
OVERCOMING UNION RESISTANCE TO EQUITY ISSUES AND STRUCTURES¹

Marie Clarke Walker
Executive Vice-President,
Canadian Labour Congress,
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

Despite many changes in the labour movement, in the last three decades, some unions remain resistant to representing the concerns of marginalized workers and developing pro-active programs for equity seeking groups. Often workers with concerns about racism, sexism, homophobia, etc., are marginalized and treated as problem individuals. At the same time, successful organizing has encouraged many unions to take up equity issues. What can we learn about overcoming union resistance from both the success stories and the failures?

We need to look at some of the issues equality-seeking groups have raised about their unions. In 1997, the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) produced an Anti-Racism Task Force Report entitled, *Challenging Racism: Going beyond Recommendations*. The recommendations in this report

drew on the views of labour and community activists from all parts of Canada. In respect to anti-racism work, aboriginal peoples and people of colour, I will refer to the voices of concern captured in the task force report.

The issues and points made during the task force include the following:

- Activists said that they are tired of minimum gains, platitudes and tokenism. They want labour to move decisively to close the gap between what we say and what we do about racism in our movement and our communities.
- Aboriginal workers and workers of colour view the labour movement's values as completely compatible with the struggle against racism. These values are grounded in equitable and fair economic opportunities, popular participation in the political process, equal access to, and treatment from, our institutions, and the right to live in affordable and safe communities. Unions believe that fighting racism is about defending equality, justice, and collective rights and responsibilities.
- The labour movement must analyze racism from a broad social, economic and political perspective and fight it on all

¹ Marie Clarke Walker is Executive Vice-President of the Canadian Labour Congress. This article is based on the presentation she gave at the "Advancing the Union Equity Agenda" conference, March 19, 2005.

of these fronts. And the movement must look critically within its own house at the ways in which racism undermines the power and effectiveness of unions.

- Overall, the gains the labour movement has made on equity issues have been small. In particular, after years of passing policy statements and resolutions, writing reports, and giving speeches about the need to fight racism, there is still a huge gap between union principles and the actions of union members and leaders.
- Activists described systemic racism as a disease slowly eating away at our very foundation. They view the strengthening of internal union structures as key to the labour movement's growth. These structures cannot be revitalized without taking on systemic racism and including the voices of Aboriginal peoples and people of colour in decision-making processes and bodies.
- Unions should review existing rules and practices which rob our membership and our organizations of the talents, views and experiences of Aboriginal peoples and people of colour. Our hierarchies and "union

culture" present barriers to the full participation of Aboriginal Peoples and people of colour. Breaking down these barriers will mean making changes to our constitutions, by-laws and the way we run our meetings.

- In order to broaden representation and inclusion at all levels of union leadership and work, unions must examine the culture of privileges, perks, hierarchies and Euro-centricity which mirror aspects of corporate structures and have no place in organizations fighting for equality. Unions must ensure that aboriginal members and members of colour are represented on committees, delegations and at bargaining tables.

STRUCTURAL TOOLS TO OVERCOME RESISTANCE

The formation of committees and working groups representing women, people of colour, Aboriginal peoples, people with disabilities, lesbian, transsexual, and gay workers is a political acknowledgement that the existing power structures and decision-making within the labour movement is not inclusive enough of all our members.

Changes were made to include various committees and

working groups in our work, in order to structurally recognize the diversity in our membership and to ensure that all issues important to workers are addressed. It would be a mistake to contemplate eroding the effectiveness of these structural tools in any shape or form. The work of the committees and working groups complement the tremendous work which gets done by caucuses, where union sisters and brothers self-organize to strengthen our movement.

Working to eliminate all forms of marginalization in our movement is critical to building our strength as a social justice movement. So often equality issues are treated as side issues, instead of integrated into every single aspect of labour's work. For example, presentations made to the CLC Task Force on Racism, expressed continued disappointment at the labour movement's failure to include the experiences of Aboriginal peoples and people of colour when assessing the impact of government economic decisions, social policies and corporate decisions on workers' lives and their communities. We must ensure there is an equity analysis in all the work we do. So, what does job strategy, child care, UI, pensions etc., mean for marginalized groups? How does the current situation help or hinder? How do the suggested recommendations, made by labour in each of these areas, impact on marginalized groups? These are all

questions that we need to ask ourselves with respect to everything we do.

Canadian federal employment equity and the Ontario legislation focuses on holding employers accountable with some involvement of unions, but it does not mandate unions to look at their own structures. In Canada, there are human rights laws which speak to union responsibilities in representing its workers. For example, we have jurisprudence which holds unions accountable in regards to bargaining duty to accommodate provisions. Duty of fair representation under various labour codes also requires unions to live up to the responsibility to represent the interests of all members.

However, Canadian human rights requirements do not go to the heart of internal union staffing and leadership structures. While progress is slow and frustrating, examples or models from other countries, struggling with the same issues, can provide inspiration. For example, in the UK, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) supported an important initiative which provides a legal tool, an "equality audit" - which gives them a sense of where each affiliate is at and what needs to be worked on. The audit was established by resolution to the TUC in 2002 as an attempt to tackle institutional racism in the trade union movement.

Conducting “equality audits” is now a condition of affiliation to the TUC. It is a demonstration of the affiliate union’s commitment to equality.

The audit works by way of a questionnaire which is sent to all affiliates of the TUC every two years. The first audit in 2003 was a comprehensive one in that it tried to cover as many aspects of union work as possible. The second audit in 2005 concentrated on equality issues in collective bargaining.

This process offers labour a public and transparent means of documenting unions’ progress or lack of it, in regards to the inclusion and representation of diverse communities. Unions affiliated to the TUC are held publicly accountable for their record on equality. It may seem to be a long drawn-out process, but that is the case only the first time that each employer and union fills out the questionnaire - after that it is just updating. An equality audit is something that we need to do in order to understand who our members are, therefore, how best to service them.

IDENTIFYING IMPORTANT EQUITY STRUCTURES

We need to look at how we work within our union structures, and find ways to move our work forward. Conferences organized by affiliates and central labour bodies are important organizing tools for the labour movement, as they offer

participants an opportunity to learn from each other. The CLC conference provides an opportunity for union members from different unions to discuss ways of strengthening our movement.

We also need to look at the contributions of other organizations which may not have been embraced by all union leadership but are critical to our survival and growth as a workers’ movement nonetheless. While organizations such as the Coalition of Black Trade Unions (CBTU) and the Asian Canadian Labour Alliance (ACLA) are not part of formal union structures, they should still be seen as structures “within the larger labour movement”. This is because their members are union members, and they offer a different but important political space.

The CBTU promotes access and opening doors for Black workers and workers of colour within the labour movement. It does this by promoting minority rights within unions and organizes to maximize political influence within the labour movement.² The ACLA is an alliance representing the voice of Asian-Canadian trade union members, Asian-Canadian workers and the Asian community at large. Through educational events, organizing, and strike support, the ACLA hopes to establish a wide network of labour and community activists in Canada. ACLA British

² For more information on the CBTU visit the website at www.cbtu.ca

Columbia was launched in June 2002 in Vancouver and in November 2002 in Toronto.³

Until space is given for true self-organization for our members in unions across the country, certain workers will continue to be marginalized because, although we have committees and positions, people on those committees and in those positions are still lacking real power to create the type of change that is needed.

The worst thing that can happen to the labour movement is for the committee structures and equality rights positions to be merely seen as part of the ongoing, prevalent tokenism. It took years to organize around these structures as a way of dealing with existing power imbalances, and to strengthen solidarity within our movement.

The lack of representation in key positions goes beyond the labour movement. It is just as critical in Canadian society in general where particular communities are not represented in the political decision-making structures.

BUILDING UNIONS THROUGH INCLUSION

Despite the frustrations in our movement, Aboriginal workers and workers of colour want to use their energy, talents and experiences to build their unions. As workers

from these two communities, we see ourselves as strong trade unionists that have a good understanding of the role, structure and decision-making processes of unions. We passionately believe in, and fight for, trade union principles of social and economic justice, at committee meetings, equality rights conferences, labour rallies and other venues, in order to represent the interests of all our members in our workplaces and society in general.

Issues brought from these communities should always be seen as union issues in an effort to strengthen our movement. That is also why those who appeared before the task force hearings said they hold their unions to a higher standard than other institutions in society because of the labour movement's stated principles on equality, human rights and social justice.

All of us can be part of the barriers - I know that at times I am part of the barriers. Silence, and the pressures that create that silence, contributes to the barriers and lack of representation that marginalized workers face. By not acting and speaking up - we are, at times, barriers. We need to make sure that we all continue to act and speak up regardless of the cost of doing so - the cost of not doing so is much more in the long run. At the same time, we need to recognize that it is easier for those with privilege to speak up without fear of further marginalization.

³ Roger Kishi and Jenny Ahn et al. "Part of the Movement: The Asian Canadian Labour Alliance" *Our Times*, August/September 2002.

As for actions trade unions can and must implement - I will list just a few:

- Recognition of foreign credentials - we can't begin to work on raising rates of pay or collective bargaining if we are not part of the workforce;
- When we hire members of marginalized groups to work - respect and value the work that they do and understand that they are going to tell you things you don't necessarily want to hear. It is important to listen and act if we are serious about wanting change;
- Recognize that we need to look at amalgamations and mergers as part of a bigger picture and address what they do to already marginalized workers;
- Make sure we use members of particular communities on organizing campaigns, and once we organize, ensure that collective agreements and servicing accommodates the needs of those workers; and
- Lastly, name the resistance - we cannot begin the battle unless we acknowledge and understand what the barriers are.