

Barriers still exist in British Columbia (B.C) for equity-seeking populations. Throughout the literature, the predominant barrier for equity-seeking groups in BC is discrimination (Bakan, 2004; Benoit, Jansenberger, & Phillips, 2013; Agócs & Burr, 1994). Systemic discrimination, reflected in the workforce, is discrimination established throughout the broader sociopolitical, economic and cultural contexts (Agócs & Burr, 1994). Traditionally represented with able-bodied, Caucasian, Christian men as the dominant population (Agócs & Burr, 1994). Therefore, some examples of equity-seeking groups include women, individuals with disabilities, cultural minorities and Indigenous groups (Bakan, 2004). Systemic discrimination persists when the labour force does not focus on improving the lives of all workers (Agócs & Burr, 1994). Therefore, the labour movement has a responsibility to focus on improving the lives of all BC workers. Equity employment, the Canadian government's solution to discrimination in the workforce, has been controversial in BC and influenced by political, economic and social hierarchies (Bakan, 2004). Unions exist to improve the daily life of employees through different initiatives such as income and work-place environment, thus positioning them to be leaders in BC employment equity (Canadian Labour Congress (A), 2015). This paper will discuss employment equity, the current labour force, why the labour force should improve the lives of all employees and how unions can be leaders in employment equity. Although barriers to employment equity exist in BC, the labour force has a responsibility to improve the lives of all workers and unions can be leaders in promoting employment equity.

Employment Equity

The term Employment Equity was debuted by Rosalie Abella in 1984 (Bakan, 2004) and is the Canadian governments' response to persistent discrimination in employment (Agócs & Burr, 1994). Employment equity programs are an employer's responsibility to ensure

competitive standards of specified target groups within their organization, as opposed to quotas, to eliminate discrimination (Falkenberg & Boland, 1997). This is accomplished through policies, non-biased performance appraisals, and equitable training and promotions within the organization (Agócs & Burr, 1994; Falkenberg & Boland, 1997). However, no legislation exists for employers to develop equity programs to mitigate systemic discrimination despite the employer's responsibility and policies for equity-seeking groups at the provincial level (Bakan, 2004). Employment equity policies attempt to eliminate systemic discrimination by “redress[ing] inequalities in the workplace, to identify and eliminate unfair barriers in recruitment, retention and promotion, and to improve the workplace environment” for these groups (Bakan, 2004, p. 61).

In BC, the election of 2001-initiated backlash against employment equity legislation, and cutbacks in the public services which essentially demolished employment equity in BC (Bakan, 2004). Prevailing employment equity policy exists only in the public services sector and is completely voluntarily based (Bakan, 2004). Additionally, “[n]eo-liberalism has systematically targeted the gains made by working people” and has attempted to set different sectors of workers, such as unionized and nonunionized against one-another (Noonan, 2013, p.10).

Success and Failure

Equity in employment has been debated in Canada for several decades (Bakan, 2004). Henry and Tator, (1992) in Falkenberg & Boland (1997) state that the “opposition to employment equity programs believes circulating myths that employment equity enables reverse discrimination [favouring women and minorities], ignores merit principles, enforces quotas which will lead to erosion of occupational and professional standards, and stigmatizes minorities who have moved into desirable positions” (p. 94). Employment equity has been successful in the

employment of able-bodied women into certain positions and persons with disability, but less successful for Aboriginal peoples, or visible minorities (Bakan, 2004; Agócs & Burr, 1994). The general failure for employment equity includes the “failure by certain ministries to create the mandatory employment equity plans or audits, an absence of targets, or resistance to suggested remedial measures” (Bakan, 2004, p.63). Burstein (1994) in Falkenberg & Boland, (1997) states that the passionate controversy regarding employment equity should be expected as employment and income determine an individual’s position in broader socio-cultural contexts. Employment equity is currently in a precarious position, being neither subsequently revived or fully repealed, and is being replaced with the “less proactive term diversity” (Bakan, 2004, p. 65).

Current Labour Force

‘Diversity’ is replacing employment equity because “BC government officials [...] believe [...] that employment equity has been fully integrated and therefore no longer a central concern” (Bakan, 2004, p. 65). Despite this belief, a study of employment for legally blind individuals in Canada found that 40% of participants felt discriminated against and within that 40% a third were discriminated against at work (Benoit et al., 2013). Additionally, the general workforce is diversifying, which means that the traditionally dominant Caucasian male workforce is being numerically surpassed by other populations in the workforce (Agócs & Burr, 1994; Noonan, 2013). Although “promoted as a market adaptation to changing demographic factors”, mitigation of systemic discrimination is not an anticipated outcome of employment equity policy (Bakan, 2004, p. 65). Within Canada global competition is creating “a loss of jobs in the industrial and manufacturing sector (the traditional base of unions support), more non-standard part-time and seasonal work, an increase in working from home, offshore production and contracting out which is resulting in a privileged few with ‘good’ jobs and the majority of

others, predominately equity-seeking groups, with 'bad jobs' (Briskin, 1994 p. 89). Through these conditions, it is appropriate and primed for unions to take a lead on equity employment.

Social Justice and Unions

It is appropriate for the labour force to focus on improving the lives of all BC workers. Noonan defines social justice as the ability to attain resources such as employment and income which enables individuals to support life (2013). Evans (2015) elaborates how unions are congruent with human rights due to their promotion of improving quality of life. "Unions advocate in Parliament and in the courts to advance legislation that improves the day-to-day lives of all Canadians, such as workplace safety, and collective bargaining rights and employment equity" (Canadian Labour Congress (A), 2015). Briskin (1994) found that "five themes occur frequently: organizing the unorganized, developing an alternative economic vision, increasing grass-roots participation in unions, playing a new kind of leadership role and, finally, building national and international coalitions and alliances" (p. 90) which directly counters modern employment challenges. Unions are primed to be leaders in employment equity.

Income

The Canadian Labour Congress (B) states that unions originated by passionate employees were desired and sought the right to a healthy work environment with success such as stable income, shorter working hours and work weeks, and job protection (2015). Unions provide a better income for a variety of populations such as Aboriginal, women and disabled individuals (Agócs & Burr, 1994). The populations facing barriers to employment equity are amongst the most vulnerable populations in BC regarding poverty (Potter, Kushner, & Jackson, 2018). Income is the number one social determinant of health, making poverty the number one deterrent to health (Potter et al., 2018). "Through collective bargaining, unions tend to equalize

wages among workers and across sectors, helping close the income gap between the rich and poor” resulting in a healthier population (BCFED, 2000, para 4).

Communication

Additionally, discrimination is maintained through a lack of accurate and/or valid information on the performance and potential of organizational members and is influenced through informal communication channels such as ‘the grapevine’ (Falkenberg & Boland, 1997). New strategies must be developed to ensure that accurate information about individuals’ performance and potential is being communicated (Falkenberg & Boland, 1997). Agócs and Burr (1994) state that “improving interpersonal and inter-group communication and relationships in the workplace” will assist in promoting employment equity (p. 36).

Workplace Environment

Continuing discrimination and harassment has contributed to job dissatisfaction and turnover among affirmative action groups (Agócs & Burr, 1994). This discrimination results in social exclusion from society’s main resources, including the labour force (Benoit et al., 2013). Unions can lead equity employment by providing education on how systemic discrimination influences the workforce and encouraging employees to be involved in creating equity policies to reinstate perceptions of fairness in equity employment (Falkenberg & Boland, 1997). Unions can offer “programmes that promote awareness of difference, [...] to assist employees to identify and confront their stereotypes about persons whose characteristics differ from their own” (Agócs & Burr, 1994, p. 36).

Conclusion

Employment equity is a prevalent and relevant issue within BC due to discrimination (Bakan, 2004; Benoit et al., 2013; Agócs & Burr, 1994). Employment equity is necessary for

improving the quality of life and health of all individuals in BC (Canadian Labour Congress (A), 2015). Unions can be leaders in employment equity through advocating for education on income, workplace environment and communication (BCFED, 2000; Falkenberg & Boland, 1997). This paper has discussed: employment equity, the modern labour force, how social justice requires the labour force to improve the lives of all workers and how unions can be leaders in employment equity. Discrimination is a barrier to employment equity in BC, and the labour force has a responsibility to improve the lives of all workers which can be led through unions.

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