

# Broadening union citizenship:

## Unifor's members in community chapters

Union forward | Unis, l'avenir nous appartient  
Unis, l'avenir nous appartient | Union forward



### **Unifor Founding Convention**

August 30 -  
September 1, 2013  
Toronto, Canada

### **Congrès de fondation d'Unifor**

30 août au  
1<sup>er</sup> septembre 2013  
Toronto, Canada



# **UNIFOR**

the **Union** | le **syndicat**

# Broadening Union Citizenship: Unifor's Members in Community Chapters

## Rationale and Goals

Our new union aims to be a fighting force on behalf of all working people, addressing and campaigning on their issues in the workplace, in their communities, and in broader society. The core strength of our union will continue to be our members in duly certified or recognized bargaining units. Those members enjoy the benefits of full union membership: including an enforceable contract, representation and grievance rights, union wages and benefits, and security.

However, a growing share of Canadian workers does not have effective access to traditional union representation and benefits, even if they want it, for a range of reasons. These barriers include hostile labour law and powerful employer resistance which defeats many organizing drives. And some groups of workers in non-standard arrangements (including freelance and nominally self-employed workers, contract or agency workers, homeworkers, workers in other forms of precarious work, and others who do not have a stable workplace) can't ever imagine having their job "unionized" in the traditional sense. To reinforce union power in this challenging context requires that the labour movement utilize innovative organizing and campaigning methods.

Our new union must prove to all Canadian workers, union and non-union, that it is working on behalf of the collective interests of the whole working class – not just our members in existing bargaining units. We must find new ways of organizing and fighting for positive change in non-traditional settings.

Therefore, Unifor will embrace an innovative and flexible organizational structure, called Community Chapters, that will allow us to reach out to new groups of workers otherwise excluded from union membership, and will enhance our reputation and credibility as a fighting force for all workers.

We must find new ways of organizing and fighting for positive change in non-traditional settings.

These Community Chapters will open up new possibilities for union membership and activism to many additional segments of the working class, including: workers in workplaces where organizing campaigns have not yet succeeded in forming a bargaining unit; workers in precarious jobs such as contract, temporary, agency, and freelance workers; unemployed workers; students working to put themselves through college or university; and any other group of workers hoping to improve their economic and social condition.

One major goal (though not the only goal) of our Community Chapters strategy is to support (where feasible) our continuing efforts to assist workers to organize their workplaces. Remember: our

members in certified or recognized bargaining units will remain the organizational and financial core of the new union. We will place top emphasis on using Community Chapters, where feasible and relevant, as a step toward the formation of bargaining units.

Other goals of our Community Chapters strategy include:

- Providing workers traditionally excluded from collective bargaining (including precarious, contract, freelance and self-employed workers; unemployed workers; and workers in not-yet-organized workplaces) an opportunity to use their collective strength to improve their conditions;
- Increasing our overall membership, including through new members in non-traditional settings;
- Giving those members more opportunities to connect with the union & participate in union activity;
- Redefining how other Canadian workers see and understand unions;
- Increasing our public credibility as a force working for all workers; and
- Building the profile and presence of our union in the communities where our members live.

## **The Principle of Collective Action**

Unifor welcomes members from workplaces which have not yet formed a bargaining unit (and/or where the prospects of doing so are limited by legal, economic, or other factors), in order to expand their opportunities for using the collective power of a union to better their lives (in the workplace and in the community).

Our approach to organizing in non-traditional settings is guided by the principle of collective action. To have maximum effect, activity, and ultimately power, these new union members must work together: with each other, and with the other members of the union. Becoming a union member (even through this new process) must be much more than just choosing, as an individual, to join; it must be rooted in a process of building collective power.

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For this reason, these members will belong to the union through a collective body: a Community Chapter of a local union. This body serves as their point of entry to membership, activity, and services of the union, and constitutes the most immediate and relevant collective platform for their participation and activity. (In some cases, as described below, Community Chapters may be directly chartered by the national union, without a connection to a specific local.)

## **Applying to Create a Community Chapter**

Community Chapters may be formed anywhere there is a sufficient critical mass of interest among people who are not members of a bargaining unit, but who wish to come together and form a new structure to advance their fight for economic and social justice in their workplace and community.

The criteria to determine whether this critical mass exists, include the following factors:

- A sufficient number of dedicated, active potential members;

- Some common interest (in a particular workplace, community, or interest area) that creates the potential for sustained shared activity; and
- A clear strategy for how they will use the collective power of the union to better their conditions and win victories from employers, governments, or other campaign targets.

This group of potential members will approach a Unifor local union that is willing to open its membership by creating a Community Chapter.

The local union, in turn, will approach the national officers with their proposal. (Local unions in Quebec will approach the Quebec Director, who will then liaise with the other national officers.) The proposal must identify the level of interest, the common interest that unites those potential members, and their concrete strategy for what the proposed Community Chapter will do.

A local union which wants to create a Community Chapter will also need to amend its bylaws to create a Community Chapter, and to provide mechanisms for consultation and participation of that Community Chapter in the broader life of the local union. The Community Chapter itself will also require its own bylaws (governing its own democratic practices, elections of executives, and other matters). The precise form of the Community Chapter's structure, practices, and integration with the local will reflect the decisions and preferences of the "host" local. The Community Chapter's bylaws, and the amendments to the local union's bylaws required to create and integrate the Community Chapter, must both be approved by the members of the host local union, and the local union must ultimately oversee the activity and financial integrity of the Chapter. To ease the process of creating a Community Chapter, the national union will develop a template set of by-laws which can be amended as desired (on a case-by-case basis) by the chapter and the host local union.

To ensure that new Community Chapters are conceived and created in a deliberate, effective, and strategic manner, the National Executive Board will also review and approve proposals for new Community Chapters.

Where a Community Chapter is created as the result of an ongoing organizing drive in a not-yet-organized workplace, the Organizing Department of the union will be consulted in the planning and creation of the chapter.

In most cases, local unions which create a Community Chapter will be large, capable, high-profile local unions in their respective communities, which are thus able to provide the support, visibility, and infrastructure which the new Community Chapter will need. This is consistent with our overall effort in Unifor to foster the emergence of stronger local unions with a strong community presence.

In some cases, especially where an existing group of workers, outside of a bargaining unit, want to collectively become members of the union, their organization may be directly chartered (at the discretion of the national officers of the union, and with the approval of the NEB) as a stand-alone Community Chapter, thus forming a specialized body within the union reflecting their particular situation and common interest.

## Rights and Responsibilities of Members in Community Chapters

Members joining the union through a Community Chapter must make a minimum initial commitment to membership for at least one full calendar year (that is, agreeing to pay at least 4 quarterly dues payments). An individual member may end their membership at any time after that.

Members in Community Chapters attend meetings of their chapters with full voice and vote.

Members in Community Chapters elect an executive of their chapter, the size and composition of which is specified in the Chapter's bylaws.

The sponsoring local union may include a representative of the Community Chapter on its local executive board, as determined by the local union's bylaws.

Members in Community Chapters will be encouraged to participate in all activities, standing committees, educationals, campaigns, and other initiatives of their local union.

The participation of members in Community Chapters in other local union democratic structures and processes will be determined by each sponsoring local union, as reflected in its by-laws.

Members in Community Chapters will not elect members of bargaining committees; vote on strike mandates, collective bargaining proposals, contract ratification, or other bargaining-related matters; or run for elected executive positions within the local or national union.

Some Community Chapters, as described above, may be directly chartered by the national union (with the approval of the National Executive Board). In those cases, the NEB may also determine processes through which those stand-alone Community Chapters are able to participate in the activity and democratic processes of the national union (including, where appropriate, participation in councils and conventions).

## Dues

Members in Community Chapters will pay union dues.

The dues structure will reflect a basic distinction between waged and non-waged members .

Non-waged members will pay \$5 per month, paid in quarterly installments.

Dues for waged members (including those earning income in non-standard employment forms, such as freelancing or contract work) will be set by each Community Chapter, but will be a minimum of \$10 per month, paid in quarterly installments.

These dues thresholds may be reviewed occasionally (to reflect inflation and other economic changes) and adjusted by a decision of the National Executive Board.

Dues will be collected and forwarded to the Community Chapters through a centralized electronic

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infrastructure (organized and operated by the national union) allowing members in Community Chapters to conveniently pay their dues through quarterly credit card, bank, or on-line deductions.

At least until a national network of Community Chapters is well-established and new structures for their participation in the broader union are developed, each Community Chapter will receive back through the national dues collection system 100% of the dues paid by its members.

In the future, if a network of Community Chapters becomes feasible, to undertake activities that link their work and provide broader voice for Community Chapters within the national union, then the allocation of some dues revenue to support that work (along with the creation of corresponding higher-level democratic councils and structures for the Community Chapters) may be contemplated, requiring appropriate constitutional amendments.

## Services

The national union will work to develop an information infrastructure (including information on the legal rights of non-bargaining-unit-represented workers in Canada's various jurisdictions; "how-to" information on labour rights, advocacy, and organizing; information on the union's broader activities and campaigns; and other relevant information). This database/website will be accessible to all members in Community Chapters.

The national union will work to arrange a package of union benefit programs (potentially including discounted health, car, and home insurance programs; discounted credit card services or other financial services; and other consumer discount opportunities) that will be made available to members in Community Chapters (and other members of Unifor and their families) on a voluntary basis at cost.

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The national union will develop, and work with local unions to deliver educational training modules on information relevant to members in Community Chapters, including new member orientation, know-your-rights, campaign and advocacy skills, EI/WCB/ CPP matters, and more.

The national union will work to engage members in Community Chapters in all our broader educational, political, and community campaigning.

The Community Chapter, working together with its host local union, may undertake to provide additional services (including representation, advocacy, workplace presence and campaigns, negotiations with management, and others) for its members. These services will be financed from the dues revenue collected by each Community Chapter (and hence are fully contingent on the Community Chapter reaching a critical mass of membership and dues collection), supplemented by additional support (such as the assistance of trained local benefit reps, the use of local offices and meeting rooms, etc.) made available by the host local union.

It is explicitly recognized that working people will not be able to enjoy the full benefits of traditional union membership (including protection of an enforceable collective agreement, representation, grievance

systems, union-quality wages and benefits, etc.) unless they succeed in organizing a bargaining unit and negotiating a binding collective agreement with their employer(s). Again, one key goal (but not the only goal) of our Community Chapter strategy is to foster the successful organization and certification of these bargaining units.

## **Conclusion: Finding New Ways to Use the Power of Collective Action**

Unifor is committed to finding innovative, effective ways of assisting exploited working people, including those in non-standard employment settings, to organize themselves to fight for change.

Our union is not some higher body that “delivers” benefits to its members. The union is a tool – the power of collective action – that workers can use to improve their own lives.

Our new Community Chapters represent our effort to provide more access to this tool, to more Canadian workers – including those who never believed that they could ever belong to a union.

We will be flexible, creative, and determined in building and supporting these Community Chapters, recognizing that through experimentation and experience we will find some models and settings that work better than others. Our initial “pilot projects” – working with groups of activists who want to form Community Chapters, and supportive local unions which are willing to be their “host” – will help us learn and improve our efforts to organize among non-traditional groups of workers.