



ROUNDTABLE REPORT

# BCGEU WORKERS OF COLOUR

BC GOVERNMENT & SERVICE  
EMPLOYEES' UNION (BCGEU)

EQUITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS  
COMMITTEE



BCGEU HEADQUARTERS  
BURNABY



JUNE 27 TO JUNE 29  
2019

B.C.'S UNION SINCE 1919



BC GOVERNMENT AND SERVICE EMPLOYEES' UNION

# MOVING FORWARD ON A SHARED VISION FOR A MORE EQUITABLE BCGEU

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## Introduction and background

Workers of colour experience a serious and ongoing struggle for justice and equity, not only in the workplace, but within the broader labour movement and throughout Canadian society as a whole. In recognition of these significant barriers and challenges, in 2017, delegates from BCGEU's Constitutional Convention adopted resolution C-113 calling on the union to host a roundtable dialogue, *“for workers of colour to identify and implement an anti-racism action plan that ensures members facing systematic barriers in their communities and workplace[s] will have an equal opportunity to access assistance and participate in the telling of their authentic narratives.”*

On July 27-29, 2019, more than 25 racialized members from across the BCGEU assembled in Burnaby, B.C. for the union's first official equity roundtable for workers of colour. Jackie Pierre and Jason Singh—the workers of colour representatives to the BCGEU equity and human rights committee—worked closely with union staff to organize and host the event.

## Panels and presenters

Upon receiving a request to step back from the roundtable in order to enable participants to feel fully empowered, president Stephanie Smith prepared brief remarks that were read aloud at the gathering: *“While I am disappointed not to join you and to thank you personally for the work you will be doing, I also understand the wishes of your chairs and want to ensure that I act as an ally to, and supporter of, workers of colour. ...I sincerely look forward to working alongside you in the future as we make the BCGEU a more inclusive union for all working people.”*

Khari Wendell McClelland, a Vancouver-based musician, historian, activist and facilitator, used artistic and experiential activities to help support

collective learning. McClelland's inspirational approach to facilitation relied on creative formats of expression and communication—for example, music, art, dance and role-playing—to explore complex equity issues and the impact of systemic oppression as experienced by members. His facilitation also led the group to uncover and discuss ways the union can better address these issues going forward, both in its day-to-day work representing members, and by considering changes to the BCGEU's internal structure and culture.

Panel discussions and other presentations helped supplement and inform group proceedings. Nat Lowe of the Health Sciences Association of BC and youth collaborative for Chinatown presented on community and union organizing for change; Hasan Alam of the BCGEU advocacy department hosted a panel discussion on organizing workers of colour. Panelists included Byron Cruz, a worker at Sanctuary Health (BCGEU Local 403), Valda Kargbo of the Sierra Leonean community of B.C. (BCGEU Local 304), and Karen Joy Bation of the Migrant Workers Centre.

## Understanding barriers to equity

In addition to the roundtable's facilitated group discussions, one session in particular helped to establish a conceptual framework for the key issues and barriers that obstruct racial equity for workers of colour, which participants further investigated in subsequent dialogue. This presentation was delivered by Dr. Lisa Gunderson, an award-winning educator and trainer. She provided the group with a succinct overview of essential concepts for understanding systemic racism and barriers to equity, and some important strategies for overcoming both.

For the purposes of contextualizing and describing both the racial equity challenges before the union, and the recommendations arising out of the roundtable,



Dr. Gunderson's core concepts and definitions are summarized here in this report:

- **Racism:** a system in which one racial group maintains supremacy over another through a set of attitudes, behaviors, social structures and institutional powers. Racism is a system of structured dis-equality where the goods, services, rewards, privileges, and benefits of society are available to individuals according to their presumed membership in particular racial groups.
- **Equity:** Dr. Gunderson proposes a critical perspective on equity that involves (and requires):
  - Taking action to disrupt the status quo;
  - Changing core structures, policies, and practices to be more equity-focused;
  - Expecting that institutions, departments, and their members change the behaviours, culture, and values that contribute to inequities; and
  - Being conscious of bias.
- **Privilege:** gaining benefits, advantages and rights by default (at the expense of others) because one belongs to the perceived "Us," or the normal or natural state of the mainstream and/or dominant culture. Privilege allows for the active and persistent exclusion and devaluation of the perceived "Them," and those who are othered and/or marginalized.
- **Institutional power:** the ability or official authority to decide what is best for others; the ability to decide who will have access to resources; and the capacity to exercise control over others.
- **Bias:** a subjective opinion, preference, prejudice or inclination, often formed without reasonable justification, which influences an individual or group's ability to evaluate a particular situation objectively or accurately.
- **Implicit bias:** automatic attitudes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. Implicit bias produces attitudes and beliefs that:
  - individuals are unaware of;
  - do not consciously intend;
  - might reject upon conscious self-reflection; and
  - can influence their actions if left unexamined.
- **Microaggressions:** biases that come out as daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental slights, snubs or insults. Microaggressions are often committed by well-intentioned people who are unaware they have engaged in harmful conduct.
- **White fragility:** discomfort and defensiveness on the part of white people when confronted by information about racial inequality and injustice. This often results in efforts to silence much-needed discussion about justice and equity, including a tendency to close off self-reflection about how one's own actions and attitudes contribute to the problem. It may cause individuals to hijack conversations in order to shift the focus away from issues identified by equity groups, or to criticize the messenger who is bringing forward the issues—rather than listening to and addressing the substance of their message.



## Workers of colour express their hopes

Early in the roundtable, participants were asked to voice their hopes for what a better workplace and a more inclusive union would look like, as well as what sort of actions the roundtable could help launch.

Their ideas were wide ranging: workers of colour say they are tired of being invisible and want to raise their profile to make space for themselves in workplaces, communities and in the union itself. Many expressed hopes of seeing more workers of colour in elected positions within the union, and for the union to develop better strategies to support workers of colour. They believe increasing their participation will strengthen the union for all workers.



Participants at the roundtable talked about the need for greater empowerment, and their need for new tools to help reclaim power from management and fight back against racism in their workplaces—be it in confronting subtle structural barriers, overt and blatant racist language, or acts of discrimination. They want increased opportunity for professional development and training, improved professional mobility and growth opportunities at work, as well as basic financial equality. They also want manageable workloads and fair pay for the work they do.

Workers of colour say they want to encourage conversations about these issues among white people, and they hope that white allies will do more work themselves to understand the various manifestations and impacts of racism—including their own unconscious biases.

## Speaking their truth: members' experiences with racism and discrimination

### CHALLENGES IN WORKPLACES AND COMMUNITIES

Workers of colour shared their experiences of dealing with overt as well as subtle forms of racism and discrimination, both inside and outside the workplace. Participants described instances that ranged from blatantly racist comments in the workplace, to obvious discrimination in hiring and promotion, to more subtle, everyday microaggressions that reinforce racial hierarchies and take a heavy emotional toll on workers of colour over the long term. While racism is by no means limited to smaller and/or rural communities, some workers noted particular challenges living and working in those areas, especially when people of colour are not well represented in the wider population.

### CHALLENGES IN THE LABOUR MOVEMENT

In principle, the labour movement should be a key source of strength and solidarity for workers of colour. However, roundtable participants said that unions need to do more work to improve their inclusion and support of workers of colour. They noted that workers of colour are underrepresented at all levels of the labour movement, and particularly so at the executive level. This current underrepresentation is reinforced and perpetuated by a lack of training and mentorship for workers of colour, including the support required for building leadership skills and political experience.

More broadly, roundtable participants pointed to a lack of time and space in the labour movement for independent discussion (and organizing) around issues that workers of colour feel are important and unique to them. Ultimately, the consequence is a failure to prioritize issues that are significant for workers of colour, both at the bargaining table and within the core work of the union.



# EQUITY ROUNDTABLE 2019 WORKERS OF COLOUR

Facilitation by: NIKKI McLELLAND



**MOVING TOGETHER IN THE SAME DIRECTION.**

**OUR HOPE FOR TODAY**

- THAT THE NECESSITY WE FEEL HERE TODAY, TRANSLATES TO CHANGES ACROSS THE BCGEU AND INTO THE EXECUTIVE LEVEL
- FOR OUR VOICES TO CONTINUE BEING HEARD AFTER THIS SESSION.
- HELP + ENCOURAGE OTHERS TO NOT BE AFRAID TO STAND UP TO BIAS, DISCRIMINATION + INJUSTICE
- BUILD ALLIANCE TO FIGHT BIAS + GENDER DISCRIMINATION

- CREATE A STRATEGY + ACTION PLAN TO TACKLE BIASISM + ELICIT + EXPLICIT DISCRIMINATION
- ENCOURAGE OTHERS TO BE ACTIVE THAT THE ENERGY + LEARNINGS FROM THIS ROUNDTABLE NEED TO BE CHANGE.

**FOR BCGEU TO MAKE A STRONG COMMITMENT TO SUPPORT WORKERS OF COLOUR.**

**WORKING TOGETHER**



**TO APPLY OUR VOICES**

**GOALS**

- BUILD LASTING COMMUNITIES AND ALLIANCES INSIDE BCGEU
- EXPLORE EQUITY WITHIN BCGEU AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO THE CORE OF CONDUCT.
- EMPLOYEE SYSTEMIC OPPRESSION AND HOW IT THREATENS IT BCGEU.
- MAKE CLEAR AND FORMAL RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE BCGEU.

**A SHARED VISION FOR AN EQUITABLE BCGEU**



- **POWER DYNAMICS: CLEARING THE LENS**
- SHARING OUR STORY OUR WAY
- TAKING A PROACTIVE APPROACH
- CREATING CULTURAL SHIFTS
- **FOR US, BY US, FOR ALL**
- RECOGNIZING OUR POWER + STRENGTH
- **GROWING TOGETHER**
- THROUGH EDUCATION + COMMUNICATION.
- CELEBRATE OUR DIFFERENCES
- FINDING UNITY IN DIVERSITY.
- SEEK OUT FRIENDSHIP, ALLIANCE + SUPPORT.
- MOVE AWAY FROM AN US VS THEM MINDSET

WORK IN SOLIDARITY WITH FIRST NATION'S COMMUNITIES

MANAGEABLE WORKLOADS + FAIR PAYMENT

INCREASE OPPORTUNITY FOR:

- PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
- WORK MOBILITY
- GROWTH

FINANCIAL EQUALITY

THAT OUR EXPERIENCES, KNOWLEDGE, PERSPECTIVE AND EXPERTISE ARE VALUED AND RESPECTED.

THAT THE DIVERSITY OF MEMBERSHIP IS REFLECTED IN THE LEADERSHIP

UNITY THROUGH STRONG COMMUNICATION

**HARVEST: DAY 1**

- ALLOWING OURSELVES TO ACTIVELY LISTEN AND GETTING TO KNOW ONE ANOTHER.
- WE NEED TO OPEN + CREATE AUTHENTIC SPACES FOR BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS
- WE ARE BUILDING COMMUNITY EACH STEP OF THE WAY
- OUR CHALLENGES CAN BECOME OUR STRENGTHS

**WE HAVE ONE ANOTHER AND THERE IS GREAT WORK AHEAD**

ENERGY CONNECTION  
EMPOWERMENT  
COMMUNITY SOLIDARITY  
APPRECIATION  
HOPE



BCGEU Equity Roundtable: Workers of Colour (Day 1) | June 28, 2019

LIVE GRAPHIC RECORDING | Drawing  
Adriana Contreras Correal | Change

# EQUITY ROUNDTABLE 2019

## WORKERS OF COLOUR

FACILITATION BY KHARI MCELWAND

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BCGEU

HARVEST DAY 2

**QUESTIONS WE STILL HAVE**

- WHAT ARE THE NEXT STEPS?
- HOW DO WE STAY CONNECTED AND KEEP THE MOMENTUM ALIVE?
- HOW DO WE GET INVOLVED?
- HOW WILL OUR RECOMMENDATIONS BE RECEIVED AND HOW WILL THE BCGEU SUPPORT OUR EFFORTS FOR EQUITY AND JUSTICE?
- WHY HAS IT TAKEN SO LONG FOR THIS CONVERSATION TO BE AT THE FOREFRONT?
- WILL THIS BE OUR GLASS CEILING?
- WHO ARE WE ALLIES?

**UNDERSTANDING THE BARRIERS TO EQUITY**

THE LINE OF OPPORTUNITY

POWER } THE ABILITY TO DEFINE REALITY & CONVINCE OTHERS THAT IS TRUE

EQUITY ≠ DIVERSITY } EQUITY REQUIRES CHANGING STRUCTURES + SYSTEMS AT THE CORE

PRIVILEGE } WHEN SOMETHING IS NOT AT THE CORE OF YOUR IDENTITY, YOU ARE VERY LIKELY TO MISS IT.

A BROWN, JEWELRY, MARRIED, MOTHER, AND AGRICULTURIST EMPLOYED BY AN INTERNATIONAL GROUP HELD A POSITION WITH PRIVILEGE OF OTHERS.

**WHAT ARE THE STRUCTURES + INVISIBLE RULES, THAT BLOCK AND STIGMATIZE US AS WE NAVIGATE SYSTEMS?**

**BE AWARE OF THE GREY ZONE**

TO KEEP IN MIND: FLAG + BE MINDFUL OF HOW WE POLICE OURSELVES + OTHERS.

**PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION IN BCGEU LEADERSHIP**

- HONORARY PROFESSIONAL SERVICES, IN EXCLUSIVE ADVISORY WITHIN THE UNION.
- PROTECTED CLASS OF COLOR WITH REPRESENTATION FROM ALL REGIONS ON ALL LEADERSHIP LEVELS.
- Provide appropriate training + mentorship to all in leadership positions on L.A.C. + COMPENSATION EXEQUITIVE

**ENSURE EQUITY + SAFETY**

- MANDATORY EQUITY TRAINING FOR ALL BCGEU MEMBERS, ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES + STAFF.
- OTHER SUPPORT + FOLLOW UP WITH REPECTED UNION MEMBERS REQUESTS THE POLICE HEALTH SUPPORT WHEN NEEDED.

**CONTINUE THE DIALOGUE**

- HOST A SERIES OF TOWN HALLS 8 TIMES
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- PROVIDE RECOMMENDATIONS AND PREPARE ACTION ITEMS AND TIMELINE FOR ENGAGEMENT
- ALLOCATE \$20 PER MEMBER PER YEAR TOWARDS PLANNED EVENTS SPECIFIC TO MEMBERS OF COLOR OR PROFESSIONAL SERVICES
- HOST EVENTS: TOWN HALLS, ISSUES FOCUS BY REGION, BACKLASH SUPPORT, NETWORKING TOWARDS DAY.



**BIAS, PREJUDICE, AND RACISM**

BREAK THE SILENCE AND STAND UP TO INJUSTICE

**RACISM** ATTITUDES, BEHAVIORS, SOCIAL STRUCTURES

SYSTEM IN WHICH ONE RACE MAINTAINS SUPREMACY OVER ANOTHER RACE VIA INSTITUTIONAL POWER

**WE ALL HAVE BIAS. WHAT IS YOURS? HOW WILL YOU DISMANTLE IT?**

**MICROAGGRESSIONS**

EVERYDAY VERBAL, NON-VERBAL, AND ENVIRONMENTAL SLIGHTS, SNIBS, AND INSULTS, INTENTIONAL AND UNINTENTIONAL.

THEY BUILD UP AFFECTING MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH.

PERPETUATE STEREOTYPES AND DISCRIMINATION.

**FOR REAL CHANGE TO TAKE PLACE, OUR EXPERIENCES NEED TO BE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT.**

**LISTEN + BELIEVE**

TRUE SUPPORT + SAFETY: NO FEAR OF RETALIATION

**THERE'S HEALING IN COMMUNITY. WE ARE PLANTING SEEDS FOR THE FUTURE**



BCGEU Equity Roundtable: Workers of Colour (Day 2) | June 29, 2019

GRAPHIC RECORDING IN STUDIO | Drawing Change  
Adriana Contreras Correal

# Recommendations and priorities for the BCGEU

Participants spent the final afternoon of the roundtable identifying a common set of priorities and recommendations. They focused on strategies to ensure fairer representation of workers of colour at all levels of the union, as well measures to promote safety and equity for workers of colour. Crucially, the recommendations also address the need to continue building momentum around this effort through ongoing events and future opportunities for dialogue.

While the wording of convention resolution C-113 directed an action plan be developed to address inequities within communities and workplaces, the roundtable's recommendations centre almost exclusively on actions internal within the BCGEU; the reasons behind this shift in focus and priorities are not clear.

## 1. ACHIEVE PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION ACROSS BCGEU LEADERSHIP

- 1.1. Establish proportional seating in executive leadership that reflects and fairly represents the diversity of the union.
- 1.2. Create separate and dedicated caucuses of colour at all levels of leadership, incorporating representation from all regions.
- 1.3. Provide appropriate training and mentorship opportunities for workers of colour who wish to seek leadership positions on local and component executives.

## 2. ENSURE SAFETY AND EQUITY

- 2.1. Provide mandatory equity training for all BCGEU elected representatives and staff.
- 2.2. Offer support to affected union members when and where discriminatory and racist

incidents take place, including follow up work. Provide professional counselling and mental health support when needed.

## 3. CONTINUE THE DIALOGUE

- 3.1. Host a workers of colour roundtable three times annually in order to address ongoing issues faced by workers of colour. Each roundtable should provide the opportunity to make recommendations, propose action items, and establish timelines for projects.
- 3.2. Allocate \$0.20 per member annually toward planned events for workers of colour, or toward initiatives and projects aimed at addressing issues experienced by workers of colour.
- 3.3. Host regular events to raise the visibility of issues faced by workers of colour. Examples and possibilities include: a yearly caucus and/or retreat for workers of colour; Black History Month; Anti-racism day/week; Indigenous Peoples' day.

