

CUPE

Submission

**by the Canadian Union of Public Employees
(CUPE)**

to the

**Standing Committee on Public Safety and
National Security**

BILL C-19

November 24, 2011

The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) represents over 615,000 Canadian workers from coast to coast to coast. Our members work in the vast majority of Canada's local governments, and the quasi public sector as well as the federal jurisdiction. Many CUPE members work on the front lines in home care, children services, shelters, hospitals and as paramedics and police officers who see, first hand, the impact of domestic violence on women and children. Sometimes these members are under threat because of their work. Information from the gun registry helps to protect them in their workplaces.

Women comprise more than two-thirds of CUPE's membership. CUPE has always engaged in social justice and equality issues including women's equality issues.

From the beginning CUPE has supported the gun registry and in December 2009 reaffirmed this commitment at our National Executive Board. We did so because (i) On December 6, 1989, 14 women were murdered in Montréal because they were women. This sparked a national awareness of the urgent need to address issues around violence against women, including a call for gun control measures. (ii) The National Gun Registry was created in 1995 and requires gun owners to be licensed, register their firearm and store them locked and unloaded. It does not impose any limitation on access to firearms or usage. (iii) Currently 90 per cent of guns are registered, approximately seven million shotguns and rifles. This allows police to track the presence of firearms in any situation and has led to convictions such as the men who were accessories to the murders of four RCMP officers in Mayerthorpe, Alberta. (iv) The gun registry has saved lives. The firearm homicide rate is down by 40 per cent since 1991, while the homicide rate without guns is only down 28 per cent. (v) The gun registry is an important tool in tackling domestic violence. Police use the registry more than 10,000 times a day across the country, including when intervening in cases of domestic disputes.

Two-thirds of Canadians support the registry, according to a 2010 Ipsos-Reid poll. Even in rural areas, support for the registry is evenly split. Put simply, the registry works, Canadians support it and comply with it. The government should be seeking ways to make the registry even more effective, rather than dismantling it.

But Bill C-19 goes beyond ending the registry. It also takes unprecedented steps to destroy the data contained within the registry. According to Information Commissioner Suzanne Legault, destroying the data in the registry likely violates the Library and Archives Canada Act as well as access to information laws. On Nov. 22, Legault was quoted by the Canadian Press as stating that Bill C-19 "does raise major concerns in terms of transparency and accountability in general." Legault went on: "As information commissioner, I have serious concerns about the impact this bill will have on government information management."

Privacy Commissioner Jennifer Stoddart also raised concerns that the destruction of the data before a two-year period normally required for the maintenance of all personal information would violate the Privacy Act, according to a Nov. 22 article in the Hill Times.

The gun control registry helps protect public sector workers who come under threat. For example in 2004 an individual threatened workers at the Cape Breton Children's Aid who

are CUPE members. Because of the system, the regional police service knew that the individual had firearms and was able to obtain a warrant to seize them.

CUPE represents some first responder workers, paramedics and police officers. The registry is important for the safety of our members, and all first responders, in addition to helping them do their jobs. Milo Murray, President of CUPE Prince Edward Island Division, has been a street level police officer for 20 years. He said, *“the Firearms Registry represents a valuable tool in assisting in my job, with keeping our communities safe. Rifles and shotguns are the firearms most often found in people’s homes. Domestic violence and spousal homicides involving firearms occur twice as frequently with long-guns as compared to handguns. Long-guns are five times more likely to be used in suicides. Firearms registration increases the accountability of firearms’ owners by linking the firearm to the owner.”*

Not only is the registry an individual health and safety issue but it is a public safety issue as well. Since the regulation of firearms in Canada began in 1991 gun deaths have dropped dramatically. Many of our members work with victims of domestic violence. To be frank many of our members are or will be victims themselves simply because they are women.

The campaign for the gun registry grew out of the tragic events of December 6, 1989 where 14 women were killed at l'École Polytechnique, among them CUPE member Maryse Laganière. December 6 has become a national day of action to address the many outstanding issues that continue to threaten the safety and security of women.

Houda Braun, children’s counsellor at a shelter for abused women and their children, and member of CUPE 2348, explains why gun control is so important: *“The lethal potential of small arms and light weapons reduces a women’s ability to resist, reduces her chances of escape, reduces the possibility of getting help from others and also reduces her chance of surviving an assault.”*

Susan Shiner, childcare worker and member of CUPE 3017 addressed the importance of gun control legislation, stating, *“We need to work toward strengthening – not weakening – gun control legislation in Canada. To dismantle the long gun registry would be totally disrespectful to the families and their supporters who worked so passionately to remind Canadians of the death and destruction that these guns can cause. Their work convinced parliamentarians that a gun registry would give police forces documentation that they could use to map gun ownership in their communities. We need to retain the gun registry.”*

CUPE has supported the work of the Coalition for Gun Control because gun control is an inextricable element of ending violence against women especially domestic violence as 65 per cent of women murder victims are killed by their intimate partners as compared to only 15 per cent for male homicides.

Since 1991 the overall rate of homicides with firearms in Canada is down by 40 per cent while homicides without guns are only down by 28 per cent. Notably, the rate of homicides

with rifles and shotguns has plummeted – a decrease of 70 per cent in the same period. The number of women murdered by guns has fallen from 85 in 1991 to 24 in 2004.

This is in part thanks to the stricter gun control laws from both 1991 and 1995 where the gun registry requires registration and regulation on the storage of firearms.

Both British Columbia and Ontario have found that possession or access to a firearm is a serious risk factor for domestic violence. The Threat Assessment Questions for Field Personnel created by the Domestic Violence and Criminal Harassment Unit of the Vancouver Police Department includes ownership or planned ownership of a firearm as one of its 13 risk factors. The Investigative Guide Aid to Safety Assessment Planning is a manual that was created as a result of a partnership between the Victim Services and Crime Prevention Division, BC Ministry of Public Safety and the BC Institute Against Family Violence and includes access to firearms. The Domestic Violence Supplementary Report Form created by the Ministry of the Solicitor General and the Ontario Provincial Police Behavioural Science Section includes access to firearms as a risk factor. Access to a firearm has been recognized internationally as an important risk factor for domestic violence.

The regulations also provide that a chief firearms officer who issues a licence to an individual shall consider revoking it if the chief firearms officer becomes aware that the individual has been involved in an act of domestic violence or stalking. Screening and licence renewals occur every five years. Current and previous spouses (past two years) are notified of an individual's intention to acquire a firearm license. Spousal consent is not required for acquisition; however, if a spouse has concerns, it will trigger a secondary review of the application.

Canada through this law is in compliance with the United Nations mandate to include domestic violence in small arms laws including long guns. As stated by the International Action Network on Small Arms, *“Small arms can be diverted from licit to illicit uses – a weapon legally purchased for hunting purposes can be used to kill, threaten or intimidate an intimate partner. Despite the emphasis among law enforcement on illegal small arms and crime, legal firearms are the primary weapons used in domestic homicides in many countries. A gun in the home is much more likely to be used to intimidate or physically injure family members than be used against an outside intruder.”*ⁱ

Many CUPE members are gun owners. At the Newfoundland and Labrador CUPE Division convention last year, Rick Kean, president of CUPE 706 representing the City of Corner Brook's outside workers, said *“as a gun owner I have nothing to hide. The memories of the killing at the Polytechnique in 1989 and the 2006 Dawson College shooting still resonate. If CUPE as a whole can make a difference by stopping the bill from going through that's a plus for us.”*

The gun control registry has made huge strides in decreasing the rates of homicide and may have helped prevent incidents of domestic violence and threats of violence. Bill C-19 will cause great harm to women and to workers on the front line of public safety. The proposed

destruction of the registry's data likely violates a number of Canadian laws, and prevents provincial governments from establishing their own registry. Bill C-19 should not be passed.

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¹ IANSA Women's Network – BMS Policy Paper July 2008

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