

## What Unions Mean to Me

To me, a union means community where we all belong and are valued equally. CUPE has shown me this on many levels: personal, organization, municipal, and nation-wide. The first time I contacted our union president, I told her “I am just an LA4.” She told me that I’m not *just* an LA4—I am an LA4, and that is as important as anyone else. This really changed how I saw my role at work, and I felt equal to others in a way I hadn’t before. The Union works to ensure that I feel a sense of belonging and am valued in the workplace. I have had many jobs where I felt insignificant and did not bother to uphold my rights if something happened—instead I would leave the company if possible. When this started to happen again, people let me know that I wasn’t alone and that I could reach out to our Union. The result was ultimately very positive. I was able to stay with my organization, love the work I am a part of, value the company, and stay as a part of that community. When this happens, it leads to a stronger organization as well. Instead of workers leaving when something feels wrong, there is a greater chance of making things right, talking about different issues, and working together to understand what is happening. When someone is shown they are equal, it makes things better for everyone, not just the individual. When unions can help organizations retain workers, it upholds that community and sends a message that everyone does belong here.

Unions build community and belonging outside the union as well. When we had a CUPE banner at a local soccer field, people called it “the CUPE field”. Soon cities across Canada will be celebrating Pride, including Calgary. CUPE will be marching in the parade, and I am excited to be with them, as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. By making the commitment and showing up in this way, our CUPE Local is showing everyone in the Calgary community that they belong, and don’t have to change themselves to do so.

Our Union spreads the sense of community belonging beyond our Local. It is nation-wide, and it *feels* nation-wide. Last year, Bill 28 was passed in the Ontario legislature, which would take away education workers’ right to strike. Because this violated Charter Rights, frontline education workers took a stand. Education workers were being undervalued, but members stood strong and showed that they are important and equal members of society and deserve to have their Charter rights upheld. When they walked out of schools, they had the support of CUPE Locals and members across the country. We felt such solidarity even from the other side of the country and sent messages of support. We talked about it amongst members, with other people we knew, and read about it in the news. The strong message of equity and equality from education workers connected with people from all walks of life. It brought people together from other unions as well, including the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU/SEFPO) who also held a solidarity walkout. Unifor likewise pledged solidarity with CUPE workers and said they would not cross picket lines. Unions build community across unions and they work together for the good of all workers’ rights. We recognize those in other unions as having the same rights as us and as being equal members of the same community. Being united in this way brought success, and after two days of walkouts, the provincial government repealed the bill. Right now, flight attendants are campaigning with “Unpaid Work Won’t Fly”. This issue, like with education workers in Ontario, is important to CUPE members of all sectors and in any part of the country. We talk about it and raise awareness because we are all part of one united community. By supporting each other in this way, I think they are bound to succeed.

Our union advances community and equality by promoting other causes to union members. For example, our website and members are talking about Barrier Free Alberta. This is a campaign by the Alberta Ability Network that is trying to get accessibility legislation passed at a federal level so it can be implemented cohesively across provinces in Canada. It is important for us to be talking about it within our Local because Alberta is one of only two provinces who have not signed up to commit to this initiative. Other provinces already have accessibility legislation in place, which requires organizations to adhere to set accessibility standards. Accessibility legislation addresses equality in our communities at a very literal and basic level—everyone in our communities should have equal access to employment, public transportation, services, and public spaces. This is something that I think people generally agree on but must also be acted on. Activism from groups like the Alberta Ability Network and unions that support them help advance action on these important issues of equality that affect every community.

These are some examples that remind me of how unions mean everyone in our community belongs and is equal. It happens on a personal level when a union president tells a member that they are just as important as everyone else, on an organizational level when we can work together to find solutions and retain employees, on a municipal level when we show support at Pride for our LGBTQ+ community, and nation-wide when we show solidarity for our education-sector members on the other side of the country upholding their rights. Unions show that issues are important no matter who it affects, personal or seemingly far away.

Every CUPE meeting includes a reading of our Equality Statement, which begins, “Union solidarity is based on the principle that union members are equal and deserve mutual respect at all levels.” This is a strong reminder of our belonging and equality, and frames each gathering as one where we all come equally to the table, and where each of us is recognized as a vital member of our community.

Julia Sitter