



After #MeToo: Labour's Role in Addressing Gender-based Violence

This year the labour movement's commemoration of the National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women on December 6th finds us amidst an outpouring of revelations from survivors who have experienced harassment, sexual assault and abuse inside and outside of the workplace. #MeToo is a response to the statement that if all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote 'Me too' on Facebook and Twitter, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem. With countless survivors coming forward, filing criminal lawsuits, and demanding action to end gender violence, harassment, sexual assault and the rape culture that enables it, the problem can no longer be ignored.

The labour movement – and the women in it – has often been a leader in working toward programs and legislation to address gender-based violence across society and in our workplaces. Responding to the École Polytechnique massacre, the Canadian Auto Workers negotiated Women's Advocate Programs. OPSEU and other unions fought for Bill 168, which was enacted in 2009 to require training and other measures on workplace violence and harassment.

Since the introduction of Bill 132 in 2016 that strengthened Ontario's sexual violence and harassment law, situations have improved in many of our unionized workplaces. Our employers are now compelled to investigate complaints and incidents of workplace harassment and are responsible for maintaining a harassment-free workplace. Labour fought hard to ensure Bill 148 included paid and unpaid leave for workers experiencing domestic or sexual violence, and we celebrate its passage. Now we need to expand this work to find solutions that will address the gender-based abuse that is happening in our communities, in our homes and sometimes in the labour movement itself.

For women not in unions, and for those in precarious workplaces whether unionized or not, for indigenous, immigrant, migrant and racialized, queer women, trans and gender diverse people and some men, gender-based violence has a disproportionate impact. Many survivors don't report incidents, based on the injustice of the justice system and the physical, economic and mental costs of having to testify. Solutions need to address these experiences.

The labour movement is not above the systemic oppression that defines our current political and economic system. We have our own history of ignoring bad behavior, including the challenging working conditions women in the trades face in their workplaces. Let's commit ourselves to solving these problems at the same time.

These solutions must acknowledge that people are socialized by our patriarchal society. Some people may not realize how their background can lead them to maintain the unequal power imbalance that exists in all structures and institutions in our society.

The impact of the #MeToo response is that survivors are emboldened to share their own experiences. However, it cannot be left up to survivors to 'solve' the problem of gender-based

violence. The individual examples must be addressed with systemic solutions that help fight oppression and build a 'culture of consent' – a move from victim-blaming to survivor-believing. Whether inside or outside of the workplace, survivors of sexual harassment, sexual assault and gender-based violence need to know that they will be believed and supported in order to feel comfortable and safe turning to their local union for support. To accomplish this, workers need to know how to recognize signs of gender-based violence, how to be active allies rather than bystanders, how to deal with reports with empathy, beginning with the premise that 'we believe survivors.' In doing so, labour unions would become resources for their whole community. The current situation calls for acknowledgement of the problem by the labour movement and the development of an action plan that will begin immediately.

The Women's Committee and the Executive Board recommends that Toronto and York Region Labour Council:

- Convene a roundtable with the heads of unions on harassment, sexual harassment, sexual assault and gender based violence in and outside of the workplace, to establish an action plan to address these issues
- Work with affiliates to develop an education that would include modules on how to be an active ally
- Work with affiliates to develop and share bargaining language and research that will push employers to take action
- Stand in solidarity with survivors by adopting the statement: "we believe survivors"
- Provide resources to Labour Council's Women's Committee to convene ongoing 'Roundtable' events for women, trans and gender-diverse workers every year including those to develop actions and recommendations regarding harassment, sexual harassment, sexual assault and gender-based violence and to include articles and resources on this subject in future Labour Council communications
- Call on the provincial and municipal governments to enhance policies and enforcement on gender-based violence and harassment, including making the creation of Gender Equality Offices a priority

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