

**GUEST EDITORS' PRÉCIS TO
THE SPECIAL SECTION OF
JUST LABOUR:**

**ADVANCING THE EQUITY
AGENDA INSIDE UNIONS
AND AT THE BARGAINING
TABLE**

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This section of *Just Labour* provides a brief report on an important conference called *Advancing the Equity Agenda: Inside Unions and at the Bargaining Table*, sponsored by the Centre for Research on Work and Society (CRWS) in March 2005. The topic attracted over one hundred trade union activists, university students and professors

from across the country, to discuss and debate what has happened with equity organizing in the Canadian labour movement over the past thirty years and to strategize about dealing with the challenges we face today, and in the future.

The conference was part of the Centre's major research project, *Restructuring Work and Labour in the New Economy*, funded through Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), Initiatives in the New Economy program. A sub-committee of the Organizing research domain of Geoff Bickerton, Linda Briskin, Janice Foley, Jane Stinson and Rosemary Warskett planned the conference to critically evaluate what had been accomplished through organizing around equity issues in the Canadian labour movement.

It provided a rare opportunity to discuss tough issues around advancing equity policy, practice and organizing in the union movement. Participants came together to identify more clearly what had been accomplished and where new strategies were needed to overcome barriers that prevented progress. It provided a space to reflect on what is meant by the new economy, on what are its implications for future equity organizing inside unions, and on the development of new strategies.

The conference focussed on organizing efforts within the Canadian trade union movement

over the past thirty years. The work presented at the conference sought to highlight the steps undertaken to have unions better reflect the diverse demographics of their membership in activities, leadership bodies, policies, as well as in achievements in collective bargaining, and social and political action. Through plenary speeches and workshop discussion, the conference traced the legacy of feminist organizing, followed by equity organizing on a broader range of identity politics, including racialized, aboriginal, disabled, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and transsexual workers' rights.

Through this forum, we explored how to achieve gains around equity issues when job security is under attack and pressure is on to lower wages; how to deal with backlash against equity measures; what has been accomplished through greater representation of equity seeking groups on decision making boards; how to organize across constituencies to achieve greater understanding, support and influence through a "caucus of caucuses"; how strategies need to change to make new inroads and continue to advance equality rights.

Conference speakers and attendees sought to bring forward examples of best practices - strategies that have worked to promote more equity in unions, in our workplaces, and in society as well as to identify key barriers to

challenges that continue to stand in the way of change. We hoped that through these discussions we could sharpen our vision for the future and be better prepared to deal with persistent and new challenges.

The articles here represent only a small a portion of the discussions that took place, but they do provide some highlights as well as a flavour of the debate and discussion generated by both speakers and participants. Some snippets of presentations or comments by participants are also included to reflect the discussion as well as to bring more voices into the text.

The keynote address by Judy Darcy, long-time feminist and trade union activist and national leader, provides a sweeping history of equity organizing in her lifetime, pointing out the tremendous changes that have occurred, as well as the tremendous challenges now faced in what is called the new economy. Postal worker and feminist activist Marion Pollack shares frustrations and insights from her history of dealing with the backlash against equity organizing. Saskatchewan union organizer Don Moran explains how unions are changing to reach out to the growing aboriginal workforce in Saskatchewan. Law Professor Judy Fudge and Jane Stinson of CUPE talk about what the new economy means for collective bargaining. John Cartwright relates what this means for the Toronto Labour

Council's organizing. Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) Vice-President Marie-Clarke Walker provides an overview of important equity changes to date and suggests further steps. Former CLC Secretary-Treasurer Nancy Riche explains how five affirmative action seats for women were created on the CLC Executive. And Women's Studies Professor Linda Briskin sets out a strategy for the next stage of union equity organizing. Key ideas about how to move the union equity agenda forward wrap up the conference report. They are summarized from ideas provided by conference participants in their conference evaluation forms.

A major goal for the conference was to produce popular and scholarly educational material from the conference discussions. This issue of *Just Labour* is an important step in doing so.