



YES, IT MATTERS!

Working together to end systemic racism and create
a just Canada for all





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Unions in Canada have a proud history of standing up for justice and dignity. Since our unions were first formed, working people have sought a collective voice in the workplace and in society. We have found many ways to achieve better wages and working conditions and, most importantly, respect for what we do and who we are.

Union members reflect the incredible diversity of Canada, one of our country's greatest strengths. Our unions benefit tremendously from the wide range of personal experiences, views and histories our members bring.

Unfortunately, too many of our sisters and brothers face systemic racism, discrimination and prejudice at work, and in their every day lives. That is simply unacceptable. The Yes, It Matters! campaign – a joint project of the Toronto and York Region Labour Council and Labour Community Services – is intended to help us explore how we think about systemic racism and discrimination our sisters and brothers experience. It also provides you with a plan of engagement to affect positive change.

When we are all respected, valued and empowered, we are more engaged in our unions and communities, championing the issues that matter most. The task of shaping a common future – which falls on all of us – is central to the success and longevity of our unions.

We look forward to working with you to create a just Canada for all.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John Cartwright".

John Cartwright
President

Toronto and York Regional Labour Council

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Faduma Awow Mohamed".

Faduma Mohamed
Executive Director

Labour Community Services

HOW SYSTEMIC RACISM HURTS US ALL

Many people get very uneasy when the issue of racism and prejudice comes up; it's a complicated topic that often taps into complex feelings. **We all grew up with preconceived ideas of what makes people different.** Our families have come from every part of the globe, and bring that history, too. To make real progress in our quest to end all forms of racism and inequality, we need to first understand and agree with the basis of our shared reality.

Canadians have come to understand the terrible legacy of discrimination against Indigenous people. And, the vast majority of Canadians reject blatant racism today – verbal and physical assaults, hate crimes at places of worship, and the like. We nearly unanimously condemn these horrendous acts when they occur.

What makes systemic racism more difficult to combat is that it is much less obvious to those who do not experience it. Evidence shows that there is real inequality in the job market, in the criminal justice system, and in education systems across Canada. It is not about a few individuals being aggressive or hateful, it's about how institutions of power were formed and operate today.

Unfortunately, our members of colour, those from a religious minority or the LGBTQ community are most likely to experience systemic racism and prejudice, and it deeply undermines the equality within our unions and communities. Most often, it is systemic racism that our sisters and brothers rightfully push back on – **and union leaders need to do a better job at understanding the systemic barriers in place that have created these inequities.**

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For unions, the goal is not to divide people on the basis of identity, but to recognize that there is a real dynamic of systemic racism throughout our country's history that has shaped our society. Indeed, if we want to tackle these inequalities, we need to start by acknowledging that systemic racism exists and needs to be addressed.

CHALLENGING THE POLITICS OF DIVISION

Workers who are divided can never win full economic or social justice. As we know, unionization is weakest in places like the southern U.S. where black and white workers have been pitted against each other for centuries. It is no accident that the rise of right-wing populism, with its scapegoating of immigrants or refugees, **inevitably opens the door for anti-worker policies and weaker labour laws.** It is not an accident that some of the wealthiest businessmen in the world fund political crusades that fan hatred and division.

We cannot assume that every union member consciously rejects the intolerance that has gained so

much traction in recent years. Conservative politicians are determined to stir up a backlash against refugees for their own political gain, even though so many of our families first came to Canada seeking refuge. Showing how the politics of division sets the stage for anti-worker policies will be important in winning people to take up this challenge.

By doing the work now, we will truly stand united through upcoming election cycles and the continued assault on labour. That's why those who built our movement learned that we are only strong when we truly believe that "an injury to one is an injury to all".

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It is our job to not only believe in this tenet but to also, where necessary, make consistent and subsequent changes to the way we operate to ensure that we are uniting our members and working towards true equality.

OUR SHARED VALUES

The core belief of unions is in solidarity. We want every one of our members to feel they belong, to appreciate the gains that unions have made for working people, and to have a sense of our common purpose. **For all of us, fairness matters.** Winning union members to embrace those common values is one of the most important tasks we have. It is in that context that we address the challenge of tackling systemic racism and building stronger unions.

By working together, we can nurture inclusive workplaces and strengthen our shared commitment to our union's shared values of equality, respect, justice and dignity for all. And we can continue building the kind of Canada we and our children can be proud of.



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USING THE TOOLS WE HAVE

The labour movement has many tools it can utilize to engage members in understanding our role in the workplace and society. Stewards are essential to upholding the collective agreement and defending members' rights. Membership meetings provide the opportunity to discuss a wide variety of issues. Social media, websites and newsletters offer ideas and analysis of current events. Committees allow activists to focus on specific areas of interest. In-depth training provides new skills that enrich the union culture.

We can use all of these avenues to take the question of equality to every member, far beyond the activist core of our union. But to succeed, someone in leadership needs to champion the cause of equity and give it their personal support.

A PLAN OF ENGAGEMENT

Here is a basic outline of how you can undertake this work in your union.

- ✓ Recruit a well-respected leader in the organization to sponsor this effort.
- ✓ Ask the Executive to adopt the Charter of Inclusive Workplaces and Communities. Use this document as a background for discussion. Consider inviting someone from Labour Council to speak to the issue.
- ✓ Ask workers of colour to help guide this work, but don't leave it only up to them. All leaders have a responsibility to ensure the resources and support are in place for this effort to succeed.
- ✓ Create an internal working team, perhaps drawing from your union human rights or equity committee, to help reach out broadly to the membership using the Charter and clear language material on equity.
- ✓ Take the Charter to a membership meeting for endorsement. Decide what material is best to provide for that discussion
- ✓ Post the Charter in the union office and on the website
- ✓ Include it in your next newsletter
- ✓ Take time in the next Stewards meeting to discuss the principles of solidarity involved in the Charter, and why addressing systemic discrimination is a core function of every steward. Ask each of them to take it back to their workspaces and discuss it with members.
- ✓ Recruit active members to take human rights courses offered by your union
- ✓ Find opportunities to celebrate and honour the diversity of your membership
- ✓ Ask the union Executive to consider using the "Leaders Guide to Strengthen Unions – Moving Beyond Diversity...Towards Inclusion and Equity" to plan deeper equity work for your union.



CHARTER OF INCLUSIVE WORKPLACES & COMMUNITIES

Discrimination in all its forms threatens our country's rich social fabric, including the workplaces of union members and the communities in which we live. Dividing people because of race, religion, ancestry or any other difference that undermines human rights serves only to weaken our unions and our society.

We commit to standing up for the rights and dignity of everyone in order to promote inclusive, just and respectful workplaces and communities.

THAT IS WHY WE AFFIRM THAT:

- Islamophobia, anti-Black racism and all other forms of racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and bigotry have no place in our workplaces or communities.
- Discrimination and acts of hate against union members and others in our communities marginalizes individuals and groups and excludes them from participating fully in our union, workplaces and their communities.
- The dignity of every member is essential to a healthy and vibrant union and workplace.
- As a labour movement, we will work with all levels of government, Indigenous peoples, civil society and communities to develop policies, programs and initiatives to reduce and eliminate racism, hate and bigotry in all its forms.
- By working together, we can nurture inclusive workplaces and strengthen our shared commitment to our union's shared values of equality, respect, justice, and dignity for all.