

Unions and Equity Employment

Canada is a very diverse country in which many cultures, ethnicities, and gender identities and expressions co-exist. To support an inclusive workforce, there has been a focus on gaining workplace equity for all diverse citizens within Canada. To date, unions have played a large role in reducing the inequalities in some areas. For example, unions have worked to reduce wage gaps for female and younger workers (Canadian Labour Congress, 2015). However, there are still many barriers that exist for in gaining and maintaining employment for groups of visible minorities (Public Service Alliance of Canada, 2013). So despite the fact that some improvements have been made, issues such as systemic racism are still apparent in society and need to be addressed by unions (Walker, 2006).

Why Equity?

It is important that unions focus on improving the lives of all workers in British Columbia (BC). More accessibility to employment for all people will result in a more diverse population contributing and giving back to the economy (Government of British Columbia, n.d.). In addition, eliminating employment discrimination is a part of the Federal Employment Equity Act (Government of Canada, 2018). Through this act, the government of Canada also addresses the need for equity rather than equality in certain situations. The Duty to Accommodate acknowledges that in some situations a workplace may need to accommodate some workers needs differently than others in order to avoid acts of discrimination (Government of Canada, 2018). For example, a working woman who just came back from maternity leave may need more breaks or areas to breastfeed or pump milk. Equality would dictate that she should receive the same amount of breaks as all other workers while equity dictates that she should receive the extra needed breaks. By working towards equity for employees, unions would be facilitating a

welcoming environment in which visible minorities feel comfortable in expressing their beliefs and sharing their knowledge.

Barriers to Equity

Minorities still face more adversity when seeking out employment and retaining jobs, and often face more barriers at work than the rest of the population (Public Service Alliance of Canada, 2013). “In 2017, Worksafe BC responded to over 4,800 inquiries and complaints directly related to bullying, harassment, and discriminatory action” (Worksafe BC, 2019, para. 1). These are the known cases, many cases of discrimination may have gone unreported as surveys indicate it is more common than realized (Serebrin, 2015). This demonstrates that while there has been movement in regulations and laws, this is still a relevant issue that needs to be addressed.

BC, especially in the north, has a large Indigenous population. Historically, Indigenous persons in Canada have had lower employment rates and more job losses when compared to non-Indigenous persons (Statistics Canada, 2018). It is important to address that Indigenous peoples of today are still being impacted by colonialism and that this can be a contributing factor to their higher rates of unemployment (National Collaborating Centre For Aboriginal Health [NCCFAH], 2017). Employment is a component of the social determinants of health and can have an effect on a person’s health and well-being (NCCFAH, 2017). As a result, unemployment can lead to barriers to accessing further education and can contribute to the development of physical or mental illness; all of which create more barriers to gaining future employment (NCCFAH, 2017). Therefore, it is important that there are initiatives put in place to make employment more accessible to Indigenous populations in BC.

Working towards Equity

For unions to work towards equality and creating safe work environments for all, they must first acknowledge that while there have been improvements in the past, there is still work to be done. An important piece of creating a healthy working environment is having workers, employers, and the union acknowledge and reflect on personal and systemic biases. Acknowledging biases towards cultural, ethnic, gender, cognitive, or physical differences allows one to put aside these biases in order to reduce the risk of discrimination and promote diversity (Agarwal, 2018). After acknowledging these biases, unions should work in partnership with employers in order to ensure that the mentioned interventions are not only being implemented, but that there is consistency and follow through with all of the programs. In addition, unions can also act as an advocate for workers who are lodging any discriminatory complaints related to their workplace environment.

The BC Federation of Labour has a list of interventions that can be used by unions to embrace and support their diverse members. Some of these interventions include: conducting audits, providing cultural awareness education, accommodate persons with disabilities, seek out proper education for working with LGBTQ populations, and uncovering and acknowledging personal biases (BC Federation of Labour [BCFED], 2018). One of the best ways to uncover problems or discrimination that employees face is to go directly to the source. Unions have taken a lead in this through surveying and auditing their members. Auditing employees allows them to voice their concerns about their workplace and offer ideas of what could be improved (BCFED, 2018). Learning more about other cultures and sharing this with employees to improve their cultural literacy allows others to gain an understanding of the individual needs of people from other cultures (BCFED, 2018). Another way to ensure that the voices of minorities in the workplace are being heard is through the creation of committees. Creating committees for visible

minorities acknowledges the current lack of representation of minorities in unions as well as offers them a platform to share their opinions and to ensure their individual needs are met (Walker, 2006).

Workplace accessibility and use of unaccepted terminology can also lead to discrimination. Accommodating persons with disabilities allows the workforce to be a more accessible place. This in turn allows people with disabilities to continue to support themselves as well as remain active members of the community. Similarly, employers and union members who attend sessions on working with people from the LGBTQ community can set guidelines and provide education for employees to gain the knowledge of proper terminology and understanding of genders/sexual orientations (BCFED, 2018). This knowledge would allow for respectful communication and provide a more welcoming environment when for the LGBTQ population.

Another intervention that unions could use is educating workers of their rights as outlined in the British Columbia Human Rights. Work BC has a user friendly document related to the BC Human Rights that defines discrimination and harassment and offers possible ways to resolve problems with these subjects in the workplace (Work BC, 2016). While the majority of responsibility for reducing discrimination in the workplace rests on the employers and unions, workers should know and understand their rights to help in the overall reduction. By providing this education, the workers will be able to recognize when their rights are being violated, and refer to a credible source that can be used to demonstrate that their working conditions were discriminatory.

Conclusion

In conclusion, unions have a duty to advocate for and support equity for all employees under their domain and to help promote the same for all Canadian workers. By implementing

interventions such as audits, committees, specialized cultural, and LGBTQ educational sessions, a platform for the voice of previously underrepresented populations can be heard and valued. These interventions will also help foster a working environment that is conducive for minority populations to feel comfortable sharing their knowledge, and will lead to more of this population obtaining equitable employment. While there have been improvements in equity over the years through the implementation of the Employment Equity Act and the Duty to Accommodate, there is still a need for more reinforcement and implementation of new programs. Unions have a responsibility to establish this and ensure the Canadian workforce is a safe and inclusive environment.

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