

**12TH OFL BIENNIAL CONVENTION
NOVEMBER 25-29, 2013
TORONTO, ON**

OFL CONVENTION REPORT

YOUNG WORKERS

**RISING
TOGETHER**



ONTARIO FEDERATION OF LABOUR



**Convention Report: Young Workers
November 25, 2013 • Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL)**

The Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) represents 54 unions and one million workers.
It is Canada's largest provincial labour federation.

15 Gervais Drive, Suite 202, Toronto, Ontario M3C 1Y8
416-441-2731 • 1-800-668-9138 • info@ofl.ca
TDD: 416-443-6305 • FAX: 416-441-1893

www.OFL.ca  [OFLabour](https://www.facebook.com/OFLabour)  [@SidRyan_OFL](https://twitter.com/SidRyan_OFL) [@OFLabour](https://www.facebook.com/OFLabour)

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1.

YOUNG WORKERS ON THE RISE: AN OVERVIEW

Today's youth are among the most negatively impacted by austerity and therefore must be called upon to help lead the way forward.

Branding their re-engineering of the social safety net as “austerity,” baby boomer politicians at every level are championing a stunning double standard that plots to pull up the ladder in healthcare, post-secondary education, Employment Insurance and Old Age Security, just after their generation has taken full advantage of each. These social program cuts will have the most significant impact on the next generation – today’s diverse students and young workers – and threaten to undermine the advancement of young people, especially those from equity-seeking groups.

Today’s youth find themselves at the forefront of the struggle for a just economy and good jobs for all. In many ways, they are among the most negatively impacted by austerity and therefore must be called upon to help lead the way forward.

The economic climate and austerity cuts have slowed down employment growth and eroded job creation, including summer jobs programs that provide money and experience to young workers. At the bargaining table, two-tier wages and benefits and the full-scale replacement of defined-benefit pension plans with defined-contribution schemes are some of the most significant ways in which today’s decisions are most adversely affecting tomorrow’s workers.

The OFL’s Workers Under 30 Committee has responded to this demand by broadening participation in the committee, putting young workers’ issues on the radar of the media and making equity a central concern. The goal of the committee is to bring attention to the intersection of equity and youth as it gives voice to those who have the most to lose (or gain) from Ontario’s economic future.

2.

FIGHTING FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

PULLING UP THE LADDER: YOUTH AGAINST AUSTERITY

The 2011 OFL Convention focused on defending the future of work for the next generation. The OFL Workers Under 30 Committee responded by highlighting the generational warfare being waged by today's politicians and business leaders against future workers. Two-tier wages, defined contribution pensions, high tuition fees and ballooning student debt were among a few of the focuses of a comprehensive report called "Pulling Up The Ladder: Austerity's Impact on the Next Generation," published by the OFL in November 2012. The report pulled together data and statistics into accessible charts, info-graphics and short summaries of various issues facing today's youth and young workers. The document serves as an educational guide, a research digest and a lobbying aid for young workers seeking to advocate on a variety of issues. Most significantly, the report puts a particular focus on challenges facing youth from equity-seeking backgrounds. Read the full report at: <http://ofl.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012.11.09-Report-PullingUptheLadder-Web.pdf>

ENOUGH WITH UN(DER)EMPLOYMENT

In the spring of 2013, the OFL Workers Under 30 Committee identified record youth unemployment and underemployment levels as the focus of a media campaign and a priority for action. The OFL approached the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) to produce a comprehensive research paper on the issue of youth un(der)employment, for public release during a youth forum on the same topic. The OFL then partnered with the CCPA, Canadian Federation of Students (CFS), Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), Unifor, United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) and Workers United Canada to host a Youth Forum called "Enough with Un(der)employment!" on September 27, 2013.

The CCPA report, "The Young and the Jobless: Youth Unemployment in Ontario," was publicly released the morning of the Forum and made national headlines. Written by Sean Geobey, a University of Waterloo doctoral candidate and a McConnell Fellow with the Waterloo Institute for Social Innovation and Resilience, the report found that Ontario's unemployment rate among those aged 15 to 24 is among the worst in the country and on par with rust belt states like Michigan, Indiana, Minnesota, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. With Ontario's youth unemployment pushing 17 percent, only Illinois at 18.5 percent and New York at 18 percent fared worse. Read the full report at: <http://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/young-and-jobless>

However, even these bleak employment figures don't capture the full extent of the problem. Not only are youth having difficulty finding work, but those who do are often forced to work multiple part-time jobs and are stuck in jobs for which they are over-qualified. According to a 2012 Community Foundations of Canada report, one in three post-secondary graduates aged 25 to 29 moved into low-skilled jobs after graduation. In short, today's youth are more educated and more qualified than ever before, but their talents are being squandered and the impact is being felt socially and economically.

After the successful launch of the CCPA paper, the Youth Forum on Un(der)employment generated a second day of front page media coverage and together, both events earned a sympathetic editorial in the Toronto Star calling for government action to address the crisis of youth unemployment. The extensive media coverage sparked a reaction from all three parties, as the question of youth jobs dominated Question Period at Queen's Park. Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne responded by saying: "It is necessary for us to engage the private sector on solving this issue" to "give young people an opportunity to take part in businesses, in work environments that they wouldn't necessarily consider." Both opposition parties pounced on the governing Liberals for failing to create jobs for young workers. The OFL and its partners are working to keep the media and politicians focused on solving this youth jobs crisis.

THE STRUGGLE FOR AN EQUITABLE FUTURE

The OFL's Workers Under 30 Committee has begun actively partnering with the OFL equity committees to challenge the intersection of youth and equity. This collaboration gained new strength in March 2012, when the Workers Under 30 Committee was invited to participate in the OFL Equity Retreat. The Committee opened up participation to all young workers and was able to attract 20 participants to the Retreat. However, one of the criticisms flowing from the weekend was that young workers who were members of equity-seeking groups were forced to choose between which committee to attend. As a result, the Workers Under 30 meetings did not benefit from the full diversity of the youth delegates in attendance. This issue was rectified at the OFL Equity Conference, held in November of that same year. At the Equity Conference, participants attended different morning sessions than afternoon sessions and were, therefore, able to contribute more broadly to discussions about the intersectionality of inequality.

At the Equity Conference, young worker participation was broad and diverse and the Workers Under 30 Committee released its report on austerity, which focused on the differential impact of austerity on marginalized youth.

PROVIDING OPPORTUNITY

For 29 years, the OFL has awarded two scholarships for post-secondary studies, worth \$2,000 each, in honour of retired or deceased trade union activists who have contributed to the labour movement in Ontario. These scholarships are awarded for the best essays submitted by members or the children of members of the OFL who are heading off for the first year of full-time study at a college or university in Ontario.

Over the past two years, the OFL has attracted growing numbers of applicants and this year a record number of submissions were received. The Workers Under 30 Committee made equity a central focus of the awards by encouraging equity-seeking nominees for the Labour Honour Roll and equity-seeking applicants for the Labour Post-Secondary Education Scholarships. The essay question for the 2013 scholarship also required applicants to reflect on their own experiences of equity and underscore the importance of equity-based work for the labour movement.

3.

REPRESENTING YOUNG WORKERS

RESTRUCTURING THE COMMITTEE

Participation in the OFL's Workers Under 30 Committee has traditionally been limited – both during and between conventions. There are many structural obstacles within the economy that conspire against union protection for young workers that are compounded by barriers against participation within their own unions. The result is a perennial deficit of young worker activism within the labour movement. However, there is increasing evidence of growing youth activism within broader society. From the student movement to environmental activism, from Idle No More to Occupy, young activists have been making headlines for their militancy, their optimism and their commitment to equity.

As a growing number of affiliates make a concerted effort to create space for young workers in the labour movement, the structures for representing young workers have become more divergent between unions and locals. As a result, the OFL's Workers Under 30 Committee has found itself out of step with some affiliates and is taking steps to bridge the divide.

WHAT'S IN A NAME? THE OFL YOUNG WORKERS' COMMITTEE

The OFL Workers' Under 30 Committee and the OFL Executive Board are proud to support a convention resolution to change the name of the Committee to the "OFL Young Workers' Committee." This will bring the Committee's name into line with the majority of affiliates. In light of the different age criteria used by various affiliates for their own Young Workers' Committees, the convention resolution also proposes to open up membership in the OFL's Young Workers' Committee to any member who meets the definition of "young worker" used by their affiliate. This will enshrine the self-determination of affiliates, recognize the different criteria used by each, and ensure that full participation and reporting is always possible between affiliates and the OFL.

In addition, over the past two years the Committee has doubled its membership email list and boosted meeting attendance by opening up meeting and event participation to any interested young worker, rather than limiting it to formally appointed committee members. This has proven successful in getting new activists involved and bringing in diverse perspectives. However, greater commitment is still required from affiliates to ensure that an active young worker is appointed to this Committee, attends meetings regularly and reports back on the activities of the OFL.

EMPOWERING YOUNG WORKERS AT CONVENTION

The OFL Workers Under 30 Committee has responded to a call for stronger mentorship within the labour movement by organizing a Young Workers' Assembly immediately preceding the 2013 OFL Convention. Similar pre-convention sessions have been successfully hosted by the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), the BC Federation of Labour and various other federations and affiliates.

This informative and instructive session was open to all young workers and allies and included a full day of educational sessions and discussions, followed by a morning of training for the convention ahead. The Assembly provided an opportunity for participants to get to know other young workers in Ontario's labour movement, discuss relevant issues, share strategies and learn about convention protocols, policies and practices in order to effectively participate and represent their members at the OFL Convention.

This kind of young worker organizing is vital to empower and develop an active and engaged union membership that is capable of taking on leadership positions and helping the labour movement chart a brighter future for workers in Ontario.

A COMMITTEE HARD AT WORK

In August 2013, Amanda Atwell (UFCW) submitted her resignation as the OFL Vice-President Representing Young Workers and the alternate, Matt Dumas (COPE), was appointed to the OFL Executive Board on September 17, 2013.

At the time of publication, the membership of the OFL Workers Under 30 Committee is as follows:

- Erin Harrison (CLC)
- Amy Huziak (CLC)
- Jessica Budway (CUPE)
- Denise Martins (CUPE)
- Kate Walsh (IBEW)
- Mark Cairns (ONDY)
- Jennifer Ojalammi (OSSTF)
- Christo Aivalis (PSAC)
- André Poliquin (PSAC)
- Joel Thelosen (UFCW)
- Angelo DiCaro (Unifor)
- Amarjeet Chhabra (UNITE HERE)

OFL Officer & Executive Board Members:

- Irwin Nanda, OFL Executive Vice-President
- Matt Dumas (COPE), OFL Young Worker Vice-President

OFL Staff:

- Joel Duff, OFL Director of Communications
- Brynne Sinclair-Waters, OFL Researcher

The Committee would like to thank all those who participated since the last convention.

4.

YOUNG WORKERS RISING: A CALL TO ACTION

Young workers in Ontario are facing steep challenges. For the first time, today's generation is likely to become the first to inherit a lower quality of life than their parents. This is largely because young people are entering a tough labour market characterized by increasingly precarious and low-paid work.

Today's youth are more than twice as likely to be unemployed and make up 60 percent of the province's minimum wage earners. Of those fortunate enough to find employment, multiple part-time jobs are the new reality and very few have benefits, job security or adequate training. This growing problem of underemployment is being compounded by a workforce that demands post-secondary education but fails to reward it – a trend which carries a hefty price tag as Ontario leads Canada in high tuition fees and student debt increases.

However, young people appear more motivated than ever to tackle the challenges of our economy, society and the environment. Inspiring movements for social change – from Occupy to the Québec student strike, from Idle No More to the anti-pipe line campaigns – have been driven by young activists. The OFL's newly minted "Young Workers' Committee" is committed to building a broad alliance between students, youth and the labour movement in order to rise together to shape the future of work around the principles of fairness, full employment, good jobs and retirement security.

