

CUPE NATIONAL EXECUTIVE BOARD

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# SAFE UNION SPACES WORKING GROUP

FINAL REPORT

OCTOBER 2023





## THE NATIONAL SAFE UNION SPACES WORKING GROUP

**Candace Rennick**, National Secretary-Treasurer (Co-Chair)

**Debra Merrier**, Diversity Vice-President, Indigenous Workers (Co-Chair)

**Judy Henley**, General Vice-President (MB, SK) (Co-Chair)

**Ashley Clark**, Regional Vice-President (PEI)

**Sherry Hillier**, General Vice-President (NS, NL, NB, PEI)

**Yolanda McClean**, Regional Vice-President (ON)

**Nan McFadgen**, Regional Vice-President (NS)

**Gina McKay**, Regional Vice-President (MB)

**Barb Nederpel**, Regional Vice-President (BC and the Yukon)

**Karen Ranalletta**, Regional Vice-President (BC and the Yukon)

## THE SUPPORT STAFF TO THE WORKING GROUP

**Andrea Addario**, Executive Assistant to the National Secretary-Treasurer

**Annick Desjardins**, Executive Assistant to the National President

**Anne Healy**, Special Advisor to the Safe Union Spaces Working Group

**Sylvia Sioufi**, Managing Director, National Services Department



# INTRODUCTION

CUPE's National Executive Board (NEB) formed the Safe Union Spaces Working Group in March 2021. It was established to address serious issues of sexual and gender-based violence, harassment and other forms of discrimination in our union. The working group includes all women who are on the NEB and is supported by senior staff. Its mandate is to review CUPE's policies, programs and processes to identify any gaps or deficiencies in the way that we respond to harassment and discrimination, and to propose solutions.

Throughout 2021 and 2022, the working group conducted member surveys, focus groups and listening sessions. Based on this feedback, the working group collaborated with experts to determine steps forward. Their recommendations were compiled in an interim report released in April 2022. Since then, CUPE has been implementing these recommendations.

The work to stop violence, harassment and discrimination in our union is ongoing. This report details the progress made so far.

# THE ISSUES

The working group's findings were deeply troubling.

Many CUPE members, particularly women and those from equity-deserving groups, reported experiencing discrimination and harassment in CUPE. Even more reported witnessing acts of violence or harassment in our union, often more than once. These incidents happened in locals and at conventions, CUPE schools and other events.

Members described union spaces where harassment and discrimination are tolerated, and where incidents are brushed under the rug. They described a union culture that makes it hard for people to speak out when they see unacceptable behaviour or to come forward when it happens to them. They described a culture of silence. And too many members reported that they don't fully participate in union activities because they feel unsafe.

Members also told the working group that our current mechanisms for addressing violence, harassment and discrimination are inadequate. Almost half of members who reported an incident, or went through a complaint process, said they didn't

feel respected during the process. Others said they were completely unaware of the processes available to address these incidents.

It's clear: CUPE members are being hurt by violence, harassment and discrimination in our union, and the structures we use to address these issues aren't working. As a result, some members withdraw from the union, while others choose never to get involved in the first place.

As trade unionists, we can't allow this to continue. We have a duty to build a culture that unites members, where every member feels they can participate and thrive.

The working group began by acknowledging that the people who experience violence, harassment and discrimination (in all their different forms) are mostly, though not always, women. The working group also recognizes that Indigenous members, Black and racialized members, 2SLGBTQI+ members, members with disabilities and younger members are more likely to face these issues as well. To be effective, our work and our solutions must take this into consideration.

## CUPE'S COMMITMENT TO SAFER UNION SPACES

CUPE is firmly committed to supporting survivors of discrimination, harassment and violence. Our goal is to eradicate these incidents from our union spaces. When such incidents do occur, our responses need to be sensitive to survivors' trauma while ensuring fairness and due process for all.

We need to create union spaces where everyone feels safe and included. Worker power depends on unity. If even one union member is unsafe, we become weaker. Through respect, understanding and advocacy, we can support the rights of all workers – together.

## PROGRESS SO FAR

The Safe Union Spaces Interim Report identified two areas of focus for action: **responses and prevention**. This section provides an update on these areas of work.



## Responses

### 1. Communications

The interim report recommended that CUPE improve its communication around our complaint and investigation processes. To this end, CUPE has reviewed and is currently revising our existing complaint and investigation procedures. Next steps include revamped communications on available procedures, as well as member materials on consent, disclosure and reporting options.

### 2. Ombudsperson program

The interim report identified concerns around CUPE's ombudsperson program, including fear of bias by staff and leaders as well as experience and skill level. The working group reviewed our current system and completed extensive research on alternative models. After this review, CUPE trained additional staff and members to ensure we have enough ombudspersons available at all events. The working group also recommended that CUPE create an independent office to support members dealing with gender-based violence and sexual harassment. More information on this new office can be found below.

### 3. A restorative approach

Although aspects of restorative justice are applied in CUPE's current alternate process, the interim report suggested that a more robust program of restorative justice would benefit all parties. In response, CUPE organized training on restorative practices at several events, including the All Committees Meeting in Vancouver and CUPE Manitoba's Convention. The NEB and CUPE's staff directors have also received this training. Currently, pilot projects on restorative practices are being launched in Manitoba, Ontario and British Columbia.

## Prevention

### 4. Reaching consensus

The interim report highlighted the need to achieve consensus on addressing violence, harassment and discrimination in our union. In response, CUPE has developed resources and provided additional training for its leaders, staff and members. The working group has also provided increased support for new and female leaders.

**Resources and training:** The working group created resources for locals, including a checklist to ensure safer, more inclusive union spaces. CUPE leaders and staff received training in anti-racism, harassment, bullying and microaggressions.

**Support for new and women leaders:** In March 2023, CUPE held its first National Women's Conference in Vancouver in 14 years. Over 500 attendees explored how to promote equity and women's leadership through bargaining, politics and member engagement. The working group has also strengthened leadership initiatives across the country. This has included overhauling CUPE's leadership training and backing the Women in Leadership Development Program (WILD) in Ontario.

## 5. Pre-event education

Members asked CUPE to make it clear at all events that there will be no tolerance for violence, harassment or discrimination. To this end, CUPE created guidelines and tools on what to consider when planning CUPE events. CUPE has also developed consistent messaging for NEB leaders at division conventions and all events on safe spaces and acceptable behaviour. Finally, while our union already makes widespread use of the Equality Statement to begin events, the statement needs to be updated. Members reviewed the Equality Statement at the 2022 All Committees Meeting and CUPE is compiling the results of this feedback.

## 6. Making CUPE events safer

We will use the imagery created last fall to promote the Safe Union Spaces survey and used again this spring for the interim report whenever we communicate on these issues.

## 7. Staffing

The interim report identified the importance of staff in creating safe union spaces. CUPE is developing staff training on supports for members when there are incidents of violence, harassment or discrimination.

## 8. Bystander intervention

The interim report revealed a serious issue: many CUPE members and staff don't step in when they see violence, harassment or discrimination. To tackle this issue, CUPE's Union Education Branch created a 3-hour bystander intervention course open to all CUPE members. Over the past year, CUPE provided shorter bystander intervention training at several national events, like the 2022 Sector Council Conference in Ottawa and the National Women's Conference. The men of the NEB and male senior management have also received this training.

## 9. Moving forward on the expansion of the CUPE Code of Conduct

At our 2021 Convention, delegates expanded the Code of Conduct to all CUPE events. The working group presented at division conventions to raise awareness about the change in the scope of the Code of Conduct and what it means for locals. The National President's Office is recommending that locals adopt the Code of Conduct when they submit bylaw amendments and has provided sample language.

## 10. Campaign and policy work

The interim report stressed that CUPE should continue its support of campaigns and legislative advocacy around violence, harassment and discrimination.

### *Recent work includes:*

- Lobbying for a National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence, which the federal government introduced in November 2022.
- Urging ratification and implementation of ILO C190, which we successfully achieved in January 2023.
- Pushing for Canada's ascension to the Belém do Pará Convention on violence against women.
- Calling for a stronger National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence.
- Working in coalition with the Feminist Influencing Group and Up for Debate to advocate for stronger action on gender-based violence, including increased funding to women's shelters.
- Demanding greater oversight and implementation of the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ People National Action Plan.



## SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED HARASSMENT PREVENTION AND SUPPORT OFFICE

In March 2023, the NEB approved the creation of an independent Sexual and Gender-Based Harassment Prevention and Support Office in CUPE. This office will offer confidential aid to women and gender diverse members facing harassment or violence in union spaces. The aim is to reduce incidents by promoting prevention initiatives and assisting affected members. The office will adopt an intersectional, anti-racist and anti-oppression stance. It will also guide members through the trial procedure and alternate process. Support will be trauma-informed, will centre member experiences and will employ mediation and restorative practices when suitable. The plan is to have the office staffed and providing support by early spring 2024.

The Safe Union Spaces Working Group was formed to look at the discrimination, harassment and violence experienced by women in CUPE. It is for this reason that we are beginning with an office that is strategically focused on gender-based and sexual harassment. We believe that moving forward in a measured and focused way will allow us to assess the demand for these supports, and to determine when and how to expand.

In time, CUPE may fold this office directly into a full Ombudsperson's office.



## CONCLUSION

This report presents the first steps in a long process. CUPE is celebrating its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. We have been operating under a less-than-perfect system for six decades.

The new workshops and training have been met with enthusiasm. The expert advice CUPE received has revealed new approaches to old problems. And we are developing tools and guidelines we believe will make a difference. But we can't do it alone.

The national leadership recognized that there were problems in the union and struck the working group to explore solutions.

But true change at CUPE won't come from the top down. Transforming our union into a space that is safe and welcoming for all our members also has to happen at the grassroots. We encourage locals to use our new resources and to take action to create safer, more inclusive spaces.

CUPE is a progressive union and a strong union. But we must live up to our ideals. Shifting our culture — making our union safe for all — is a collective responsibility. Together, we can make a difference.





