

Addressing membership diversity in labour unions

Modern labour and trade unions as we know them have been a boon for workers ever since they were first established in Britain in the 1700s. Before these unions, business owners held all the power in employer-employee relationships. And because the ultimate goal of many (or most) business owners was to accumulate as much wealth as possible, this led to widespread mistreatment and abuse of workers. With the advent of collective bargaining, workers were finally able to stand up to unscrupulous owners, and improve their working conditions and wages.

Unions today have a wide diversity in their membership, with representation from different genders, ethnic groups, abilities, age groups, and more. With this diversity comes a challenge – how can a union fairly and equitably support the needs of its multi-faceted membership?

One important way that this can be accomplished, is by ensuring diversity in a union's leadership. "Representation matters" is a phrase that is sometimes used, and it absolutely applies when it comes to union executives. Elections should be open to all members and be inclusive, with candidates who represent various demographics. When it comes time to make important decisions, a diverse leadership team can help ensure that these decisions take the concerns of different groups into account. One non-union example of this was seen in the Icelandic parliament, where ~50% of elected representatives are women. In 2016, member Unnur Brá Konráðsdóttir gave a speech to the chamber on live TV, while breastfeeding her baby girl, without a single objection from the room. On the opposite hand, in 2018, the entire male-dominated Alberta United Conservative caucus walked out of the legislative chamber before a

vote on no-protest zones to protect women around abortion clinics, and abstained from voting on the bill. Would this have happened if half of the conservative caucus had been women?

Another key initiative to ensure equity and inclusion is to run educational campaigns that highlight issues faced by different demographics within the union. People will often not realize the challenges faced by their coworkers, and educational campaigns can help address these knowledge gaps. When people have empathy towards their coworkers for issues they may not face themselves, they can support and stand with their colleagues. This can even include training that is specific to underrepresented groups. At the University of Alberta, there are frequent and ongoing seminars and courses on the topics of equity, diversity, and inclusivity.

The establishment of committees and working groups to discuss issues faced by different demographics is another way that unions can support their members. They are an excellent method of bringing special needs and issues to light, and to discuss ways that these can be addressed for the benefit of members. When employees don't feel marginalized, they are happier overall, and this is reflected in their work. NASA has at least one such group, the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusivity Committee.

Finally, unions should regularly survey their users on issues such as these. Even when great strides have been made to try to ensure equity and inclusivity, there will always be ways to be even better. Continually working for the needs of ALL members will help unions be the best possible versions of themselves.