

EQUITY EMPLOYMENT & BARRIER REDUCTION IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

Thank you for the opportunity to provide the following essay concerning the 2019 topic, “Barriers still exist for equity-seeking groups to employment in British Columbia. Is it appropriate for the labour movement to focus on improving the lives of all BC workers, and if so, how can unions take the lead on equity employment?”.

From my personal view, experiences and current situation, I do agree with the statement, “Barriers still exist for equity-seeking groups to employment in British Columbia.” I am a First Nations person from British Columbia who has enjoyed the privilege and opportunity to be raised in a unique situation consisting of both western and Indigenous world views. I would like to elaborate on my experiences as they relate to both world views and hopefully provide some perspectives on tangible and relative components to this essay topic, and perhaps, how these relate and become some of the elements of social and cultural paradigms that can, and often do, lead to employment challenges and barriers in almost all workplaces.

In a general sense, western world education systems from kindergarten to graduation are often aimed at providing individuals with unique life skills that hopefully provide society with a relatively competent workforce. The education system provides us with societal norms and relative consistencies related to how we behave day to day. As well, the education system helps generate a vast array of individuals with a mixture of standard to very specialized skills and experiences. These components contribute to how individuals moves forward with their lives and thereafter into the workforce and/or post secondary education and then often into the

workforce. At a young age, we are taught that today's' rapidly growing and competitive labour force requires this institutional approach to ensuring labour market growth evolves today and well into the future to meet labour and market demands. Substantial changes in the labour market are a reality in today's fast-changing world, and this is often a fundamental driver in our approach to education and career training. Unions can play a crucial role in workforce education requirements, and often provide collective agreement items that help promote work-related education opportunities in a relatively fair and equitable manner for all employees. As well, unions have and will continue to play critical roles in implementing articles that not only monitor employment equity, but ensure employer hiring practices incorporate equity employment not only for marginalized bodies but also as relates to equality components such as fair enumeration, job opportunities and equity growth for members of marginalized genders and the LGBTQ2S community.

In recent discussions with Elders, as it relates to a First Nations' perspective, western world education has not been a primary driver for past generations of First Nations people and only recently are we seeing higher levels of First Nations students graduating from secondary education and moving into post-secondary education. This in itself is creating a slow and steady increase of First Nations people into the workforce, creating a change as it relates to employment equity and placement of this changing demographic of employees in the workforce. I believe unions roles in new job recruitment and placement has and will continue to support small changes in equity employment, but we are far from an ideal situation in British Columbia due to a significant array of social and cultural differences and how these apply to corporate businesses.

A significant challenge is systemic within our beliefs that our education system is the primary driver to employment hiring and job requirement criteria. This creates substantial barriers and accessibility issues pertaining to employment for marginalized populations who do not fit into the western world education system, yet are well suited for most labour and task-oriented employment. For example, many mining companies require minimum Grade 12 or equivalent education (often a component of the United Steel Workers Union collective agreement), yet most entry-level jobs have no skill sets that actually require Grade 12 or equivalent education. Marginalized populations often struggle for years within culturally unsafe education institutions to meet Accuplacer test requirements held by industry and supported by unions. On the flip-side, it is a fair position of employers to demand the best for their workforce, and this is often one of the essential elements to ensuring business profit and growth. In this situation, with a clear understanding of cultural differences and challenges concerning employer education requirements, I believe unions can play a crucial role in changing equity employment through transparent hiring based on clear job descriptions relative to required employee skill sets. I also think the promotion of self-identification within the hiring process holds potential for Indigenous empowerment and creating accessible avenues for employment of marginalized populations trying to enter the workforce. In most cases, this will still be a limiting factor for Indigenous and marginalized people if employee demand for employment is high, as highly skilled individuals will seek employment as a bridge into future career goals and paths, thereby taking away entry-level job opportunities often filled with equity employment.

From my First Nations' perspective, Colonial institutions, although fairly common to western world views, historically have not been an essential component of First Nations' social

and cultural lifestyles. First Nations' culture is entwined in all things and is often expressed in components (circles) of four. For example, four colours represent the four key directions, and each direction is often tied to air (wind), sun, water, and mother earth. Each of these directions and elements has unique teaching in relation to life, including: new beginnings (new job for example); understanding (changes to workforce components and labour needs) wisdom as it relates to living a good life; and hardship and discomforts and how patience's and endurance helps. I have been privileged to experience both western world education and to learn from my family, and First Nation's Elders and the combination of both western and Indigenous world views and education has helped me shape a career path that respects both world views and processes.

With regard to this essay topic, the first question I would ask is, what is the culturally safe and relevant ways for a labour movement to focus on improving the lives of all BC workers? Based on my limited views of western world education and graduation into the workforce, unions help to provide standardization of job requirements for all employees irrelevant of their culture. This includes fair access to jobs, equitable enumeration, safe work environment from not only workplace hazards, but the human factor as well, pension opportunities, job protection, etc. From my perspective, I think Unions still play a crucial role in ensuring employment equity in the workforce, but I believe significant cross-cultural training is essential to ensure this occurs with respect to culture and how the job and culture can align, and how employer and employees interact to the benefit of these. For example, in my culture, a direct family death has a unique set of cultural practices essential for the passing 'soul,' and this can result in loss of the employee's ability to attend work. Although lost work time may only be for four-plus days, it results in

significant challenges to the employer, including: lost revenue; staff replacement; potentially new staff training; safety issues; cultural division; and often criticism towards cultural favoritism. I believe unions can play key and pivotal roles in situations like this example by providing clear steps to deal with situations particular to any cultural issue within the collective agreements. This in itself is a huge challenge, due to the vast array of cultural differences within the workforce, but I believe unions can play a pivotal role to help evolve the workforce into a place respecting the array of multi-cultural employees concurrent with the rapidly changing gender roles and demographics of the workforce, while still contributing to ensure the employer's demands for production, revenue, safety, etc. are met.

In summary, I see the slow and continued change in human demographics continues to impact the workforce, not only in an employment equity situation but also as it relates to profit and loss margins due to attrition and continued costs to train and adapt to consumer demands. Massive and continued changes to technology require employees and individuals seeking to enter the job market to be better prepared for employment. Employers are continually seeking highly trained individuals to support business sector growth and efficiencies, therefore unions roles continue to evolve to not only protect current employees but more importantly, as job growth and company expansion moves forward, ensuring a fair and equitable process is in place for all potential employees, irrelevant of race, ability, religion, and sex. Paradigm shifts are often slow to initiate within large corporate sector businesses, but with support and demonstration from unions to employers, this can slowly change and evolve to a workforce that may never have to ask the question of employment equity.