

Labour and anti-hate activists must unite to confront white supremacy

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Contributors

Opinion

By Hassan YussuffContributors

Bernie M. Farber

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As civil society leaders, we have individually and together advanced workers' rights and inclusive communities. Despite the passage of years, we find ourselves once again facing down a familiar threat: white supremacy and far-right extremism.

In fact, we both happened to reconnect by phone on America's inauguration day – a victory of the American people against the very worst elements of xenophobia, bigotry and fascist tendencies. Yet, after seeing what transpired on Capitol Hill weeks before, and what we know about far-right activities here at home, we both agree there is much to fear and to resist.

As we approach the fourth anniversary of the Quebec mosque massacre, the first of its kind at a place of worship on Canadian soil, it is incumbent on workers and advocates in Canada to unite to counter the forces of hatred that seek to divide us and which are anathema to the values we cherish.

Historically, labour movements have played fundamental roles in organizing against racist forces. In the late 1980s until the early 2000s, we faced the rise of the white supremacist neo-Nazi group called the Heritage Front.

Back then, the labour movement provided anti-hate advocates with resources and space in which to rally against these dark forces. Under the leadership of the Toronto and York Region Labour Council, the movement offered help when it was most needed. Groups like the Canadian Jewish Congress, the Urban Alliance on Race Relations, and Anti-Racist Action, continued working with labour until the Heritage Front fell apart in 2005.

Today, we see a troubling resurgence in far-right activity. The speed and efficiency at which white supremacist groups can organize and propagandize on the internet far exceeds the methods of the past. Previously, far-right groups relied solely on pamphleteering, or telephone “hate lines,” to get vile messages out. It's a whole different space now; one the federal government is reportedly intending to better regulate – as it must.

Even while social media platforms pledge to do more to rid themselves of groups and individuals that promote harmful narratives that threaten the well-being of minority groups and the broader society, including public figures, these platforms have failed users at large. It is why many of us are anticipating strong federal legislation in the coming weeks. Those who spread poison online must be removed from these spaces and the platforms must be held responsible if they aren't. Nearly 80 per cent of Canadians support regulation, according to a poll released this week by the Canadian Race Relations Foundation.

The labour movement, in solidarity with groups like the Canadian Anti-Hate Network, is integral in the effort to educate people in Canada about the danger of white supremacy, nativism, and xenophobia, as well as to teach about the continuum such racism represents and its impacts on our daily lives. After all, history demonstrates that at times of economic downturn or to simply create a scapegoat for people's troubles, some political leaders will direct attention at the “other”; whether it is Jews, Muslims, Blacks, immigrants, refugees, persons with disabilities, Indigenous, or LGBTQ folks.

This is extremely dangerous and has been evident in our own recent past. The young man who shot and killed six men in Quebec City on Jan. 29, 2017, was reacting to the prime minister's pledge to welcome refugees turned away under former president Donald Trump's so-called Muslim ban. In Quebec, as in the rest of Canada, Islamophobia permeated public discourse even before Trump's election.



Today, COVID-19 is similarly being used as a cover for the promotion of hate against Asian-Canadians, racialized public figures and women, including Dr. Theresa Tam and Saskatchewan's Dr. Saqib Shahab, as well as to promote a variety of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. We must guard against these trends.



As the largest civil movement in the country, workers can mobilize in ways that others can only dream of. Through education and firm commitment, workers and advocates in Canada can serve as a powerful bulwark against those who fail to understand that our strength as a nation lies in our determination to stand up for one another. It is a role we must play once more.

Hassan Yussuff is the president of the Canadian Labour Congress. **Bernie M. Farber** is the Chair of the Canadian Anti-Hate Network.