

Policy on Gender Equality

November 2014

In the 1960s Unifor women were part of the struggle that brought an end to the employer's legal right to discriminate based on sex. This battle, waged in Ontario, was one of many that feminists, women's organizations, and ultimately unions took up right across the country. It was not the beginning of the fight for equality, and it was not the end.

Today women and men share full legal equality in Canada, and all Canadians believe that this is fair, and just. However, legal equality is not the same as social equality, economic equality or political equality – none of which have yet to be achieved. Inequality is made clear by on-going gender-based violence, low wages and economic opportunities for women, and the under-representation of women in Parliament and other positions of public influence and power, including union leadership. There's no question gains have been made – and we're proud to have contributed to these gains. But there is so much more to be done, and where we have made gains, far less progress has been made for women of colour, Aboriginal women, women with disabilities, lesbians, bisexual and trans women, and immigrant and refugee women.

"Oppression", said author and activist bell hooks, "is the absence of choices". Until women have economic independence with full access to decent jobs, social programs, safe and affordable housing, meaningful childcare options, adequate and appropriate health care including reproductive rights, we will not have full equality.

Decent Jobs

Gender should not determine the kind of work any of us does, nor our pay, benefits, or working conditions. Stereotypes and prejudice should not guide how we end up in certain jobs, or are streamed out of others. But the truth is, the Canadian labour market remains highly gendered. 70% of women in the paid labour force work in five female-dominated sectors: health, teaching, clerical, sales and service. These are among the lowest paid jobs in Canada. This has everything to do with the historical undervaluing of women's work (childcare workers earn less, for example, than zookeepers). Women are not only steered toward low-paid jobs, they are also steered away from higher paid jobs. Less than 3% of skilled trades workers in Canada are women - some of the best paid unionized jobs available.

How do we address barriers to decent jobs?

Negotiate and legislate Employment Equity Employment equity is fairness in employment. An employment equity program seeks to eliminate any recruitment, selection, promotion or training

practices that have the effect of being discriminatory. It is a unique tool that actually allows unions to have a say in who gets hired. It ensures that those who are qualified get equal opportunity to apply for jobs, and are not subject to the employer's prejudices and assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, or disability. We need to reinstate employment equity laws that have been gutted by Conservative governments. At the same time, we need to negotiate employment equity programs directly with employers so that all workers have access to decent jobs.

Achieving gender equality at the bargaining table also means negotiating language that turns part-time jobs into full-time jobs, that ensures those who do work part time get full, equal benefits and wages, recognizes 'foreign credentials', and that opens up opportunities for women in skilled trades and other male-dominated sectors of the workplace.

Equal Pay

Canada ranks 38th in the world on the gender pay gap (falling behind Switzerland, Cambodia and Kenya). On average, full-time women workers in Canada still earn only 71 cents for every dollar men earn. Until we organize more women into unions (where the gap is much narrower – with women earning 93 cents on the dollar), this will continue. Women's discriminatory pay affects them from their first jobs continuing into retirement: young women graduating from high school earn 27% less than male high school graduates, and the median income of retired women is half that of men (42% of elderly women live in poverty).

Canadian women of colour earn only 64% and Aboriginal women earn on average 46% as much as men. Women with disabilities are often shut out of the labour market altogether, and are disproportionately represented among minimum wage earners.

How do we address the pay gap?

Negotiate and Legislate Pay Equity. Pay equity means 'equal pay for work of equal value' – a pay equity plan requires employers and unions to assess all jobs on the basis of skill, merit, responsibility, and working conditions, and to use this information to determine if certain groups (usually women) have been historically underpaid. If this is found to be the case, their wages need to be brought up to par, and those who have been discriminated against are entitled to back pay. This amounts to millions of dollars in uncollected wages that we need to go after – money that no employer will give up easily. Where we don't have pay equity legislation, we need to use the backing of human rights law and negotiate pay equity plans with employers directly through collective bargaining. Pay equity is our tool for rooting out discriminatory pay structures, collecting the money that is owed, and ensuring that gender-based and race-based pay gaps don't reappear.

Negotiate pay increases based on solidarity bargaining. Solidarity bargaining means bringing up the pay of the lowest paid workers relative to other workers. Since women are often among the lowest paid, this approach reduces the pay gap between men and women. It also has a positive impact on other low-paid workers, for example immigrants, people of colour, people with disabilities. Some of our most successful solidarity bargaining strategies include:

- Bottom-end loading (negotiating larger increases for lower-paid workers);
- Raising base rates (equalizing or reducing the differences between the entry level pay rates of different jobs for example office workers and outside maintenance workers);
- Negotiating wage adjustments and shortening waiting period for regular increases for specific groups (for example, part-time and casual workers);
- Reducing pay differences between classifications;
- Negotiating pay equity agreements in all of Unifor collective agreements

How do we turn bad jobs into decent jobs, and decent jobs into better jobs?

Unifor is committed to decent jobs and making gains for all workers. We have put tremendous effort into the following key building blocks of equality – and there’s no question that our work must continue:

- Raise the minimum wage. A full two-thirds of minimum wage earners are women.
- Build bargaining power in sectors where women are the majority.
- Organize. Focus organizing campaigns in sectors where women predominate, keep up the pressure on governments to make it easier, not harder, for workers to join unions.
- Implement a National Childcare Program. Safe, reliable, available, affordable, public, universal childcare is a key tool of equality.
- Negotiate and legislate better family leave policies. Together women and men in our union fight for decent jobs, for healthy and safe workplaces, for good benefits, for shorter work days and longer vacations. These things matter to everyone, but there are additional ‘bread and butter’ issues that need our attention: such as maternity and parental leave, family leave provisions, and childcare. As long as these are seen as ‘women’s issues’ they will be given less priority.
- Make violence against women a workplace issue. Negotiate women’s advocates, negotiate language that protects women experiencing violence from workplace discipline, and negotiate right to refuse language based on harassment, violence or the threat of violence.

The Role of Unifor

Over a third of our Unifor members are women. We have an incredible and increasing diversity of women in the union – Aboriginal women, women of colour, women skilled trades workers, nursing home workers, workers from northern rural communities, downtown urban workers, lesbian, bisexual and trans women workers, women with disabilities, workers who are young, old and middle-aged women. Women in Unifor are activists and leaders. Unifor women chair bargaining committees, represent workers, confront employers over health and safety violations, organize new workers, participate in all local union committees, lead the union’s gender equality work through local women’s committees and regional women’s committees, and agitate for social change that includes gender equality and builds our union.

Women in Unifor work alongside our brothers who are committed to ending gender-based violence and alongside all those committed to equal access to decent jobs and an end to discriminatory hiring

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practices and pay structures. Together, we will win gender equality and through that we will build a more powerful and more representative union.

Unifor recognizes that without strong, vibrant women's organizations our efforts to make change are not sustainable. We know that backlash against feminism and the gains we've made has led to the gross underfunding, undermining and in some cases dismantling of women's advocacy groups that have been our leaders in the fight for equality, for reproductive rights, for an end to gender-based violence, for full participation of women in all areas of public and work life. We commit to joining with them in the effort to rebuild a stronger women's movement in Canada, in solidarity with women around the world.

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