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You can help your workplace go GREEN! How to form a Workplace Environment Committee

What is a Workplace Environment Committee?

Workplace environment committees deal with environmental issues in the workplace. Like other workplace committees that have specialized interests, an environment committee looks at ways to improve the environmental record of the workplace. These committees can go by different names, such as the Green Committee or the Green Team. Sometimes, environment committees are made up of worker and employer representatives. Sometimes, unionized workers set up their own worker-only environment committee.

Unlike some other committees, such as workplace health and safety committees, there is no law in any Canadian jurisdiction that states workplaces must have an environment committee. Therefore, these committees are either set up voluntarily by agreement between workers and the employer or – in some cases – they are set up as a result of the collective bargaining process.

CUPE recommends that its members strive to set up either a workers-only environment committee or a joint worker/employer environment committee. Sometimes, joint health and safety committees extend their mandate to take on environmental issues. However, a separate environment committee

that focuses only on green issues is the better way to go to ensure that workplace environmental issues are front and centre for the committee.

Why set one up?

Environmental issues are at the forefront of societal concern these days. The signs are all around us that the natural environment is in trouble on many fronts. Climate change is the world's most pressing environmental issue. It is linked to other environmental problems, such as water shortages, flooding, more frequent and stronger storms, droughts, an increase in invasive species, poor air quality, heat waves and other impacts that affect human health and well-being. Add to this that the world is still confronted with increasing natural habitat destruction, poor water quality, soil erosion and contamination, destructive natural resource extraction practices, and a host of other environmental ills, and it's clear to all CUPE members that more needs to be done to push for environmental improvements.

The workplace is an area where some of these improvements can take place. Many of us make sound environmental choices at home, such as recycling and diverting waste from landfill by composting. We might also cut back on driving in our communities and conserve energy and resources at home. But sometimes

we don't recognize that similar improvements can happen at work. Being greener at work helps cut greenhouse gas emissions and reduces the negative environmental impact of our work.

CUPE also cares about healthy communities. Greener workplaces means greener communities.

CUPE has always been a socially active union working to improve our members' lives and all citizens' lives. This approach extends to the natural environment. CUPE knows that a healthier planet is good for everyone and every living thing sharing the earth.

Workplace environment committees won't solve all the world's environmental problems but they will go a long way to help move Canadian society in a greener, more equitable, and sustainable direction.

How does it work?

Environment committees identify areas at work that need fixing. The issues your environment committee takes on can be small or big, such as:

- Workplace recycling and composting
- Conservation (energy, water and all workplace materials)
- Greener transportation options and strategies for workers
- Greener food and catering programs
- Greener workplace landscaping and grounds-keeping programs
- Greener workplace cleaning products and practices
- Greener vehicles, equipment and materials
- Greener meeting practices
- Climate change policy and greenhouse gas reduction strategy

To identify which of these or other areas are priorities, your workplace environment committee should assess or audit the workplace to find out where the problems lie. CUPE has a simple online workplace environmental auditing tool for getting started with this (cupe.ca/forms/ecoaudit.php).

Committee members should work to come to some agreement about what the environmental priority areas are and then work to implement solutions. The employer will have to be open to worker ideas for environmental improvements. A lot of times, better environmental choices can save employers money and certainly improve their public image. Employers are eager to appear green in the eyes of the public. Workers should take advantage of this, as well as argue for the environmental benefits on their own merit.

Once solutions and programs are put in place, workers should monitor these programs to ensure they are having a positive environmental impact.

Look, GREEN does work: Real CUPE workplace environment committees

Some CUPE workplaces and other workplaces have successfully set up environment committees.

CUPE Local 2626 at the University of Ottawa set up their own union Green Team as a sub-committee of the Local. The Green Team collaborates with other environmental groups on campus to promote environmental actions, such as recycling electronics and promoting car-free travel days. Local 2626 also hosted a Climate Change Speakers Summit in 2012. All of these actions enhance CUPE's visibility on campus. Members of the Green Team also sit on the university's Sustainable Development Committee, which has implemented greater energy efficiency on campus, helped to put in

place a ban on the sale of bottled water, and encouraged the university to practise better environmental landscaping.

CUPE Local 2202 at the City of Kingston in Ontario set up a voluntary Environment Committee among its library workers. Workers set up the committee to promote carpooling, recycling and food composting, and cutting back on materials and supplies to save money and reduce waste.

CUPE members from the Hospital Employees' Union in British Columbia have a workplace environment committee at the 100 Mile House Health Centre. Known as the Green Team, this committee was formed when workers recognized the workplace needed a better environmental record. The Green Team has put a recycling system in place at the health centre, run a successful recycling awareness program, and plans to implement a composting program.

CUPE's United Kingdom sister union UNISON is a leader on workplace environmental issues. UNISON represents many public sector workers in the UK. The Great Ormond Street Children's Hospital in London has a group called the Joint Environmental Committee. This group is made up of both union members and employer representatives (mainly the director responsible for environmental issues at the hospital). The committee has implemented paperless meetings to conserve both materials and energy. It has also implemented a workplace energy conservation program that encourages hospital staff to turn off as much equipment as possible every night and avoid leaving equipment on standby. The committee also created a workplace recycling program.

CUPE Environmental Resources

CUPE Environment homepage:
cupe.ca/environment

CUPE Green workplace guide:
cupe.ca/greening-workplace/enviroguide

CUPE Workplace environmental auditing tool:
cupe.ca/forms/ecoaudit.php

CUPE guide to green contract language:
cupe.ca/greening-workplace/green-bargaining-guide

CUPE Environment Network Facebook page:
www.facebook.com/groups/104434152818#!/groups/206852039413656/

Or write to CUPE at: enviro@cupe.ca

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