

Nathan Lawley

CUPE 1169 Rh'ena Oake Scholarship Essay Submission

May 28, 2020

What Unions Mean to Me

When I first began attending University, I had been working at Calgary Public Library for five years. I was hired as a Student Page in grade 10, and as a Shelver when I graduated high school and turned 18. I had only ever worked at the Calgary Public Library, and I had apparently taken for granted the Union I had been a member of. When seeking out scholarships and finding that my Local had one available, I was faced with the question of “what Unions mean to me” and I was lost. How could I describe the importance of something I had not needed to utilize, something I had barely registered as important?

In my second year of University, when I began working part-time to supplement my Library position, I started to notice just how vital a Union can be for workers. Issues at my other job were mounting, and there was either no avenue to provide feedback when things went wrong or the feedback given was met with an uninterested ear and resulted in no changes being made. It was clear that the employees needed the job more than the employer needed us. We were replaceable, so our input fell on mostly ignorant ears. As a result, I began to think more seriously about the Union I was a member of at Calgary Public Library, and decided to attend a Local meeting, hoping to learn more about the group I had been told was working for my better interests. From my first meeting, I was hooked. The kindness I was met with at the door despite my young age put me at ease. What affected me more than kindness, though, was the equality statement read at the outset of the meeting,

which made me feel not only welcomed in the space, but recognized and valued. I had never in my life heard the words spoken aloud in a formal setting:

“Discriminatory speech or conduct which is racist, sexist, transphobic or homophobic hurts and thereby divide us. So too, does discrimination on the basis of ability, age, class, religion, language and ethnic origin.

Sometimes discrimination takes the form of harassment. Harassment means using real or perceived power to abuse, devalue or humiliate. Harassment should not be treated as a joke. The uneasiness and resentment that it creates are not feelings that help us grow as a union.”¹

After many years of trying to find communities which would accept me as an out transgender man, I had finally stumbled across one. And it happened to be one which I had been a part of since before I transitioned. It was a relief, to say the least, to hear my Local recognize me and openly deny others the ability to discriminate and harass me.

At another of my first Local meetings, I learned that the Local financially supports the Fairy Tales Queer Film Festival each year. I was astonished, and it made me proud to be part of something that didn't only depend on words to express their dedication to equality and diversity, but proved it with their actions as well. The Local meetings truly felt like a community, and it was a community I could proudly stand with, because their values aligned with mine for one of the first times in my life.

Once I was attending Local meetings regularly, I developed a passion for the idea that a group of people, when standing together, could affect change for the betterment of

¹ “Equality Statement and Oath.” *CUPE Alberta*, <https://alberta.cupe.ca/resources/equality-statement-oath/>.

their collective situation. The experience of attending meetings where we had a voice (and vote!) to affect the advocacy and direction of our executive team began a journey which recently culminated in a high-profile position in student leadership and governance. In my third year of University, I began volunteering and working more closely with the Students' Association there, and in May 2019 I was elected to become the Vice-President Academic to represent the student voice at academic governance bodies. Over the last several years volunteering and then working in the area of academic governance, I have seen the great impacts which a group united can have; and I have also seen where a group that is fractured has less success.

As we are all forced to navigate a new set of unusual circumstances in the world of COVID-19, I am once again at a loss for the answer to "what Unions mean to me." This time, however, it is not because of ignorance but because I am realizing all the vitally important work that Unions are doing right now, and I am overwhelmed by it. I see my own Local working closely with the members, though we are temporarily laid off, to ensure that our return to work is safe, efficient, and to our benefit. I see Unions across Alberta struggling to ensure safe and fairly-compensated employment for their workers. I can not imagine that many other employees have received, as I have, the opportunity to provide feedback on how to make the workplace safer upon their return, as likely very few employers will do this without the urging of a Union to influence them and relay the information. Once we are back to work, I have confidence that the Local will ensure that we are continually working safely.

Now that my time in student governance has ended, and as I enter the final year of my degree, I am bringing my focus back into the workplace I have loved since I was 15. I am beginning to attend Local meetings again, and I am still affected deeply each time the equality statement is read. It affirms my place as a Local member, as a Brother, and assures me that my Local has my best interests at heart. No matter who I am, my Local works so that my employment is enjoyable, reliable, and equitable, and it only works when we all participate.