

Diversity and Inclusion in Our Unions

An introduction

The National Union of Public and General Employees (NUPGE) is a family of 11 Component and 3 affiliate unions. Taken together we are one of the largest unions in Canada. Most of our 390,000 members work to deliver public services of every kind to the citizens of their home provinces. We also have a large and growing number of members who work for private businesses.

Larry Brown, President

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Diversity and Inclusion in Our Unions

The Winnipeg General Strike began on Thursday, May 15, 1919, when 500 telephone operators refused to show up for the 7:00 am shift.

90% of the city's telephone operators were women. Known as the Hello Girls, these operators made up the majority of the first group of workers to go out in support of the striking metal and building trades workers.

In fact, women workers were active in the entire strike effort.

For many women, the strike represented an opportunity to organize en masse with sister workers. On May 20, the Western Labor News announced an all-day organizational meeting for all women workers. Other meetings were announced throughout the editions of the paper, including those of such groups as the laundry workers, box workers and "Bread and Cake" workers.¹

Contrary to the established norms of the time, women workers participated in more direct actions during the strike.

Other women also decided on direct action and became involved in riots, inciting strikers and harassing scabs. On June 6, Mayor Gray placed a ban on public crowds and parades. This ban led to some women being arrested for being members of an unlawful assembly. On this same day, the Tribune reported that eleven persons, three of whom were women, faced disorderly conduct charges in connection with inciting strikers on Main Street near Market Square on the previous day.²

It is also important to remember that immigrant workers made an essential contribution to the strike. These workers faced extreme poverty, exploitative working conditions, and the constant threat of deportation for their advocacy work.

In June 1919 a group of immigrant workers were arrested in an effort to undermine support for the Winnipeg strike. They were not put before a Board of Inquiry as the Immigration Act required: they were sent to an internment camp for "enemy aliens" and quietly expelled, despite the protests of their lawyers.³

The labour movement has always been at its best when it empowers the exploited, impoverished, and oppressed. Through uniting people around common cause and struggle, great things have been achieved.

Unfortunately, there are also examples where the union movement has not lived up to its potential. Unions are human organizations and can be influenced by the biases and prejudices that exist; but unions have been, and must continue to be, vehicles for empowerment. They must be a tool to exercise voice, courage, and agency towards

liberation. This is the great ethical imperative of the union movement.

There is, however, another reason why the union movement needs to do more to promote diversity and foster the inclusion of all people into our organizations: the world and the workplace are changing. Unions have had to change many times in the past to reflect the reality of a new workforce and broader developments in society. Here are but a few examples of how our organizations have had to change with the times:

- the shift from craft unionism to industrial unionism,
- the mass entry of women into the workforce,
- government cuts to public services and to legal resources for low-income workers, and
- the response to demands for equality for all.

A topic that unions have been tackling via grievances, but perhaps less in educational outreach, is that of microaggressions. Defined in the 1970s, microaggressions are a “comment or action that subtly and often unconsciously or unintentionally expresses a prejudiced attitude toward a member of a marginalized group.”⁴ It’s important to note that microaggressions can occur whether there’s malicious intent behind them or not. In fact, many occur when the aggressor thinks they’re giving a compliment. An example of a microaggression is asking a racialized person where they’re “really from,” or complimenting them on how well they speak English. Another is asking everyone to stand to sing the national anthem, which excludes people with mobility impairments. A third is telling a transgender person that they “don’t look trans.”

These microaggressions, which could appear as trivial to those who have never faced them, pile up on members of marginalized groups and have a negative impact on their quality of life and mental health. Dr. Duke Redbird, an Indigenous elder and activist, calls microaggressions “death by a thousand cuts.”

Our Membership Is Changing

We are, once again, witnessing dramatic changes in the composition of our membership and broader societal shifts in population. Together we must adapt to be more inclusive and responsive to a new and evolving membership. We must recognize the progress that the union movement has made in promoting diversity and inclusion, but must also commit to further education, at all levels of the union, to address those practices and behaviours that do not go far enough or are behind the times.

This means going beyond simply recognizing that the membership and workforce are diverse to actually altering how we function to be more inclusive of that membership. The Winnipeg General Strike serves as a powerful reminder that we have done it before and that the results can be powerfully transformative.

The size of Canada's population has changed little since the mid-1990s. According to Statistics Canada, we are seeing an average population growth of around 1% per year.⁵

Despite low growth, we are experiencing very real and important changes in the demographics of our society, and, in particular, how the population of many provinces and territories is evolving.

Canada's population is not evenly distributed across regions. Between 2011 and 2014, the provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba had population growth greater than the national average. However, population growth in the Atlantic provinces has been close to zero, and, for the first time, more deaths than births are being recorded in 3 of the 4 Atlantic provinces.

We are also seeing shifting demographics across provinces. By the mid-2030s, the percentage of seniors aged 65 and over could exceed 31% in Newfoundland and Labrador and reach 18% in Alberta. In 2031, the percentage of individuals belonging to a visible minority could exceed 40% in Ontario, compared with 3% in Newfoundland and Labrador.⁶

Equality and Human Rights

While it is important to recognize the demographic changes in Canada, it is also essential to remember that due to inequities, many people's experiences in the workplace and in society are shaped by the existence of discrimination, harassment, and violence.

As a union, we must always be committed to achieving equality for all. Systemic discrimination and the oppression of people harms not only those targeted but all of us. It divides us as workers and people. We must be dedicated to creating a society that allows each and every one of us the ability to flourish. And we must work to ensure that every worker be given fair access to legal representation in tribunals.

Notably, this does not mean that we do not acknowledge differences, past mistreatment, or processes of marginalization. Indeed, to simply ignore differences in the name of a greater humanity tends to mask very real practices of discrimination and oppression. To ignore these differences can play a strong role in replicating the social structures that continue to marginalize and discriminate against people on a wide range of bases.

The goal must be to recognize the beautiful and inspiring diversity of people and create organizations where they are included and supported.

The National Union is strongly committed to achieving full equality, justice, and participation for everyone, regardless of race, age, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, citizenship status, or ability. However, there are contemporary struggles we feel merit being highlighted. In particular, we believe that achieving justice for Indigenous peoples, achieving racial justice, expanding and defending rights for transgender and gender-diverse individuals, addressing rising Islamophobia, and protecting rights for people with disabilities are issues that require concerted action.

This is not to say that we will not be active on a wide range of human rights concerns. We will be! It is to recognize that, at this moment, these communities are facing extreme challenges and need the support of the entire labour movement!

Going Forward

In the coming decade, both the Canadian workforce and our membership are going to change dramatically. As baby boomers retire, the number of young workers we represent is rapidly increasing. Demographic changes mean more new members will be from equity-seeking groups, including Indigenous people, persons of colour, the LGBTQI2S communities, and persons with disabilities.

To continue to be an effective voice for improving the lives of working people, unions need to be relevant to young workers, and workers from equity-seeking groups. This means working *with* equity-seeking groups and giving them a seat at the table without talking over them. NUPGE and its Components are already taking steps to address this with work like the Communicating with Young Workers project and Generational Cohesion project survey, but more needs to be done.

We also need to fight efforts to divide workers by race, age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, ability, or religion. That includes supporting campaigns to protect the rights of migrant workers and to replace temporary migration programs with permanent immigration. As the history of the labour movement teaches us, when workers are worried about whether they will be allowed to stay in Canada, they are more vulnerable to exploitation.

What Can Unions Do?

In an ongoing effort to make our unions and the world more inclusive, the National Union of Public and General Employees and its Components will do the following:

Create a series of public education tools addressing diversity and inclusion in our unions and the barriers facing equity-seeking groups. These will include examples of overt forms of discrimination and microaggressions.

Work with Components to collect the information on membership demographics needed to improve representation and to ensure the full inclusion of members within the union as mobilized and engaged activists.

Work with NUPGE's Collective Bargaining Advisory Committee to compile a list of best-practices language from our members' agreements dealing with issues related to equity, diversity, and inclusiveness.

Continue to support employment equity legislation and programs.

Continue to monitor, promote, and support the fulfilment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 Calls to Action and the 231 Calls to Justice from the final report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, and renew our call on federal and provincial governments to end the underfunding of services and infrastructure for Indigenous communities.

Support efforts by the labour movement to protect the rights of migrant workers to move from temporary migration programs to permanent immigration status.

¹ http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/mb_history/11/women1919strike.shtml

² Ibid.

³ <https://ccrweb.ca/sites/ccrweb.ca/files/static-files/workerdep.htm>

⁴ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/microaggression>

⁵ <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2015001/article/14240-eng.htm>

⁶ Ibid.



NATIONAL UNION OF PUBLIC AND GENERAL EMPLOYEES

- B. C. Government and Service Employees' Union (BCGEU)
- Health Sciences Association of British Columbia (HSABC)
- Health Sciences Association of Alberta (HSAA)
- Saskatchewan Government and General Employees' Union (SGEU)
- Manitoba Government and General Employees' Union (MGEU)
- Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU)
- Canadian Union of Brewery and General Workers (CUBGW)
- New Brunswick Union of Public and Private Employees (NBU)
- Nova Scotia Government and General Employees Union (NSGEU)
- PEI Union of Public Sector Employees (PEI UPSE)
- Newfoundland & Labrador Association of Public and Private Employees (NAPE)

The National Union of Public and General Employees is an affiliate of the Canadian Labour Congress and a member of Public Services International.

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