

# COUNTERPOINT

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CUPE'S NATIONAL PUBLICATION



## FOCUS

Working Class Feminism  
Powers Up Historic Strike



## The Canary

A Feminist Recovery Requires  
Addressing Women's Mental  
Health from the Bottom Up



## Tabletalk

A Feminist Social and Economic  
Recovery Starts with Universal  
Child Care



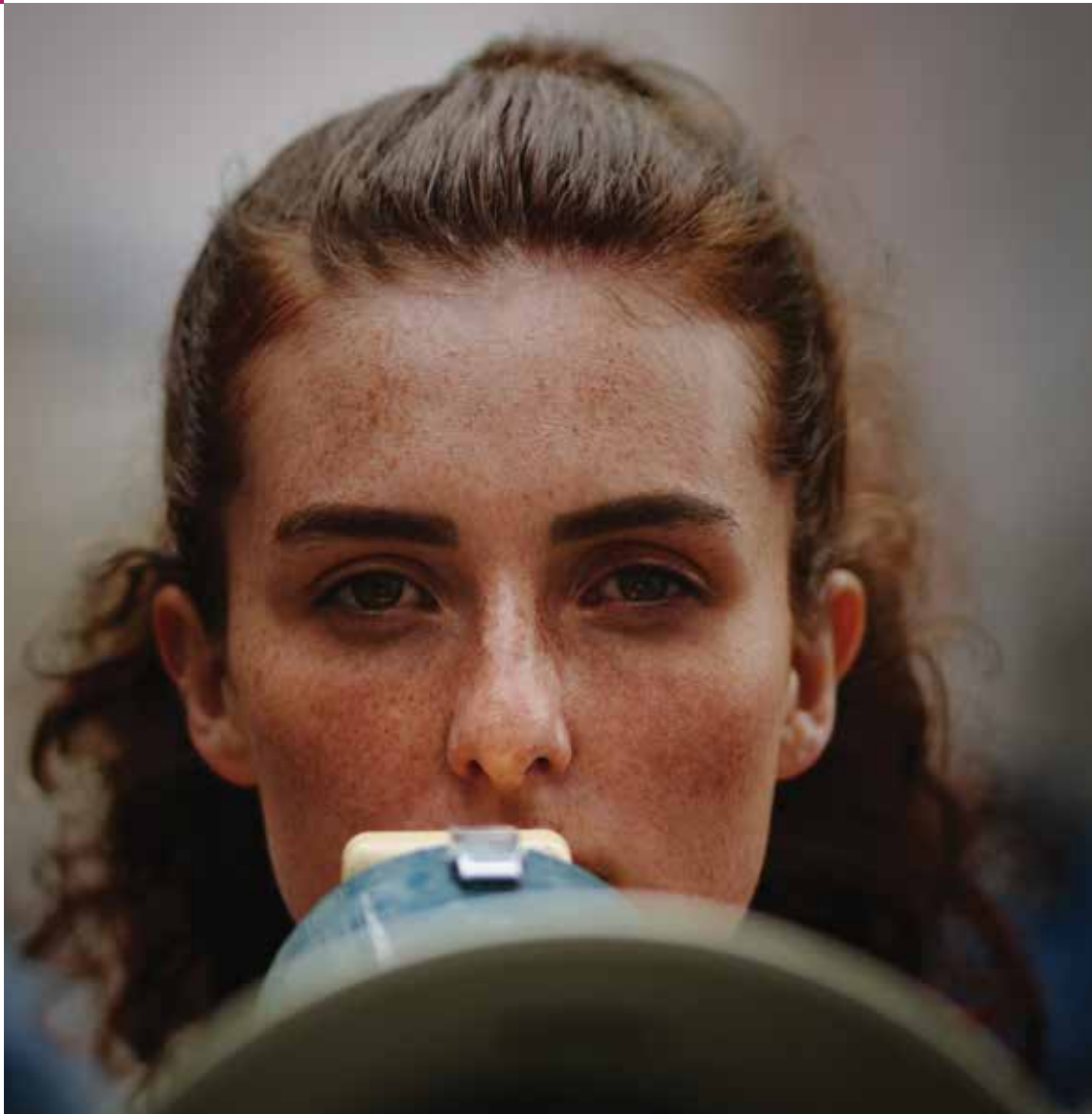
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CANDACE RENNICK  
National Secretary-Treasurer



## Reconciliation

A Time for Truth, a Time  
for Reconciliation: Making a  
Commitment through Collective  
Bargaining



## FIGHTING FOR A FAIR FEMINIST RECOVERY

With COVID-19 entering its third year,  
women at CUPE are leading the way  
toward meaningful, lasting change.

**CUPE** / Canadian Union  
of Public Employees

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# FIGHTING FOR A FAIR, FEMINIST RECOVERY FOR CANADA AND THE WORLD

By **Mark Hancock** – CUPE's National President

We're not exactly entering 2022 on the note most of us would have liked, with the Omicron variant of COVID-19 wreaking havoc on our health, our jobs, and our road to social and economic recovery.

I know that as we pass the two-year mark of this pandemic, a lot of us are fed up. We're sick and tired of this pandemic. We're sick and tired of governments who don't care about workers and their families. As union members and activists, every single one of us has been through a lot.

But we cannot lose sight of the opportunities and important work ahead of us. Our job as Canada's largest and strongest union remains the same.

In 2022, we are going to fight for a fair recovery from this pandemic, that focuses on fixing our broken health care system and helping the precarious workers, low-income families, and racialized folks who endured the cruellest effects of this crisis.

We are going to fight for a feminist recovery that addresses the inequities faced by women at work and in our communities. That starts with fighting for a national, affordable child care program, and fighting for better wages, job security and working conditions in occupations predominantly staffed by women like health care, long-term care, education, and more.

We are also going to head off calls for austerity and privatization. You can already hear right-wing governments and pundits sharpening their knives, looking to cut and sell off the very public services that helped our communities weather this pandemic.

And we're going to win. Just look at what our members achieved a few short months ago in New Brunswick. Outgunned by a provincial government that wanted to continue paying essential workers the lowest wages in the country, our members organized, engaged their locals and their communities, and fought back. And not only did we stop the Conservative agenda in New Brunswick – we made important gains for our lowest paid members too.

This is the kind of fight we are going to be bringing all across Canada.

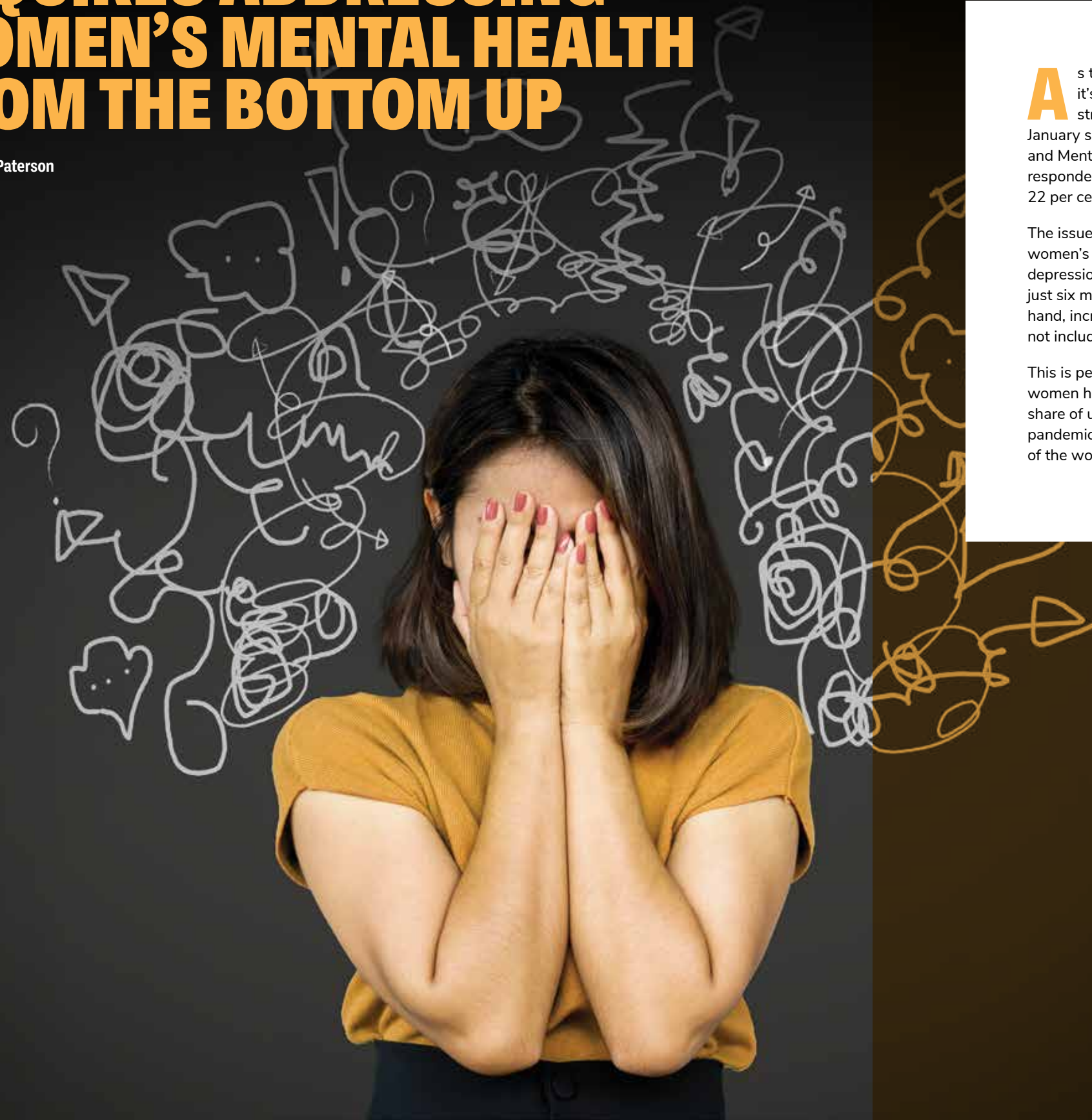
And our fight won't stop at Canada's borders either. The failure of rich countries like Canada to push for vaccine equity has devastated less-fortunate countries, and it has also allowed dangerous variants like Omicron to evolve and spread like wildfire. CUPE has been a leading voice since day one calling on pharmaceutical companies to waive their patents on vaccines so that less-wealthy nations can buy or produce enough vaccines for their populations. We'll keep up the pressure on this too.

We're not there yet. But together, we are going to fight through this pandemic and build a better country, and a better world.



# A FEMINIST RECOVERY REQUIRES ADDRESSING WOMEN'S MENTAL HEALTH FROM THE BOTTOM UP

By Tara Paterson



**A**s the pandemic enters its third year, it's no surprise that many workers are struggling with their mental health. A January survey from the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health found that a quarter of respondents were experiencing anxiety and 22 per cent were feeling depressed.

The issue is gendered. In the same survey, women's reports of anxiety, loneliness and depression had increased significantly from just six months before. Men's, on the other hand, increased only slightly. The survey did not include data on other gender identities.

This is perhaps unsurprising given that women have been saddled with the lion's share of unpaid care work throughout the pandemic, while also making up the majority of the workforce on the front lines.

**“After two years of working jobs that are often unsafe during the pandemic and also often having to take care of children, women are tired, they’re burnt out, their mental health is in the pits,” says Susan Gapka, CUPE 2998 member and mental health advocate.**

Most of the sectors deemed essential during COVID-19 – namely, health care, child care, and long-term care – are staffed almost entirely by women. “Many of the women on the front lines who are working to keep us all safe are also racialized, Indigenous, newcomers or young,” Gapka reminds us.

These workers reported some of the worst mental health outcomes, and 37 per cent were dealing with moderate to severe anxiety at the time of the survey in January.

As CUPE 6364 member Rosemary Buote puts it, “many of us health care workers are scheduled 12-hour shifts. Our shifts can end as late as midnight, so when we leave work there are not many friends or family available to chat or ‘vent’ to. We spend a good deal of time alone because of it. This, paired with the fatigue of working long, stressful hours in chaos, leaves us with nothing left to give to our families, even preparing a meal seems like a chore.”



**“We are expected to go to work in a place full of sickness, stress, and often chaos, but then it is the expectation that we will leave our health care facilities like nothing happened, go home and into our communities to navigate our own personal journey through the pandemic, and then repeat,”** says **CUPE 6364 member Rosemary Buote.**

The increased risk of exposure to the virus that front-line workers experience is inherently stressful. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the psychological burdens facing women workers are inevitable.

Unfortunately, governments and employers have failed to take the necessary steps to protect workers, especially women, from physical and psychosocial hazards.

“Managers were locking up N95 masks in their offices, implementing substandard COVID-19 policies, while we were dangerously understaffed and overworked,” Buote says.

“The burdens put on the shoulders of women working in health care and long-term care are not the fault of the workers, but of a government and systems of employers who put profit over people and barely gave us the minimum standards that we would expect for a crisis or pandemic situation,” she added.

Even for those not on the front lines, employers need to recognize the unique struggles that many women are facing when working from home – especially those with caring responsibilities.

Several provinces introduced various emergency leaves during the pandemic to allow workers to take time to care for family members and attend to other health issues. But most of them are unpaid, and few workers can afford to lose out on wages.

Every Human Rights Code in Canada includes family status as a protected ground except Quebec’s. In Quebec, they have a protection for “civil status” which is essentially the same thing. The protection that this affords means that employers have a legal duty to accommodate parents and those with caring responsibilities, up to the point of “undue hardship”.

Too often, employers fail to meet their obligations here.

# ABOUT ROSEMARY BUOTE

Rosemary Buote is a site vice-president, Oshawa and Whitby, at CUPE 6364 representing hospital workers of the Regional Municipality of Durham, in Ontario. She is a Health and Safety representative on the Ontario Council of Hospital Unions, and she sits on the Health Care Workers Coordinating Committee.

She is also the health care sector representative and Co-Chair of CUPE Ontario’s Health and Safety / Injured Workers Committee. She is a member of CUPE’s National Health and Safety Committee.



CUPE activists are pushing them to provide reasonable accommodation and increase access to other mental health supports. Yet, many face reprisal for speaking out.

According to Buote, “health care workers are unique in the aspect of privacy and confidentiality. We are taught the importance of sharing feelings and experiences, yet we are restricted in what we are allowed to share from both a moral and legal perspective.”

Workers aren’t allowed to share the interactions and experiences they have had, “they’re too troubling to repeat and most people wouldn’t even believe us if we did get the chance,” Buote says. “The fear of reprisal for health care workers seemingly overshadows the message that speaking out about unsafe and dangerous working conditions, be physical or psychosocial hazards, is everyone’s responsibility and duty.”

Some employers are also using the pandemic as an excuse.

“Trying to bargain for better benefits and mental health care has been really hard,” says Susan Gapka. “The employer wouldn’t budge because they said there was so much uncertainty around the pandemic.”

Still Gapka and many other workers are committed to doing the work on the ground.

She and her co-workers in the social services sector have witnessed the effect of cuts to public services, including mental health care, first hand. They have been helping to provide food for residents living in tents in a Toronto park while working from home. “We have really worked to provide the services that people, especially women, need and that our governments are refusing to provide,” she says.





**“I know for so many women, especially trans women, women who are street involved, women who are marginalized, it’s really hard right now,” Susan Gapka highlighted.**



The federal Liberals campaigned on a \$4.5 billion mental health transfer in the last election as one of their top priorities. The funds will almost certainly have strings attached though. So, provinces need to be ready to meet these standards.

Rosemary Buote acknowledges that there are some crisis services available. But, she says, these often have very long waitlists because most provincial governments have failed to make the necessary investments.

While federal funding should help, Buote argues that “we need to look past the immediate and make a long-term plan for healthcare workers and their family members affected as we work through pandemic recovery.”

Improving women’s mental health will require more than a one-time cash injection for services. We need employers and governments to step up and address psychosocial hazards, address the crisis in paid and unpaid care work, and invest in services women need and deliver.

# ABOUT SUSAN GAPKA

Susan Gapka is a tireless champion for equity in and outside of our union. Susan has spent years advocating for women and the 2SLGBTQ+ community, and demanding more affordable housing and better mental health care.

She has served on CUPE Ontario’s and CUPE National’s Pink Triangle Committees, and on CUPE Ontario’s Women’s Committee. She is the first trans woman to serve on CUPE Ontario’s Executive Board.

At the 2021 CUPE National Convention, Susan Gapka was recognized for her outstanding work with the Grace Hartman Award.



# A FEMINIST SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC RECOVERY STARTS WITH UNIVERSAL CHILD CARE

By **Paul Whyte** and **Alia Karim**

**O**n March 8, 2021, for International Women’s Day, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau promised a recovery plan that will help women bounce back from COVID-19. Acknowledging the current ‘she-cession’, he said his government will “ensure a feminist, intersectional recovery from this crisis”.

At that time, another report highlighted the substantial job loss among women, particularly those who earn low incomes.





In fact, in the first two months of the pandemic, the total hours worked by women fell by 30 per cent and women in the services sector lost their jobs at nearly twice the rate of men.

A month later, the federal government tabled a budget that was said to focus on women, families and revitalizing the economy. More than half of that budget would go toward a national early learning and child care policy that prioritizes lowered parent fees and space expansion. But why has it taken Canada so long to move toward universal child care?

### Child care at a tipping point

The pre-pandemic social status and economic sovereignty that Canadian women have fought for, for generations, are highly dependent on their ability to go to school, learn new skills, and make career advancements. But women also take on more responsibilities for raising children — another cause of the massive exodus of women from the workforce during the pandemic.

During COVID-19, emergency child care for front-line workers ensured that our hospitals, grocery stores, water, electricity, along with so many other fundamental services could keep running.

The need for child care didn't suddenly arise because of the pandemic, the pandemic instead showcases the urgency of its need.

For decades, there simply haven't been enough child care spaces. Parent fees are far too high. Early childhood educators and child care workers are woefully underappreciated, and they are leaving or not entering the sector as a result.

Countless centres were forced to close their doors forever, and new capacity limits led to sweeping layoffs in 2020 where more than 25 per cent of child care workers were left jobless. Statistics Canada reports that child care employment has declined by nearly 50 per cent in the last two years.

It took a global health crisis for decision makers to reprioritize child care, giving it the attention it deserves during a time when it was needed most. But this recognition wasn't met with enough resources needed to ensure the safety or viability of the sector.

Decades of chronic underfunding, the absence of policy that enshrines decent work standards, the lack of safety measures against COVID-19, and a pervasive, often sexist view of the role of child care are key indicators that provinces must remedy the worker shortage in the sector with decent wages and working conditions.

The Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Plan is an opportunity for large-scale change in the sector, if done right. The plan begins to establish an elevated baseline of what child care and early learning must be, but still has a long way to go to be a truly universal system.

Canada's investment of \$27 billion over five years includes \$2.5 billion for Indigenous early learning and child care, and the following key goals:

- Achieve up to \$10-per-day child care in licensed spaces by the end of 2026.
- Create more than 30,000 new spaces within five years.
- Reduce parent fees by 50 per cent by the end of 2022.

Capped parent fees are one step in the right direction — a victory from decades of advocacy by early childhood educators and activists.

Under the new child care plan, families in British Columbia will save an average of \$6,000 per year per child. In Alberta, a similar, annual cost saving of \$5,610 is already helping families.

There are also big promises for the expansion of child care spaces and jobs. B.C. and Alberta are each expected to create 40,000 new child care spaces and nearly 10,000 new early childhood educator jobs, according to Employment and Social Development Canada.

Ontario has been the lone holdout province in Canada yet to pen a deal, as of the time of writing. Child care advocates suspect that the Progressive Conservative government is trying to protect the interests of for-profit operators.

But if Ontario hasn't signed a deal by March 31, they could lose this year's \$1 billion in funding.

A system of universal, not-for-profit, accessible, and affordable child care and early learning is needed for a feminist social and economic recovery.

Carrie Lynn Poole-Cotnam is CUPE Ontario's Social Services Sector Chair and Treasurer of CUPE 503 that represents 19 municipal child care centres. She sits on the board of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, and for the past 14 years she has been a champion for affordable, public child care.

"While the rest of Canada is moving forward with reduced parent fees, space expansions, and increased federal funding, families in Ontario continue to be significantly impacted by Doug Ford's refusal to sign onto the national child care deal," she says. "Ontario must pen a deal that includes a workforce strategy with a \$25 wage floor and affordable fees, and prevent for-profit expansion in the sector."



### Moving toward universal, public, and not-for-profit child care in all provinces

Quebec has led the way toward a system of universal child care in the country, with the introduction of their Family Policy in 1997 and a commitment to reduce parent fees, today at \$8.70-a-day, years before the federal government unveiled their \$10-a-day plan. Quebec's female labour force participation has increased substantially ever since, and is now the highest in Canada.

Yet, women in Quebec still felt the impact of an inadequate child care system during the pandemic. Many lost their jobs or had to make tremendous sacrifices to balance family, work, and other responsibilities. Over 51,000 additional subsidized child care spaces are still needed to meet demand.

Quebec's major staffing crisis, with a shortfall of nearly 10,000 workers, was at the core of province-wide work stoppages in the past two years, which have informed provincial law reform currently underway. A lack of recognition of child care workers, low wages and poor working conditions, are causing major recruitment and retention challenges in the province.

Without child care, and without the women providing many of our vital services, sectors necessary for the survival of our country would collapse.



Canada's child care workforce is comprised primarily of women and more than one third of the sector's workers are immigrants and non-permanent residents, according to the 2016 census. Therefore, it is especially important that decision makers prioritize improving working conditions to address crucial issues of equity in this historically underfunded sector.

Provinces such as British Columbia, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba have recently made progress by committing to a provincial wage grid. But if these grids do not significantly raise pay rates, especially when compared to male-dominated jobs of equal value, women workers in child care will continue to be neglected. Workers also need to have access to adequate paid sick days, benefits, pensions, planning time, and paid time for professional training.

"We still have a long way to go in B.C., but the government has done some good work to make child care more accessible, and some, but not enough work to improve the pay and working conditions for child care workers, especially those in the public sector. That's why it's so important to have child care be a public service — publicly funded and publicly delivered," says Valeria Mancilla, child care program manager at the Graham Bruce School Age Program and member of CUPE 1936.

The federal government must do more to address chronic issues in the sector, such as compelling provinces to create a wage grid starting at \$25.00/hour, drastically improving benefits and working conditions, allocating money for new publicly operated child care spaces, and curtailing for-profit child care expansion. Provinces must be held accountable. This, in turn, will result in higher quality care and education for our little ones.

### Supporting publicly operated child care and its workforce is key to high-quality services for our little ones

Public and not-for-profit child care consistently receive higher quality ratings than for-profit centres. They are more likely to hire more and better trained staff, have lower child-to-worker ratios, and promote working conditions that reduce turnover rates and increase morale. These conditions therefore lead to higher quality of care and learning outcomes for children.

Concern with waitlists and the inadequate supply of licensed child care spaces is high in many parts of Canada. Most provincial agreements promise immense targets for child care expansion, but they have not figured out how exactly these targets will be achieved.

Some provinces are rightfully prioritizing funding and support for not-for-profit child care. British Columbia, for instance, will incentivize the



creation of spaces in public and not-for-profit centres and by Indigenous governments.

Nova Scotia's new child care agreement also moves toward a not-for-profit model. The provincial government announced an average 25 per cent reduction in parent fees. For-profit centres can join the agreement if they abide by the new provincial standards — they will have to pay workers the provincial wage rate and charge no more than the provincially-set parent fee.

Others are choosing to continue allowing for-profit enterprise to cash in on child care. Such is the case in Alberta and Manitoba where federal funding is directed toward increasing

eligibility for their subsidy programs, but little is done to challenge the market-driven approach to child care.

The future of public and not-for-profit child care expansion is uncertain. For-profit operators are pushing back against these new agreements, and public and not-for-profit centres will need help to recover from the financial impacts of the pandemic. The federal and provincial governments should

make a plan to earmark funding specifically for public and not-for-profit child care expansion, or else, the dream of universal child care is at stake.

A strategy informed by child care workers is the only way to create a system of universal, accessible, and affordable child care that can truly help families recover from the pandemic and increase the participation of women in our economy.

We need more spaces for child care and early learning to meet the demand.





## Quebec: Do as I say, not as I do

A year ago, thousands of Quebec mothers who couldn't go back to work or school mobilized to create *Ma place au travail*, a provincial movement in response to the shortage of child care spaces and of early childhood educators.

"Quebec's child care can be inspiring, but maybe there is a little bit of oil missing in the machine for it to run well. We cannot say that our system is accessible. We've been talking about insurmountable waiting lists for the past 20 years and, therefore, many families don't have access to CPEs," says Isabelle Girard, president of CUPE 3280. "I was fortunate 17 years ago, when my son got in a CPE, and I was able to go back to work and bring some money home. Today it is much worse, many women aren't as lucky."

Girard says that she receives calls from mothers, members of her local, who must either terminate their employment or ask for unpaid leave, which may or may not be granted by the employer. She says their children are sometimes aged two or older, and they are still waiting for a subsidized space as they can't afford private child care.

According to Girard, increasing wages is part of the solution to the shortage of child care workers. But to attract and retain them in this profession, they must also feel recognized as professional, competent workers, whom we value because they are taking care of our children and educating them in their most formative years.

## BC: Child care shouldn't stop at age five

In British Columbia, the BCNDP provincial government is committed to \$10-a-day child care, a model CUPE BC strongly supports and advocates for. The federal government is providing significant resources supporting child care for kids aged 0-5, but what's missing is new spaces for school-aged kids.

Ultimately a public system of universal affordable child care integrated with the existing public school system is the best system for B.C. families. Before and after school care provided by public schools is a solution that is right in front of us. The spaces already exist, and education assistants, the majority of whom do not receive full-time hours, are qualified to do the work.

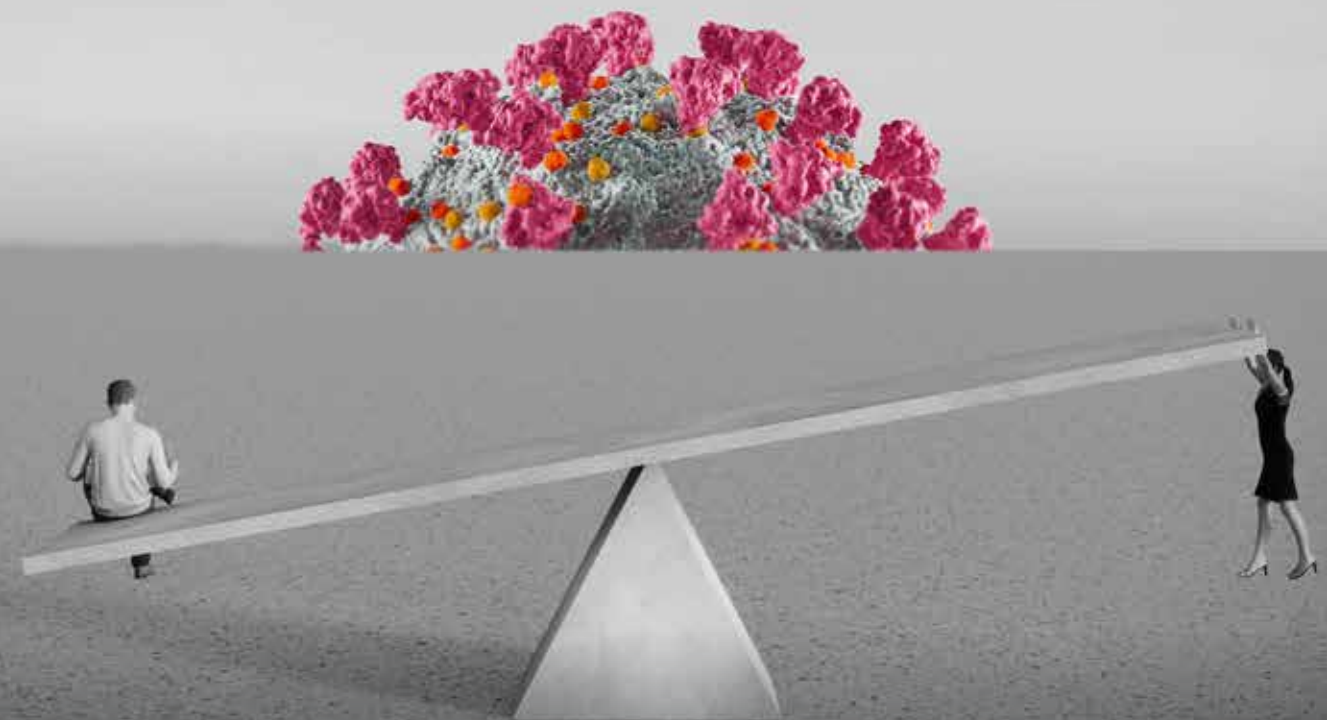
CUPE BC, in partnership with CUPE National, has been campaigning to build popular support and demand for bringing before- and after-school care into public schools. Momentum behind this concept is growing, with thousands of people calling on their local school trustees to create child care spaces in public schools.

Take action today and let decision makers know you support bringing child care into BC's public schools : [publicchildcarenow.ca](https://publicchildcarenow.ca)



# PANDEMIC HIGHLIGHTS GENDER GAP IN EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

By **Chandra Pasma**







For two decades, labour organizations like CUPE and the Canadian Labour Congress have been raising concerns about gender discrimination in Employment Insurance (EI).

The reforms introduced by Jean Chrétien’s Liberal government in the mid-1990s made it more difficult for women to qualify for EI benefits by discriminating against part-time and precarious work. As a result, EI – which already doesn’t function particularly well as a social safety net – provides very little coverage to unemployed women.

It is well known that less than half of unemployed Canadians are able to qualify for EI. But the statistics are even more striking for women. In February 2020, right before the pandemic began, fewer than one third of unemployed women were receiving regular EI benefits, in contrast to 45 per cent of unemployed men.

But just as the pandemic demonstrated that the federal government actually has tools at its disposal to make income supports more responsive and robust when they choose to, it also revealed that the government can make policy choices that eliminate the gender gap in income supports.

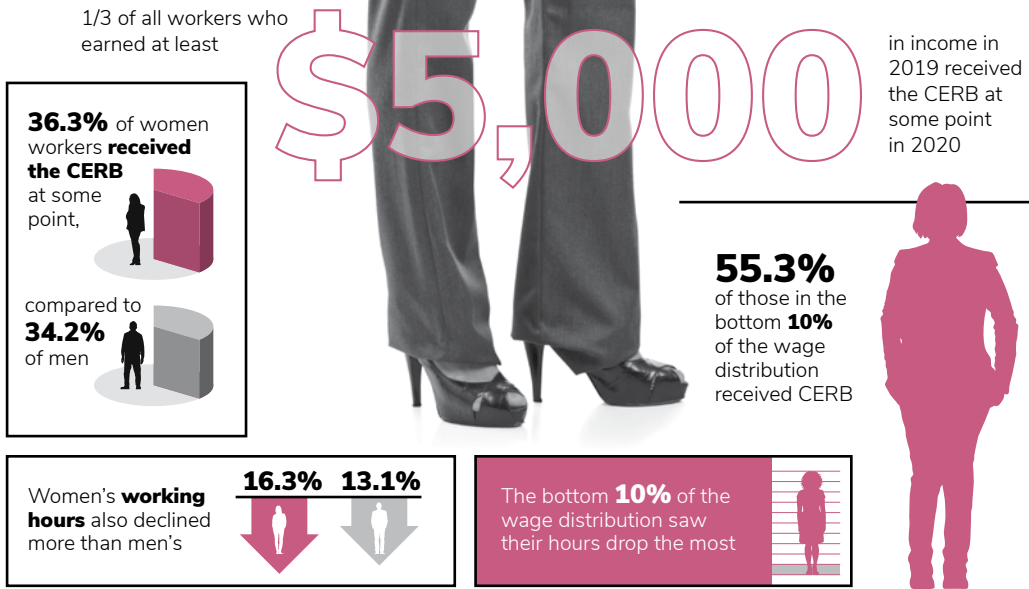
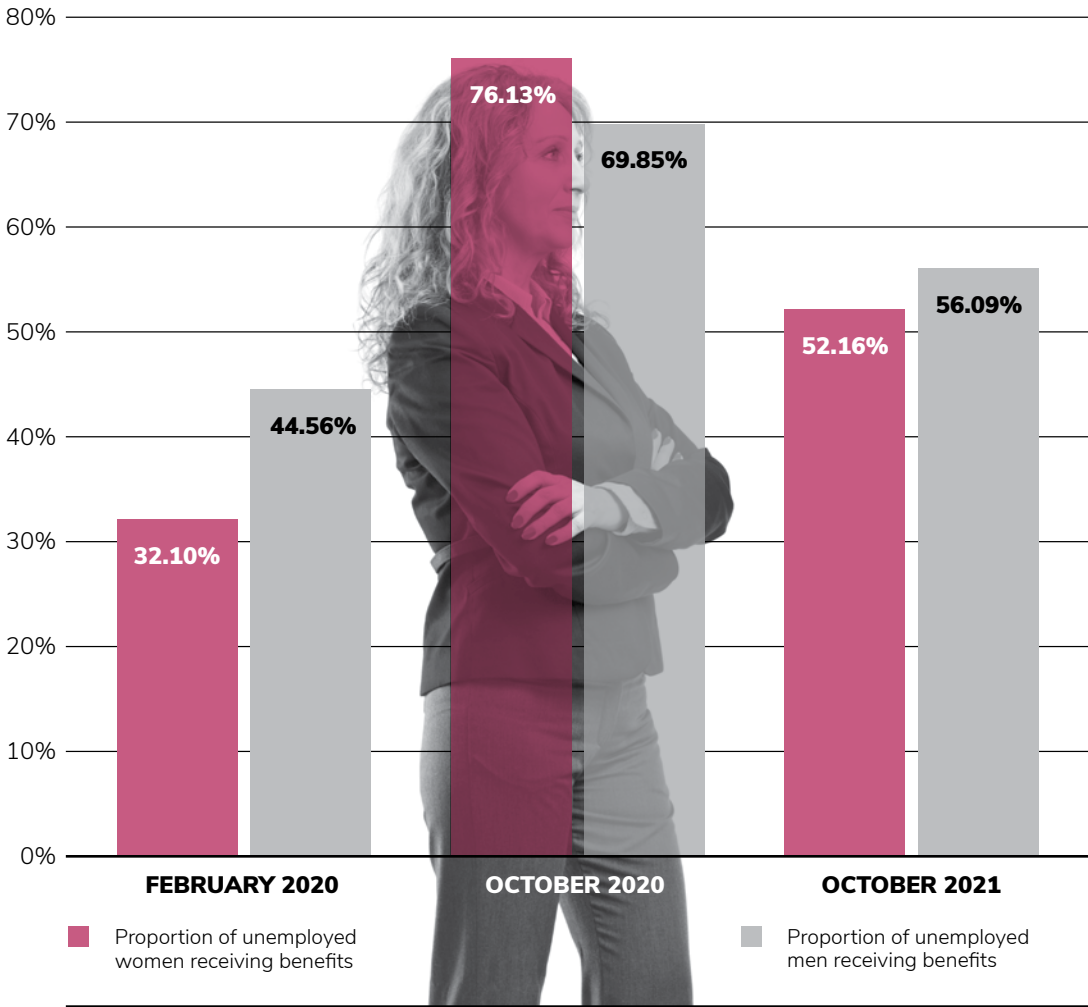
The Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) was designed to be rapid, nearly universal, and sufficient for unemployed workers to actually pay the bills. More women experienced a decline in working hours during the pandemic, and so, as we would expect, more women than men received the CERB. What’s more, the benefit level was \$500 for all workers, which means that women received exactly the same amount as men, despite the fact that they earn lower wages on average.

When the CERB ended, the federal government was also able to change the rules of EI in a way that ensured more women had access. They dropped the number of hours required to qualify to 120 hours, regardless of region or local unemployment rates, and they simplified rules around previous job separations in a way that benefited precarious workers. As a result, in October 2020, 76 per cent of unemployed women were receiving EI benefits, compared to 70 per cent of unemployed men.

However, the government’s rush to return to normal is reinstating the EI gender gap. In October 2021, with the threshold for benefits raised to 420 hours of employment, only 52 per cent of unemployed women were receiving benefits, compared to 54 per cent of unemployed men.

Gender discrimination in public policy doesn’t just happen. It is the result of choices. Sometimes these choices are made deliberately, but sometimes they are made because decision makers are not considering outcomes through a gender lens.

The federal government has made a commitment to Gender Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) in their budgets. Now, as they are reviewing EI with a goal to make long-term reforms to the program, they have an opportunity to use GBA+ to eliminate gender discrimination in EI. The process should start with implementing a universal threshold for all benefits of no more than 360 hours and setting a minimum floor for benefits of \$500 per week.







# PROFILE CANDACE RENNICK

By Aline Patcheva

## MOBILIZING AND ORGANIZING CUPE RESOURCES TO ACHIEVE REAL GAINS FOR MEMBERS

**Candace Rennick was elected as CUPE's ninth National Secretary-Treasurer at National Convention in November 2021. The first woman in 20 years to hold the position, she is a dedicated leader who joined our union at a young age and learned how to harness the power of collective bargaining and collective action to make real gains for workers.**

A member of CUPE since she began working at a Peterborough long-term care home at 16, Candace Rennick became involved in her union early and was elected president of CUPE 2280 at the age of 22. She became a leading champion for seniors and workers in Ontario's long-term care sector. She has spent her entire working life fighting to make life better for CUPE members.

After serving four terms as a vice-president on the CUPE Ontario Executive Board, she was elected Secretary-Treasurer of CUPE Ontario in 2010, the first woman to hold the position. She has always said that “workers never win anything without a fight.” In this interview, we heard more about why she is excited about her new role and the victories to come.

### Question 1

**What significance do you attach to being the first woman in 20 years to serve as CUPE's National Secretary-Treasurer?**

I have worked for decades to make our union leadership representative of the full diversity of CUPE's membership, and that includes electing women at every level of our organization. It is very significant that a woman now holds one of CUPE's two national officer positions, but what is more important is that I not be last.

Members who identify as women generally have a very different lived experience. We are likely to be paid low wages, to have inadequate benefits, no pension, and therefore very little economic security. Many of us have experienced violence and harassment. And as a feminist woman leader, I understand that not all women experience discrimination in the same way. This is why it is so important to ensure that diverse voices are represented at all levels of our union.







## Question 2

**You served for 11 years as Secretary-Treasurer of CUPE Ontario. So far, what is different about holding the National Secretary-Treasurer position?**

Obviously, the size and scope of our national operations are much larger, but fundamentally, my approach is not different than the approach I took to my former position. I am guided by the same principles and beliefs, and by the knowledge that every dollar we spend as a union is money that belongs to members, coming from their hard-earned paychecks. Every dollar must be used to improve the working conditions and enhance the quality of life of our members, and strengthen the services they provide.

I want to continue doing this work to achieve equity and justice, support members' campaigns and initiatives, enhance our membership capacity and make the changes necessary to ensure our union spaces are safe for all.

## Question 3

**How do you think your leadership has paved the way for other women who want to follow in your footsteps?**

Research shows our lived experience shapes how we view and practice leadership. Every CUPE woman has multiple identities. I am a white woman, and though I share some things in common with Black or racialized or Indigenous women, I have privilege that they don't have.

I can bring to my position my own feminist perspective, and my own lived experience, but more important, I can make sure that the voices and experiences of other women are heard and understood.

There's a huge increase in the number of Canadian women in the paid labour force. Women now have greater economic independence and security. Women outnumber men in trade unions, and here at CUPE, two thirds of our members are women. But if you go into any long-term care or child care facility, you will see women, many racialized, doing the lowest paid yet most difficult work.



So, yes, it is significant that I am a woman, but more significant is that I want to find ways to involve others and work collaboratively with diverse voices and views. Because one person alone can't bring about meaningful change.

In that respect, probably the most important leadership change that came from our last national convention was that we now have a National Executive Board and a National Executive Committee that include so many more women, with diverse identities. I am excited to be joined by so many amazing women on the NEB who will absolutely contribute to make progressive things happen for women and for all members. Thinking big and being bold together is the only way to move forward.

## Question 4

**You have been working alongside all the women members of CUPE's NEB in the Safe Union Spaces Working Group. What is the group's mission?**

The Safe Union Spaces Working Group was established a year ago to investigate issues of sexual and gender-based violence, harassment and discrimination at CUPE. It is yet another initiative related to employment equity and making our union stronger and safer.

We conducted research, identified gaps where we need changes, and heard from members at focus groups and listening sessions. Now, we need an all-out concerted effort by CUPE members and staff to make all forms of violence and harassment unacceptable.

Everyone should read our first report presented at our National Convention, because solving the problem can't be left to our national women leaders alone. Solving the problem requires all of us in CUPE to understand the issue, believe that it is real, and take action to address it. We must have the courage to examine and change the deeply rooted culture that permits and perpetuates this discrimination and harassment.



**“As your new National Secretary-Treasurer, as an activist, and as a feminist, I am determined to do my part to make real, lasting change for women in our union, and for all workers,” said Candace Rennick at CUPE Ontario’s Women’s Conference.**



# Question 5

## What are your top priorities as National Secretary-Treasurer and what do you hope to accomplish in the coming months?

I want to increase our union’s organizational capacity to make real wage gains for our members, to get good pensions for those who have none, and to address the disrespect that employers and governments show for us. Using all our union’s resources to meet the immediate needs of our members, and to plan for future needs, is crucial.

Right now, CUPE members, like all workers, are struggling because of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also because of so many long-standing issues that undermine health and safety, employment security, proper compensation, work-life balance, and much more.

Women are over-represented in the occupations and sectors hardest hit by the shutdowns and closures, and many women lost their jobs. Women continue to be held primarily responsible for children and other family members. So, mothers with young children were forced out of the paid labour force in much greater numbers than fathers – a matter of economics for families. Women were also more vulnerable to infection, sickness, and death. It makes me sad and also angry.

We need to find new ways to address the economic, social and political system failures that made the impact of the pandemic so severe, especially for the most vulnerable in our union and in our communities.

The pandemic confirmed so much of what is wrong in our country. A lot could have been prevented if we didn’t have so much inequity, if women had better jobs, better protections, and if our health system and social supports were what they should be.

Our union has been doing a really good job helping members get through the public health crisis. But an immediate priority for me is figuring out what more our national union can do to get through these very rough times.



# Question 6

## Last December, the NEB approved CUPE’s budget for 2022. How will CUPE’s finances continue to build our union and our movement?

CUPE’s finances will always be my primary focus as Secretary-Treasurer, making sure that I account for every dollar that comes in and goes out. But I view that part of my job very broadly — I wasn’t elected to be a bean counter. I want to make sure that all our resources, everything we spend money on, and all our assets are used strategically to advance the interests of our membership.

The only way we can make lasting gains is to be and act like a powerful, united, activist union —a union in which members are actively involved, a union that has what it takes to constantly move forward, never backward.

So, my focus on finances will include working with all the other leaders in CUPE — local union executives, division and sector leaders, the National Executive Board — and with CUPE’s staff, in order to find the best ways to engage members, and to do union work well.

I am also responsible for CUPE’s large Defence Fund and Strike Fund, and we will continue to use these powerful tools to support our members.

We need to bolster our campaign and political work, strengthen our coalitions with others, and make sure our union reflects the full diversity of CUPE’s membership and our communities, so that we can make big strides toward economic, social, and racial justice, real gender equity, and meaningful truth and reconciliation.

We’ve made progress for sure, but we still have work to do, including with respect to our own recruitment and hiring. We also need to push employers into implementing more equity and representative workforce programs.

Too many members, but mainly women, Black, racialized and Indigenous women in particular, don’t have access to pension and benefit coverage, or a decent wage. We must prioritize resources to securing decent wage increases, pension coverage and benefits for all members.

All these steps will make our union an organization where everybody – leaders, activists and members – act in ways that are welcoming of all members, and in ways that actively support equity and inclusion.

### CUPE’s membership self-identifies as

|   |                                    |       |       |       |                            |                |                      |
|---|------------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|----------------------------|----------------|----------------------|
| Woman:<br><b>64.3%</b>                      |                                    | Woman | Man   | Trans | Non-Binary/<br>Genderqueer | Two-<br>Spirit | Prefer not<br>to say |
| Man:<br><b>34.4%</b>                        | Airlines                           | 72.4% | 25.3% |       | 0.2%                       | 0.5%           | 1.7%                 |
| Trans: <b>0.2%</b>                          | Community Health & Social Services | 79.5% | 20.5% |       |                            |                |                      |
| Non-Binary /<br>Genderqueer:<br><b>0.4%</b> | Hospitals                          | 80.2% | 18.9% |       | 0.3%                       |                | 0.7%                 |
| Two-Spirit:<br><b>0.2%</b>                  | K to 12 Education                  | 75.1% | 23.8% |       | 0.2%                       |                | 1.0%                 |
|   | Long-Term Care                     | 88.8% | 10.5% |       |                            |                | 0.6%                 |
|   | Municipal Services                 | 52.8% | 45.5% | 0.2%  | 0.5%                       | 0.2%           | 1.4%                 |
|   | Post-Secondary Education           | 55.6% | 41.0% | 0.9%  | 1.2%                       | 0.7%           | 1.9%                 |



# THE TAVOYAN WOMEN'S UNION: WORKING FOR A BETTER FUTURE IN BURMA

By Kelti Cameron



Protest in Burma against the military coup, February 14, 2021.  
Photo: MgHla (aka) Htin Linn Aye/CC BY-SA 4.0

The violent military overthrow of Burma's elected government in February 2021 put many people in immediate danger, including leaders and members of CUPE's partner in the region, the Tavoyan Women's Union (TWU).

For months after the military seized power in Burma, also known as Myanmar, our union lost contact with TWU. Phone lines and internet were disconnected, and the country was in chaos.

Inspiring protest actions and resistance movements immediately emerged, along with a violent crackdown on peaceful protesters.

Nearly a year after the coup, CUPE finally connected with TWU Secretary General NuNu Hlaing, who is temporarily outside of Burma for her safety. The situation in her home country remains extremely dangerous, with the military targeting anyone who opposes the coup.

"The military forces try to oppress by arresting or killing. Even now they were firing everyday in the city. People in the city or even in villages couldn't sleep without the noise of exploding bombs and firing guns," said Hlaing over Zoom.



**Yet, NuNu Hlaing still hopes to go back to a democratic and equitable country someday.**

## Empowering women in Burma

Before the 2021 coup, women were underrepresented at all levels of government in Burma and had little presence in the peace process.

TWU is dedicated to advancing women's rights in the Tanintharyi region in Southern Burma. Their mission is to build a peaceful, just, equal, and liberated society.

NuNu Hlaing joined TWU in 2007 when she was 15. At the time, the union was based in Thailand because the country was also under military rule.

"I didn't know what human rights was about, I was not familiar with any kind of rights-based issues or even politicians," she said, describing herself as a simple and innocent young girl who had dropped out of school and left her country.

Joining TWU's women's political empowerment program changed NuNu Hlaing's life.

She grew into a seasoned activist working with migrant workers at the Thai-Burma border, and with women experiencing gender-based violence. She took many risks in the service of women in precarious and vulnerable situations.

Until the coup, TWU was based in the city of Dawei, which is geographically isolated from the rest of Burma. Low economic development has left the region with high levels of poverty, and Tavoyan girls are particularly vulnerable to trafficking and forced prostitution.





Teachers and student union members protest against the military coup in front of Kayin state government office, February 9, 2021.  
Photo: NinjaStrikers/CC BY-SA 4.0



Protest in Burma against the military coup, February 14, 2021.  
Photo: MgHla (aka) Htin Linn Aye/CC BY-SA 4.0

After successful elections replaced the military dictatorship in 2015, TWU left Thailand and returned to Burma, optimistic that their work empowering women could be public and could expand into political action. Yet, conditions were difficult even before the current political crisis, due to Burma's economic crisis and the impact of COVID-19 before the coup.

### Coup sparks mass resistance

On February 1, 2021, the military once again seized power in Burma, overturning the successful election of the National League for Democracy (NLD) three months earlier.

CUPE and other TWU allies feared the military would immediately target the union because of their focus on peace and reconciliation, and their promotion of political rights for marginalized communities. However, in the first few days, the military targeted government officials and NLD members. "We were quite lucky on that day, with all the military around, that we were not in their target group yet", said NuNu Hlaing.

She and other TWU members had a few days to protect vital information and prepare to close their office. But when communities in the region began to mobilize and join a national strike on February 6, 2021, they couldn't continue their work at the office or in the public eye.

The national strike was quickly dubbed the Civil Disobedience Movement, and garnered global attention. People protested in peaceful and nonviolent ways, including labour strikes, public demonstrations, civil disobedience, boycotts, a pot-banging movement, and a red ribbon campaign in solidarity with the NLD.

### Violent crackdown continues

Remarkably, the Burmese people have sustained their resistance to the coup for 11 months, as of the time of writing. Activists and civil society organizations found creative and courageous ways to avoid the violent and traumatizing military crackdown.

People resisting the coup formed working groups to prevent organizations being identified by their formal names. Communities and villages operated under collective leadership so individual leaders could not be targeted. Activists moved around frequently, changing where they slept every few days.

The military set up checkpoints and surveillance inside and outside communities and detained thousands of political prisoners in brutal and overcrowded conditions. Many of them are young people from poor communities. Torture in prison is widespread, and to date, over 1480 people have been killed.

As a young woman who has spent more than half her life trying to improve the lives of her people, particularly women, NuNu Hlaing said she is "very sad that Burma is a country with a lot of conflict."

At the same time, she said she is very proud of her people for fighting for their political rights, even though most are very poor.

She sees the groundswell of young people persistently resisting the coup as a hopeful sign: "I believe the people really want their freedom... and so there will be one point, someday, when we can achieve it."

Hlaing said the decision to temporarily leave her country again was not easy, and she sometimes feels guilty about it. But the truth is, "the activists are struggling quite a lot with their survival. I know that even for me, I got stress... not stress, I think almost trauma," she said.

The Burmese people continue to practise civil disobedience in many creative ways. The ongoing support and solidarity of the international community, including CUPE, is vital.

Hlaing is not sure what TWU's future looks like but she is clear that their important leadership and education programs need to continue. In the face of so much uncertainty ahead, she is confident TWU will continue to work and organize with women in the long term.

### "I believe we will win," says NuNu Hlaing.

With thanks to CUPE 2440 member Charlene Armstrong, a member of CUPE's National Global Justice Committee and Cuso International worker, for facilitating CUPE's interview with NuNu Hlaing.



Protest against the military coup in Dawei on International Women's Day, 2021.  
Photo: TWU via Facebook

# THE TAVOYAN WOMEN'S UNION

The Tavoyan Women's Union (TWU) is CUPE's partner in Burma. TWU is based in the Tanitharyi region in the south. Their work focuses on breaking down the political, social and economic barriers that women confront in a patriarchal society.

TWU's goal is to build "a society of peace, justice, freedom and equality in Burma". TWU supports women becoming political leaders in their communities and building networks with women from different areas.

Their work to promote women's rights in society aims to increase the participation of women who are trained to fight gender-based violence and discrimination, and advocate for gender equality.

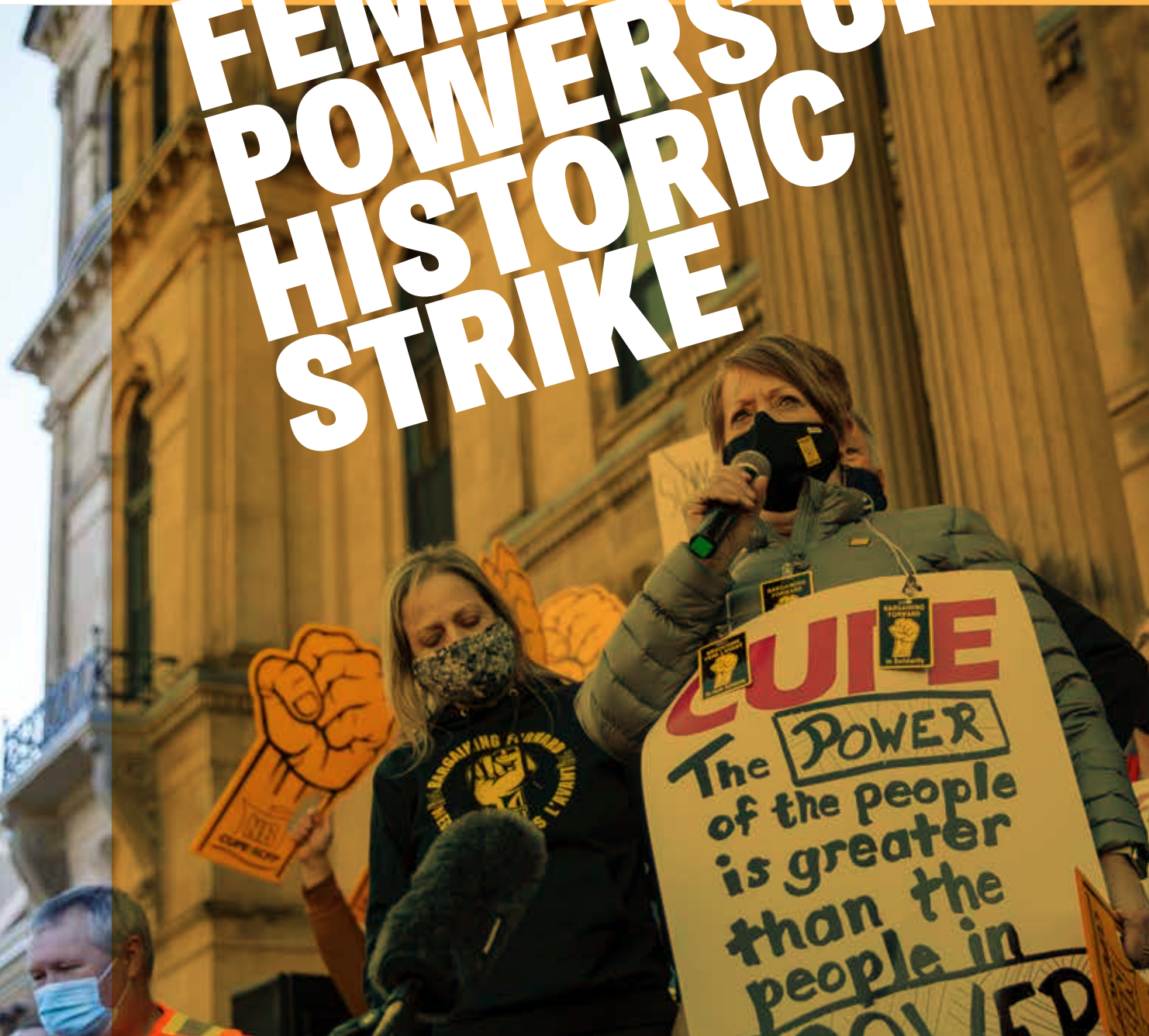
CUPE supports the organizing and education initiatives of TWU through a Global Justice Fund partnership with CUPE 2440, representing workers at CUSO International.





# WORKING CLASS FEMINISM POWERS UP HISTORIC STRIKE

By Simon Ouellette



**MORE THAN 22,000 CUPE MEMBERS WERE INVOLVED IN NEW BRUNSWICK'S BIGGEST LEGAL GENERAL STRIKE IN NOVEMBER 2021. WHILE THE ENTIRE PROVINCE WAS AFFECTED, IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE TO IGNORE THE CENTRAL ROLE PLAYED BY WOMEN IN THAT STRIKE.**



If you did a quick tour on the picket lines or in any regional strike headquarters, you would have seen just how many women were involved at all the stages of this victorious labour action.

This comes as no surprise, as women constitute two thirds of New Brunswick's public sector workforce. This reality is reflected in CUPE's leadership, at the bargaining table in New Brunswick, and more so in sectors like health, social development, and education, where the ratio of women to men is predominant.

According to CUPE's most recent data, over 64 per cent of members self-identify as women. However, if you want to understand what gives CUPE its edge and what sets us apart from many other female-dominated organizations, you must follow the thread of working-class feminism.

### Educate and agitate

To onlookers, a province-wide strike might seem to be a spontaneous event, or something planned a few months ahead. The truth is quite different. In New Brunswick's case, it took more than three and a half years of hard work and planning.

Back in March 2018, CUPE NB organized a mass membership conference titled *Bargaining Forward – Breaking the Mandate*. The conference, which was followed by a provincial tour, articulated a clear membership demand to focus on wages, wages, and wages.

More than a decade of cuts and below-inflation wage mandates had set workers back. Statistics Canada data demonstrated New Brunswick had the lowest paid public sector workers in the whole country. And this was disproportionately hurting women.

CUPE 908 President Ellie Michel said her members wanted a decent wage increase, as the government's meager 5 per cent offer wouldn't even be enough to buy a quart of milk and a loaf of bread for a week.

Organized labour needed to focus on real wage improvements that go above inflation. This required coordinated mass action, up to a provincial strike if necessary.

The next years would prove invaluable in building the capacity of the members and the leadership to fight. Despite provincial elections and a global pandemic, CUPE has been able to keep the upper hand in communicating with members and the general public. They maintained focus on their main message, that the cost of living keeps rising while wages remain stagnant. CUPE's leadership on this issue made them the champion of New Brunswick's overburdened and understaffed workers, a majority of them essential workers, and predominantly women. Over the course of the campaign, this would gradually win over the public's support.

The blueprint of the struggle to come was laid, and it had all the characteristics of working-class feminism which focused on grassroots collective action.



**“WE SHOULDN'T HAVE TO MAKE DECISIONS LIKE, ‘DO I BUY MY MEDICATION? DO I PAY THE RENT? DO I PAY GROCERIES? DO I PAY THE POWER BILL?’” SAID CUPE 908 PRESIDENT ELLIE MICHEL. “WE AS NEW BRUNSWICKERS, WE’RE WORKING EVERY SINGLE DAY, WE SHOULD NOT HAVE TO MAKE THOSE DECISIONS.”**



## Organizing through women's eyes

Women thinkers played a big role in shaping the 2021 historical strike.

Over the years, CUPE NB President Stephen Drost had relied on the teachings and battle-tested methods of Jane McAlevey, a well-known American labour organizer, campaign strategist and author.

On top of championing coordinated bargaining and mass actions, McAlevey insists on frequent communication and the importance of encouraging maximum transparency in the bargaining process, creating avenues for increased member engagement.

This is a key lever for union education and for rebuilding real worker participation in radical struggles. In this way, the union builds awareness among rank-and-file members who come to truly own their movement. And indeed, CUPE NB's centralized bargaining committee knew how to keep members and the general public mobilized, thanks to its continuous communications which demystified, day after day, discussions with the government.

In December 2020, Premier Blaine Higgs decided to impose a 'four-year wage mandate' on all public sector workers, i.e. a wage freeze for a year, followed by three years of 1 per cent increases. This was the third consecutive wage restraint mandate on those who had been already waiting close to four years for new contracts.

CUPE members were livid. They felt insulted and responded with strong opposition to the Premier's demands. He couldn't keep imposing zeroes for our heroes while the pandemic raged on. Recruitment and retention issues, a lack of resources in public services, and the government ignoring the real needs of workers had only worsened during the pandemic.

This anger was channelled in constructive action and, as Jane McAlevey had suggested, coordinated bargaining was the solution.

Over the following months, provincial CUPE leaders attended an online 'strike school' led by McAlevey and the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, rooted in the workers' and women's movements and centred on public awareness.

This cemented the will of the union's leadership to conduct centralized bargaining to settle a wage mandate for all CUPE locals in the summer of 2021.



**“CUPE HAS DONE ALL IT CAN TO SETTLE THIS WITHOUT DISRUPTION, BUT PREMIER HIGGS IS SIMPLY NOT HEARING THE CALL TO TREAT FRONT-LINE WORKERS WITH FAIRNESS AND DIGNITY. HE IS PUSHING WORKERS ON STRIKE, AND THAT WILL HAPPEN VERY SOON. ENOUGH IS ENOUGH,”** WARNED **STEPHEN DROST, PRESIDENT OF CUPE NB.**



On the picket lines

When 10 provincial CUPE locals representing front-line workers from all sectors declared the strike on October 29, 2021, Conservative Premier Blaine Higgs was still confident workers would fold.

Higgs proceeded to try every trick in the book to undermine the strike. Despite hostile ads, relentless press conferences, locking out education workers and using emergency measures legislation to force health care workers back to work, the picket lines held.

Rank-and-file members took part in countless interviews and used social media to bring attention to their struggle. Their high-visibility picketing strategy meant setting up massive picket lines along the busiest thoroughfares. And residents were all welcome to join the lines in support.

Almost every resident had at least one picketer in their family or in their extended circle of friends. Striking educational support staff were mothers, striking personal support workers were sisters and wives.

Sandy Harding, regional director of CUPE Maritimes, addressed the crowd in front of the New Brunswick legislature with her son.

“See that sign over there?” said Harding. “There’s my little Jack and he says, ‘Mr. Higgs, settle this so my mom can come home.’ Everything that students have is because of CUPE.”

Sixteen pandemic strike days later, a tentative deal was reached. On November 13, 2021, 10 out of 11 CUPE locals ratified an agreement and were able to claim victory, as they won wage adjustments which go above the cost of living – 15 per cent and 17 per cent for five-year contracts with retroactivity, as well as full pay

for casual workers. Recently, the last CUPE local signed its collective agreement.

The fight is not over, but New Brunswick workers already learned a crucial union lesson: through mass action and solidarity, we have the power to throw austerity mandates to the dustbins of history.



PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR STRIKERS REMAINED HIGH - BEYOND 80 PER CENT. EVERYONE COULD SEE THESE “FRONT-LINE HEROES” THAT THE GOVERNMENT DISLIKED SO MUCH. EVERYONE COULD HEAR THEIR DEMANDS FOR FAIR WAGES.

| MAY 28, 2021:   | LATE AUGUST:   | EARLY SEPTEMBER:  | SEPTEMBER TO EARLY OCTOBER:   | EARLY OCTOBER:  | MID-OCTOBER:  | OCTOBER 22:   | OCTOBER 29:  | NOVEMBER 3 TO 6:   | NOVEMBER 13, 2021:  |
|---|--|---|---|---|---|---|--|--|---|
| CUPE NB delivers a “100 Day – Final Notice to Bargain” to the government. | Premier Higgs invites CUPE locals to conduct centralized bargaining. Workers agree as long as talks are about wage increases, not concessions. | Talks break down, as Premier Higgs and his cabinet ministers insist on tying his 0.25 per cent yearly wage increases to a concession. | All 10 locals conduct successful supermajority strike votes, with an average of 94 per cent voting yes. | The government declares a 14-day circuit breaker to deal with the fourth wave of COVID-19. CUPE offers to hold off strikes as a show of good will. The same day that CUPE announces a 14-day truce, the Premier continues his ongoing attacks on CUPE by reclassifying over 1900 LPNs out of CUPE Health Care to another union. | The provincial fiscal update reveals a fourth consecutive budget surplus in the middle of a pandemic, with a \$400 million surplus in last year’s budget. CUPE denounces how this surplus was made on the backs of workers and by under-resourcing public services. | CUPE proposes the intervention of a mediator to achieve an agreement. The government accepts, but refuses to significantly modify their offer and continues to insist upon concessions. | CUPE locals 1190, 1251, 1252, 1253, 1418, 1840, 1866, 2745, 5017 and 5026, go on strike. Local unions came out gradually over the next two days. | CUPE 963, representing Alcool NB Liquor (ANBL) workers, overwhelmingly votes yes to go on strike. The strike will be settled before they ever had the chance to hit the lines. | A tentative agreement is reached between the 11 CUPE locals part of the Centralized Bargaining Team and the New Brunswick government. |



# CUPE MEMBERS LEADING THE WAY TOWARD A JUST TRANSITION

By **Pierre Ducasse**

**J**ust transition policies are a critical part of our response to the climate crisis. They have been a central focus of unions' demands regarding the necessary changes to address environmental challenges.

But what those policies would entail, exactly, is still a subject for much discussion. We asked two members of CUPE's National Environment Committee for their perspective on the future we are all facing.

Tiffany Balducci, a CUPE 1281 member, is active locally with Green Jobs Oshawa. After GM closed down the Oshawa car plant, the community needed to find solutions to keep good jobs locally. After many efforts, some of those jobs returned to Oshawa. And, surprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic helped: part of the plant has now re-opened to produce masks.

When we asked Balducci how she perceives a just transition as a tool to fight climate change and provide new ways of working and living, her answer was very succinct and spot-on.

"A just transition is a framework for change, for addressing the climate emergency through a worker-lead lens. The role of unions like CUPE is crucial when it comes to approaching it," she said. "We also need a local lens, because what works in one community may not work in another. We must help workers retain work while we reduce emissions. We need to shift to greener ways of working."

"We also need to look at environmental policy and a just transition with a gender-lens and from a feminist perspective," Balducci continued. "Women are already, and too often, in precarious and less secure jobs. And that's not counting the unrecognized and unpaid work done by women. It is also clear that violence against

women increases in times of crisis, unemployment or uncertainty. While building a greener economy, we must also build a more equal society. A just transition must take into account women's needs."

We know that the climate crisis affects women disproportionately. Women are also often the ones bearing the mental load of caring for their family. With natural disasters on the increase, but also with new eco-friendly requirements for cooking, cleaning or buying produce, while prices keep rising, women are experiencing higher workloads, and higher levels of stress, globally.

Carina Ebnoether is a member of CUPE 4091, the union representing 1300 flight attendants at Air Canada's Montreal base. The aviation sector was hit hard by the pandemic, as thousands of jobs were lost. Some flight attendants, for instance, found temporary jobs helping provincial vaccination efforts, while staying eligible for benefits from their airline.

"We can learn from this experience, and see what worked as a solution and what didn't. Some lessons we learned by the pandemic could be applied, even if indirectly, to the environmental crisis and the need for a just transition," Ebnoether said.

"But in order for the transition to be fair, it must not leave behind workers or traditionally vulnerable or oppressed groups," highlights CUPE 1281 member Tiffany Balducci.

Like Balducci, she believes that we need to see just transition tools through a gender lens.

She says we must take action at all levels to face environmental challenges and to fight inequalities, especially against women.

At the macro level, climate change is affecting our planet and is exacerbating social inequalities. Ebnoether is concerned about natural disasters, poverty, poor access to food and water, non-recognition of women's work, and their many daily struggles. Women in developing countries are showing remarkable resilience, but they need global support. In fact, the Paris climate agreement requires parties to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women in coping with the hazards of climate change.

At the micro level, she recognizes that local hazards of climate change are just as important: job loss and displacement,

marginalization of vulnerable people or those already living in poverty, lack of new infrastructures, and systems that are poorly adapted to women's needs.





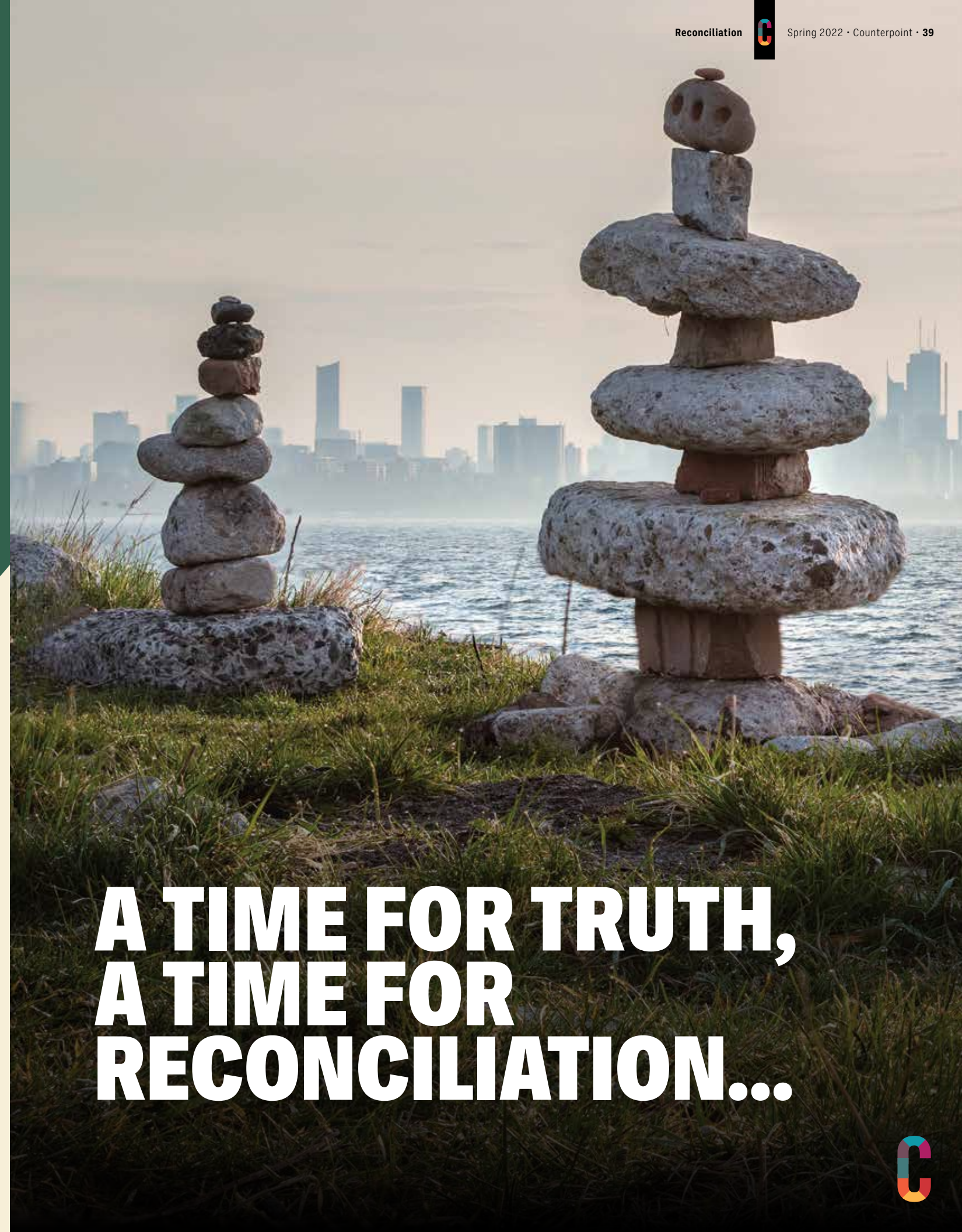
“For instance, if training and retraining are offered, there must be flexibility in order to accommodate women who may have family commitments or face other challenges. We also need to protect women’s wages and benefits, and their access to good, unionized jobs,” Ebnoether argues.

The pandemic has decimated many industries, causing job loss and community upheavals that can only be solved with just transition programs. The shift toward a zero-carbon economy will also mean significant changes that will affect workers, and women the most.

“In our thinking, we must be careful about our blind spots and take into account the needs of groups that suffer from inequality,” insists CUPE 4091 member Carina Ebnoether.

Balducci and Ebnoether both agree that just transition policies won’t only have an impact on the private sector. The public sector will also be greatly affected by environmental and technological change. This is why CUPE will make sure that our public sector members will be part of the solution.

Visit [cupe.ca](https://cupe.ca) and download CUPE’s updated *National Environmental Policy in response to the deepening climate crisis*.



**A TIME FOR TRUTH,  
A TIME FOR  
RECONCILIATION...**



# ...MAKING A COMMITMENT THROUGH COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

By Aline Patcheva



Unions have not always been places where Indigenous people felt welcomed or supported to fight for their rights.

“Let’s talk about myself, as an Indigenous woman, bringing up harassment to our local union years ago,” remembers Debra Merrier, diversity vice-president for Indigenous workers on CUPE’s National Executive Board. “What they said then was: ‘Isn’t it part of your culture?’ This is unconscious bias! This is racism! Situations like this were put under the rug and unions didn’t want to deal with them, they simply didn’t know how to.”

Many Indigenous CUPE members are carrying the weight of colonial trauma, including surviving the residential school system, the 60’s scoop, or being an intergenerational survivor of these

systems. As victims of racism, harassment, or judgmental comments, Indigenous workers were seldom being heard and often feared of losing their job.

In order to support Indigenous members and take action towards reconciliation, CUPE has just launched its new guide *Truth and Reconciliation: CUPE Taking Action through Collective Bargaining*. It is the duty of all unions to begin repairing the relationship with Indigenous people, and this guide is an essential resource for CUPE local unions, bargaining committees, members, CUPE staff, and other activists.

“Today, we need to build these relationships, because our trust is broken due to everything in our past,” Merrier explains.







"Being Indigenous, we still live it every day. So, having this guide documenting practices through CUPE is a good start. It is a practice that we needed to have and it will be successful if all unions from coast to coast get involved and educated on truth and reconciliation," she says.

Indigenous members want the same things as non-Indigenous members: decent wages and working conditions, and the right to be treated fairly and with dignity in the workplace. CUPE's guide provides guidance and multiple examples in negotiating contract language that integrates Indigenous members' needs and culture, assuring that everybody has equal opportunities to work.

"We go back to where we come from, to our education and to our culture. Not all Indigenous people meet the criteria of going to college or university, but we are smart, we have skills and life experiences. Not everybody has a mom and dad, but we have aunts and uncles and our elders who are our families. We need to take down these barriers," observes Merrier.

CUPE's guide also encourages unions to ensure there are Indigenous members in union positions and on committees, including bargaining committees. According to Merrier, Indigenous women in particular often overlook the opportunity to get involved in their union or in bargaining, as their main focus is taking care of their family.

"Indigenous people deserve to be successful, and to be what we want to be: a social worker, a lawyer, a teacher. We need that equality in the workforce. It is time to walk the talk," insists Debra Merrier, CUPE national diversity vice-president.



"In my district, 90 per cent of the members are women. Yet, the only way that we would get involved is if there is harassment – then we are forced to go see the union, while not really understanding it," Merrier says. "Truth and reconciliation is about telling the truth and getting involved not once in a while, but every day. Come to us, talk to us, ask us to participate."

Even if a local may not have identified any Indigenous members, CUPE still recommends that the union move forward on reconciliation initiatives. Building relationships with Indigenous workers is part of building a strong union.

# ABOUT DEBRA MERRIER

Debra Merrier is Cree, originally from Grouard, Alberta. She has worked as an Indigenous youth care worker since 1996 and she has been an active member of CUPE 728 in Surrey, British Columbia.

She has served in many roles within her local, she is diversity vice-president for Indigenous workers at CUPE BC and on CUPE's National Executive Board.

She has dedicated herself to empowering Indigenous Peoples in Canada, fighting for justice for missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, and many initiatives including the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.



## Get your copy of CUPE's guide

CUPE is committed to ensuring that locals have access to resources that support the union in their reconciliation work.

One of the ways that CUPE locals can support reconciliation is by bargaining language into collective agreements that supports Indigenous workers. This is a resource for those who want to put reconciliation into action at the bargaining table.

Go to [cupe.ca](https://cupe.ca) to download the guide or order free printed copies for your local.





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