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**INSIDE UNIONS AT THE  
BARGAINING TABLE:  
KEYNOTE ADDRESS OF THE  
ADVANCING THE EQUITY  
AGENDA CONFERENCE**

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**INTRODUCTION BY LINDA  
BRISKIN**

*Judy Darcy was a union activist in Toronto for seventeen years before becoming the national secretary-treasurer for the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) in 1989. In 1991 she was elected National President and re-elected five times. As the national leader of CUPE Judy gained wide recognition for building membership activism, taking on privatization and concessions, and promoting an equity agenda in the union and at the bargaining table. Judy stepped down as CUPE President in 2003 and began as the new Secretary – Business Manager for the Hospital Employees Union in British Columbia in March 2005. People like Judy Darcy throughout the labour movement have made a difference.<sup>1</sup>*

**JUDY DARCY**

I want to try to distil some of the lessons from our experience in fighting for equity within the trade union movement - at the bargaining table and in society over the past thirty years, and also put forward some ideas and challenges about the future.

So let me start with where we've come from. I want to paint a picture about a few experiences, starting with the 1974 Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) convention in Vancouver, the first one that I attended as a very young, new activist. Women's equality rated a couple of paragraphs in a much bigger policy paper. There was no talk of racism and disabilities or about gay and lesbian rights. Most of the women who spoke on that policy paper felt defensive and introduced themselves by saying "I'm not one of those women's libbers, but..." and then went on to offer an opinion.

The first woman ever elected at the CLC was elected at that convention: Shirley Carr from CUPE. It was about getting public sector representation on the slate for the first time. There were no women leaders of major national or international unions in Canada that year. It was only the next year that Grace Hartman was elected the first woman national union leader in our country as President of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE).

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<sup>1</sup> Introduction by Linda Briskin of York University.

There was not another woman national leader elected until I was elected President of CUPE in 1991.

In 1974 we didn't talk about harassment. It wasn't a word. And in some of the hospitality rooms at that convention there were go-go girls in very skimpy costumes. There was probably more than one woman who gave a militant speech and before she sat down had someone approach her to say "I like the way you talk when you're angry. Will you go to bed with me?" Equal pay for equal work was beginning to be talked about, but certainly not equal pay for work of equal value. Paid maternity leave was virtually unheard of. There were almost no part-time workers, casual workers, or contingent workers organized in unions. A national childcare program was not even a twinkle in anybody's eye. And as for affirmative action and employment equity programs, it was generally assumed, in the workplace and in the unions, that the best person for the job was a straight, white male.

I could go on, but I think that paints you a bit of a picture about where we were in 1974. It's clear when you contrast that picture with today, that we've made incredible gains in the trade union movement with an impressive list of achievements: The changes we've negotiated in collective agreements,

the laws we've changed, the committees we've created, the policies we've adopted, the positions to which we've been elected and the union culture that we've begun to change.

### HOW DID WE CHANGE THE LABOUR MOVEMENT?

We did it by caucusing, by bargaining, by mobilizing, by demonstrating, by coalition building, by lobbying, by speaking out, by demanding, by laughing, by crying and most of all we did it by organizing. When I say organizing, I mean organizing ourselves to win. Getting together, caucusing, strategizing, defining our demands and our goals and then mapping out what we needed to do to achieve them, which allies we needed to build, which resolutions we needed

to draft, which leaflets we needed to get out, which picket lines and bargaining struggles were most important, and so on. We did it by building a powerful movement and a force for change that could not be ignored by governments, by employers, by union leaders or by power structures within the trade union movement. We did it in one union after another. We did it in one collective agreement after another. We did it in one convention after

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another. We did it in one campaign after another.

Our gains were certainly uneven and remain so. In some unions and sectors the gains we've achieved on the equity front are far greater than they are in others. And there's no question that there have been far more significant advances in some areas, for some equity-seeking groups compared to others. I think women's equality and gay and lesbian rights have been the areas where we've made some of the most significant advances. The advances for people of colour, for aboriginal workers and for people with disabilities have not been nearly as great, both in the union, as well as in our workplaces.

In the course of those struggles for internal union equity we changed the parameters of what was considered a legitimate union issue, whether it was reproductive choice for women or childcare or racism or immigration policy or same sex marriage. In the course of taking on those struggles we did some of the first, and most effective, coalition building the trade union movement engaged in. For example, with the women's movement, especially in the case of the NAC<sup>2</sup> and OWW<sup>3</sup> and the equal pay coalition in Ontario, with gay and lesbian rights organizations, with anti-racism groups, with First

Nations, with disability rights groups, and so on.

The strength of what was happening in the women's movement had an impact on what we were able to do internally on women's equality in the trade union movement. The work we did for women's equality in the trade union movement helped to build, reinforce and strengthen the broader women's movement. Today, we can see a decline in the advances we're making for women's equality, and the decline in the broader women's movement.

Those equity struggles and coalition building efforts broke new ground and laid the basis for the wide acceptance and support for social unionism in the Canadian trade union movement today. We can be proud that trade unions in Canada have profoundly contributed to fundamental advances for equity that affect everybody who lives in this country. This history includes:

- Early bargaining and strikes for equal pay that led to legislation covering hundreds of thousands of women;
- Strong support of the movement for reproductive choice - a very, very controversial issue - but one that feminists in the trade union movement worked closely with feminists in the pro-choice movement to advance;

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<sup>2</sup> National Action Committee on the Status of Women

<sup>3</sup> Organized Working Women

- Negotiating same sex benefits in a local union collective agreement and taking forward court challenges on issues like pensions and benefits for same sex, as CUPE did.

A lot of the work we have done in local and national unions certainly helped to pave the way for major advances we've seen in Canada today, like same sex marriage. All of those struggles are far from over and all of those gains are an incredible tribute to a lot of the people who are in this room and the tens of thousands of activists who aren't in the room but who are working on the ground from coast to coast.

### SO, WHERE ARE WE TODAY?

I don't know that there is a trade union movement that has achieved as much as we have achieved. Significant as those gains are, we live in an era where a lot of the equity gains are fragile. We need to look closely at both the external and internal forces threatening the gains we made through many years of hard struggle.

*The trade union movement needs to come together around economic justice issues for low paid workers. That is the most fundamental or overarching equity issue of the day. If we don't refocus our efforts as a trade union movement on doing that we will become increasingly irrelevant to the major challenges that we're facing in the new economy.*

The forces of globalization, privatization, cutbacks and deregulation threaten our equity gains. Attacks on free collective bargaining in one province, and one sector after another, also threaten them. Our gains for equality are threatened by the Wal-Martization of our economy. Our gains are threatened by the race to the bottom and by social conservatism as an organized political force in this country.

Problems within the labour movement also threaten our equity gains, such as backlash in our own ranks. Our gains are threatened by a profound lack of commitment to equality and understanding of equality by some people in power in our trade union movement. Our gains are also threatened by our own weaknesses as equity activists in learning lessons from our own history about how to most effectively bring about change. I want to focus on just a couple of major ones.

The first critical lesson is: We need to have a fundamental debate in the labour movement today about what's happening to equity gains in this new economy and how we need to change as a trade union movement. We need to learn lessons from our experiences about how to become even more effective, far stronger, and far more powerful, in

order to defend our equity gains and to build on those gains in the future.

We're beginning to move backwards in a number of equity areas. In one industry after another, one employer after another, one corporation after another, one sector after another, employers try to contract out and subcontract our work, trying to replace full-time permanent employees with part-time casual, contingent workers. The employers try to replace decently paid or well-paid unionized jobs with low pay workers who have no benefits at all.

We have to ask ourselves hard questions about whether raising low paid workers' wages, (mainly women and workers of colour), is our collective goal as a trade union movement - not just something we pass resolutions on at conventions, but whether we will focus our collective and cooperative energies in working to achieve it? Will we decide that cutthroat competition belongs in corporate boardrooms, not in the trade union movement and replace our relationships of stiff competition instead with real relationships of cooperation in solidarity? Will we make concrete commitments - one union to another, working together with trade unions through our central labour bodies that we will not undercut one another in attempting to secure a foothold in some new sector or corporation? Or, will we say instead that our efforts will be put into working together to

ensure that we improve workers' lives, that we defend our equity gains and that we build on them?

More and more we talk about the importance of solidarity and of coordinating our efforts closely with trade unions around the world because we're taking on the same multinational corporations at the bargaining table, or in fighting privatization. Yet, at home, what happens in one company, in one collective agreement, in one union or with one employer has a profound impact on what happens to everybody else in that corporation, or sector, or industry. But cooperation and working together is something that is still foreign to a lot of the work we do. We need to ask ourselves, as a movement, whether we can tackle low wages and equality issues effectively when we're almost as competitive with one another as contractors are when they're bidding for new work.

One way competition gets played out is when unions rush to sign voluntary recognition agreements with employers, trying to convince employers that they can be the best, the most reasonable union to deal with. This often comes at the expense of the workers who will be covered by that collective agreement, as well as being detrimental to trends in the sector, industry, or corporation.

## WHAT IS THE ROLE OF CENTRAL LABOUR BODIES?

Fundamentally, unions are about collective bargaining, about making gains for our members, improving the position of working people, men, women, and people from all equity-seeking groups. We do that first and foremost through collective bargaining. And yet, our central labour bodies deal with just about everything except collective bargaining. That's why it's crucial that we have a debate in the labour movement today about what we want our central labour bodies to be all about.

An important debate is happening in the American labour movement about this. A proposal spearheaded by Andy Stern in the AFL-CIO is to reduce the number of trade unions from fifty-eight to twenty, I believe, through forced mergers, and also to cut dues to the AFL-CIO by fifty percent, putting that money back in unions on the condition that it be used for organizing the unorganized. This is to deal with union density in the United States,

which has gone down now to about twelve percent. Without getting into what we might agree or disagree with about this position, there is a fundamental debate happening about direction. There are clashing visions being proposed. It's difficult, it's tough, it's controversial, and it's acrimonious.

I believe that we must have the courage to have the same kind of debate. Some issues will be the same. Some will be very different. I personally believe that encouraging mergers, not forcing them, is a good thing because I strongly believe industrial unionism is fundamental to advancing workers' gains and equity gains. We must rebuild a sense of industrial unionism, which is about bargaining power. But I can say over many years, in many situations where there were attempts to try and discuss some of those issues, it was virtually impossible. In the early years it was "There, there little girl, you're new, you don't understand, nobody's pure. It's about turf and we all care about defending our

turf, don't we?"

*The issue is not whether we need to have special or designated seats. The issue is what we have to do to ensure that the representatives of equity-seeking groups actually have some power and strength behind them when they speak at that table. The major way to do that is to focus our efforts back on bargaining, back on organizing, back on mobilizing for economic justice, especially for groups like the lowest paid workers in our society who mainly come from equity-seeking groups.*

## **WE NEED BARGAINING POWER TO RAISE LOW WAGES**

But these issues are not about turf or union jurisdiction. Fundamentally they're about bargaining power and bargaining strength. They're about whether we're going to organize ourselves in such a way to give ourselves power and strength to defend and advance our equity gains and raise wages for low wage workers in particular. It's about whether we're going to be effective in taking on the Sodexos and Aramarks and Wal-Mart's of this world. It's about whether we will have one union pitted against another continually and race to the bottom line or, whether we'll work in solidarity to raise the wages of those people who need our support the most.

The trade union movement's equity agenda is a very broad one and it needs to continue to be a very broad one. We need to continue to work for that equity agenda on a variety of different levels, working on national policy issues, working on legislation, continuing to fight for a national childcare program, continuing to take on issues like same sex marriage and making our voices heard so that what the majority of Canadians support becomes the law of the land. Speaking out on issues like racial profiling and the effect of EI changes on a contingent workforce, in addition to all the other issues that are really critical equity issues

affecting our members and equity-seeking groups across the country.

We do some of those things very well. We do some others not very well. But, I believe the paramount equity issue that is facing our current generation of activists and the trade union movement today is the challenge of raising low paid workers' wages. It is integrally linked to being able to defend our gains for equity and the gains we've made for our members in general throughout the trade union movement. The relevance of the labour movement, of our central labour bodies, and of our equity agenda will be measured in large part by how successful we are in achieving some of those goals.

I don't pretend to have the answers. We have to work together to develop those answers as a movement. But, if we don't start asking the hard questions now about our effectiveness, about our ways of working together, about the role of our individual unions and of our central labour bodies in particular, I don't think we're ever going to get there. We need to ask questions like:

- Why can't we come together to define common bargaining goals that we're going to take on together as a trade union movement?
- Why can't we work together on cooperation agreements for organizing the unorganized rather than wasting scarce

resources on competing to represent the same groups?

- Why can't we go to our members and our locals and our leaders and convince them to sign onto solidarity pacts that really are about one group of workers, one union being there for another when we need them the most?
- Why can't we commit that no union will sign voluntary recognition agreements that undermine the interests of all workers?
- Why can't we agree that when work is contracted out, or subcontracted, that unions should be able and supported in following that work?
- And why can't we lead a movement in this country that brings together a wide variety of equity-seeking groups?

In some cases we need to rebuild some of those equity-seeking groups, like the women's movement, bringing them together with the trade union movement to build a powerful movement for economic justice, especially for the lowest paid workers in our country. I think it's within our power to do all of those things. It's going to take vision, leadership and some good, old-fashioned organizing too.

## **HOW TO STRENGTHEN EQUITY REPRESENTATIVES?**

That brings me to the final issue of how do we strengthen the role of equity activists, of equity committees, and of our elected equity representatives on leadership bodies in the course of taking on these other struggles. We have taken a whole lot of steps forward on equity representation in our movement. But we've also taken some big ones back and we're in danger of taking even more back. We have equity committees at various levels, at almost all levels of many unions, and at all levels of our central labour bodies. Today we have several women union leaders, five I think, who are heads of unions, which is very exciting. We've lost some. We've gained some. Hopefully, the trend is an upward trend, but I really worry about that.

We have many folks from equity-seeking groups on executive boards, not as national union leaders or international union leaders yet, but on many executive boards. We have equity activists who have made a very, very important difference in ensuring that equity issues are raised on various leadership bodies and that all of the issues that we look at are seen through an equity lens. But the role that equity reps have been able to play in those positions varies widely from what is essentially tokenism, in some situations, to having a very deeply

respected role at the table in other situations. The role has everything to do with having a base. It has everything to do with having an organized movement for change out there happening in workplaces, in the unions, and in society at large.

When I think back through our history about when some of our equity representatives have been the strongest at the table, one period that comes to mind is in Ontario in the 1980's when, for the first time in the country, there were five affirmative action positions for women created on a union executive board, at the Ontario Federation of Labour. That came about as a result of the tremendous influence and organizing of the women's movement in the province, in the country, and within the trade union movement. It gave those women a very powerful voice at that table and reinforced the work that women activists were able to do throughout the trade union movement. I think there is a real direct connection between the strength of that organizing work at the base, the strength of the movement for change that we've built in our organizations, the movement for change that's happening out there in society, and our ability to have a voice, a powerful voice, at the table. I hate to say it, but without that organized force behind us we aren't going to get any respect at the table.

Let me also speak from personal experience here. If women who have been elected at the highest

levels of the trade union movement are marginalized, are not consulted before a consensus is declared on a major issue of the day, imagine the marginalization that occurs for people who come not with a wide elected base, with an entire union behind them or an entire convention, but who come there chosen from an equity caucus at a convention. They have a voice, but it has not necessarily meant a change in the fundamental power relationships in our movement.

### **WE NEED TO MAKE EQUITY GAINS THROUGH COLLECTIVE BARGAINING**

I want to be very clear. I am a strong advocate and defender of affirmative action seats in the trade union movement at all levels. The issue is not whether we need to have special or designated seats. The issue is what we have to do to ensure that the representatives of equity-seeking groups, who sit at those tables, actually have some power and strength behind them when they speak. Learning from our experience, I believe that the major way to do that is to focus our efforts, as equity activists, back on bargaining, back on organizing, back on mobilizing for economic justice, especially for groups like the lowest paid workers in our society who mainly come from equity-seeking groups. If we wait for somebody else to give us a greater role at the table we're going to wait an awfully long

time. In fact, we probably could lose those places at the table.

One of the most critical ways to advance our equity agenda internally in the labour movement, as we strive towards greater, stronger, and more powerful representation, is for us to seize the leadership as equity activists on the most important economic and social justice and equity issues of the day and run with them. Let's provide the leadership to make sure that that debate happens in the trade union movement about what we want our trade union movement to be. Equity activists are uniquely positioned to be able to do that.

And let's also make sure that we strengthen our commitment rather, than weaken our commitment, to build a broader social justice movement, to work with coalition partners, to build a women's movement, an anti-racism movement, a people with disabilities movement, and a gay rights movement. That work with our coalition partners is more important than ever before. As those movements have weakened, so too has the movement within trade unions for equity weakened. So it's absolutely critical that we commit our resources and our energies to strengthen those broader movements so that we, in turn, will be stronger in taking on our fights.

## **DEVELOP EQUITY ACTIVITIES THROUGH STRUGGLES**

It is also our experience that leadership develops first and foremost through struggles; by activists coming to the fore who are fighting for issues that really matter and affect the daily lives of their fellow workers. A whole generation of activists came to the fore in many of our equity battles. Leadership develops in the course of those battles, those strikes, those struggles, that bargaining, and campaigning for change. If we are able to take on our equity issues in a way that really reaches, touches, involves, and mobilizes the vast majority of our members, we will see a whole new generation of leaders emerge in those struggles, leaders from equity-seeking groups, leaders who will indeed have the force and power behind them when they speak at the tables at the highest level in the trade union movement.

So, let me just conclude by saying this conference provides us with a badly needed opportunity to strategize across unions and across equity groups. I think we're at a crossroads in this country and in the trade union movement in our battle for equity and also in our fundamental definition of ourselves. And I believe that the people in this room have the courage to take on what need to be very tough debates in order to ensure that the trade union movement is up to the

challenge. So let's let the debate begin. Thank you very much.

## QUESTION PERIOD

### QUESTION

My name is Denise Hammond and I'm a member of CUPE. Your first convention was actually the year that I was born and your last convention was my first national convention. I don't have a lot of those gains to talk about and to feel the collective capacity and movement that's been built through the union.

How do we make equity issues our collective goal? I see a lot of resolutions come to the floor. People pass them and a year later they haven't been implemented or they haven't been circulated. They don't mean much more than the piece of paper that they're handed out on. That's a really frustrating thing to realize. You go through that process and then at the end of the day you don't really feel like you've moved anywhere.

And how do we bring youth into the movement so that they don't feel tokenistic? How do we actually build a capacity where young workers stand up and say, "I want to belong to a union because I believe in it and because I think it's important?" Because right now a lot of people my age, and that I work with, don't want to belong to a union. If we're going to look forward and talk about how do we

advance and continue to advance through unions to build an equity agenda, how do we ensure that we're building a union movement for the future?

### RESPONSE

There is a real danger of our equity work being reduced to the work we do in those committees, the resolutions we bring to conventions, the seats that we gain, the voice that we raise at a table when the way we got there in the first place was through collective struggle, through collective organizing, through movement building. And that's why I really believe that we need to focus back on that.

Once we've adopted something at convention, it doesn't necessarily mean very much unless we're organizing in local unions and in communities and on picket lines and in demonstrations and in lobbying and in conferences and workshops and going out there and reaching our members, member by member, local by local, across the country. I think that's an area where we're really slipped backwards and where we absolutely need to focus our energies. Our folks at the table will not have power and strength behind them until we rebuild that movement at the base.

We've got to be strategic and talk together union by union, sector by sector, but also collectively as equity activists about what are those key demands and issues and goals

that we can most effectively mobilize around. We can't do a hundred at once.

We need to say this is the goal, this is the demand that we're going to take out to our local unions and do the grass roots organizing and mobilizing around it, and then be in a position at the bargaining table and in our unions to really make a difference. It's about the approach that we need to take to inspire youth. A lot of young activists I talk to get pretty frustrated with the bureaucratic process.

We need to do organizing, we need to do mobilizing, and we need to be out there with the issues that affect young workers the most in order to organize young workers. And I do think that the issue of low wage contingent workers is one that affects youth in particular because those marginalized groups are women and workers of colour and First Nations people and young people in particular.