

What Unions Mean To Me

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In my personal life, I am part of several grassroots community organizations that aim to improve the lives of Calgarians who are part of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community and those who are unhoused. I am passionate about food justice and queer rights; a lot of the work that we have done as queer organizers is historically connected to that of labour movements. Labour unions are inextricably linked to human rights issues, and it has often been folks who are at the intersection of many marginalized identities that have spurred change through these. I am continually inspired by the connection between organizing for 2SLGBTQIA+ and for labour rights, as they have oftentimes been one and the same. To me, unions are an essential component of our collective fight towards equality, as they unite us in this fight thereby giving us our own control over our freedom.

As queer people we have faced many forms of discrimination due to our identities, including employment discrimination, which is something that we have fought back against throughout history. Labour organization has been a key component of this fight by supporting us through the exchange of knowledge and information with 2SLGBTQIA+ activists. For example, in 1973 queer activists were shut down by Toronto city councilors after demanding they include sexual orientation as part of their anti-discrimination policies. They reached out to various CUPE locals, with Local 79 offering their support and solidarity as they recognized that our struggles are all interconnected, and no one should be discriminated against throughout their hiring or employment due to their sexual orientation. Many other situations like this followed suit across Canada, at a time where there were no codified legal protections for 2SLGBTQIA+ at the federal and provincial levels. The relationship between unions and queer activists wasn't always harmonious, but many labour organizers still chose to fight for workers who were unjustly harassed for their queerness, oftentimes facing backlash from within the movement due to their stances. One such example includes Wally Majeski, former President of Toronto Metro Labour Council, who in 1981 outwardly supported gay men against police harassment even when this decision was frowned upon by others within labour organizing. Despite this, this declaration of solidarity was pivotal in demonstrating that all workers' rights must be protected and fought for.

Before the start of my employment with Calgary Public Library, I was employed at a community place where I had similar duties to those in my current role, working with children and families. Although I was satisfied with this role and the compensation I received for it, my

work relationships were very strained due to having a publicly homophobic supervisor. I was not safe to talk about myself, nor to share a diverse range of educational materials with the children and families for fear of repercussions, as I was not protected by a union at this place. Upon starting my position at CPL, I was pleasantly surprised to learn that I became a member of CUPE Local 1169, which played a large role in my feeling comfortable sharing more about myself here, including my pronouns. This also gave me the encouragement to take up opportunities to share educational materials about the 2SLGBTQIA+ community through my role, encouraging me to create safer spaces for queer staff and patrons and making me feel fulfilled in this position.

I am now part of the team leading the launch of a 2SLGBTQIA+ Employee Resource Group within CPL, which came with its own challenges due to management's initial hesitance to compensate us fairly for our demands for this group. Thankfully, the union was present to ensure that we were not put in situations in which our skills and contributions were taken advantage of, allowing us to connect with other library workers across North America to learn more about how their Employee Resource Groups work and what they have done to ensure this extra work is compensated appropriately. We have been able to secure a paid meeting and privacy measures for everyone participating in this launch, as well as paid opportunities for staff involved in the planning of CPL's presence at Calgary Pride.

Unions are a large part not only of 2SLGBTQIA+ rights movements, but also of the struggle for the rights of immigrant workers. As an immigrant myself, I am familiar with our vulnerability to employer abuse and discrimination. Given our initial unfamiliarity with workers' rights and labour laws here, my parents and I saw ourselves in various situations in which our labour was diminished or taken advantage of. In one of these instances, I was injured while working in a non-unionized place, and I had to seek medical attention. The hospital reported this to the Workers' Compensation Board (WCB), but my workplace did not, which resulted in them being fined for it. I was verbally reprimanded by management for this fine and made to feel as if it was my fault, when I did not even know of the WCB or of my rights after being injured at work. I left this position not long after due to this ongoing harassment. Contrastingly, throughout my time as a member of CUPE Local 1169 I have been aware of all rules and regulations pertaining to my safety at work, even participating in workplace inspections myself. I know my rights to refuse unsafe work, to speak about these conditions, and to ask for mitigations whenever they are not already present. When these mitigations are not properly addressed, as has been the

case recently for some of my colleagues and I, the union has strongly supported our attempts to address these issues, reinstating their commitment to stand by us at every step of the grievance process. Addressing these issues is never easy nor straightforward, but being part of a union, I know that there is someone dedicated to listening and supporting us in this so that we can do so without fear of retaliation.

Overall, my experiences as a worker at the intersection of several identities have been challenging, meaningful, and unexpected. Despite all of this, I have never been more committed to my work, both within CPL and outside of it, than during my time being part of CUPE Local 1169. Being a union member plays a large part in feeling secure as I publicly participate in sensitive and important grassroots work for the 2SLGBTQIA+ community; it has also made me feel secure in being a proud queer CPL worker, supporting every single person that comes through the library. In this way, the union has expanded my understanding of my small role in our collective struggle as workers, and it has taught me many things about the intricacies and rewards of organizing for our rights. To me, unions mean freedom.

Sources

Labour Pride: What Unions Have Done For Us, Prabha Khosla (2021).

<https://usw.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/labour-pride-new-edition-2021.pdf>