

Policy on LGBTQ Issues

November 2014

For over 20 years Unifor members and activists have been actively engaged in struggles for social and legal equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual, intersex, two-spirited and trans people. The movement for LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer) rights in Canada has accomplished an enormous amount in a relatively short time. Unions have played a fundamental role in Canada becoming a leader on LGBTQ equality rights – both in terms of bargaining equality measures (same sex benefits, pensions, anti-harassment and anti-discrimination language) and in terms of pushing forward progressive legislative change through protest, public campaigns, court challenges and intense lobbying.

The Situation Today

To many people, it may seem that sexual orientation and gender identity are becoming less and less of an issue in Canada.

It is true that we have made tremendous gains in terms of legal equality – LGBTQ rights are fully protected in Canada today (though some work remains to explicitly legislate against hate crimes and discrimination based on gender expression/identity in some jurisdictions). However, in spite of important legal victories, such as clear protection for LGBTQ families and equal marriage, there is more to be done to bring about full social equality for the LGBTQ community.

More change is not only necessary, it is possible. We know it's possible because we know people who never thought they'd have the courage to come out of the closet have done so. Parents have found it in their hearts to honour their LGBTQ children and love them, not in spite of, but because of, who they are. Religious organizations of all kinds have struggled and, in many cases, found ways to understand and welcome their LGBTQ members. Unions have learned to become true supporters of LGBTQ issues – our leaders speaking out with the power of many to voice the needs of the minority. LGBTQ members led the way in the on-going struggles against HIV/AIDS – tackling both the disease and the stigma. Students and teachers have shown remarkable courage in confronting the toxic, even life-threatening, homophobia and transphobia faced by so many young people. People who once thought it was okay to gay-bash, have become some of our strongest allies. Some have even become part of the LGBTQ community.

There is more to be done

Violence against the LGBTQ community is not only on-going, it is increasing. The most likely hate crimes to involve violent offences are those motivated by sexual orientation (65%) – and more than half of the

victims are under 25. Anyone perceived to be lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans can be targeted for ridicule, brutal beatings, and even murder, making it clear that violence against the LGBTQ community is gender-based, an expression of homophobia/transphobia and sexism.

We can challenge bullies and bigots. We can demand that the crimes against the LGBTQ community are responded to with the gravity they deserve, and we can challenge a culture of gender-based violence.

LGBTQ workers and their families continue to experience oppression and discrimination; for many this discrimination is coupled with discrimination based on race, ethnicity, sex, linguistic background, ability, class, age, or economic circumstances. Employers continue to discriminate in hiring practices, using traditional gender stereotypes to keep LGBTQ workers out of, or slot them into, certain jobs, as well as to dictate gender expression at work.

Workplace harassment continues to be a major issue – whether it's outright hostility or the daily expression of jokes, innuendo, and inappropriate remarks or questions that undermine, belittle, degrade or simply make light of the reality of LGBTQ life experiences. The aggressive harassers are few but the jokers and the bystanders (whose laughter or silence speaks volumes) are many. Our members need to have faith that the union will stand with them in cases of harassment, and that our union is proactively working to ensure the overall culture in our workplaces is LGBTQ positive.

We can re-double our efforts to eliminate homophobia and transphobia from our workplaces, by demanding stronger action from employers and by expanding our anti-harassment workplace policies and education programs. We can support our co-workers who are facing homophobia or transphobia on the job and speak out against sexist, racist, homophobic and transphobic stereotyping and harassment. We can attend pride parades and anti-violence rallies and show haters and that we will not be divided. We can call on our governments to speak out against harassment and discrimination against the LGBTQ community beyond our borders and we can call on them to voice their opposition to the criminalisation of homosexuality when they meet with international leaders.

The disproportionately high number of gay and trans youth who are homeless or who work in the sex trade is a testament to the barriers LGBTQ youth face accessing safe, regulated work, and speaks volumes to the lack of parental support, social acceptance, safe housing, appropriate services and available jobs. Despite changing attitudes, suicide rates among LGBTQ teens remain at more than twice the national average.

We can support the ongoing work of youth groups, teachers' unions and Egale in their commitment and action to end bullying in schools. We can stand up for school curriculum that reflects the diversity of our sexuality, gender, and family lives.

People who transition face overt discrimination in the workplace and society. Their right to access necessary medical procedures is precarious at best. Many trans people live with daily fear of violence and harassment; they may be especially vulnerable in the workplace while transitioning. Trans issues may be complex, but they are also straightforward: trans workers deserve the same rights as all workers to feel safe at work, to be free from harassment and violence, to be respected for who they are, to have

their privacy respected, and to have full benefit coverage and medical leave as required. As a union we can stand in solidarity with our trans members in their demands for dignity, security and clear human rights protection.

We can negotiate transition policies and stronger anti-harassment measures with employers to ensure our trans members' rights, dignity, safety and needs are protected. We can provide resources and support to our leadership so they have the tools to fully back up our trans members' workplace rights. We can demand that our governments pass explicit human rights protection for trans people into law.

Unifor: A Leader on LGBTQ Issues

Twenty years ago we launched vibrant visibility and awareness campaigns that continue today. For over a decade we've held national pride conferences and in 2010 we launched our week-long activist program for LGBTQ members. All our Unifor education programs include materials on LGBTQ issues to educate and support our bargaining committees, stewards and activists. In addition to local and regional pride committees across the country, our Unifor Constitution now includes, for the first time, official regional LGBTQ committees and elected representatives. This allows rank-and-file activists to truly lead the union on LGBTQ issues. Our LGBTQ Unifor activists and leadership are committed to supporting and connecting with other LGBTQ members of the union, and encouraging them to also become involved in all aspects of union life. Over the years we have elected an ever-increasing number of LGBTQ stewards, health and safety reps, local union executive members, Presidents, bargaining chairpeople – demonstrating that members of the LGBT community are contributing fully at ALL levels of union activity. Their presence and visibility has made a major contribution to greater understanding and stronger relationships between the LGBTQ community and the rest of the union, which in turn has led to the development of real allies and a growing solidarity within the union.

Human rights are central to the overall work and commitment of Unifor. This means that when we go about our daily union work, it's everyone's responsibility to include members of the LGBTQ community and their issues. When we organize new workplaces, we can welcome our new LGBTQ members and find out about their workplace issues. When we talk about the impact of cuts to health care or education, we can include the impact on the LGBTQ community, on women, on people of colour, people with disabilities and other uniquely affected groups. Workplace campaigns - such as HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns, anti-bullying campaigns, campaigns to improve nursing home care, and the campaign to end the discriminatory blood ban against men who have sex with men - can connect and strengthen our activism in the areas of gender and sexuality, health and safety, rights of the disabled and international solidarity.

We need to cement and protect the gains that have been made, and ensure that they extend to the entire LGBTQ community – rural and urban, flamboyant and quiet, white and racialized, employed and unemployed, young and old, unionized and yet-to-be unionized.

We can all be a part of keeping change going

We can take the lead from our Regional LGBTQ Unifor Committees and support the campaigns and actions they undertake. We can ask ourselves tough questions about the work we need to do to confront our own homophobia and transphobia. We can celebrate difference as valuable and essential to human experience. We can learn that we stand strong when we stand together.

There is more work to be done and Unifor is proud to be part of it.

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