

For Equality Against Poverty  
Linking the Struggle for Equality to the Fight Against Poverty

Equality Leadership School  
Report on the June 2003 Sessions

Equality Leadership School Report  
Sam Jake's Inn Merrickville, Ontario June 22-25, 2003

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**Valuing our Diversity**

THE STRUGGLE for equality and justice is an important objective for the National Union and its Components. It represents our future and has been an important part of our past.

We have a proud history of fighting racism, intolerance and homophobia, promoting justice and self-determination for Aboriginal communities in Canada and advancing disability rights. We view this as an integral part of the work of the National Union.

We must further develop the capacity to organize in diversity and constantly embrace our differences rather than let them divide us. We must continuously reinforce to our membership that diversity gives us strength, energy, skills and new ideas.

We need to educate our members about equality and human rights. We need to create a greater awareness of the systemic barriers and discrimination facing our diverse members. We must engage our membership in mind, heart and spirit so that we can achieve social justice. Our equity-seeking members must feel confidence in their Union as a vehicle for positive and progressive change. We need to make them aware of the Union as a driving force to achieve full participation and equality.

## **The Struggle for Economic Equality**

*The world holds enough to satisfy everyone's need, but not everyone's greed.*

*Mahatma Gandhi*

IN THESE FEW words Gandhi identified the main cause of most of the world's social and economic problems - and also pointed to their obvious solution. Poverty, hunger, homelessness, illiteracy and most of the other ills that harm humankind have the same root cause: the inequitable distribution of wealth and resources. There are few places on this planet where we see this ring so true than in a country as rich as Canada.

There are huge inequalities in income, employment, education and rates of poverty among equality-seeking groups in Canada. Aboriginal persons living off reserve comprise less than 1% of the Canadian population but make up over 13% of the 1.5 million persons who live below the low-income cutoff - this translates into two-thirds of off reserve Aboriginals in Canada living in poverty. The depth of poverty is also greater for people with disabilities; 17% of the adult population are adults with disabilities of which more than 25% are below the low-income cutoffs. Immigrant visible minorities form about 6% of the Canadian population, yet nearly 17% of immigrant visible minorities lived below the low-income cutoff. This compares to 6% of the total Canadian population that lives in poverty.

Poverty amongst equality-seeking communities in Canada and the resulting social exclusion they experience is a national disgrace.

## **Making the Link**

THE NATIONAL UNION is committed to work with our diverse membership to achieve equality and full participation for all our members within the National Union, the broader labour movement and all aspects of society. An important part of this objective for the National Union and our membership is to be able to make the link between our struggle for social justice and the struggle for economic equality.

Linking our struggle for equality to the fight against poverty was the primary focus of the National Union's Equality Leadership School held in Merrickville, Ontario in June, 2003. The school was attended by a number of leadership activists and staff from the National Union and its Components from across the country. These activists play a lead role in advocating for equality rights within our Union and work within broader social justice movements in their communities.

The program for the school was designed to assist participants in creating a greater awareness of the economic barriers faced by Canadians from equality-seeking communities and how these barriers link to our overall struggle to achieve social justice and equality. The school consisted of several sessions led by a combination of national spokespersons for equality-seeking communities and leading social policy experts in Canada.

## **Equality Fact Sheets**

Attached to this report is a series of National Union Equality Fact Sheets which summarizes those sessions. We encourage activists to read the Fact Sheets and give them wide distribution within your membership. These fact sheets will soon be posted on the National Union's web site ([www.nupge.ca](http://www.nupge.ca)) under a new section entitled "Equality Rights."

Under the "Equality Rights" section on our web site you will also find a number of National Union publications on equality, human rights, globalization and international solidarity.

## **Equality Education Modules**

To assist us in our equality and human rights work the National Union established an Equality Committee on Human Rights and International Solidarity (ECHRIS) in 2000. One of the mandates of ECHRIS is to advise our National Executive Board in the development of educational and organizing material which encourage a greater appreciation and value of our diversity while facilitating a better understanding of the oppression and discrimination faced by equity-seeking groups.

To help accomplish this objective ECHRIS has developed a series of six equality educational modules designed to be incorporated into Components' educational programs. These modules have been structured in a flexible manner so that they can be delivered in a variety of formats ranging from short educationals at Local meetings to a three-day equality education school.

These modules were unveiled to the participants attending the school and ECHRIS members provided a brief overview of the objectives, content and format of this educational package.

A brief overview of each of the modules entitled "The National Union's Series of Equality Education Modules" is attached to this report. This overview will also be included on the "Equality Rights" section of the National Union's web site - [www.nupge.ca](http://www.nupge.ca).

For copies of any of the six modules, or to find out when they are offered as a part of your Component's education program, please contact your Component's education department.

## **Moving the Equality Agenda Forward in our Movement**

THE SCHOOL also included a group discussion on "Moving the Equality Agenda Forward in our Movement." led by National Union's Derek Fudge. All participants gave their perspective on how we move our collective equality agenda ahead within the labour movement.

As a starting point the participants acknowledged the fact that Components of the National Union have implemented many positive initiatives to raise awareness about equality issues; have implemented anti-harassment policies; negotiated no-discrimination clauses in collective agreements; and organized conferences on equality issues. But overall, the participants felt that we still need to encourage and facilitate greater union activism from members of equity-seeking groups.

Brother Fudge noted that one of the barriers to advancing equality and human rights issues within the Union is to have this work treated as "separate" issues instead of being integrated into every single aspect of the Union's work. He noted that the work of advancing equality for equity-seeking groups should form a part of all activities and events of the union.

It was also noted that an important component to advance equality issues is education. As stated by several participants, the way to achieve greater equality is through "education, integration and public awareness."

Brother Fudge suggested a framework to help focus the discussion that centered on four key areas to advance equality and human rights Issues:

- the workplace
- the union
- organizing
- outreach to broader communities of equity-seeking groups.

## **The Workplace**

IT WAS NOTED that there is an obvious correlation between the number of equity-seeking activists in our Union and the number of equity-seeking workers in the workplaces represented by our Components.

A discussion centered on where the "good jobs" (decent paying) and "bad jobs" (low paid) are within the public sector. Participants agreed that the direct government sector is where most of the "good jobs" are; this sector has become increasingly less accessible to members of equity-seeking groups. On the other hand, the sectors of the workforce that show some promise for equity-seeking groups are the broader public sector and the private service sector, where there is a greater concentration of "bad jobs."

The workforce of the direct government sector has been shrinking in the last two decades. This is the result of restructuring, downsizing, privatization and devolution. These changes have created a smaller workforce that's made up mostly of older and "white" workers.

In every single province, the government has implemented some form of employment equity program. Generally these programs have been a complete failure, simply because the hiring of new employees has not been happening.

However, the "bulge" of older workers within the direct government sector should soon make for greater employment opportunities for members of equity-seeking groups. With this in mind, it was agreed that Components should refocus their energies on promoting and negotiating pro-active employment equity programs within the government sector.

The broader public and the private service sectors lead in employment growth, but most of the new jobs created have been seen as "bad jobs" - low paid, few benefits and contingent employment. The biggest growth has been in retail, financial services, the hospitality industry, home care and NGOs; it is precisely these that have the largest concentration of members from equity-seeking groups. National Union Components have done well in organizing workers in these areas. In fact, a very large proportion of the over 1,000 new certifications of our Components in the last 15 years has been in these areas.

Besides organizing in these sectors, a great deal of our Components' work has been trying to bring up the "value" of the work of our members through collective bargaining. The greater economic security we can achieve for our members, the greater the chances they have of achieving equality.

The key point to keep in mind when we talk about these sectors is this is where we will likely find most of our members from equity-seeking groups. With this in mind, participants felt the National Union and its Components need to:

- continue to organize in these sectors;
- continue to use the collective bargaining process as a way of advancing equality in these sectors; and
- develop and implement proactive measures to ensure that members from equity-seeking groups within these employment sectors have greater opportunities to take on activist and leadership roles in their unions.

Participants also considered the impact of immigration and other demographics on the workforce. It was noted that Canada expects to have 350,000 immigrants coming into the country each year. Another significant factor is that the Aboriginal community accounts for a large segment of current population growth in the under 15 age group and the 15 to 24 age group.

It is obvious that the face of the Canadian workforce will dramatically change in the next two decades because of an aging workforce, a lower birthrate, a large segment of the young population being aboriginal and with annual immigration rate continuing to be around 350,000. This is all the more reason we should embrace diversity within our membership.

## **The Union**

PARTICIPANTS DISCUSSED a number of barriers faced by members from equity-seeking groups. The greatest barriers are union structures (political, bargaining and administrative) where there needs to be more work done to accommodate members from equity-seeking groups.

But besides the systemic barriers, it was noted that many equity-seeking members do not readily identify with the union. The participants agreed that it is basic human nature for individuals to come together and feel most comfortable with groups with whom they have the most in common.

It's fair to surmise that visible minorities will usually associate themselves first with their own ethnic community before identifying with the union; an Aboriginal will first seek guidance from the traditions and culture of his/her native band before seeking help from the union.

It's also likely that a person with a disability, a gay, lesbian or bisexual who experiences discrimination and/or harassment will first seek support and comfort from their own community support network before seeking out their union as a defender of their rights.

It was also noted that new immigrants and their families, for example, face so many struggles in their first several years in Canada that they just can't find the time for

involvement in their union.

It was suggested that we need to add to our Union's equality education program a component aimed at new members from each of the equity-seeking groups which would:

- inform them of the union's goals and values and the types of services the union provides;
- show them how the union can be a vehicle to assist them in obtaining full participation, integration and equality;
- teach them about the various structures of the union; and
- encourage them to become activists in the union.

It was suggested that Components consider implementing a "buddy system" where an activist is identified to provide support and guidance to a new member from an equity-seeking group.

Another issue discussed was the difficulty members from equity-seeking groups have in getting their issues to the bargaining table and not having them dropped early on in the negotiation process. Examples of bargaining issues for each equity-seeking group that the participants noted were:

- Visible Minorities  
Observance of religious holidays and elder care leave for immigrant families;
- Aboriginal  
Access to alternative counseling services such as healing lodges;
- Persons with Disabilities  
Ergonomics, job redesign and duty to accommodate;
- Gays, Lesbians & Bisexuals  
Same-sex benefits, pensions and family leave.

It was noted that these issues are brought forward as bargaining demands, but are often dropped off the table during the negotiation process. It was suggested that our Components need to create increased awareness among the full membership of the bargaining demands specific to members from equity-seeking groups - and that these demands be given a more favourable chance of remaining on the table and ultimately included in the new collective agreements.

As a final point in the discussion on how we advance our equality work internally within the union, participants felt that it was critical for the National Union and its Components to continuously reinforce amongst our members that the diversity of our membership gives the Union strength. We constantly need to embrace our differences rather than let them divide us. Wherever and whenever possible the National Union and its Components must promote the theme that "diversity gives us strength - solidarity, energy, skills and new ideas".

## **Organizing**

It was noted that a large part of the unorganized workforce, especially in the more populated provinces, is made up of a large proportion of members from equity-seeking groups, especially from visible minority communities.

To organize effectively in a workplace employing many visible minorities, Components have to pay special attention to the ethnic communities to which workers belong. Building on existing ties within each ethnic group, such as common birthplaces and neighbourhoods, can help establish a base for a union and maintain solidarity as well as security against employer infiltration.

Participants felt that when organizing workplaces with a large percentage of visible minority workers, it is critical that components have representatives on their organizing committee from each ethnic group. In fact, such an organizing campaign can provide visible minority activists with a great training opportunity for building their union skills. The experience should benefit them in their quest to seek elected office or a staff position within the Union.

Information in the form of leaflets, pamphlets and letters should be translated into the most widely used languages of the workplace. The content of material should also speak to their issues and their culture.

## **Outreach to broader communities**

The final area of discussion focused on the need for components to outreach with broader communities to which equity-seeking groups associate themselves. The National Union and its Components must continuously work at connecting with all equity-seeking communities.

It was noted that we must constantly explore ways in which we can bring equity-seeking communities and their issues into our Union. Those communities have a lot to offer us in terms of education and understanding about equality issues. In many instances they can do more to raise awareness amongst our membership than our own internal structures can.

At the same time we have to raise awareness within equity-seeking communities about our Union and the important role we have and continue to play in advancing equality rights. We need to speak out and publicly support equity-seeking communities in their equality struggles.

Components of the National Union should consider every opportunity to show our support - such as sponsorship of events of equity-seeking communities or taking out advertisements in their community/organization newsletters. The greater awareness and understanding a particular community has of our Union, the more receptive their members will be when we come to them for support or to join as union members.