

# COUNTERPOINT

SUMMER 2023

CUPE'S NATIONAL PUBLICATION

## FOCUS

Water is life: Indigenous Council members protecting water for the next seven generations and beyond

## Health & Safety

"I didn't want this to happen to another woman again"

## Profile

SYLVAIN LE MAY  
Co-Chair, CUPE National Persons with Disabilities Committee

## Global Justice

Organizing for justice: Including migrant workers in the labour movement every step of the way

## Reconciliation

From bearing witness to taking action

# A STRONGER ALLY AND A VOICE FOR INCLUSION

We all have a vital role in the fight for human rights

**CUPE** / Canadian Union of Public Employees

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# WE ALL HAVE A ROLE TO PLAY IN THE FIGHT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

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

**C**orporations and politicians are using words like “diversity” and “inclusion” a lot these days. But too often, it amounts to little more than a PR move.

For CUPE, honouring diversity and inclusion is essential to who we are as a union. For 60 years, our union has been at the front line of important fights for equity in our workplaces and our communities. And we are proud to amplify the voices of those who have been left on the sidelines, every single day.

As a straight white guy, I do my best to acknowledge and understand the privilege I hold in our society simply because of my background and my gender. And I'm acutely aware that the opposite is true for so many, who face discrimination and hardship for things outside their control. As a union leader and activist, I know how important it is to highlight the work and lift the voices of other leaders and activists who bring different perspectives to our work.

The struggle for equity isn't about any one member of our union. It is work that each of us must contribute to, as part of a collective effort toward building a stronger, more representative society.

Whether it's our recent Women's Conference, our Anti-Racism Strategy, our Water is life campaign, or our bystander training, I am proud of the work CUPE is doing to advance equity, diversity and inclusion.

As Canada's largest union, we represent an incredible diversity of workers in communities across the country. Which means we have a collective expertise and a base of power and strength to bring to conversations about equity and human rights.

And it is an important time to use it. We are seeing an outright assault on reproductive rights and the rights of the 2SLGBTQI+ community in the United States. Rights we thought we could take for granted are being clawed back. And as we all know, it never takes long for the worst undercurrents of right-wing extremism in the United States to make their way north.

Now more than ever, we must stand and fight against attacks on our human rights, while we also fight to expand those rights. In doing so, we will take our lead from members who are most impacted, but we will also take our part in the struggle and be there with them every step of the way.

We all have a role to play whether that's making space for important conversations, creating opportunities for learning and understanding, or leading the way in advocacy.

This year, as part of my commitment to human rights, I'm getting involved with the Moose Hide Campaign – a nationwide, Indigenous-led movement to engage men and boys in ending violence against women.

I encourage you to think about how you can be a stronger ally and a voice for inclusion, so we can make our union stronger and our communities a better place for everyone.





# OUR MOVEMENT NEEDS STRENGTH AND SOLIDARITY RIGHT NOW MORE THAN EVER

By **Candace Rennick** – CUPE's National Secretary-Treasurer

**W**e stand at an important moment in our history. We face the risk of major setbacks. Misogyny, racism, violence, and hate are on the rise. Most governments in Canada are Conservative or worse, and their leaders are shifting Canadian politics further into the extreme right. This, at a time when our economy is moving into a recession, when the central bank is promoting austerity once again, when employers are pushing back, and workers are at the end of their rope.

The pandemic hit us all hard. But it was hardest on those of us who are the most vulnerable. It made inequities impossible to ignore, and it exposed the fragility of our economy.

As the weak spots in our social safety net were revealed, we used our strength and solidarity to demand better. And we had some big wins.

Federally, we won 10 days of paid sick leave as a minimum standard, and similar improvements in several other jurisdictions. We won paid domestic violence leave for almost all workers across the country. And after 50 years of relentless campaigning, we finally got the federal government to make universal child care a priority.

These gains, and many others, were won with hard work, and with persistent struggle led by a diversity of women, including CUPE women, from different sectors and backgrounds, who took the lead.

This shows us that we can win when we mobilize, when we set our expectations high and then fight our hardest to meet them. But it also shows us that we only win when we make room for all of our members to take leadership roles in the union.

It shows us that we can only win if we refuse to let racism, misogyny or any other forms of discrimination or oppression divide us.

In order to push back against right-wing governments and make real gains for working people, we need to build a stronger, more inclusive union — one that fights for all of us.

This is why the Safe Union Spaces Working Group's recommendations are so important to address the serious and ongoing issues of sexual harassment, gender-based violence and other forms of discrimination that set us back. We know these problems are systemic. And like all systemic problems, they are embedded in our union's culture — that is, our way of doing things that perpetuates inequity, consciously or unconsciously.

This is why, through our Water is life campaign, CUPE's commitment to reconciliation extends to support Indigenous peoples in their fight for safe drinking water and working to protect and heal water in their territories.

We must dig deep and get at what lies at our foundation. We must better understand the different barriers that each of us face and build more inclusive and equitable communities, workplaces and union.

And shifting that culture — making our union safer for all — is a collective and ongoing responsibility that involves all of us. It is a continuing struggle that will make us stronger.

We can't delay one minute longer. We must fight together to have true solidarity, for it is only with this unity that we can win the fights ahead.

# WATER IS LIFE: INDIGENOUS COUNCIL MEMBERS PROTECTING WATER FOR THE NEXT SEVEN GENERATIONS AND BEYOND

— By **Karin Jordan** and **Rebecca Benson**

A powerful new video series features members of CUPE's National Indigenous Council talking about what water means to them and their communities, and calls on us all to protect water resources and services. The series launched on World Water Day, March 22, 2023, and is part of CUPE's Water is life campaign.

The campaign aims to raise awareness about the ongoing effects of colonization on Indigenous communities and build solidarity with CUPE members. Meaningful reconciliation starts with listening, learning, and honouring Indigenous peoples' role as the stewards and protectors of the waters of their treaty lands and traditional unceded territories.

Access to water and sanitation are human rights under international law, yet many Indigenous communities in Canada live with water that is unsafe to drink or wash with — some for decades. Other communities don't have any functioning water system. Pollution and corporate abuse have also harmed water sources that many Indigenous communities rely on.

Indigenous peoples have been fighting threats to their water for generations, including government inaction, corporate resource exploitation, and environmental racism, as a result of the ongoing impacts of colonization.

The National Indigenous Council members share an urgent message through their stories and experiences: we need to act now and take up the fight for water as life.





# LINDSAY (LOYER) POLL

Lindsay (Loyer) Poll is a CUPE 4070 member and flight attendant with WestJet Airlines. Over the years, pollution has turned the water in her home community from healing to harmful.

“Our community is right on the water. My kookum (grandmother) tells many stories of them as kids, the water was clear and perfect and beautiful. This goes long before colonization. Our water has always been known as the lake of healing. People in our community would come from many miles to just go in the lake, because the lake would heal you. My grandmother is a devout Catholic, and she was baptized in that water. But we can't even touch it anymore,” they say.

Poll lives on a small family farm on Treaty 7 territory in the Calgary area, but is originally from Lac Ste. Anne Métis Nation and Michel First Nation in the Edmonton area, which is Treaty 6 territory and Métis Region 4.

“Water is not a financial commodity. Water is the lifeblood of Mother Earth. It is not just Lac Ste. Anne – my little tiny community, my little piece of water – that has been destroyed. It is water across this Turtle Island that has been destroyed.”

Poll is taking action to create change and is urging people to ask questions, to invite Indigenous members to share their stories and to truly listen to them.

“I want to make sustainable change. And it's not for me. It's healing the next seven generations. It's giving that voice to my children and my grandchildren, and the great grandchildren. We want all the nations of Mother Earth to be safe, because water is life. Water is what gives us everything. If we don't have it, there is nothing,” they say.

“Water is life, but land back. Giving back the land that we don't even own. Nobody owns it. Our kids own the land and when they grow up, their kids own the land. So, we're just borrowing it, and we've got to leave it better for them.”

# LEO CHEVERIE

Leo Cheverie is of Inuk ancestry from Labrador and a CUPE 1870 member. He has worked since 1985 as a library technician at the University of Prince Edward Island. His home community in geographic terms is East Point, P.E.I.

Coming from a fishing family, Cheverie sees the urgent need to protect water sources from contamination and abuse.

"I see destruction of fish and other things. My family used to go dig clams or gather other things, but now you cannot do it in some of those places," he says. "Prince Edward Island depends solely on groundwater for its drinking water and it is very vulnerable in terms of access to water and the purity of water. I have seen small farms be replaced by large monocultural farms using a lot of pesticides or other chemicals which have run off into waterways and made them anoxic. A lot of bodies of water that I grew up with, including Diligent Pond which is close to my home, have become anoxic."

Cheverie has stood alongside activists, fishers and Indigenous community members and their allies in protests across the Maritimes to sustain water for everyone, and to protect it from big oil companies and other industries. "I think people are getting it," he says. "When people know what is happening with water and its pollution, people want to protect it."

He calls on us all to organize and work together to stop the pollution and the destruction of our water supply for short-term gain.

"Water is globally in short supply and needs to be protected. A lesson I've learned is that we are all in this fight together to sustain a blue planet, and make sure that water is available to everybody — not just the richest people who would buy water at the expense of everybody else."







# NATHALIE CLAVEAU

Nathalie Claveau is a lead line worker with Hydro-Québec and member of CUPE 1500. She lives in Mashteuiatsh, an Innu community in Lac Saint-Jean, right on the shore of the huge lake. Water has always been a very important part of her life and she sees it as an invaluable treasure.

“Just because we have clean drinking water today, it doesn’t mean we will still have it tomorrow. We have to protect and defend it. There isn’t a never-ending supply of clean water. Even rainwater will be polluted at some point, and our water sources are drying up. It’s about being mindful and not taking anything for granted.”

Claveau highlights the water injustice many Indigenous communities face, particularly because water is a natural resource.

“Water is something we are supposed to have. We shouldn’t have to fight for it,” Claveau says. “At home, we have our own drinking water treatment service. But I know for lots of communities that’s not true. Even in the North, Inuit don’t have access to drinking water. They have to haul it in with tanker trucks. And then we’ve got these big companies buying up spring water and bottling it. It is unfair. It doesn’t go back to those communities, they are stuck with not having drinking water. They have to go out and buy it. It is a glaring inequity.”

Claveau is happy to see that water and other Indigenous issues are becoming a more common concern. “Because even when members say ‘We don’t know what the issues are,’ that’s not really true. Often we are so close to other communities but just don’t take that next step.” She believes CUPE members are on the right path, asking more questions and becoming more aware of an issue that is critical for our very survival.

“What do we mean when we say ‘Water is life’? Asking the question answers the question. Without water, there is no life. Humanity goes extinct. Do I take this to heart? Of course I do. I want to live!” Claveau says.





# DAWN BELLEROSE

Dawn Bellerose has over 33 years of experience as a developmental service worker with Community Living Algoma, and is a CUPE 1880 member. She lives in Sault Ste. Marie, which is the traditional territory of the Robinson-Huron and the Anishinaabe people. Water has always been central to Bellerose and her family's well-being and happiness.

"In Sault Ste. Marie, we are surrounded by the beautiful Great Lakes of Lake Superior, Lake Michigan and Lake Huron. My grandfather and his brothers were fishermen. That was their life. That was what they brought to their community, to feed not only their family, but their community. As a young child, we would always go to my grandparents, who lived in a little town called Thessalon, and we loved to swim. And my father always took us fishing and boating."

Bellerose recognizes that she is privileged to be an urban Indigenous person with access to clean water. She says she was shocked when she learned that Grassy Narrows and so many Indigenous communities across Canada have not been able to bathe, drink, or cook with their water for decades.

"Grassy Narrows has been contaminated by mercury for well over 60 years. Studies have proven the levels were very high. Not having clean water is horrific on its own, but the impacts it has on their family and their communities — their food source is contaminated as well. But every government that has been in power always says they're going to help them, and promise after promise has been broken," she says. "I didn't understand that. This is Ontario, this is Canada. I didn't know this was happening within my country. And I wanted to know what I can do to help."

So, she got involved whenever the community came to Toronto, supporting them in their activities and protests. CUPE members are allies in this struggle to protect and heal water. We all have a role to play in ending water injustice and working for reconciliation.

"Water is life. It is like the air that you breathe. It cleanses you, it quenches your thirst. It cleans your soul, it feeds you. It is everything. If everybody can just turn on their tap and enjoy a glass of water," says Bellerose, with hope in her voice.



Everyone is invited to watch and share all four videos online. They are one way CUPE members can learn more about the significance of water for Indigenous peoples and their communities, and get involved. Members can also order a poster of the Water is life painting created by artist Aaron Paquette.

Stand with Indigenous peoples and demand an end to water injustice. Take the pledge to listen, learn and act at [cupe.ca/water-is-life](https://cupe.ca/water-is-life)



**WATER IS LIFE | L'EAU, C'EST LA VIE**

Artist/Artiste : Aaron Paquette

**CUPE • SCFP**





# FROM BEARING WITNESS TO TAKING ACTION

By **Daniel Gawthrop**

**A** ccording to the most recent RCMP report, 1,017 women and girls identified as Indigenous were murdered between 1980 and 2012 — a homicide rate roughly 4.5 times higher than that of all other women in Canada — and at least 105 Indigenous women and girls remained missing. These numbers, however, don't take into account the past 10 years, nor underreporting, discrimination and ineffective data keeping that have been denounced by Indigenous advocates.

Every year, on May 5, red dresses become a symbol of the crisis and are hung outside of homes, from trees or statues. On Red Dress Day, also known as the National Day of Awareness for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls and Two-Spirit People, CUPE members, allies and families across the country mobilize to bring awareness, to honour the memory of loved ones and to demand action.

On the late afternoon of May 5, 2022, about 125 people gathered on the

rain-drenched grounds of Bear Creek Park in Surrey, B.C. — the unceded and shared territory of the Katzie, Kwantlen, and Semiahoo First Peoples. The crowd was there for a Red Dress event marking the National Day of Awareness for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls and Two-Spirit People.

Hosted by CUPE 728 with support from the Hospital Employees' Union (HEU), the gathering took place within a grove of trees on which red



dressess and ribbons representing lost loved ones had been hung, the rain falling like tears on laminated portraits bearing the photo, name, and story of many.

Along with speeches by CUPE National Diversity Vice-President Debra Merrier, HEU's Louella Vincent, and Shelley Saje Ricci, who was CUPE BC Diversity Vice-President at the time, the event featured powerful statements by seven witnesses called upon to share their personal reflections. Food and refreshments were served and music by Stars of the North, a family drumming group, closed the event by leading a circle of attendees in a collective rendition of the Women's Warrior Song.

The fourth gathering of its kind held at Surrey's Bear Creek Park — the others were organized by HEU's Vincent during the month of October — this Red Dress event was the first hosted by CUPE 728 representing Surrey school support workers.



Saje Ricci was a speaker at the first gathering. She recently recalled her local's response after several members of its women's committee attended.

"We realized at that point that we could be more involved because it was held on the territory where we worked,

so the women's committee was invited and volunteered," she said.

The local, with guidance from Vincent, eventually struck its own Red Dress Day committee, which prepared a project plan and solicited donations from other CUPE locals and other unions. As well as the HEU, contributors included MoveUp and the New Westminster District Labour Council.

NDP leader Jagmeet Singh, the MP for Burnaby South, could not attend but had sent a video highlighting the importance to "commit to justice" on this day in the ways called for by the Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.

The presence of union leaders who are men, like CUPE BC Secretary-Treasurer Trevor Davies and MoveUp President David Black, was also important. Organizers wanted to invite men to stand in solidarity with women and take action against what was happening to them.











Debra Merrier said she would like to see this kind of event from coast to coast.

“It is about education,” she added. “Not everybody has knowledge about the missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, and Two-Spirit people. And there are still barriers to that knowledge. We’re still not getting the acknowledgement. We look on social media and every day somebody is going missing, and nothing is being done. It is about truth and reconciliation. Let’s stop talking and let’s see the action.”

Merrier and Saje Ricci added that more support and advocacy of this and other Indigenous issues should come from allies and not only from the Indigenous people who live these experiences every day. However, they also agreed that CUPE and the labour movement as a whole need more Indigenous members taking leadership roles.

**“For me, it is so personal,” said Merrier, “because of my aunt who never returned, and my sister who was murdered.”**



“Our women are still 12 times more likely to go missing or be murdered than any other cultural group of women in Canada. And why is that? Why are our women considered disposable?” noted Saje Ricci.

“Who is going to step up to continue doing this work when Shelley and I are not there? We need more Indigenous leadership,” said Merrier.

According to Merrier, what is needed is not only new policies but action by politicians who listen, and who actually read reports such as Red Women Rising and the final report of the National Inquiry.

We are outraged the federal government hasn’t acted on the 231 calls for justice in the Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. Every May 5, you too can demand accountability and action in solidarity with community members who have organized tirelessly for decades to end the violence. Mark the day by planning a Red Dress event in your local or join a vigil in your community.

**The National Day of Awareness for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit People is not the only time of the year to raise awareness. We must take action every day to put an end to this genocide, hold governments to account, support the work of organizations such as the Native Women’s Association of Canada, and show our commitment to reconciliation.**

**On October 4, 2022, in Ottawa, CUPE members and national leaders joined the Families of Sisters in Spirit vigil for missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls and Two-Spirit people. Hundreds bore witness as family members shared stories, songs, poems and prayers to honour the memories of loved ones, and to call for action from all levels of government.**



# ORGANIZING FOR JUSTICE: INCLUDING MIGRANT WORKERS IN THE LABOUR MOVEMENT EVERY STEP OF THE WAY

By **Kelti Cameron**



**M**igrante Canada is a Canada-wide alliance of Filipino migrant and immigrant organizations. Working with CUPE 40, a local representing education workers in Calgary, they created a Global Justice Fund project in 2021 called *Undocumented Workers are Workers - Regularize Now!* which supports their organizing program.

Organizers reach out to temporary foreign workers and convene workshops about their rights and how to assert these rights. Lately, Migrant Canada has been focusing on meeting with undocumented non-status workers to learn about their experiences, provide guidance to support their organizing efforts, and find ways to share workers' stories without putting them at risk.

## It is political

Migrant Canada Director Marco Luciano says the importance of this project with CUPE is political. "As migrants working in a host country like Canada, we truly see ourselves as part of the workforce and therefore we should also be part of the labour movement."

He believes it is crucial to connect with organized labour in different sectors to really build solidarity and an understanding of the role migrants play in the country, as they are part of our communities and will likely keep working here.

Since the 1800s, Canada's colonial project has been dependent on migrant labour. Migrant workers built the Canadian Pacific Railway, as well as major urban centers across the country.





Two centuries later, even our food security depends on migrant labour. When COVID-19 hit, farmers from southern Ontario and central Alberta lobbied the federal government to let migrant farm workers come into Canada, because they could not plant and harvest food without them.

The Canadian government is taking the wrong approach to claims of a future labour shortage by relying on the recently expanded Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP). In sectors such as accommodation and food services, construction, long-term care and hospitals, and in some manufacturing industries, up to 30% of the workforce can be temporary foreign workers. Instead, labour activists say the government should be encouraging employers to incentivize workers, and provide higher wages and better working conditions.

Global migration is big business. In Canada alone, Filipino migrants and immigrants send over \$1 billion a year to the Philippines. “It has become a systemic way of making profit from people — from migrant workers,” Luciano says. He adds that our profit-driven economy engages in the “trade” of people and benefits from recruiting and deporting migrant labour.

Temporary foreign worker programs prey on the vulnerability of migrants to ‘lower the bar’ and establish low wages and poor working conditions for the entire working class. According to Luciano, temporary foreign worker programs exist “precisely to divide workers because one worker is cheaper than the other.” Canada is one of the major players in the world using and abusing migrant labour.

In fact, most migrants do not want to leave their countries of origin to start a new life somewhere else. Poverty and joblessness, as well as the search for safety and stability because of violence, military occupation, war, or the climate crisis are all driving forces behind their need to leave home. And their desperation to earn money in Canada and to support family abroad forces them into jobs under conditions that less vulnerable workers — workers who are not in fear of being deported — simply won’t accept.

Luciano says that without a fight, “there is always going to be a temporary worker program. There is always going to be cherry picking of a ‘good’ migrant to stay in Canada, and a ‘not-so-good’ migrant to be deported. Why? Because the McDonald’s, the Tim Hortons, the big hotels in Canada need cheap and disposable labour, captured labour. And if a worker complains, they get a new one. The complainer will be sent back home.”

Government policies support these employer tactics. A good example is Canada’s Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA), which is the contract between the government, the employer and the worker. It ties the worker to only one employer. If they lose their job or leave that employer, they are on their own until they can get a new LMIA, which takes a long time.

When the process takes too long, many workers fall into the cracks. They become undocumented, meaning they lose their immigration status and they can get deported.

According to Luciano, the deportation system is designed to perpetuate the temporariness of these migrants and to provide a source of labour as cheap as possible to employers. “It is all part of a package, and it is designed that way,” he says.



## It is personal

CUPE 40 President Clay Gordon says the CUPE Global Justice Fund project is meaningful because of the current situation for migrant workers, and also for his members. Being able to lend political support while also increasing member engagement and solidarity are what make this project so important for him.

Gordon remembers feeling excited when the project was being developed: “Maybe our local could do something for a group of people that weren’t just within our local, but were part of our immediate community.”

CUPE 40 has a large Filipino membership. Many know friends, family members, and people in the community who have firsthand experience with Canada’s immigration system and the Temporary Foreign Worker Program. Gordon wants to encourage CUPE members who have experienced Canada’s immigration system to speak up because they have important insights and information to share about their struggles.

He knows there are CUPE members who are hesitant to come forward because they are worried about their job security and the repercussions of asserting their rights. Some members may be scared because of experiences with the immigration system, or maybe they worked in non-unionized jobs where they could be easily fired for speaking up.

Gordon believes the local’s involvement will help others understand what is happening to people within their community. The pushback Gordon got from some local members when he proposed the project reinforced this need to build understanding. “Why would we focus on anything other than our issues, and why are we putting resources into people who not part of our local?” Gordon recalls some people asking.

Gordon is clear that the issues facing temporary foreign workers, whether undocumented or not, affect us all. “We are all part of one community. You know that CUPE and other unions have led the way on workers’ rights for decades, like on the 40-hour work week, on overtime, on weekends. So, the work that we do is going to benefit everyone.”

This project, and ones like it, make our union stronger. It aims to stop employers from exploiting workers and we all need to stand united as workers in this fight.

“Maybe us doing this work can remove the stigma from people’s minds that foreigners are coming and taking their jobs. This isn’t a fact — they are doing the jobs that nobody



wants to do, this work is needed, it is appreciated. And maybe with us partnering with a group like Migrante Canada, it will help people within our organization realize that this isn't an issue of people coming to take our jobs," Gordon adds.

## We can't do this alone

Luciano says the solidarity and allyship the Global Justice Fund project aims to create is essential. "Migrants' issues and the call for permanent residency cannot be won by migrants alone. Migrants do not vote. Migrants are very afraid to speak out. But solidarity and alliances between local workers and migrant workers are very important in the struggle for migrant justice."

The Canadian government is considering whether migrant workers in Canada should have rights equal to other workers. The answer lies in how Canada chooses to treat racialized workers and communities, particularly those coming from poor countries and working low-wage jobs.

There are at least 1.7 million migrants in Canada, or 1 in 23 residents, who do not have equal rights. At least 1.2 million people in Canada are given temporary work permits or study or refugee claimant permits each year. Low-wage workers in this group have no access to permanent residency, so eventually they are forced to either leave Canada or stay in the country undocumented. Currently there are over 500,000 undocumented people in Canada.

The Migrant Rights Network, Canada's largest migrant-led coalition, is calling for a regularization program that ensures permanent resident status for all 500,000 undocumented people and their families.

There are signs the Canadian government is looking into some type of a regularization program. It is not clear what it will look like or when it will be implemented. What is certain is that it wouldn't even be a consideration if it wasn't for the migrants and their allies who have spoken out, lobbied, and mobilized across the country pressuring to respect the dignity and security of migrant workers.

Gordon hopes to see more local members involved with Migrante Canada in the future, providing help with workshops or sharing information. The project launched during the pandemic, and everyone involved is ready to step up the work making more migrant voices heard, and getting their message out to all levels of government, the labour movement and beyond.

*Migrante Canada is a Canada-wide alliance of Filipino migrant and immigrant organizations. Founded in October 2010, it has 13 chapters and member organizations across the country. It is a founding member of the Migrant Rights Network.*

*CUPE 40 represents Calgary Board of Education Employees who work in facility and environmental services.*

## Global Justice Fund

*Worker-to-worker solidarity is at the heart of CUPE's global justice work. Through our Global Justice Fund, CUPE members have opportunities to build relationships with workers and activists around the world.*

*The fund supports and strengthens connections with workers and grassroots movements demanding decent jobs, living wages, safe workplaces, justice and peace.*

*The fund supports projects that advance our fights for workers' rights, for access to public services and land rights, and for an end to war and violence in all its forms.*

*By learning from each other and sharing our experiences, all workers are stronger. CUPE members, locals, councils, divisions, and committees can all contribute to the Global Justice Fund.*

*Learn more about CUPE's international solidarity work, and support the Global Justice Fund, at [cupe.ca/international-solidarity](https://cupe.ca/international-solidarity)*



**“I DIDN'T WANT THIS TO  
HAPPEN TO ANOTHER  
WOMAN AGAIN”**

# **HOW A CUPE PARAMEDIC ORGANIZED TO FIGHT FOR THE RIGHTS OF PREGNANT WORKERS**

By Zaid Noorumar







**CUPE 5911 paramedics in Kenora had faced discrimination seeking accommodation during pregnancy going back many years. But in the spring of 2022, they reversed the tide, and achieved significant wins during negotiations for parents and expectant workers as well, as they found a far more receptive employer at the table. This is the story of how an organizing effort made that possible.**

**N**icole Runge always knew about the difficulty Kenora's paramedics faced when applying for accommodation during pregnancy. Therefore, as an expectant mother, she worked as long as she could before finally requesting modified duties. "I pushed myself on the road until I felt completely unsafe and no longer able to do the job," she says.

But it wasn't until her second pregnancy that the unrelenting misery of battling her employer for a basic human right made her determined to fight back against systemic discrimination.

The employer, Kenora District Services Board, denied her request for accommodation — which in a paramedic's case would mean 'light work' such as working in an office environment, instead of riding in an ambulance responding to emergencies and doing strenuous physical work. In response, CUPE 5911 filed a grievance.



Nicole Runge, CUPE 5911 member

"I had to fight tooth and nail for accommodation. The employer would take their sweet time to respond as we moved through the grievance process," notes Runge, who is now the vice-president of her local. "It was like a marathon. They would say they would have an appointment with me, or they would work with me, and then they wouldn't."

The employer contended that she should go on short-term disability (STD) leave. Runge felt that was wrong — she was not disabled, and the reduced STD compensation wouldn't be sufficient to pay her bills and her mortgage.

Backed by her union, Runge persisted. And during the last month of her pregnancy, she was finally accommodated. But the experience was draining and she had had enough.

"There were many times where I was super stressed out, crying and trying to figure things out," she says, reminiscing about the stress of potentially losing her home. "And I didn't want anybody to feel like that. Because there is nothing worse than the joyous moment of bringing a new life into this world being squished by concerns women shouldn't face in the 21<sup>st</sup> century."

Resolved to change the workplace culture, Runge began organizing.

## Together, co-workers are stronger

The first step was finding out the extent of the problem, Runge says. She reached out to all the CUPE 5911 members who had requested accommodation for pregnancy over the last 20 years and compiled their testimonies.

"I told them that this is still an issue, that it is unacceptable and that I want to change this so it never happens again," she recalls. "Everybody was onboard and supportive. And it took some time and patience, but I collected letters from all these women and heard their stories."

Runge found that nearly every paramedic had faced the employer's resistance. It was clear that sexist discrimination was deeply embedded in the work culture.

There was Amanda\*, placed on unpaid medical leave and asked to apply for STD. She was eventually reimbursed by the employer just before delivery, but still lost out on a month's worth of wages.



Sandra\* told the employer that her doctor disagreed with their recommendation that she apply for STD. In response, her manager made the highly inappropriate suggestion that her doctor revise their note. She was eventually accommodated.

Laura\*, too, faced a struggle before the employer assigned her light duties. But she was directed to work from an office that was 90 minutes away, despite her doctor advising her against travelling. The employer's response? "Take it or leave it."

And Claire\* was told that she should be grateful for the benefits she has because women in the United States only receive six weeks of maternity leave.

In addition, in multiple cases, women saved vacation days in anticipation of their request being denied.

Hearing about her co-workers' struggles was an emotional experience for Runge, who cried while reading accounts of the atrocious treatment meted out to women.

"It was heartbreaking to know that is what they suffered, alone and in silence," she says. "I felt like someone finally heard them and felt their pain. And I feel like I helped them in two different ways: I helped them change the system, and I helped by listening to their stories and acknowledging what had happened to them."

She says it wasn't easy for the workers either to write those testimonials, as they feared backlash and gendered stigma of being labelled 'crazy.'

**"Women always fight against being stigmatized in male-dominant careers. You must be stoic, and if you show emotion, then you are weak. And then if you are weak, you can't do your job," Nicole Runge explains.**

## A successful campaign

The next step was sending a message to the elected municipal officials of the Kenora District Services Board. In December 2021, CUPE 5911's letter — signed by every member of the union's executive board — cited anonymized testimonies collected by Runge and demonstrated a clear pattern of gender-based discrimination.

Around the same time, Runge's midwife who had also provided care to some other Kenora paramedics, wrote to the board of directors about the treatment faced by these women.

The rising pressure led to success. Since then, the two paramedics who have requested accommodation have had their requests swiftly approved.

The union also noticed a change in the employer's attitude during contract negotiations in the spring of 2022. During bargaining, CUPE 5911 won significant gains for parents and pregnant workers, including five extra weeks of paternity leave, and 100% compensation during maternity and paternity leaves (up from 93%).

According to Runge, these positive developments are a testament to the strength displayed by the paramedics in standing up for their rights. She says that the members are very satisfied with some of the achievements for parents in the new contract, especially the younger generation of women who are having children or expecting to start families soon.

As for the previous generations of women, Runge acknowledges they are happy about their involvement in the process of making the long-awaited change. "They feel like they are a part of accomplishing that. Even though they know that they won't benefit from these wins, they are glad that others won't suffer like they did," she says.

\* Names have been changed to maintain confidentiality.







# PROFILE SYLVAIN LE MAY

By Lisa Djevahirdjian

## DIVERSITY IS THE KEY FOR ACCESSIBILITY AND INCLUSION

In December 2022, on the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) paid tribute to Sylvain Le May's exceptional work by presenting him with the Carol McGregor CLC Disability Rights Award. A member of CUPE and a long-time trade unionist, Le May is an outstanding activist and an inspiration to us all.

From 2007 to 2021, Sylvain Le May ran the *Service d'accueil et de soutien aux personnes étudiantes en situation de handicap* (Reception and support service for students with disabilities) at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM). He currently sits on committees representing persons with disabilities at CUPE, the CLC and the Quebec Federation of Labour. Since 2017, he has been a member of the *Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse* (Quebec human rights and youth rights commission). He has also represented paratransit users as a member of the *Société de transport de Montréal's* Board of Directors since 2022.

### Question 1

**Do you remember the first time you encountered a situation that helped you understand why recognizing our diverse human rights struggles is important for the collective good?**

When I was 18, I worked as a counsellor at a summer camp for youth with disabilities, and I realized that a disability often hides barriers to what I consider to be a dignified life. For example, a disability would hide poverty some people experience, lack of access to culture, racism or mental health issues.

My path in life led me to understand that I am the sum of all my parts, just like everyone else. Among other things, I am a man, gay homosexual, and educated, with a disability. We must show that if we stop hiding our differences, others will too, and we'll all be better off. As far as I'm concerned, diversity is the only acceptable way to move forward!

Having a disability often defines who we are, but it doesn't have to. It is only part of my identity. I am not just "a disability." I think it is important for our collective well-being, and for a society that is richer in every way, to work to welcome and support persons with disabilities.



## Question 2

### *How does embracing diversity benefit us all?*

Everyone gets old. Everyone eventually loses their autonomy, each at their own pace. Building an inclusive society doesn't just give access to persons with disabilities today, but also to people who don't realize one day they'll need accessibility too.

Here is another example: why not install light switches lower in all buildings to ensure accessibility to housing for everyone who uses a wheelchair? There is no doubt that people who have children would also appreciate light switches at that level too!

## Question 3

### *What is the union movement's role in defending the rights of persons with disabilities?*

Unions aren't just obligated to defend these rights, they are also well positioned, through different committees and working groups, to monitor workplaces and ensure they are accessible.

A union's main duty is to defend its members. Unions have the tools they need to campaign for human rights to receive the attention they deserve. The goal is to ensure everyone can fully exercise their rights and freedoms, and that we truly fight all forms of discrimination. It's why unions exist.

Unions must be proactive. They can and should clear a path for vulnerable people and lead by example. It is what they did in the past when it comes to labour law, and what unions have accomplished ended up benefitting non-unionized people.

For persons with disabilities, we must innovate and show that a path forward does exist in spite of differences or difficulties. Unions are also in a good position to educate on these issues. This duty to educate is substantial, because it relies on dialogue, and without dialogue, nothing can be achieved. This challenge is even more real and far-reaching when it comes to invisible disabilities.

## Question 4

### *Is Canadian society an example to the rest of the world when it comes to the rights of persons with disabilities?*

Although the situation isn't perfect, Canada is and must be a major driver for change. Because it has two founding nations, Canada has an openness to others right in its DNA. We see that in our history. In this context, reconciliation with Indigenous peoples is the next step forward. Dialogue will enrich our future and our differences will make it stronger. We must strive for a better way to live together and to be open. We have to avoid knee-jerk reactions and jumping to conclusions.

A major gesture of openness, for example, would be to learn to say a few words in an Indigenous language or in sign language. The same goes for our two official languages.

Canada is also a land of immigrants. In that context, living together means putting our differences to work in the pursuit of a common project. This project could involve building a fairer and more equitable society, and each person living in this great country could participate and contribute to its development.

I have always been convinced that empathy is only possible when we know something about another person's story. However, in a world bombarded by a sea of news, taking the time to interact in this way is unfortunately becoming increasingly rare.

Knowing the other person's story is, in a way, allowing them to be part of ours – it is opening the door to our heart.

## Question 5

### *What are you most proud of?*

First, I am proud of the education my parents gave me, which in large part made me the man I am today. They were both working class, and never stood in the way of my dreams and the opportunities to achieve them.

My two other great sources of pride relate to my professional life.



The first is feeling that I have been able to positively influence people in the path they chose in life. I am happy to have supported them and to have broken down some barriers in the way persons with disabilities are seen.

Through my work, I have seen people reach their goals, which makes me useful and like I'm able to make a difference, no matter how small. Sometimes our attitude toward people can be far more disabling than a physical obstacle. Inclusion is much broader than just providing a reserved parking space.

Of course, receiving the CLC award makes me very proud, but the pride I feel would be meaningless if I didn't share this award with all the people who also try to make a difference in their daily lives.

Through many small acts, together we end up making a big difference.

Secondly, I am proud to be co-chair of *Agir pour l'équité et l'inclusion des personnes en situation de handicap* (Acting for equity and inclusion of people with disabilities), a wonderful initiative from UQAM to increase equity, diversity and inclusion in structures and practices throughout the university community.

## Question 6

### What is your dream?

I dream of an inclusive society that brings people together and is proud of everyone who make up its social fabric – a fabric that is as rich and diverse in its shapes and colours as it is in the origins that define it. Our society would then be like the quilts my grandmother sewed – rich with meaning.



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