day area courses;

- Organizing a movie night;
- Fundraising for local women's shelters;
- Mobilizing around changes in the laws that affect women;

It is important to expand our work beyond critical fundraising. The Women's Committee has a crucial role in making change in the workplace, local and community. This involves taking steps beyond fundraising into true advocacy for change of community causes.

## Making Meetings Effective

Every committee meeting should include something useful and educational for members - an interactive quiz, a quick report back from all of the committee members (and their workplaces), a short video, a short discussion about a newspaper article, a guest speaker, a book review, etc.



Here are some additional tips for making your meeting more successful:

### Have a Purpose

Ask yourselves, why are you meeting? What do you hope to accomplish? Are you meeting to plan an event, to learn, to re-energize and to deal with standard items, or just one of these things? Be aware that some members see the Committee's work as about 'getting things done', and other members may see it as providing informal support for their issues - both of these perspectives are valid and they represent needs that should be met in a meeting.

### Consider How Often You Need to Meet

Most committees meet monthly with a break during the summer months and with options like zoom, you can find a time that works best for the group. A good meeting gives people energy about their activism. Use your meeting time to collaborate and create open space for members to share ideas. If you're meeting to develop a plan, think carefully ahead of time about a good process for developing one and for reaching a consensus.

## Plan Ahead

- ☐ Where will the meeting be held? If space needs to be booked be sure to do this in advance. Check with your local on how this process works.
- ☐ Be strategic about the timing of your meetings (i.e. can you hold them to coincide with membership meetings so that you can bring your issues forward?).
- ☐ Do you want new people to attend your meetings? If yes, how will you get the word out? We know the majority of people get involved in social movements because someone asked them to (not because they saw a poster, or were even committed to the issues). Don't assume people will show up if they're interested - people need to be invited. Again. And again.
- ☐ As well as making personal contact, use your local union newsletter to invite people to join the Women's Committee - by making it sound interesting and letting them know they're needed.
- ☐ Consider what it would be like to be a new person at one of your meetings - how are new people welcomed? How are they brought into the discussions so they don't feel left out?
- ☐ Provide child care at meetings, or at least a play area set up with age-appropriate toys, books, games, etc. Talk to your local about what can be arranged to accommodate women with children attending.
- ☐ Distribute an agenda in advance so people can prepare.





- ❑ All committees will have an ebb and flow of attendance at meetings. Attendance will be increased when people feel there is progress made on projects identified as important. Leaving the meeting with clear ideas of actions that have been agreed on and who has agreed to take these actions. Remember that tasks need to be spread out to develop skills and to ensure we don't burn out. Some locals have found alternating between meetings in-person and online or by conference call have been effective.

Remember to keep the Women's Department updated on your projects and successes!

## **Women's Committee Resources**

### **Unifor Constitution**

The Unifor Constitution sets out the core principles, structures, objectives and functions of the union. The Constitution is written in plain-language, and can be accessed online at:

[unifor.org/constitution](http://unifor.org/constitution)

### **Unifor Website**

Unifor's website is filled with useful information and resources for the members and activists, including current news stories, campaign information, member services, and more. There are specific sections on Human Rights, Women, Black, Indigenous and Workers of Colour (BIWOC), LGBTQ, Workers with disAbility and Young Workers. Please visit [www.unifor.org](http://www.unifor.org).

### **Unifor Women's Regional Council Standing Committees**

Unifor is comprised of four regions across the country (Atlantic, Ontario, Prairies and British Columbia). Quebec operates as a separate region with their own priorities but in parallel with the work being done across the country. Each of these regions maintains its own Regional Council, a parliamentary body that includes elected delegates from the various local unions in those jurisdictions. These Regional Councils meet once or twice per year.

Each Council has its own set of bylaws, and maintains its own Standing Committees - including a Women's Committee. The Committee is made up of three elected representatives, including one chairperson.

The Chairs from each region comprise Unifor's Canadian Council Women's Committee that meets, in person, once every 3 years.

To learn more about the Regional Council Committees and the Quebec Council Committee, email: [women@unifor.org](mailto:women@unifor.org).

### **Unifor Women's Area Networks**

Our union has hundreds of Women's Committees in local unions from coast to coast to coast, many have set up Area Networks. These networks aim to connect them all together locally, and facilitate campaigns, communication and information-sharing.

To join, or for more information on setting up a Women's Area Network, please email: [women@unifor.org](mailto:women@unifor.org).

### **Unifor Women's Conferences**

Unifor holds a National Women's Conference every year. They are held either at the Unifor Family Education Centre in Port Elgin, Ontario, or on alternate years, in a different city across Canada. Conference call letters are sent out to every Unifor Local in the country, encouraging leadership to send delegates. Conference call letters are also circulated through existing Women's Committees and on the Unifor website. All costs of attendance are the responsibility of the Local.

### **Education Courses**

The Unifor Education Department offers an extensive labour education program both in the areas where our members live as well as at our Unifor Family Education Centre. The union offers courses on a variety of subjects that range in length from one-day workshops to intensive four-week programs. Unifor boasts one of the most comprehensive and sophisticated education programs for union members in Canada with courses aimed at developing women's leadership skills including Women Activist, Women's Advocate, Women in Leadership, Women's Health & Safety, Women, Power & Political Action and Collective Bargaining for Women.

There are two weeks dedicated to women's courses yearly, please check the Education website for the schedule. [\*\*www.unifor.org/education\*\*](http://www.unifor.org/education)



## Answering Resistance to a Women's Committee

Occasionally members in the Local will be resistant to the Women's Committee. They may say, "Where's the men's committee?" In most of our workplaces, men make up the majority of the committees and leadership positions. Their voices and concerns are part of the conversation. Even in workplaces where women are the majority, it is useful to have a Women's Committee that focusses specifically on women's equality. Women still, on average, earn less than men; we are still responsible for a greater portion of child/family/home work; we are still more likely to be victims of violence; we are still less likely to be in positions of leadership and power than men in most institutions, from our unions to Parliament, etc. Until we eliminate these barriers to equality, women require spaces to discuss, analyze and organize toward solutions.

There are also many spaces carved out for specific groups in our union. With 115,000 women we represent a large membership base with unique perspectives and experiences that benefit from a focused conversation on our issues.

### A committee for all women?

Do an audit of your activities - overall, when you are dealing with sexism, are you also including a lens for racism, homophobia/transphobia, disability discrimination in your workplace?



## Sample Meeting Agenda

This is an example of what your Women's Committee meeting agenda could look like. Take the time to set your agenda in advance and distribute to those who express interest in attending.

Make your meetings your own!

- 1 - Welcoming remarks and Land Acknowledgement
- 2 - Introductions around the room, welcome new members
- 3 - Review and adoption of agenda
- 4 - Assign roles for International Women's Day rally:
  - Liaison with community organization
  - Poster distribution in workplace
  - Bring Uniform Women flags
  - Take photos to share with National Women's Department
- 5 - Watch video on abortion access in Canada & discuss
- 6 - Review and accept committee letter to Premier on abortion access
- 7 - Other community issues and concerns
- 8 - Tasks to complete by next meeting
- 9 - Set next meeting date and time
- 10 - Adjourn



## Stay Connected!

Follow the Women's Department and Unifor on social media:



[facebook.com/uniforwomen](https://facebook.com/uniforwomen)



[@UniforWomen](https://twitter.com/UniforWomen)



[@UniforCanada](https://instagram.com/UniforCanada)



[youtube.com/UniforCanada](https://youtube.com/UniforCanada)

To receive email alerts for upcoming events and other Women's Department information please sign up using our online form at [unifor.org/women](https://unifor.org/women)



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