

Encouraging Equity Through Labour Unions

Do labour unions possess the power to promote equity in the workplace? Initiated in the 1800s by the arrival of the Hudson Bay Company to British Columbia (BC), unions have long provided people with fair wages, safe work environments, and appropriate work hours, not only dramatically improving the quality of life for workers, but strengthening entire economies as well [1]. As a product of the Labor Movement [1], unions can act as sources of equity in work environments, encouraging accommodation of differences among members of visible minorities [2]. In contrast to equality, which refers to equal treatment regardless of individual circumstances, equity accounts for differing situations and ensures each individual is provided what he/she requires to be professionally successful [3]. Equity is not only critical to forming fair work environments, but also to motivating employees: an employee is more likely to feel unmotivated when he/she observes coworkers yielding greater successes while dedicating identical efforts to him/herself. This often translates to employees developing mistrust for their employers, harming productivity and morale of organizations if left unaddressed [4]. Improving and enforcing equity is an essential action of unions and can be accomplished through forming Employee Resource Groups, testing for potential bias, and expanding the cultural knowledge of union members.

Employee Resources Groups (ERGs) are employee-led groups that provide an inclusive work environment often associated with specific perspectives, practices, goals, and objectives [5]. Often formed within unions, ERGs can foster a collective expression for visible minorities,

providing support to individuals who may face professional disadvantages and promoting diversity [5]. Allowing employees to unite through commonalities, ERGs enable workers, who may have otherwise been disregarded, to yield changes within a company [6]. Since these changes often arise from equity-seeking individuals of ERGs, the influences produced by these groups commonly encourage equity, perhaps by updating hiring policies or connecting lower-level employees with senior leaders [6]. While ERGs can generate equitable work environments, they can also be viewed merely as social crowds or mediums for individuals of similar backgrounds to enjoy each other's company. Although the social aspect of ERGs is essential to their formation and success, it is important they maintain professional goals as well if they aim to improve workplace equity, goals which may be guided or outlined by unions [6]. Unions can expose employees to improved equity by encouraging or sponsoring ERGs within organizations, enabling employees to leverage common concerns or interests and generate a sense of community [7]. By promoting professional development through offering activities such as leadership training, technology training, or ethics informational sessions, unions can initiate the formation of ERGs [7], empowering their members while extending professional skills. Both unions and associated companies can reap the benefits of improved equity and diversity that ERGs produce, and unions should seek to partner with company management to organize these groups. ERGs can provide the equity union members desire, improving the retention of these members and resulting in an increased motivation and satisfaction among workers.

While ERGs may improve equity in a union, additional measures are often still required to overcome pre-existing bias in a work environment. Bias in a workplace is nearly inevitable, with even those who attempt to act as egalitarians falling victim to implicit bias. Implicit bias refers to bias which affects an individual's actions, thoughts or decisions unconsciously [8].

While an individual may not be aware of his/her implicit bias, it will still influence his/her professional decisions unintentionally [8], hindering equity in the workplace. Although it may seem somewhat unpreventable, the potential detriments of implicit bias can actually be addressed through several approaches executed by unions. Introduced in 1998, the Implicit Associations Test (IAT) was designed to identify and assess implicit biases surrounding race, gender, age, sexual orientation, and other factors. Completed by millions of employees, the IAT acts as a crucial step in eliminating the effect implicit bias yields by making workers aware of the unconscious prejudice they possess. Research suggests becoming aware of implicit bias can lead individuals to counteract its impact as they can begin to identify the circumstances in which the bias is most likely to impact their decisions [8]. Unions can promote this awareness by offering the opportunity for its members to take the IAT, then following the test with training that teaches cognitive strategies for inhibiting implicit bias. Statistical analysis should also be executed by unions to observe any patterns among performance appraisals that may indicate potential bias in performance evaluations [9]. Unions could also offer ethics coaching and mentoring in the workplace, providing direct opportunity for members to improve their professional integrity. Through the acceptance and elimination of implicit bias in a work environment, improved equity is likely to arise as a result.

Accompanying the eradication of implicit bias, expanding the cultural literacy of employees should also act as a main objective of unions in the strive for equity. By improving cultural knowledge of union members, it becomes easier for the union to accommodate those of varying ethnicities and enable cultural minorities to feel included. As an annual practice, the Affiliation of Multicultural Societies and Service Agencies of BC (AMSSA) offers a multi-faith calendar that details significant dates for a range of cultures [10]. This calendar could act as a

potential strategy for unions to educate their members on varying cultures. Members could collaborate to discuss the meaning of each date and resolve which hold the most significance, potentially celebrating or honoring these dates in the workplace [10]. Additionally, unions can promote the recognition of Human Rights Dates that are significant to diversity [10].

Acknowledgement of these dates demonstrates to employees that equity stands as a main value of the workplace and provides opportunity for recognition of equity-seeking groups. Unions can also offer global citizenship training that educates employees on etiquettes and professional customs of different countries [11]. By valuing and understanding cultures in the workplace, the needs and expectations of each employee can be addressed, allowing diversity to flourish and encouraging an abundance of ranging perspectives and assorted aptitudes. Supporting diversity in a work environment enables a unity of employees, simultaneously encouraging equity.

Equity is essential to the success and strength of a union. It allows employees to be accommodated for their differences and addresses any disadvantages visible minorities may endure, building resilient professional relationships and fostering a sense of community. Providing equity not only benefits employees, but also the unions and organizations to which they belong, as it forms the foundation for increasingly productive, diverse, creative, and motivated work environments, the type of environments that must be supported by unions.

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