

Issue Sheet 3

Unions: *Working Towards Women-Friendly Workplaces*

Research clearly shows that there is an advantage to working in a unionized environment. Women have unique needs that must be addressed. Both men and women want the same wage advantages, non-wage working benefits, job security, and better employment arrangements that unionized employment offers, however, unionized workplaces continue to push for equality measures in the workplace that address the needs of working women.

In fact, through the decades, unions have made impressive progress for Canadian women workers creating workplaces that are more welcoming to women. The following examples are ways that unions in Ontario are creating women-friendly workplaces:

❖ Child and Elder Care:

Child care in Ontario continues to be an issue due to the government's chronic under-funding. Under-funding results in thousands of women and their families with few options for their own employment or their children's care. Unions bargain, and often win, paid leaves for care of either children or elders, child care subsidies to help pay for child care, and workplace child care centres. Unions in Canada lead the fight for more public child care funding, for higher standards to define high quality child care, and for higher wages for child care workers.

The labour movement recognizes elder care as a vital and necessary responsibility while many employers do not. Unions fight for legislation and bargaining to provide paid leave when issues arise such as family emergencies. Unions continue to work together to bring child and elder care to the top of the political agenda.

❖ Maternity and Parental Leave Top-Up:

Thirty years ago, parental leave for most workers did not exist. Unions fought for - and won - this basic right. Today, the government of Ontario has guidelines regarding maternity and parental leave and benefits. As a new mother, you are only legally entitled to 55% of your earnings for a maximum of 50 weeks under the Employment Insurance Act (EI). While this financial benefit is helpful, receiving only half of your usual earnings can create considerable financial strain and pressure. Unionized employees have fought for maternity and parental top-up benefits that range from a small percentage above the standard 55% for several weeks, to 97% top-up for the full 50 weeks of leave. While each union individually negotiates the percentage of top-up that their members receive, the end result is better maternity and parental benefits for unionized employees.

Did You Know?

1,325,400 children under 12 years in Ontario have mothers in the paid work-force; however, there are only regulated child care spaces for 12% of them... Where are the other 88% of these children of working women?

❖ Job Sharing:

Job sharing is a work arrangement where two or more employees voluntarily share or split one full time position. Jobs can be shared by dividing a shift, or a work week into separate sections. Unionized employees are more likely to have a job sharing arrangement (15% versus 6%). Because women still hold the bulk of family responsibility, a job sharing provision is attractive for working women. Job sharing allows women an opportunity to better balance work and family.

❖ Flexi-Time:

Flexi-time allows employees to work a variable work schedule. Under flexitime, there is typically a core period of the day when employees are expected to be at work (for example, between 10 am and 2pm), while the rest of the working day is "flexi-time", in which employees can choose when they work. These benefits are subject to achieving total daily, weekly or monthly hours in the region of what the employer expects, and subject to the necessary work being done. There are generally two arrangements in which flexitime takes shape: compressed work time and staggered working hours. *Compressed work time* is a work arrangement where an employee works extra hours on a regularly scheduled work day so that the weekly or bi-weekly schedule is completed in fewer days. *Staggered work hours* is a work arrangement where an employee, regularly arrives and leaves at times other than the working hours. Flexi-time is crucial to making a workplace welcoming for women as it allows more flexibility for women to balance her family and her career.

Did You Know?

You have the right to refuse work that you believe is dangerous to your health and safety or to another's health and safety. To refuse unsafe work, call the Ministry of Labour:
416-235-5330

❖ Anti-Discrimination and Anti-Harassment Policies:

Unions were in the forefront of the struggles for human and civil rights which resulted in the forming of the *Canadian Human Rights Act*. Today, this legislation clearly prohibits an employer from discrimination or harassment based on age, sex, race, family status, gender, religious affiliation, disability, or sexual orientation. Unfortunately, even with these strict policies, discrimination and harassment continue to take place in the workplace. Unions continue to fight for human rights, conduct conferences and workshops aimed at eliminating discrimination, bargain clear processes to address harassment in the workplace, and create committees to specifically address the unique needs of disabled and racialized members.

❖ Education and Training

Unions commonly bargain education and training provisions to help workers deal with technological changes and improvements and organizational change. These provisions could include paid time off the job for education or literacy & second language training, skills upgrading, or other provisions for on-the-job training. The labour movement promotes training which gives workers formal, portable qualifications, as opposed to training which is very narrowly geared to the needs of a single workplace. These opportunities allow for women to continue their education, enhance their qualifications and skills, and become more confident. Internally, unions work to create women-friendly workplace education by hosting women's conferences, leadership seminars & workshops specifically targeted towards women, racialized members, and other equity seeking groups.

❖ Pay Equity:

Pay equity means paying women equal wages for work of equal value. In the 1950's, unions and women's groups fought for, and won equal pay for equal work. Although this was a step-forward, work where women predominated continued to be under-valued and under-paid. Subsequently, in the 1970's, these same groups built coalitions that have succeeded in creating equal pay for work of equal value legislation. Today, the *Canadian Human Rights Act* and the *Ontario Pay Equity Act* identifies unequal pay for work of equal value as discrimination against women and workers in female-dominated jobs. Unions continue to fight to close the wage gap between women and men, for stronger pay equity legislation, and have made important gains for pay equity through bargaining in the workplace.

Did You Know?

An Ontario woman only earns 70.5 cents for every dollar that her male counter-part earns. However, unionized women continue to shrink the wage gap and earn 93 cents for every dollar a man makes. Equal and fair? Certainly not! For this reason, unions continue to push forward and fight for fair wages for all women!

For any questions or information concerning unions in Ontario, please contact:

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