

Our strength

Women in CUPE strengthening our union

Pro-active policies boost women's activism



Yolanda McClean, CUPE 4400 equity vice-president

With 12,000 members, mostly women, working for the Toronto District School Board, CUPE 4400 is the largest education local in the country. Formed in the late 1990s out of the school board amalgamations forced by the Mike Harris government, the local started out with an executive board of more than 100 members.

Today, the 22-member executive includes 12 women and 10 men, with five women and three men making up the table officers.

While the CUPE pattern shows smaller locals more often have women leaders than larger locals, Local 4400 has taken steps to make participation easier for women, says equity vice-president Yolanda McClean.

“Don’t get me wrong; change is hard,” says McClean. “We have to keep working and plugging away.” But, she says, the number of women active in the union has grown enough that this year, the focus is on increasing the diversity of women – and other active members – as part of the local’s “Year of the Steward” campaign.

The measures that CUPE 4400 has adopted to support women’s participation are based on a set of principles, including:

- Women learn to lead by leading;
- Women need to have relief from doing work, union work, home work and child care (i.e. book-offs, support for child care);

- Women need to have a clear pathway for elected positions.

Having a large local doesn’t just mean having access to more financial resources for book-offs and child care, McClean says. When it comes to attending conventions, for example, a large local can afford to send more than just the president and maybe one other delegate. And that means the local can ensure its delegation has gender balance.

CUPE 4400 has instituted a range of pro-active policies such as:

- Offering two choices for monthly meetings, one on Saturday morning and one on Monday evening;
- Providing child care and food at all membership meetings;
- Booking off members to work on special projects or take training so they are not doing union work on their own time;
- Monitoring the male/female ratio, as well as unit composition, on committees, delegations, etc.;
- Sending a large number – uncapped – of members to educationals and women’s conferences;
- Negotiating benefits for part-timers (in Canada, seven out of 10 part-time workers are women).

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Listening to members

The National Women’s Task Force is reaching out to CUPE members across the country, consulting widely on how to make our union stronger by increasing women’s participation and representation. Our first newsletter covers just a few stories. We hope to bring you many more in the months ahead. If you’ve got a story about how your local is becoming more inclusive for women, or how women in your local are mobilizing, let us know. E-mail women@cupe.ca or contact coordinator Cheryl Stadnichuk. And don’t forget to fill out the online member’s survey at www.cupe.ca/nwtfsurvey before November 10!

Women in CUPE – then and now

How has the situation for women in our union changed over the past 20 years? In 1985, CUPE produced a special edition of *The Facts* on women's issues. We've compared the facts in that issue to today to illustrate how the situation for women in CUPE has both improved and deteriorated in the last two decades.


| | 1985 | 2005 |
|---|------------|------------|
| Total number of CUPE members | 300,000 | 550,000 |
| Percentage of members who are women | about 47% | about 66% |
| Number of members on the national executive board (NEB) | 20 | 23 |
| Number of women on the NEB | 5 (or 25%) | 3 (or 13%) |
| Number of women presidents of provincial divisions | 4 | 1 |
| Percentage of women who were delegates to the CUPE national convention (*1983 data) | 41%* | 51% |
| Percentage of staff representatives who are women | 12.9% | 43.4% |
| Number of women directors and managing directors of national union departments | 1 | 4 |
| Women's average earnings as a percentage of men's average earnings in Canada (*2003 data) | 60% | 71%* |
| Percentage of part-time jobs in Canada held by women | 71.5% | 70% |
| Percentage of Canadian mothers with children aged 3-5 in the paid labour force (*1982 data) | 53%* | 70% |

Source: CUPE *The Facts*, vol.7, no.3, May-June 1985; *Strategic Directions Policy*, CUPE national convention, 2005; Statistics Canada.

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McClellan also credits the leadership of the local for giving new activists, especially executive board members, leeway to try out new ideas.

"The whole executive is behind you 100 per cent," says the alternative school library technician, who hasn't looked back since she got involved in a 1999 strike. "Whenever I visit my old school, they ask when I'm coming back. But I can't imagine doing anything else than what I'm doing with my union right now."

CUPE 4400 has a women's committee in place to help implement the work of the national women's task force and to organize three annual events: the Dec. 6 National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women, International Women's Day (March 8) and a women's wellness day. It's a committee that the local hopes will continue long after the task force has presented its report at the next national convention. 



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Barriers shared for women with disabilities

MAKING CONTACT: CUPE women with various kinds of disabilities find that they face similar barriers in the workplace.

CUPE women with disabilities enjoyed a rare opportunity to discuss common issues at an informal ‘town hall’ meeting in Burnaby, B.C., facilitated by National Women’s Task Force member Sheryl Burns.

Burns, also a member of CUPE BC’s Workers With Disabilities working group, offered eight sisters a safe and supportive environment in which to share their experiences as workers and union members with disabilities.

Their discussion was assisted by real-time captioning and American Sign Language (ASL) translation services.

“There was some nervousness when the meeting began, but a lot of positive energy by the end,” said CUPE 2950 (University of British Columbia support services) president Natalie Lisik, who has a hearing loss. “There was a good exchange of ideas and a better comfort level for everyone.”

CUPE 1091 (Delta School District) member Carolyn Becker, who is deaf, said the meeting offered welcome relief from the isolation she feels as a deaf school custodian.

“It felt good to be able to explain how things are in my workplace,” she said, through a sign language interpreter. “I’m very isolated at work, because no one talks to me.”

Becker was one of several women who said they have found, despite many advances in labour relations law, that their disability is the biggest barrier to advancement.

“It’s difficult to get a promotion or do another job, because the employer simply says I can’t do it – that I wouldn’t be able to do it,” said Becker, who served three years on the board of directors for the B.C. Deaf Sports

Federation. “Even if I wanted to work as a teacher’s aide, I can’t because the employer won’t provide interpretation.”

Despite feeling stuck in this predicament, she added that she was encouraged by the discussion and felt genuinely supported by the other women – all of whom she was meeting for the first time.

One idea that came out of the meeting was to allow self-identification of disability on union membership cards.

“Why not?” said Carrie Bishop of CUPE 2262 (Castlegar civic workers), who is dysgraphic (has difficulty writing). “For federal government jobs you have the option of self identifying as having a disability. If the union could do it, that would help us find more of our disabled members. Think about the difference that would make for their first contact with the union.”

Lisik said the meeting strengthened her work as a union activist.


“I’m keen about educating on the issues,” she said. “There’s a real need to educate co-workers, and for employers to know what accommodation is required of them. But employers often don’t know what to do because they don’t have the resources. A lot of the time, things can be done that don’t cost money, but they can’t get around the money issue.”

CUPE 2950 member Karin More, who has chronic depression, said she came to the meeting to learn about other forms of disability and to spread awareness about her own.

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“Listening to women with other types of disabilities, getting that alternative perspective, really helps,” she said.

More, a fundraising secretary for UBC’s faculty of medicine, said she loves her job and is happy to serve as a workplace role model for people with mental illness.

“A lot of members won’t disclose [their illness] to anyone else for fear of retribution or stigma,” she said. “I’ve been pretty open about my illness, but my disability doesn’t disrupt my work, day-to-day. People know how well I work and how hard I work.” 



June forum in Montreal

well-attended women’s summer forum.

National Task Force member Lucie Levasseur says that although it’s still early in the process, the working group is beginning to see certain patterns emerging.

“We’d always suspected that the reasons women aren’t more active in their locals are very different from why they aren’t present in the leadership at the provincial and national levels,” Levasseur says.

“As we talk to more women, we’re seeing our suspicions confirmed. At the local level, the barriers tend to be more systemic. Women have a limited amount of time and they prefer to spend that time at home with their families. It’s a question of lifestyle values and priorities. They’re not interested in attending union meetings in the evenings, or they can’t because they have to be home to take care of the kids. In the vast majority of instances, women are still the primary caregivers, especially in the evenings.”

Levasseur says locals can amend this problem by holding meetings at different times or by providing on-site child care.

“At the higher levels, the barriers are more structural,” she continues. “The problem is that the leadership right now is visibly very male. Women see this and think it’s a man’s world, or that it’s not a place for them. It’s the same thing on our convention floors, which tend to be dominated by men. Women don’t feel welcome. There are also very complex relationships that women have with positions of power and authority. And I’m sure some locals still choose to present male candidates over female ones.”

Barrier patterns for women emerging from Quebec meeting

In June, more than 100 members met to discuss, listen and work together on solutions to increase women’s participation in the union at a forum held on Task Force issues.

Keynote speaker Marie-Josée Legault, a professor at the Université du Québec, Montreal, told CUPE women and men at the forum that true equality means more than equal rights, such as running for office. It is more about changing the social power roles that underlie and maintain an injustice or a discriminatory situation, she said.

Many who attended, such as Hélène Simard, president of the CUPE Quebec women’s committee, found the event was an opportunity to learn about and reflect on the issues facing women members.

The participants produced suggested solutions on how to better enshrine equality rights among members, including:

- Negotiate contract language for family leave;
- Pay for child care when members attend union functions;
- Negotiate child care centres in large workplaces;
- Hold union meetings during the noon hour instead of evenings;
- Have shorter, more frequent union meetings;
- Fight for permanent jobs and oppose precarious employment;
- Launch a mentoring program within the union.

The working group is consulting with members this fall, covering the Abitibi, Chicoutimi and Sherbrooke regions before moving to Quebec City and Montreal. The provincial women’s group will also give a presentation and hold a debate during the November CUPE Quebec general council meeting. 