

2019

Professional Employees Association Scholarship Essay

“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?”

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Equity in the workplace is a major controversial issue, not only in BC but has become prevalent all over the world. Equity is important in running a strong and stable business no matter its size. In BC barriers still exist for persons seeking employment who are perceived as a minority. It is important that the unions focus on equity in the workplace and how they can make employees feel safe and part of a team. Diversity in the workplace is important for communication and a stronger employee network. Lastly, the union needs to implant programs and stress the importance of following the Employment Equity Act to improve the lives of employees in the workplace.

A union is a group that represents employees who have specific concerns in the work place. In BC, and across Canada, there are different kinds of unions. One major union that is seen across Canada is the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), which is Canada's largest union (CUPE). It has around 680,000 members. BC Federation of Labour, which represents over 500,000 workers through more than 50 affiliated unions around the province (BC Fed). Unions are a part of many different work places, some varied work places they may represent include: health care, emergency services, education, early learning and child care, municipalities, social services, libraries, utilities, transportation, airlines, and many more (CUPE). Unions were implemented to give employees a safe and fair place of work. Equality in the workplace has been an ongoing issue for many years whether it is seen through gender equity, equal pay, etc. Unions help protect people from facing these issues which still exist today all over the world. Gender equity is a major controversial issue that unions deal with. The Women's Rights Committee works with BC Federation of Labour in fighting for equity for women in BC. The three main priorities are: Women's Safety – violence against women, equal pay, employment opportunities, workplace safety, skill training and affordable daycare, and women in Leadership. They look at supporting women at all levels of leadership and encouraging women to run for more political roles in B.C.'s communities, one of those being Union Leadership.

Diversity in workplaces can be a major issue for people, even here in Canada. Many people are still transitioning from the “traditional” forms of work, where men supported their families and women stayed in the home to be housewives. Women are not the only group fighting for equality in the workplace, other groups include; Indigenous workers, LGBTQ workers, workers of colour, people with disabilities, young workers and many more. All of these groups make for a very diverse and engaging work place. The benefits of diversity in the workplace include the respect colleagues have for one another (Chron), when working in groups there are people from different cultures, religions, etc., which helps to achieve new ideas and values. Diversity also helps with the reputation of that specific workplace and encourages people with different backgrounds to work there. Companies that are not as diversified may lose clients and employees because it is not a desired place to be. Unions support diversity in the workplace.

A big question that many unions are asking is “what can they do to encourage equity employment in the workplace?” Christine Gelowitz, RPF, participated in a meeting that wanted to develop an action plan that would promote gender equity in the forest sector (Gelowitz). Studies have shown that in 2016, 17% of people employed in the forest industry were women, while the 2015 data show women represent 47% of the labour force (Gelowitz). Unions need to set up groups and tackle the debate over equity in the workplace. Employers as well as employees need to be taught and made aware that even the little things said can have a huge affect on the people around them. The BC Federation of Labour has recommended some activities for members to present to their unions to help support them on their road to diversity. Some of these include the following: the importance of Unions to be knowledgeable and understanding of the barriers members face, to be aware of members with visible and invisible disabilities and what can they do to eliminate barriers so they are included, build relationships with local First Nations to better understand their needs and expectations. For unions to take the time to seek out consultants to help provide information and training that is valued and makes an impact and lead to change. The BC Federation of Labour also provides lists of

resources available for those interested in supporting the efforts towards greater diversity and inclusion (BC Fed.)

It is imperative that Unions take a leading role in fighting for the rights of all workers. Once rights have been established it is important that the Union oversee the employers to make sure those commitments made are carried out. Unions fully support diversity in the workplace. All employees should feel valued and that their opinions and ideas matter. Communication and inclusiveness makes for a stronger team approach. In order to improve the lives of workers the Union has to keep itself and its members informed and aware and to continually fight for inclusion of all workers.

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