

# National Young Workers' Strategy Meeting

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## Introduction

The rise of corporatization, globalization, and the changing demographics of Canadian workers has transformed the world of work. Increasingly we see the casualization of work, two-tier contracts, the erosion of wages, pensions, benefits and working conditions, the undermining of protective labour legislation, the exploitation of temporary and foreign workers, and an anti-union, anti-worker agenda--all of which is cementing a new reality for the workforce. This new reality creates economic and cultural barriers for new and young workers, and these changes cannot be ignored by the labour movement if we are to remain a relevant and protective force in Canada and around the globe.

CUPE must respond to the changing world of work to ensure the economic and social well-being of all-workers now and into the future. We will ensure that young workers are engaged in understanding and committing to the importance of collective action through organized labour. We must respond to the challenges and opportunities during this time of change.

In contrast to messages we hear about young workers in popular media, this new generation of workers wants to be active in their union. We must continue to explore and understand barriers that new and young workers face in when they try to become involved. We must create structural and cultural changes so all of our members have the opportunity to become activists and leaders within CUPE, the labour movement and civil society.

At CUPE's 2011 National Convention, Resolution 261 created an opportunity to investigate the issues, talk to young workers and develop an action plan. The perspectives and strategies offered by young workers during this first CUPE Young Workers' Strategy Meeting supports our work to defend individual and collective rights. We must also consider important steps toward the inclusion of a growing majority of our members who are being left out because of the changing nature of work that is, at times, incompatible with the structure of the union. We need to ensure that all of our members and their changing needs are considered in the every-day business of the union and in our larger structure. We need to guarantee that workers have access to decent work, safe working conditions and living wages. In so doing, we can strengthen our union and the labour movement as a whole.

## Mandate

Resolution No. 261 made 2013 the Year of the New and Young Worker. CUPE sought to develop an action plan to increase new and young workers awareness, involvement and education. The National Young Workers' Strategy Meeting was an important event, meant to bring together young CUPE members to deepen our understanding of the issues your workers face, and strategize how to move forward as a union.

## Theme

The theme for CUPE's young workers' initiatives is **All in! Our Union, Our Future.**

## Objectives

In planning for the strategy session, we set out to create opportunities for diverse and representative young CUPE members age 30 and under, to:

- Give advice to CUPE on how to become more relevant to young workers.
- Learn about CUPE and connect to the labour movement.
- Work together to better understand the social, economic and political context that young workers face.
- Envision the way forward and recommend action strategies for CUPE.

## Participation

It was clear from the outset that CUPE needed to obtain input from a wide range of young workers with diverse backgrounds and experiences from across our union and the country. An online application was developed and promoted through the CUPE national website and social media. CUPE received over 300 applications to fill 50 seats.

The selection process was challenging given the quality and quantity of applications. But it also presented opportunities to learn more about younger CUPE members. Our selection process ensured a diverse range of participants reflecting region, sector, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, ability, as well as activism experience within the union and the community. We sought to engage both experienced member activists and leaders, and those new to community and labour activism.

### SUMMARY ANALYSIS OF THE APPLICATIONS

The online questionnaire asked applicants the following:

- What issues and barriers do young workers face in their workplaces, union and community?
- How do you think your involvement in CUPE can help?
- I want to attend this meeting because...

### We **learned** that:

- Most participants want to be involved in a variety of union activities, from education and networking opportunities, to building union strength.
- Young workers feel like they have the education, experience, and awareness required to make a difference in the workplace, the union and the community.
- Young workers are energized and committed to be an active part of the labour movement.

### Issues and Barriers

#### IN THE WORKPLACE

- Struggling with under-employment and unemployment.
- Feeling undervalued, negatively labeled and stereotyped.
- Experiencing exploitation.



## IN THE UNION

- Lack of awareness about CUPE's role in the workplace and in the community.
- Unclear understanding of rights. Young workers often have less experience in unionized settings; they feel daunted by the steep learning curve. The lack of clarity is preventing young workers from becoming engaged in the movement.
- Not understanding and feeling alienated by the union culture.
- Intergenerational communication challenges.
- Minimal opportunities for mentorship.
- Feeling unsupported during bargaining, and excluded by the proliferation of two-tiered agreements.



In general, the world of work is creating major challenges for young workers. They are under-employed and experiencing a lack of opportunities, a high cost of living and plenty of student debt. The current job market, with unpredictable work schedules, precarious, and insecure work, is forcing many to put their lives on hold. Young Canadians find themselves behind previous generations economically and socially, because of low wages, few benefits, and a lack of public services – child care in particular – and high tuition costs.

Despite these challenges, most applicants were hopeful for change and expressed an eagerness to participate. Young workers want to make a difference.

## CUPE NATIONAL YOUNG WORKERS' STRATEGY MEETING

Over three days, the CUPE National Young Workers' Strategy Meeting created an opportunity for 53 CUPE members to connect to their union in a meaningful way; discover ways to become more involved; have their voices heard; explore their needs and points of view; and develop a network with other young workers.

Opening discussions explored some of the issues and challenges young workers confront today. Barriers in the world of work mirrored what we read in the applications, including major concerns about high unemployment levels and overall underemployment. Young workers are face low wages, precarious work, poor work/life balance, and a high cost of living coupled with exorbitant student debt. The problems are even more significant for young workers marginalized by structural racism, classism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia and sexism.

We heard that young workers very often experience ageism and stereotyping by employers, older colleagues and local leadership. Despite efforts to educate themselves, many felt unaware of CUPE's structure, governance, and the union's role in the workplace and in the community. The union culture as expressed in language and structure is often difficult to understand, and can be alienating to new and young workers.





The effect is a sense of weakened solidarity and often vulnerability and exploitation in the workplace. The current model and structure of the union may have trouble addressing the emerging needs of this generation of workers, who are in precarious, temporary and casualized work and forced to take on multiple jobs. Young workers often feel excluded.

Participants reflected on the value of unions and reminded us why unions matter: our collective strength when we unify and mobilize, our ability to achieve better working conditions and workplace safety, and our efforts to negotiate decent wages that raise the standard of living for all workers. They expressed the view that unions bring equality and fairness to the table, giving a strong voice to equity-seeking members and marginalized workers. In an increasingly globalized world, labour stands for human and labour rights, in international solidarity with our global partners.



Participants analyzed the attack on labour with the help of brief presentations that informed the discussion. CUPE staff gave an overview of anti-union legislation and helped debunk some of the myths purported by those who seek to exploit and profit from a non-unionized labour force. The Unite for Fairness project presentation gave hope and paved the way to explore other opportunities before us, to renew and continue to build the labour movement.

## 1. STRATEGIC PRIORITIES



In small groups and large plenary discussions, participants provided advice to CUPE about becoming more relevant to young workers within the union, and in the community:

- Increase accessibility and openness of the union to all CUPE members by enhancing and developing relevant education and communication approaches.
- Develop and implement succession and mentorship plans.
- Establish proactive and progressive approaches to labour and social issues by providing leadership in environmental and social justice.
- Promote good jobs and equality in the workplace, at the bargaining table, and in social and economic policy.
- Create CUPE policies and practices that will ensure solidarity among all workers by increasing representation at all levels.
- Grow more diverse and inclusive forms of leadership and union involvement.
- Organize and involve precarious workers, including part-time, casual and contract positions.

## 2. STRATEGIC ACTION RECOMMENDATIONS

Young members agreed that strategic action is needed to:

- Promote environmental sustainability, including sustainable workplaces.
- Build solidarity between unionized and non-unionized workers.
- Strengthen political activism and engagement.
- Develop comprehensive communication strategies within CUPE.
- Integrate findings from this meeting into work at the local level, and work with other equity-seeking members.
- Create a comprehensive CUPE orientation program for new members.
- Engage community allies.
- Integrate young workers into CUPE structures at all levels.
- Expand equity in the workplace and in the union.
- Create more inclusive workplaces, locals and CUPE structures.



## 3. ENVISIONING THE FUTURE



Young workers called on CUPE to become more relevant to young workers – more equal, inclusive, accountable, inviting, flexible, accessible, adaptable, and supportive – so that young workers can feel connected and become more involved in the union. Participants expressed their solidarity, preferring not to be narrowly defined by age; rather, they wished to be included simply as workers.

### CUPE is our union! We share a vision for CUPE where:

- We have a culture of inclusion and accountability.
- We are open and accessible to everyone, promoting diverse forms of leadership, being involved in the union, and relying on up-to-date communication tools.
- We are progressive and proactive about ways to organize, involve and represent precarious workers, including part-time, casual and contract workers.
- We play a positive role for social and environmental justice in the community.
- We promote good jobs, living wages and equality in the workplace, both at the bargaining table and in social and economic policy.

Participants felt that CUPE is already doing a lot, but more work remains.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PARTICIPANTS

These recommendations outline concrete areas the union can address:

### 1) Mentorship

CUPE is a complex organization with many layers. Mentorship takes place both formally and informally, in many ways across CUPE.

CUPE should implement environmental scans that will help us identify what is happening in our union.



CUPE should also develop resources to support mentorship based on young workers' defined needs that would be useful to both experienced activists and potential mentees.

While individual mentorship can be important for succession planning at the local level, we cannot depend exclusively on individual activists and locals to make the changes that are needed.

The future of our union depends on building mentoring into the culture and practices of our union. We must include the lens, voices and experiences of young workers in all of the work we do.

CUPE currently engages in activist training and education, through workshops offered by our Union Development Department on topics like *"Building Strong Local Unions," "Involving Young Members,"* and more.

We actively support organizations such as "NEXT UP" that run sophisticated and in-depth activist and leadership training programs for young people in cities across Canada, within the union and in non-union environments. We must ensure that young CUPE members are aware of these opportunities and encouraged to participate.

### 2) New member orientation and engagement

Young workers agree that the best opportunity to create a positive first impression is when members first join their local. CUPE is currently revising its national "Welcome to CUPE" kit, which provides a template for locals to adapt and expand. Participants in the strategy meeting offered the following proposals to improve on how new members are welcomed to the union:

- A short, online component that members access on the main page of the CUPE website. It would provide info-graphics to explain the CUPE structure, as well as the decision-making process. It could include links to parliamentary procedures, the constitution, and more. It would also include instructions about how to find information about their union, a member's local collective agreement, and contacts for help or to become involved.
- Each local or bargaining unit will be encouraged to identify members whose role is to hold face-to-face conversations with every person who joins the union, within a designated period of time. This role could be further enhanced by an education component for stewards, to ensure that these roles are well supported. The conversations should be sensitive and inclusive of new and young members' diverse issues and needs.



### 3) Educate youth before they enter the workforce or early on in their work lives

CUPE already supports labour councils, federations of labour and others across the country to deliver education to youth about unions, labour rights, health and safety and more in high schools and summer camps. This work is increasingly vital to the labour movement's future. It should be expanded by:

- Training members to do education work through labour federations, the Canadian Labour College, labour councils and so on.
- Making the connection between labour and the issues that matter to young people, like environmental issues and green alternatives.

### 4) Diversity: including all members at grassroots and leadership levels

CUPE is well positioned to be a leader on employment equity and inclusion. We can do more.

For young workers, it's important that the growing diversity of our membership is reflected in the union's leadership. It is equally important that our members see their issues as a priority for CUPE.

Anti-oppression and human rights training at the local level, designated equity officers, audits or other strategies to achieve equality need to be explored.

Locals can ensure that bargaining committees and executives reflect the needs of its members. This might include appointing a new member liaison, who could advocate on behalf of young worker.



## Conclusion

CUPE has taken an important first step during 2013 the Year of the New and Young Worker. We brought together a diverse and representative group of members to learn from their experience and expertise.

The participants to the National Young Workers' Strategy Meeting feel they are ready to step up, and are eager to participate and to lead. Despite the barriers and challenges, participants believe change is possible. They were enthusiastic about their participation in the meeting. Now we have the opportunity to make concrete and lasting changes in the union that will be more responsive and inclusive to all members, current and future.

CUPE extends our gratitude and thanks to all the participants for their energy and commitment at the Young Workers' Strategy Meeting, and to all those who applied to attend. Your hard work and input provided valuable information and advice to address the challenges and take advantage of opportunities today and in the future.



**Participants:**

Colin Hipditch, Nancy Payne, Evelyn Downie, Penny Krill, Courtney Faulkner, Adam Arsenault, Kim Jamieson, Jean-Léo Richardson, Carolyn Radcliffe, Kristin Ross, Jenna Saunders, Carl Lafrance, Roxane Moreau-Laliberté, Cassandre Ouellet, Éric Poirier Ouellet, Mélissa-Anne Archambault, Simon Marcil, David Simao, Mike Bryck, Levi Barton, Victoria Dowswell, Natalie Aitken, Jane Bulloch, Erin Mudry, Tiffany Balducci, Heather George, Tzu-Jung Chen, Kimalee Phillip, Edward Harris, Andrij Filipowich, Jessica Hanna, Carmel Mitchell, Lisa Worobec, Jeff Lindsay, Kyle Mytruk, Tessa Porth, Amanda Jonson, Dylan Funk, Alex Hartung, Lauren Paluck, Dylan Steeper, Cesar Agudelo, Jason Tillsley, Crystal Chan, Coral Williams, Cheryn Wong, Alex Krnasty, Aaron Young, Bradley Hanninen, Hary Kang, Spencer Rasmussen, Kelly Davies, Jen MacPherson, and Kelly Lim

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