

SPRING REPORT
OF THE NATIONAL WOMEN'S TASK FORCE
TO CUPE MEMBERS

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



Women in CUPE
Strengthening our union

March 2007

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INTRODUCTION

The National Women's Task Force has spent the last year listening to members.

So far, we have heard from about 7,000 CUPE members across this country – an overwhelming and amazing response!

CUPE members were thankful and eager to have this conversation about women's involvement in the union. They discussed the many benefits that come from active participation in the union and how the union can improve their workplaces and lives.

Below is our mid-term Task Force report. It describes what we did. It highlights what we learned. And it recommends ways to move forward to strengthen our union in six key areas.

At this CUPE convention, and other conferences and meetings across the country, members now have the opportunity to talk about this proposed action plan – not at a pro or con microphone but in an open discussion.

The comments and suggestions generated at these meetings will be incorporated into our revised plan and presented to delegates at the 2007 CUPE National Convention.

OUR MANDATE

The National Women's Task Force was created because of a resolution passed at CUPE's last national convention held in Winnipeg in 2005.

Resolution 106 asked the Task Force to do the following:

- Gather information about the situation of women at all levels of our union and review our education and leadership programs;
- Seek advice from CUPE activists and staff on women's equality needs, the reasons why women are not represented at all levels of the union, and possible changes to CUPE's structures to address women's equality needs;
- Make recommendations on programs that will advance women's equality in the union, including structural changes or new Regional Vice-President positions;
- And report back to the members through the National Executive Board, provincial division conventions and the 2007 National Convention.

There are 16 rank and file members, representing the regional, sectoral and cultural diversity of our membership, serving on the National Women's Task Force. A staff advisor from each province and staff from the national office assists the Task Force.

WHAT WE DID

- We held 196 face-to-face meetings with almost 2,300 CUPE members in 121 different communities across the country. We met with an incredible diversity of members and many who never make it to provincial or national conferences and conventions. Meetings were inclusive and participatory and followed a standard set of questions.
- 4,600 CUPE members responded to a membership questionnaire that was available on CUPE's website and distributed in each region or division by members of the Task Force.
- We also direct mailed a survey to local unions to gather information about women and equity groups in our membership, local executives and to learn more about the policies and practices of locals.
- We conducted research on other unions, their structures and measures to support women's involvement in their union.
- We produced Fact Sheets and communications material on women's issues, all of which are available on the CUPE national website. We produced a new poster, "Women strengthen our union", that has been sent to every CUPE local.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Through our consultations with members and research on other unions, we learned two key things:

- Although we have many women who play strong leadership roles at the local level in our union, women continue to have many challenges at home, in the workplace and in our union that prevent their full involvement in the union. Women from equity groups face particular challenges.
- Other unions have used a combination of targeted programs and structural models to ensure women's participation and representation in their union.

WHAT WE HEARD FROM THE MEMBERS

About 30% of respondents to our survey said they do want to be more active in the union. So what prevents women from being more actively involved?

- **Women continue to have primary responsibilities for family and home.** Women are exhausted and experience double and triple days as they try to juggle all their roles and responsibilities for family. In some cultures, there are higher expectations of women or they have extended families to care for. The demands at home and the need to earn wages to support their families means that many women do not have the time or energy to give to their union. Unsupportive partners, families and lack of child care support are major barriers to women.
- **Working conditions and economic insecurity.** Too many CUPE women work for low wages, in multiple jobs or struggle to get by with part-time or casual employment. Our survey revealed that 27% of members regularly work at more than one job. Over 21% work part-time or casual, and of those, over 54% said they would prefer a full-time job. Employers often retaliate against union activists or don't backfill when union leave is taken. Many members face crushing workloads and find it difficult to participate in the union. Over 37% of respondents to our survey said that work commitments prevented them from taking a more active role in the union.
- **The union culture and practices.** Members who told us that there are certain behaviours or practices in the union that turn them away. Many women are uncomfortable with loud, aggressive and confrontational behaviour that can exist at union meetings or events. Women of colour and Aboriginal women in particular said such conduct creates stress and keeps them from getting involved. Newcomers can feel intimidated or unwelcome by activists. Unfortunately, some women have experienced bullying and harassment and others said they do not feel safe at union conventions and schools that have a drinking and partying culture.

Harassment was cited as a systemic problem and the Task Force was urged to recommend a code of conduct and fair and transparent procedures to address harassment within the union.

- **Time and place union meetings held.** About 36% of respondents to the survey said they never attend union meetings. Of those members who said they wanted to be more active in the union, 20% said that the time and place of meetings prevented them from getting involved. How can we get members involved in our union if they cannot even make it to meetings? Women with family responsibilities or no child care support,

members who work shifts or in multiple jobs, and members who commute or travel long distances face serious obstacles to union involvement.

BARRIERS TO WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS

The majority of CUPE members (56%) who answered our survey believe it is a problem that women are not well represented in leadership positions. The response was highest in British Columbia and Ontario where 67% and 61% of respondents respectively said they were concerned.

These are some of the reasons members said it is difficult for women to get into leadership positions.

- **Workload and segregation in union positions.** The union culture of “all or nothing” means that many women feel that union involvement can swallow them up. The higher the position in the union, the heavier the load. Many feel that there are heavier expectations of women leaders. In CUPE, women are less likely to be in paid union positions and are getting burned out. About 15% of respondents to the survey said that union workload prevents them from being more active in the union.

Additionally, women tend to be segregated into traditional union roles. In several consultations, members remarked that women can be the recording secretary or on the education committee, but not on the grievance or negotiations committee.

- **Backlash to women’s equality.** Many sisters spoke about a backlash against women and equity seeking groups and the fact that women are losing ground. Members who speak out on equality issues are often silenced and marginalized. This is a particular concern in this current political climate in which a federal conservative government is attacking women and equality rights.
- **Barriers in the union electoral process.** Women find it difficult to get to union conventions or conferences. Their local may not have the finances, especially in small locals where women are concentrated, or in larger locals they may only send the officers who are more likely men.

For women who do get to conventions and other CUPE functions, the process and rules of order can be confusing or intimidating. Members with disabilities often do not have accommodations for after-hours activities, which prevent them from fully participating in all convention activities.

Women also spoke about the unwritten rules around elections, such as not challenging incumbents and backroom deals to decide on successions. Running against a long-term leader can be risky.

Women from equity groups do not see themselves reflected in union structures and want to see a more inclusive and representative union.

- **Training and skills development.** Women in many consultations identified the need for CUPE to provide leadership training and skills development specific to women so they have the knowledge and confidence to take on leadership positions.

RESEARCH ON WOMEN IN OTHER UNIONS

Our Task Force looked at the situation for women in other unions, and studied the different measures those unions have taken to advance women's equality.

Table A

Comparison of Women's Representation in Canadian Union Structures

Union	# of union members	% of women members	% of women on executive	Ranking – % of women on executive
CUPE	560,000	67%	3 women out of 23 (13%)	8
NUPGE	340,000	55%	14 women of 21 (66.7%)	3
USWA	280,000	20%	3 District Directors (elected) are men. 2 of 3 Assistant Directors are women.	9
CAW	260,000	33%	3 women of 17 (17.6%)	7
CEP	150,000	17%	8 women of 31 (28.8%)	5
PSAC	150,000	60%	4 women of 9 (44.4%)	4
SEIU	95,000	N/a	3 women of 4 (75%)	1
ETFO (Elementary Teachers Fed. ON)	70,000	80%	10 women of 14 (71.4%)	2
CUPW	54,000	33%	4 women of 15 (26.7%)	6

- A comparison of nine Canadian unions shows that, although CUPE is the union with the second highest percentage of women in its membership, it ranks eighth out of nine when it comes to the representation of women on national executive boards.
- Other unions use different approaches to advance women's equality, such as: education and training programs specific to women, bargaining key provisions to support women, leadership and mentorship programs and biennial or annual women's conferences.
- Other unions also use different structural models to guarantee the presence of women in elected structures. The different models include: affirmative action or designated seats, gender parity (equal representation of women and men) or proportionality.

Table B

Different Models to Increase Women's Representation in Union Structures

Union or Federation	Structural Model	% of members that are women	% of women on executive
CLC <i>Canadian Labour Congress</i>	6 affirmative action seats for women on executive. Gender parity among 4 executive officers.	Not known.	Officers: 50% women. Exec. committee: 5 of 16 are women (31.3%). Exec. council: 22 of 58 are women (37.9%).
OFL <i>Ontario Federation of Labour</i>	9 affirmative action seats for women on executive.	47% of 700,000 affiliated members.	2 of 3 officers are women. 9 of 36 (25%) executive members are women.
BCFL <i>BC Federation of Labour</i>	Gender parity among vice-presidents.	Not known. 450,000 affiliated members.	7 of 14 VPs are women (50%). Gender parity and diversity in other seats.
SFL <i>Saskatchewan Federation of Labour</i>	Gender parity for affiliates with more than one VP.	Not known. 85,000 affiliated members.	12 of 28 executive members are women (42.9%).
PSI <i>Public Services International</i>	Gender parity required in all elected structures and delegations. All PSI affiliates to achieve gender parity by 2007.	65% of the 20 million members.	50% women (gender parity).
UNISON (United Kingdom)	Proportionality. Women must be elected in proportion to their numbers in the membership.	70% of the 1.3 million members.	44 of 67 national executive council members are women (65.7%). One third of seats held by low paid women.

OUR GOALS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on what we heard from members across the country, the National Women's Task Force developed the following goals and recommendations.

Our long-term goals are to strengthen the union by:

1. Improving working conditions for women, through collective bargaining and other actions such as lobbying for legislative change;
2. Building toward gender parity in the union leadership at all levels of the union, and improve representation of equity groups;
3. Making the union more inclusive, transparent and welcoming of women in all their diversity.

Over several days of meetings, our Task Force developed 44 recommendations that we believe will help us meet the above goals. Those recommendations fall into six priority areas for our union in the coming two years:

1. Bargaining to support women;
2. Applying equality throughout the union;
3. Education and training;
4. Leadership development for women;
5. More effective union meetings and ways to involve members;
6. Creating a more representative union structure.

We propose a two-fold strategy for reaching these goals:

- A multi-year action plan with focused and sustained actions to develop women leaders at all levels of the union, address key workplace issues, and integrate equity, respect and inclusion into all aspects of the union.
- Specific changes to our structure at the national level to set a minimum threshold for women's representation.

OUR PROPOSED ACTION PLAN TO ADDRESS THESE PRIORITIES (2007-2009)

Changing our union culture and doing things differently from the ground up will take time. That's why we are proposing a multi-year action plan that will be reviewed every two years to measure our gains and adjusted as we determine what more needs to be done.

Fortunately, CUPE has many excellent programs and resources to support this work. And changes adopted at the 2005 CUPE National Convention already have been implemented to increase women's participation in our union. For example, the new appointment process to national committees has increased the number of women on committees from 48% to 62%. An equality lens is being applied to the new trainee representative program.

Some of the recommendations in our action plan can be implemented immediately and others will require planning and dedicated resources. That is why we have focused on six program recommendations and three structural changes that would move the work of the Task Force forward in the next two years.

Our proposed plan builds on this work in six key areas:

Recommendation # 1: A National Women's Bargaining Conference

As the 2005 Strategic Directions document stated, "We need to initiate a more effective union-wide strategy to put working women's issues back on the bargaining agenda in a concerted and coordinated way".

Too many women members are concentrated in low paying jobs, or are struggling to make ends meet on two or three part-time jobs. Pay equity is still not achieved in many provinces and sectors. Many women lack collective agreement language that provides them with family illness leave, the ability to balance work and family, maternity benefits top up, paid leave for union work or benefits for part-time workers.

CUPE has developed important bargaining resources to advance women's equality needs and equity issues. The *Up with Women's Wages* documents and "Bargaining Equality" binder are valuable tools. We need to regularly update them and continue to use them in all of our work.

The Task Force recommends that CUPE build on this work and:

- Organize a National Women's Bargaining Conference in 2008.

The conference would provide an opportunity for members to build strategies and set clear achievable goals on bargaining the issues that are important to women. It would also be an opportunity to put the "Bargaining Equality" binder into action and develop accountability measures for bargaining equality issues.

Recommendation # 2: Creating a Respectful Union

Women members across sectors and across the country spoke about unacceptable behaviour and harassment that can exist at CUPE conferences, schools or conventions. Often these behaviours are part of social events where women may not feel safe or welcome. Although we read the Equality Statement at all CUPE events, there are no consequences for unacceptable behaviour or we rely on internal trial procedures that are intimidating, complex and difficult.

The Task Force recommends that CUPE:

- Develop a Code of Conduct that would be enforced at all CUPE conferences, conventions and schools with consequences for unacceptable behaviour.
- Develop a clear and effective internal harassment procedure, along with the appropriate constitutional changes.

Recommendation # 3: Education and Training for Women

Our union has recently developed specific workshops for women, such as the weeklong course, *Women Breaking Barriers*, and a new workshop, *Women Speaking Up*. Members told us that education and leadership training on a range of topics was critical to giving women the skills and confidence to be more active in their locals and at other levels of the union. It is difficult, however, for many women – especially women from small locals – to attend courses because of financial reasons, family responsibilities or inability to get union leave.

The Task Force recommends that CUPE:

- Continue to develop and offer courses specific to women.
- Expand scholarships or subsidize the cost of courses to enable more women to participate, including women from equity groups.
- Make courses available in more communities so it is easier for women to participate.

Recommendation # 4: Mentorship and Support for Women Leaders

When women are elected into leadership positions, the new position can seem overwhelming and, at times, isolating. Members spoke repeatedly in the consultations and through the survey about the importance of mentoring to develop women leaders. Women can learn from other women leaders about how to empower members and develop an inclusive union that strengthens our union. Members also told us that once women are elected into leadership

positions, they need concrete support systems to continue to grow and develop in their role.

The Task Force recommends that CUPE:

- Develop and expand a mentorship program for women so women can learn important skills and qualities to be a leader.
- Develop other organized supports for women leaders, especially new women leaders.

Recommendation # 5: Equality Representatives in Every Region

When our union was founded in 1963, women only made up one-third of the membership but now represent two-thirds of CUPE members. Today, our membership is predominantly female and more diverse.

Although we are making efforts to be more inclusive of equity groups, we often fall short of integrating equality and diversity in our union. Women and members from equity groups are under represented in our union structures, as participants in our conferences, conventions and schools and on staff.

Equality representatives play an important role in educating members and staff on equity issues and providing expertise on challenging issues like harassment and duty to accommodate. Equality representatives can lighten the workload of servicing representatives. Currently there are only four equality representatives in our union. The Task Force believes that the creation of equality representatives in all regions will advance equality issues and strengthen our union.

The Task Force recommends that CUPE:

- Provide funding for the creation of a full-time Equality Representative position in every region.
- Discuss the importance of creating these positions with every region as part of the budget and priorities and planning process.

Recommendation # 6: Training on Equity and Bargaining Equality

As our union membership becomes more diverse, there are increased demands for representation on equality issues. If we are to move forward on equality issues, it is critical that we train staff on equity issues so they have more expertise for their increasingly complex jobs.

Staff plays an important role by supporting locals in bargaining, developing collective agreement language, coordinating sector strategies and providing locals with expertise on a range of issues. CUPE staff are in a position to help us create a more inclusive union, and we need to support them with training on topics such as anti-racism, bargaining equality, Aboriginal issues, a representative workforce, using a gender or diversity lens, "Thinking Equality" when planning meetings or events, disability issues and more.

Taking into account existing language around training in staff collective agreements, the Task Force recommends that CUPE:

- Offer more courses on equity issues at staff training sessions and strongly encourage all staff to take these courses.
- For new staff, make training on equity issues part of orientation and the trainee rep program.

RECOMMENDATIONS ON CUPE's STRUCTURE FOR 2007-2009

The Task Force has a long-term goal of creating a more inclusive and representative union. We believe that changes to our union's programs and specific action plans will increase the representation of women and equity groups over the long-term. Changes to our structure are also necessary to ensure the minimum representation of women on our National Executive Board. We must demonstrate that it is important to us that women's voices are included at the highest decision-making level of our union.

Therefore we recommend the following structural changes:

1. Clarify the Process for Electing Regional Vice-Presidents

- The Task Force recommends that the Regional Vice-President (RVP) elections to the National Executive Board be changed so the process is clear and transparent.
- Each region entitled to Regional Vice-Presidents would meet in Caucus at the National Convention and elect their RVP. These names would be announced on the convention floor and declared elected by the Election Officer.

This would enshrine the principle of caucus choice by regions. It would put into writing what is already in practice and make the RVP election process clear and transparent.

2. Create Two New National Officer Positions and Gender Parity

- The Task Force recommends the addition of two (2) full-time Executive Vice-President positions for a total of four (4) full-time National Officers. Of the four National Officers, *a minimum of two must be women*.
- The decision to create these positions would be made at the 2007 National Convention. The elections to fill the positions would take place at the 2009 National Convention and thereafter.

CUPE's membership has increased from almost 56,000 members in 1963 to over 560,000 in 2007. We have had two National Officers since our union was founded, despite the fact that our membership has grown ten-fold and there are increased demands on our officers. Creating two new National Officers will allow four officers to share the workload, make our officers more accessible to the membership, and strengthen the democratic side of our union. Applying the concept of gender parity to our National Officers is a positive message to our members about equality and the role of women in leadership.

3. Create Four New Regional Vice-President Positions to Ensure Minimum Representation of Women on the National Executive Board

The Task Force recommends the addition of four (4) Regional Vice-President (RVP) positions to the National Executive Board as follows:

- Quebec – Three (3) Regional Vice-Presidents, *at least one of which must be a woman* (addition of one RVP);
- Ontario – Five (5) Regional Vice-Presidents, *at least two of which must be women* (addition of two RVPs);
- BC – Three (3) Regional Vice-Presidents, *at least one of which must be a woman* (addition of one RVP).

The addition of the above four new RVPs would take effect at the 2007 National Convention.

Quebec, Ontario and BC are the only regions with multiple RVP positions due to their size (76% of CUPE's 560,000 members reside in these three regions).

With the additional positions, these three regions will have one RVP for every 38,000 members versus the remaining provinces which have one RVP for every 20,000 members (see appendix A).

This proposal, along with the two new National Officers, would guarantee a minimum of 20% women on the National Executive Board. Presently, there is no requirement for the number of women on the NEB, even though our membership is two-thirds women. This proposal is not the same as designated seats because

the seats are not assigned as “women’s seats”. Instead, a threshold is set for a minimum number of women among total Regional Vice-President positions.

CONCLUSION

This is our first report to CUPE members on what we did and learned from our discussions with members across the country. In fact, these have been the most extensive consultations with members ever held by CUPE. More detailed information on what we heard is available in separate reports on the face-to-face consultations and the membership survey.

Women told us that they want to be included and more active in our union. They want to contribute to making our union a strong and powerful force. This is our historic opportunity to make positive change so our union can make a difference in women’s lives at work, in the community and in the union.

Over the next several months, the National Women’s Task Force will be making presentations in each region and division about our findings and proposals for strengthening our union. We want to promote discussion among the membership at all levels about the challenges and changes arising from our work so far. Do you support the proposals we are putting forward? Do you believe that the action plan will strengthen our union?

The Task Force will receive feedback from discussions in the regions before formulating its final report for the 2007 CUPE National Convention in October.

For more information on the work of the Task Force, visit www.cupe.ca and click on the National Women’s Task Force box on the front page of the website. You can e-mail us with your comments at women@cupe.ca. You can also contact the Task Force member(s) in your region or division, or Staff Coordinator Cheryl Stadnichuk (see Appendix B).

APPENDIX A

National Executive Board Structure

National Officers (2)

- National President
- National Secretary-Treasurer

General Vice-Presidents (5)

Regional Vice-Presidents (14)

Nova Scotia.....	1
Newfoundland and Labrador.....	1
New Brunswick.....	1
Prince Edward Island.....	1
Quebec.....	2
Ontario.....	2
Northern Ontario.....	1
Manitoba.....	1
Saskatchewan.....	1
Alberta.....	1
British Columbia.....	2

Diversity Vice-Presidents (2)

APPENDIX B

Members of the National Women's Task Force

Newfoundland and Labrador

Donna Ryan, CUPE Local 488
Lynn McDougall, National Representative

Nova Scotia

Barbara Moore, CUPE Local 3912 (Co-Chair)
Elizabeth Borden-Paris, CUPE Local 2330
Jacquie Bramwell, National Representative

New Brunswick

Odette Robichaud, CUPE Local 1840
Danielle Savoie, National Representative

Prince Edward Island

Donalda MacDonald, CUPE Local 1770
(NEB Member)

Quebec

Lucie Levasseur, CUPE Local 2051
Annick Desjardins, Equality Representative

Ontario

Candace Rennick, CUPE Local 2280
(NEB Member)
Helen Kennedy, CUPE Local 79
Joanne Martin, National Representative

Manitoba

Arlene Macklem, CUPE Local 998
Maureen Morrison, Equality Representative

Saskatchewan

Hitomi Suzuta, CUPE Local 2419
Geraldine Harris, CUPE Local 3967
Elaine Ehman, National Representative

Alberta

Shelina Hassanali, CUPE Local 4731
Marie Boyd-Robinson, National
Representative

British Columbia

Sheryl Burns, CUPE Local 1936
Conni Kilfoil, Equality Representative

HEU

Donisa Bernardo, CUPE-HEU Local 6014
Margi Blamey, HEU

Airline

Cidalia Ribeiro, CUPE Local 4092
Marilyne White, National Representative

Coordinator

Cheryl Stadnichuk, Research Representative

National President

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To Contact the National Women's Task Force

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