
A CAUCUS OF CAUCUSES: THE NEXT STAGE IN UNION EQUITY ORGANIZING¹

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Over the past thirty years, constituency organizing, also called separate or self-organizing, has brought together members of equity-seeking groups to strengthen their voices, skills, self-confidence and political power. Such self-organizing highlights the significance of social identities, builds community, and supports collective action. It is expressed organizationally in formal committees and caucuses, sometimes mandated by union constitutions. In the current context, the various separate committees and caucuses -- representing women, people of colour, Aboriginal peoples, people with disabilities, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered peoples -- need to invent new political and organizational ways to work collectively and collaboratively. The idea of a "Caucus of Caucuses", a singular thread picked up in a variety of sessions at the conference on Advancing the Union Equity Agenda sponsored by the Centre for Research on Work and Society (York University) in March 2005, is one such strategy.

The article begins with an overview of separate and constituency organizing in Canadian unions among women and other equity-seeking groups. It assesses various kinds of equity structures as vehicles for advancing equity organizing in Canadian unions. The key strategic question brought into sharp relief by the call for a 'caucus of caucuses' is explored: how to address the multiple, sometimes overlapping, and sometimes conflicting, agendas of various equity-seeking groups.

Experience in Canada has demonstrated that taking account of difference can build a stronger union movement. In fact, solidarity is increasingly understood to mean *unity in diversity*. The 1994 Policy Statement of the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), *Confronting the Mean Society*, recognizes that difference can be a source of strength: "Equality seeking groups have strengthened our movement, bringing new ideas and perspectives into the practice of unionism. The diversity that is now present in our unions has not divided the labour movement: on the contrary, it has energized us and brought many more

committed people into our activist cadre." Further, it is possible to be "unified without uniformity": "The CLC clearly understands that sexism, racism, ableism, and heterosexism share common roots. We acknowledge that we can change attitudes and behaviour if we stand united; we know we will fail if we allow ourselves to be divided. We believe that we can be unified and that we can celebrate our diversity without divisiveness. We will strive to achieve a truly inclusive union movement that is representative of all its members" (CLC, 1994a). These statements recognize difference through pro-active support for separate organizing, and at the same time, acknowledge the common roots of the equity project for all equity-seeking groups.

Simply calling for solidarity among equity-seeking groups, however, will not address the realities of power differences, and will be no more effective than the traditional exhortations for class solidarity which assumed a *generic* worker. Like that *mythical* worker, there is no generic equity-seeking worker with the same set of interests. New strategies to work across equity-seeking groups will have to take account of the diverse and often marginalized voices of women, immigrants, the racialized, members of sexual minorities, people with disabilities, Aboriginal workers and young workers who are rapidly becoming a larger proportion of the unionized workforce. For the first time in 2004, union density was higher among women than men (Morissette, Schellenberg and Johnson, 2005: 5). And "virtually all of the growth of the Canadian labour force now comes from immigration." Since the 1980s, 75 per cent of new immigrants have belonged to a 'visible minority' group (Jackson, 2005: 103). In fact, developing new *organizational* vehicles to support alliances among diverse groups is necessary not only to ensure the success of cross-constituency organizing but also to strengthen the union movement as a whole.

Globalization and restructuring are raising new challenges for equity organizing in Canadian unions, and for mobilization strategies both inside unions and workplaces. Unions are struggling with declining densities, organizing in the often difficult-to-organize private service sectors, and corporate and state attacks on union rights. In this context, there is a greater risk that equity concerns *inside* unions will be marginalized. However, gendered, racialized, aged and citizenship competition is at the heart of restructuring and globalization. Indeed, the deepening exploitation of racial and gender differences by corporate capital, and the increasing silence of the state on equity issues are positioning unions as the key vehicle of resistance. Unions need to be vigilant about not marginalizing equity issues inside unions or workplaces; in fact, they need to strategically reposition equity from the margin to the centre, and reinvent solidarity to address its complexity in a global context.

SEPARATE ORGANIZING AND CONSTITUENCY BUILDING²

For more than three decades in Canada, union women's committees, and educational programs and conferences organized by and for women, have played a key role in politicizing women and producing them as a vocal constituency. Women have organized in response to male domination, patriarchal cultures, and hierarchical organizational practices in unions that have indisputably marginalized women and their concerns (Briskin and Yanz, 1983; Briskin and McDermott, 1993).

After years of struggle, a growing acceptance of separate and self organizing, at least in the public statements of unions, is evident, as well as the creation of formal structures to facilitate it. For example, the 2005 convention of the United Steelworkers of America (USWA) passed the following amendment to its constitution: "To further our commitment to encourage activism, leadership development and greater understanding of gender issues in our Local Unions with female membership, a Women's Committee, under the direction of the International Union or its designated representative, shall be established by such Local Unions." The constitution of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) mandates the establishment of local Women's Committees. The constitution of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), a union with 20 per cent female membership, mandates women's committees and human rights committees at all levels of the union, has offered annual national women's conferences until 1999 when it shifted to regional women's conferences to reach out to more women members. The three Maritime Federations of Labour (Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island) organized a women's conference with the Theme 'Rise Up! Act Up!' in April 2000.

Union women's separate organizing has often been instrumental in raising issues of other marginalized groups. Women's committees and conferences have offered a venue where race and racism, and sexuality and homophobia were first addressed, and continue to be raised. White's study of Canadian unions concludes: 'Issues of race or disability or gay/lesbianism were often first raised within women's committees or women's conferences, because these forums were more accepting of the problems and more prepared to deal with them' (1993: 232). Hunt (1997: 806) confirms this point in his overview of Canadian union initiatives around sexuality. His three detailed case studies showed that gay and lesbian activists "found their strongest allies within women's committees". Yet such support is often forthcoming only with struggle. Ann Newman of the Ontario chapter of the American Coalition of Black Trade Unionists recalls a fight at one convention of the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) to retain the position of human rights director which was not supported by the women's committee. "To speak out on human rights issues" was seen as something that "would take away from the women's issue" (Gordon, 2000: 24).

Women were the first to organize separately through unofficial caucuses that gradually became formal union committees. Increasingly, women and men of colour, lesbians, gay, bisexual and transgendered workers, and native peoples are organizing separately, often through Human Rights and Rainbow Committees, Aboriginal Circles and Pink Triangle Committees. For example, CUPE established a Rainbow Committee in 1988 to address issues affecting racial minorities and Aboriginal peoples, and in 1991 a Pink Triangle Committee which works toward eliminating homophobia and heterosexism and promoting the human rights of lesbian, gay and bisexual members (CUPE, 1997).

The success of self organizing by equity-seeking groups on the basis of gender, race, sexuality, ability, region and language have led to a growing awareness of relative privilege in union statements. In fact, the last decade has witnessed a remarkable development of union policy on racism, homophobia, sexism, and recently on transphobia and ableism. Despite the fact that these policies are not necessarily fully in place in the daily life of unions, particularly at the local level, without a doubt, the passing of each policy has involved widespread education and mobilization.

The CLC *Anti-Racism Task Force* (1997) is described as historic -- the first time the labour movement has been involved in documenting the experiences of Aboriginal Peoples and People of Colour. The Framework for Action in this report focussed on "Racism and Unions" with recommendations about internal structural change, union democracy, education, research, communications strategy and organizing. It also developed a set of recommendations about "Racism in our Communities" focussing on employment, immigration, education, housing, political process, legal system, media and environmental racism and health, and international issues.

CLC affiliates reported the following anti-racism initiatives: active standing committees; resolutions and policy statements at conventions; awareness material and courses; constitutional clauses prohibiting discrimination; workplace anti-racism education program delivered to mixed groups of employers and managers by union trained workers; contract compliance programs requiring organizations doing business of \$20,000 or more to adopt a specific anti-racism and anti-discrimination policy; employment equity plans; staff members with specific anti-racism responsibility; and building alliances with Aboriginal People and People of Colour communities, among others (1997a: 16). Following the Taskforce, the 1999 CLC Constitutional Convention adopted a Statement on Fighting Racism:

The future of workers of colour, Aboriginal workers and the labour movement are linked because as a working class movement we can not separate the exploitation of working people from the exploitation of women, Aboriginal Peoples and People of Colour We must work with

Aboriginal Peoples and People of Colour in the fight to address the disproportionate impact of government fiscal and economic policies on their communities.... We must assume a commitment to fight all forms of multiple oppression faced by workers of colour or Aboriginal workers who are women, gay, lesbian, young persons or persons with disabilities.... A commitment to fighting racism and upholding human rights should be integrated into every oath of office taken by elected union officers (CLC, 1999).³

An upsurge in organizing among gay and lesbian union activists, increasingly supported by the union movement, can also be documented. In May 1994, delegates at the CLC convention overwhelmingly endorsed a major policy paper on sexual orientation. Since that time, the CLC organized the 1997 Solidarity and Pride Conference which attracted over 350 activists and was the first pride conference world-wide to be officially sponsored by a trade union movement (Genge, 1998). In 1998, it sponsored A Solidarity and Pride Conference in co-operation with the Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba Federations of Labour. In 1999 the OFL sponsored the Labour Behind the Rainbow conference. In 2001, the CLC completed a position paper on transgendered and transsexual workers and in 2005, it sponsored the third Canadian conference on "Beyond Legal Equality to Social Equality". Individual unions are also taking initiatives. For example, in 2002 CUPE published a document on transphobia focusing on why it is a union issue. The CAW (1999: 97) has negotiated same sex benefits, adopted the *Working with Pride* policy statement, and used their national union voice to demand that both provincial and federal governments amend all necessary legislation to provide protection from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. They have future plans to expand sexual orientation caucuses, incorporate workshops on sexuality issues in their human rights and women's conferences, and make their family program fully accessible to same sex partners.

On the issues of disability, the labour movement has primarily focussed on the legal responsibilities of unions, like the duty to accommodate.⁴ Penni Richmond of the CLC notes that "the activism part has hardly been developed" (quoted in Garcia-Orgales, 2000: 22). However, the CLC offered its first course on disability awareness in 2000, and in 2004 launched the MORE ["Mobilize, Organize, Represent and Educate"] campaign which focusses on disability in the workplace. As part of the campaign, they published *The MORE We Get Together: Disability Rights and Collective Bargaining Manual*, a resource not only for union negotiations around disability rights, but also for disabled, union and community activists working to improve the conditions of workers with disabilities. It contains information, self-audit checklists and sample clauses. The manual's primary focus is on the duty to accommodate but it also addresses

human rights, employment equity, privacy, training, job rights and seniority.

Before exploring the issue of cross-constituency organizing, it is worth asking whether separate organizing has led to the ghettoization or marginalization of equity concerns. Evidence actually suggests the opposite, that is, separate organizing has been a vehicle for mainstreamingⁱ equity concerns.

For example, through separate organizing, women have forced unions to take up women's concerns as union members and as workers – through policy initiatives and at the negotiating table, promoted women's leadership and challenged traditional leaderships to be accountable, and encouraged unions to be more democratic and participatory (Briskin, 2006, 2006a and 2006b). Separate organizing has also facilitated different constituencies coming together. For example, Messing and Mergler (1993) examine the links established between health and safety committees and women's committees in Quebec which led to the consideration of previously-ignored women's occupational health issues.

CROSS-CONSTITUENCY ORGANIZING

In the current context, unions and working people face increasing attacks from employers and the state, and as a result, an intensified need to build coalitions. Does continued separate organizing increase the possibility that the legitimately diverse agendas of various groups will be played off against one another, not only by union hierarchies but also by employers and the state? How can unions best address the multiple, sometimes overlapping, and sometimes conflicting, agendas of various equity-seeking groups, given the expansion of constituency committees representing various equity-seeking groups, the need for coalition work between and across these groups, and the pragmatic issues of time and resources? How can unions support the needs of particular equity-seeking groups and also establish formal structures to bring all equity-seeking groups together in order to institutionalize effective cross-constituency organizing?

This section considers two organizational strategies: the first involves a single equity committee or human rights committee which folds the different equity-seeking committees into one integrated structure; the second is a dual structure which supports separate equity-seeking committees but also formalizes mechanisms for equity-seeking groups to work together.

ⁱ "Mainstreaming involves ensuring that gender perspectives and attention to the goal of gender equality are central to all activities - policy development, research, advocacy/ dialogue, legislation, resource allocation, and planning, implementation and monitoring of programmes and projects." From the Office of the Special Adviser on Gender for the United Nations.
(Available at: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/gendermainstreaming.htm>.)

SINGLE EQUITY STRUCTURES

A common response to the multiplication of committees representing equity-seeking groups has been to move towards one generic equity or human rights committees, folding constituency committees into one integrated structure which would then address the diverse needs of various groups. Sometimes such a move is premised on efficiency, that is, one integrated committee will require fewer union resources of time and money. Sometimes the goal is to help ensure that equity concerns are mainstreamed into all union practices, policies and projects. The responsibility for equity, then, would be borne by the entire union and the marginalization of equity issues might be reduced. Such integrated committees might also address the inter-relationship of equity issues, and highlight the fact that many workers face discrimination on the basis of multiple identities. For example, sexual harassment experienced by women of colour often takes race-specific forms, and women of colour might find themselves torn between participation in women's committees or committees for workers of colour. And perhaps there is the hope that such committees can decrease the potential polarization among various equity-seeking groups. There is no research which specifically assesses these various claims so it is hard to know the efficacy of the single equity structure.

However, in my view, there are risks associated with a single committee structure. I suggest that it can worsen rather than ease tensions among various groups and reproduce rather than challenge existing power relations inside the union. Power dynamics and competition for resources do not disappear inside a unified committee. It may be that the most marginalized voices will be silenced in a single committee. In fact, all the reasons for setting up separate constituency committees may re-emerge inside a *unified* committee. This suggests an inherent weakness in the current move to singular committees. Interestingly, coincident with celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Status of Women Committee of the British Columbia Teachers' Federation in March 1998, a resolution to amalgamate the Status of Women Committee into a larger Social Justice Committee passed by a tiny margin: 334 votes for and 322 votes against. Those who argued against the motion feared that integration "will dilute and make invisible the voices of women" ('BCTF vote', 1998: 8). In the current context organizing strategies must ensure that the voices of the most marginalized are heard -- those with disabilities, women of colour, aboriginal people and members of sexual minorities.

My own experience as the first Co-ordinator of the Equity Committee in the York University Faculty Association (YUFA) in 1998-9 raised another concern about an integrated single equity committees. In October 1997, following a two-month faculty strike in which equity and democratic university governance were central issues (Briskin and Newson, 1999), YUFA approved new constitutional

language which set up a Standing Committee on Equity to deal with race, gender, ability, age, sexual orientation, ability, ethnicity, religion, political belief, language, culture and other forms of discrimination. This committee had considerable structural power and was on a parallel level with the Executive Committee, Contract and Grievance Committee and the Negotiating Committee. However, despite the commitment to develop and support informal caucuses of specific equity-seeking groups, in that first year, the fledging attempts in this direction which had started during the strike vanished (with the exception of an Aboriginal Caucus initiated by a member of the Equity Committee). Without the voice, pressure and witnessing of such caucuses, it was difficult for the Equity Committee of YUFA to function effectively. In this instance, the setting up of a equity committee without a foundation of strong constituency organizing actually undermined rank-and-file constituency organizing. So both trajectories may be problematic: the folding of existing committees into a single equity structure, or the starting with a single structure without functioning constituency committees.

DUAL EQUITY STRUCTURES

Despite the additional claim on resources, successful coalition work may depend on a dual structure, one that combines integrated equity initiatives with separate organizing for marginalized groups. Such an approach may help to maintain the delicate balance between addressing the concerns of specific equity-seeking groups, and the need to work across constituencies to develop a culture of alliances, a strong equity consciousness throughout the union, and a widespread commitment to equity practice.⁵

In fact, strong constituency organizing may provide the foundation for an effective Equity Committee, and for successful alliances across equity-seeking groups. Constituency committees (such as a Women's Committee or a Pink Triangle Committee) can help activate specific equity-seeking groups, highlight their concerns, and guarantee that the most marginalized are heard. Constituencies can elect their representatives to Equity Committees and ensure some degree of accountability. Separate committees, then, can monitor and support the work of an integrated Equity Committee.

At the same time, the political potential of *unity in diversity* is mobilized structurally through the Equity Committee whose mission can include addressing the inter-relationship of equity issues, and decreasing the potential polarization among various equity-seeking groups. Furthermore, situating claims for justice by particular groups within the complex web of equity issues helps make visible the power structures which maintain inequality for all equity-seeking groups. Given the stronger voice of the integrated equity committee, it can help ensure the mainstreaming of equity.

AUTONOMY AND INTEGRATION

In the scholarly work I have done on union women's organizing, I have argued that the success of equity organizing depends upon maintaining a strategic balance between autonomy from the structures and practices of the labour movement, and integration (or mainstreaming) into those structures (Briskin, 1993 and 1999).

Distinct and autonomous committee structures offer a vehicle for equity-seeking groups to assert their specific concerns. They help prevent the *political* marginalization of equity groups and increase pressure for inclusion and democratization. Integration into union structures, on the other hand, prevents *organizational* marginalization, ensures resource allocation, and encourages the mainstreaming of equity into union policy and strategy. Assessing equity structures in relation to the goals of both autonomy and integration suggests that the dual structure of Equity Committee (the integration structure) and constituency committees (the autonomy structure) supports an effective strategic balance.

Union constitutions offer a vehicle for formal equity and constituency structures. Such *integration* can ensure legitimacy and access to union resources. For example, the May 2004 Constitution of the Ontario Division of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) offers an example of constitutional entrenchment of dual structures. In addition to a Women's Issues Committee, a Pink Triangle Committee, a People with Disabilities Committee, and a Rainbow Committee, there is also a Standing Human Rights Committee whose membership includes the visible minority and aboriginal representative to the Executive Board and one representative each from the Pink Triangle Committee, the People with Disabilities Committee, and a Rainbow Committee, the Women's Committee, the Youth Committee and the International Solidarity Committee. The goal of the Human Rights committee is "to promote equal treatment and equal opportunity for members of CUPE and society at large".

CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly it is difficult to craft an effective equity strategy for unions; yet the suggestive image of a 'caucus of caucuses' does help to visualize the next step. Unlike a single equity committee, a 'caucus of caucuses' combines separate organizing with a cross-constituency vehicle. In the current context of increased competition among workers, such a dual structure prevents the marginalization of the concerns of any particular equity-seeking group, and demonstrates that solidarity can, indeed, be built on a foundation of diversity.

Despite the persistent barriers that equity-seeking groups face inside unions, and the continuing struggle to ensure the mainstreaming of the equity

project, unions remain the most responsive and democratic of institutional arenas available in our society. They offer a vehicle to counter the ideological onslaught supporting competition, the marketplace and individualism which is weakening support for making claims on the basis of systemic discrimination. At the same time, the dual structure of constituency organizing of marginalized groups and coalition building through cross-constituency Equity Committees is part of the project to democratize union structures, and may even offer a model of equity practice for other institutional environments.

The strategic balancing between difference (which encourages separate organizing) and commonality (which encourages alliances) is constantly being unsettled. In this time of severe attacks on working people, and at the end of more than three decades of separate organizing, a noticeable ideological and strategic shift toward working together through alliances and coalitions, what is often called *social movement unionism*, can be identified. Perhaps more than any other single strategy, coalition building, nationally and internationally, will be critical to successful resistance to corporatization, workplace restructuring, changing state forms, downloading of caring work to families, and globalization. Undoubtedly, cross-constituency organizing, that is, coalition building inside unions, can make an important contribution to that end.

NOTES

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- ¹ This article draws freely on Briskin, 2001 and 2002.
 - ² The examples given in this section are in no way exhaustive.
 - ³ The "Aboriginal Rights Resource Tool Kit," produced by the CLC in 2005 will help to build cross-constituency alliances. It includes sections on The Historical and Contemporary Situation of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada, Demographic and Socio-Economic Profile of Aboriginal Peoples, Aboriginal Rights, Aboriginal Peoples and Labour Issues, Resources: Misconceptions About Aboriginal Peoples, Definitions, Contact List and Bibliography. "The topics in this Tool Kit will enable the union leaders and organizers to engage in coalition building with grassroots Aboriginal organizations or to launch organizing campaigns Also, certain common causes and structural links, such as unemployment due to racism, between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workers can be established quite easily. It will then, in effect, help both groups of workers to form solidarity with each other" (from the Preface).
 - ⁴ The important 1999 decision on the Meiorin case ('duty to accommodate') brought forward by the British Columbia Government Employees Union (BCGEU, a component of NUPGE) has had a direct impact on how non-discrimination is now to be negotiated. In this case, firefighter Tawney Meiorin was laid off after failing the fourth component of the job fitness test - a 2.5 kilometre run to be completed in 11 minutes. Her time was 11:49. The Court agreed that Meiorin was a victim of sex discrimination. The Meiorin decision placed "a positive obligation on employers to design workplace standards and requirements so that they do not discriminate (i.e., the employer must take proactive action to ensure these standards and requirements are not discriminatory). In other words, there is now a positive obligation on the employer to design the workplace so that equality and accommodation are built in to all policies and practices" (NUPGE, 2002: 2). To put it another way, this ruling shifted employer responsibility from the fair application of rules to the conception and codification of these rules (Jackson, 2005: 231).
 - ⁵ In some unions, there is a women's committee and also a human rights or equity committee. It appears that the relationship between the two are often unclear, the women's committee having a

long history and the equity committee newly established to address the 'other' equity-seeking groups. For a comment on the problems with this model in the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT), see Briskin, 2001. OPSEU seems to have a similar structure.

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