

WHAT WE HEARD:

Key Themes from Face-to-Face Consultations with CUPE Members



Women in CUPE
Strengthening our union

National Women's Task Force
January 2007

Introduction

This document summarizes the key themes that emerged from 196 face-to-face consultations organized by the National Women's Task Force in 2006. The National Women's Task Force set out to have a conversation with a broad spectrum of CUPE members about women's lives: their experiences in the workplace, society and in the union. The Task Force wanted to hear from women about what prevents them from fully participating in the union and what our union can do differently to more effectively advance women's equality at work and in the union.

Consultations with close to 2,300 CUPE members provided very rich, detailed information about women's experiences in society and the union. As is often the case when people come together to discuss important issues, the discussions sometimes branched out beyond the immediate topics and extended to broader social issues of unions and their place in the community.

These consultations have been an important and historic opportunity to listen and respond to the experiences of CUPE women in the workplace and in the union. Participants spoke openly and honestly, and they addressed many highly charged and difficult

issues with determination and hope. They discussed the many benefits that come from active participation in the union and the ways that the union can improve their workplaces and their communities. Although members identified many barriers faced by women, they readily proposed concrete solutions to address these barriers. Despite the very difficult, sometimes emotional and potentially divisive discussions, there was a belief that this process and the actions flowing from the consultations will result in concrete changes that will strengthen and improve the union.

CUPE members in every region and in every sector spoke openly and honestly about their experiences and feelings. Many of their words are in this report. The quotes and examples used are meant to reflect the nature of the discussions and the themes that emerged. For many members, confidentiality was an important feature of the consultations and, therefore, the voices in this document reflect what was said but do not identify the speakers. They are words that were spoken across the country in different ways by different participants. In some cases the experiences and suggestions are contradictory and in others there is surprising consistency and agreement. Because the

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consultations offer a different dimension to the work of the Task Force, they go beyond the numbers and statistics that also form an important part of the overall picture. They illustrate the themes that emerged as members wrestled with very large issues for the union, our families, and our communities. Although some of the material is difficult there is an overriding sense of optimism, excitement and energy at the possibilities presented through the process of engaging in these discussions.

In some cases, the discussions were quite emotional and invigorating. One participant said that she had never spoken so much and vowed to take the discussions into her local and council and she will now speak more than ever. Another said that she was “moved to tears”. Many of the consultations generated excitement and optimism. A sister reported feeling “lighter”. She felt she couldn’t vent elsewhere and that now the flame has been lit we can move onward. In this group there was discussion about “how to take sadness and turn it into moving together”.

The consultations themselves were often exciting, stimulating and empowering, and members were appreciative that the union had initiated these discussions. One woman said, “This discussion is good. I wish I had found something like this when I first started out instead of now, just a few months before I retire.”

The Process

The National Women’s Task Force was formed after the adoption of resolutions at the 2005 CUPE National Convention. The official launch of the 16-member Task Force was on March 8, 2006 — International Women’s Day.

The mandate of the Task Force is to consult broadly with CUPE members on women’s equality issues in the union, to examine barriers to women’s participation at all levels of the union and to seek advice about how to bring about real change for women that will strengthen our union.

The members of the Task Force decided to consult with CUPE members in two principal ways: through a survey of the membership and through face-to-face consultations in each region/division. The Task Force members consciously decided that its face-to-face consultations would be done in an inclusive and participatory manner, and that we would meet with a broad and diverse cross-section of CUPE members. The Task Force reached out to both active and non-active members and made special efforts to reach members from equity-seeking groups. Some equity seeking groups participated actively. Others are absent from this report. Their experiences and recommendations are missing. Several members spoke about the need to continue and accelerate efforts to include members from all the equity seeking groups.

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This report captures the views from the very diverse membership in our union. The Task Force members and their regional committees completed 196 consultations in 121 different communities (see appendices) and reached an impressive number of members — almost 2,300. The majority of members who participated were women, but there were close to 300 men who also took part. We met with members from urban and rural settings, including geographically remote

communities, members from across sectors, and members from different cultural backgrounds.

Participants in the consultations were asked a standard set of questions to assess their experiences as women in society and in the union. Their responses and discussions reveal a deep interest in advancing women’s involvement and contributions in CUPE.

Barriers in the Workplace and Community

Women's Multiple Roles

The consultations asked about CUPE women's experiences in their workplaces, families, and communities. Not surprisingly, there was a focus on women's multiple roles and responsibilities and the difficulty of balancing work, family and community responsibilities. In one group CUPE brothers "felt that women face societal barriers as their gender roles have more responsibilities to their children and families". These issues emerged again and again no matter which topic was being addressed. The double and triple days that women experience and the demands of each role reach into all other aspects of daily life. Some women spoke of the stress of trying to juggle all their roles and responsibilities.

In a consultation with Aboriginal members they said, "Time is a huge problem in that most Aboriginal support workers hold down at least two, and sometimes three jobs, plus spending a lot of time driving in carrying out family and community obligations". In some communities in eastern Canada the out-migration of men to provinces with more

employment means that women have even greater family and community responsibilities. In these circumstances, women struggle with the implications of filling every role in their families, communities and workplaces.

Women's Economic Insecurity

Closely connected to this was the theme of women's economic reality and the work situation for many CUPE women. In addition to the diverse roles that women occupy, many women are working multiple jobs, receiving inadequate wages, and working in casual or part-time employment. One group said that in some female dominated sectors women are working two and three jobs. According to one participant there are "lots of people trying to make up full time work in multiple departments. They need full time work to pay the bills." Another group said, "Many Aboriginal support workers are living below the poverty line because they do not get enough hours of work. The combination of trying to balance family obligations and work life, makes getting involved in the union, on top of that, even more daunting!".

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Inadequate wages, multiple casual, part-time, temporary or precarious jobs characterize the sectors where many CUPE women are employed. Many women spoke of the fear of losing their jobs and the pressures of poor pay and benefits. One woman said, “Lack of job security is an issue for all members, but single women are particularly vulnerable to any employer abuse or manipulation and may be fearful of standing up for their rights”.

Management Retaliation and Tactics

This issue of unreasonable, hostile and manipulative employers was raised in several consultations. It was mentioned that “management pits union members against each other. Creates climate of conflict.” Some workers in Community Based Organizations (social services sector) cited “horrible management” who “have no respect for workers. Treat us like children. We’re always waiting for the hammer to fall.” Poor management skills were frequently mentioned. In some cases both bullying and retaliation were identified as major barriers.

Some groups talked about employers creating internal dissension by refusing to

backfill positions when union leave is taken and then complaining about the workload increase on members who have to take up the slack. “Management erects barriers by talking about time away for union business and the loss of jobs due to stewards proving that jobs aren’t needed”, said one group. Another said, “Managers become aware of the divisions in the union and in labour and use these to conquer and divide workers. Women felt that union members should have the right to stand up for workers.”

For women with disabilities, Aboriginal women, and women of colour the employer tactics of division and retaliation were particularly acute. Women spoke of the lack of a representative workforce and the ways that this is used to create division. One woman said that the employer doesn’t even recognize disabilities and uses requests for accommodation as a way to create divisions. Eventually, she said, “I feel ashamed asking for accommodations, so I stopped asking for it”. According to some of the groups there is a racist pattern of employment with women of colour and immigrant women clustered at the bottom of the workforce. Others talked about how racist and sexist comments were made and tolerated under the guise of jokes.

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Barriers to Union Participation

When members were asked about barriers to women's participation in the union their discussions covered a wide range of issues. There were certain themes that emerged consistently.

Women's Family Responsibilities

Mirroring their responses concerning the workplace and community, women's need to juggle and balance competing roles and responsibilities was identified as a major impediment to full participation. One group said, "Women are juggling their families and get a "guilt trip" when they come home". Women were wondering, "Where is the line? When is too much, too much?" In another group a participant said, "Why would I want to add to my plate? I already have children and elders to take care of. There is no replacement for sisters when they are booked off to do union activities, which means their workloads are still there when they return."

A consultation with women of colour said, "A huge cultural barrier felt by a lot of women from ethnic minority groups is the disproportionate burden of family responsibilities borne by those women who are expected to spend all their time and energy caring for extended families at home, or by earning wages to contribute to the family. Therefore, any extra activity outside the home, which is not perceived as directly contributing to the family's welfare, may be discouraged, or even prohibited."

CUPE women experience the stress of multiple roles and this was evident in the overwhelming references to the large responsibilities to families and communities. One group said, "Multiple roles and responsibilities (partner, home, children, elder parents), especially during child-rearing years, is exhausting CUPE women." One woman said, "One day, I hope to get involved and advance one step at a time but, since I want to finish raising my children first, I risk not starting until I'm almost 40. That will take away any chance of advancing until I have acquired the skills."

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Workplace Restructuring

Employment and workplace restructuring have had an impact on the structures and culture of the union for many women. “Amalgamation of school districts and locals has seen a move to increased male domination at union meetings. Intimidating.”

The restructuring of workplaces has specific consequences on the size and structure of union locals. One group spoke of “... the difficulty of meeting with members in a fragmented workplace (numerous locales). In the health sector, the restructuring of negotiation units requires so much energy, to ensure the cohesiveness of the new unions, that everyone is exhausted; and the majority of them are women.”

Economic Insecurity

In addition, the casualization and precariousness of women’s jobs have accelerated with many of these changes. One group made the point that, “Some women are so concerned about being able to feed their family that they don’t see the light at the end of the tunnel — union activist is the last thing on their list”. Another said, “Lots of members are single mothers who don’t have full time hours and are what we consider working-poor. They don’t have the time or energy to go to union meetings.” In other workplaces women reported the difficulties of dealing

with “fragmented bargaining, lower paid jobs, no power to achieve gains in bargaining”. A union member said, “It’s hard to come to union functions when you’re not getting enough work to pay the bills”.

Many women spoke of the demands of multiple jobs and shift work as a result of substandard wages and restructured workplaces. One sister explained, “her part-time unionized job means having to hold a second (non-unionized) job and that makes it very difficult to be involved in union matters”.

The financial restraints of requiring more than one job were a particular concern for women in marginalized communities. One group noted that, “Women of colour are more likely to work in low wage jobs without pension or benefits, sometimes two or three part-time jobs”. In addition, discrimination against women in pension plans creates barriers for women, as they are often required to buy pension benefits if they qualify. One group said, “Women are most commonly in part-time jobs — no benefits, no pensions, no job security”. Several women in this group were juggling two or more jobs.

In one consultation women who have been active in the union for several years said that they had “stopped participating in union activities during the time when they had small children (meaning not just while on maternity leave but also the entire period prior to their children reaching adulthood)”.

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Workloads

Crushing workloads are a reality for many CUPE members. Employers who refuse to backfill for union leave and expect workers to double up and make up for any lost time exacerbate this. One member talked about these demands, “Workload is an issue. Many women end up working for free and working through lunch in order to get required work accomplished.” Another said, “Staff shortages and workload scrap growing and taking on major developments. Staff has not increased, but decreased. Adding union work to crushing workload is a major barrier. Current workloads leave us feeling unable to do the kind of good work we expect of ourselves, so we don’t feel we can spread our resources even thinner.” One group said, “Women are overloaded at work, at home and in the union!”.

Lack of Support at Home for Union Activism

Related to these concerns for women is the issue of support in the home front. In addition to the guilt that many women experience when they don’t have adequate time and energy to devote to their family obligations is the guilt and criticism that may emanate from their husbands or partners and community members with opinions about women’s appropriate roles. Lack of support at home was raised several times as a factor inhibit-

ing union involvement. One group identified, “Unsupportive partners; lack of supports at home to allow us to focus on work including access to childcare”. Some said that the expectation from their families is that their priority should be with the family and not the union.

These attitudes may also prevail within the union. In one group women spoke about a female union leader and single parent who was looked down on because she gave so much time to the union. One participant said, “There is outright discrimination against women among members who reflect society’s views”.

There were reminders as well that violence against women creates very concrete barriers for women and is a reality in many families. One group pointed out, “As an organization we need to recognize that a barrier to involvement could be an abusive relationship at home”.

Negative Image of Unions

Several groups discussed the negative image of unions in the media and other parts of society. They expressed the view that unions are often portrayed as self-interested, ineffective, and confrontational. The dominant view of unions can be a barrier to involvement since there may be little positive approval in the family and community. Some Aboriginal sisters said, “The intensely negative media

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coverage of all unions can make being a union member feel like one is being greedy, which is contrary to Aboriginal values, and this therefore creates a barrier”.

Union Culture and Structures

Union culture and structures were consistently identified as barriers to women’s full participation. The discomfort caused by loud, aggressive, confrontational behaviour at meetings was a common theme in the consultations. Women spoke of the tone and demeanour of union activism, the timing and location of meetings and opaque decision-making processes and rules. There was a marked distaste with the competitive nature of union politics and the manifestation of competition in behaviour. One participant spoke of the “male model of fast-talking, hard language, attack, sarcasm, name-calling. It turns women off or becomes the model to emulate to get ahead.”

A consultation with women of colour said, “Conduct at union meetings is often too assertive or confrontational for women of colour to feel comfortable; such conduct actually creates stress and tension for a lot of women, and particularly for women of colour, so that will keep them away from union involvement”.

Another group said, “In some cases, the culture of the union may act as a deterrent to women’s participation. For example, the

adversarial nature of union work may be a barrier as many women prefer to look at problem solving on a consensual basis rather than through the “win/lose” model.”

Intimidation of Women and New Members

Another said that, “Activists tend to scare new members. There is a fear that you will say the wrong thing.” The word intimidation came up frequently. Women reported feeling afraid to speak or ask questions because they might say something wrong. Some said, “A male, bullying culture often makes women feel like they don’t want to return to meetings. Many simply don’t come back, old boys club. Men even roll their eyes in some meetings when women speak. Many speak in acronyms and don’t think to explain their meaning. They show disdain for new members or newly active members.” This can be an acute problem for young workers. One consultation said, “For younger workers there is a different power struggle between women and men than for the older workers”. In another group, the issues of distrust and exclusion were raised as an issue for young women. They spoke of “Getting involved because they didn’t see any young people at their local level and they feel they have just as much to contribute as other members. They have faced challenges in that members of their local view them as a threat instead of a positive contributor.”

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One woman said she quit one of the committees due to male treatment of her. One group noted that, “Shop Steward meetings are predominantly male and intimidating as well. Men often do not consider or listen to women’s viewpoints.” One woman spoke of “fear of appearing stupid because I do not know enough about the union or its issues, fear of failing, lack of confidence”. Another mentioned the “negativity of union meetings. I don’t want to spend an hour of my time listening to people constantly complaining.” In one consultation the problem with union culture was described as “feeling intimidated by angry, swearing men, fear of union activists because they are so angry, aggressive, confrontational. Chauvinistic remarks, remarks that make a newcomer feel foolish.” These behaviours can have significant impact. One woman said, “Mental abuse can scar you for life. You don’t want to be active after this.”

Many members also felt that there is a lack of recognition for those who do become active in the union. One group said there is a “lack of recognition/acknowledgement in union culture. You don’t know how you’re doing until you screw up.”

Union Meetings Alienate Women

Unspoken and unwritten rules prevent many women from getting involved according to several of the groups. The process of meetings and elections can be difficult to

understand for people trying to get involved and understand the importance of the union. In one group the relevance of the union was questioned, “especially with respect to the way union meetings are held. Women are not attracted to, and don’t see the point, in attending meetings that are boring, not understandable due to terminology and acronyms, characterized by anger, swearing, yelling, unpleasantness, negative.” A participant spoke of “not knowing enough about how the union works to get involved in it. Union protocols can be intimidating and confusing.” Another said, “The jargon and acronyms can be overwhelming for women. It’s as if people are speaking another language.”

Socializing at Union Functions

The informal processes can also define participation. Many members spoke of the kind of socializing connected to meetings such as “meetings over a beer. The way men do business is not always comfortable for women.” In one group there was a discussion about “food being representative of male culture, beer and pizza and the discomfort this causes”. Some participants felt that “men socialize differently than women. Women get together to accomplish something, however men go out to mentor, and participate in social activities.”

The partying culture at conventions and schools was identified as a problem for many

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participants. “Conferences and committee meetings are often accompanied by socializing that might not always seem acceptable for sisters. Wild hospitality rooms, drinking and antics that go on.” Some participants said, “Many women are put off by the drinking culture”. Others mentioned, “Too much liquor and partying at conventions and/or educationals, and not enough time spent on issues are keeping women away”. One group said the party atmosphere means “men are there to pick up women. If women don’t party, then they’re not welcome. Socials are important, but not the way it exists now.”

Time and Location of Union Meetings

For many groups the timing and location of union activities create obstacles to participation. For some large amalgamated locals and many rural locals there are several work-sites represented by one local, and union meetings require significant travel. One group spoke of “travelling long distances to meetings. Even when the location is rotated, it can be a problem with family commitments.” Some members said that “geographic isolation makes it difficult for rural members to participate provincially”. Large geographic health and school regions pose problems for involvement according to

several groups. One group said that members “need a car to get to another town for meetings and it’s too expensive for the local to pay mileage”. In addition, some mentioned that many women are leery of travelling alone. One group said, “Most union meetings and events are held in the evening, making it difficult for many South Asian women to attend”.

Lack of Childcare Support

The discussions around meeting times was very connected to the issue of childcare and dependent care that remains the responsibility of women in most cases. Some members thought that the availability of childcare was critical for the union to function effectively. In some locals there was no childcare available and no reimbursement for childcare costs. In others, there was a lack of awareness. One group said, “Single mothers who are on the lower end of the pay scale might not realize that free babysitting is offered for meetings and to attend workshops”. Evening and weekend meetings were identified as problematic even with the ability to access childcare since women’s family time is often so limited. Several members said that they were reluctant to attend events that require large time commitments when they could be with their families.

Barriers to Women in Leadership

In addition to all the barriers facing women in the community, workplace, and union, there are specific obstacles for women interested in leadership roles. The pressures facing women who may be interested in leadership roles in the union include all those that were raised for women's overall ability to participate in the union.

Excessive Demands and Workload in Union Positions

The union culture of all or nothing means that many women feel that union involvement can swallow them up. There is very little capacity in union structures and culture for involvement that can accommodate balance. One group said, "As you climb the ladder in the union the load gets heavier and heavier". Several groups spoke about the time and energy required to participate actively in the union and the excessive demands that are often placed on leadership positions. In one consultation the members said, "The union workload is as onerous as our employer excessive workload". In another group members said, "Union duties

can be a full time workload on top of job duties. It depletes energy." There is a "volunteer vortex", said another group.

Some members identified "burnout. We overwork our activists while they are stewards and executive members. They never make it to leadership positions." Some members felt that "women have too many other responsibilities to take up union tasks. Often the tasks are all or nothing." Another group said, "The lack of participation, apathy in the union means that people who do volunteer get sucked into a black hole that requires energy". The union can become a third job, said some members, outside of work and home. "Attend one meeting and you are on a committee or three", said one member.

Some groups talked about the perception that activists should be so devoted that they have no room for anything but their union activism. One group said, "The "work until you drop" attitude that is pervasive in many aspects of the union movement which suggests that sisters who take time for family responsibilities are somehow not committed to the union movement".

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Traditional Roles for Women in the Union

Traditional views of women are sometimes replicated in the union and women are clustered in particular positions where there is significant work and limited capacity to participate in decision-making. Several consultations remarked that women in their locals “can be recording secretary or on the education committee, but not negotiations or grievance committee”. In one consultation members said, “Local bylaws are usurped to keep people without power, powerless. Only presidents and the business agents have decision-making abilities. The recording secretary and vice-president have no decision-making rights. These positions are filled by sisters.” One group said, “Being in a leadership role means being political and women do not approach it in the same manner that men do, and they often cannot use the same tactics as men. While a man may be considered forceful and strong, a woman is often labelled as aggressive and shrill in the same situation. Unfairly, women have a fine line to walk if they want to be effective, and this is another area that requires education.”

Women who step outside their traditional roles can face heavy and often sexualized criticism from their communities, their employer, and their brothers and sisters. One group said, “Often sisters have had to fight hard to get to the position they have. They

are very assertive, which can be misinterpreted.” This group also noted, “When a sister is successful there are often negative rumours as to how she made it there”. Another group commented on the dominant social views of women leaders and the negative perceptions that attach to strong women. They said, “When women run for leadership positions they are stepping out of their comfort zones and are often subjected to increased scrutiny and criticism as a result of their gender. This is evident in the media with respect to female leaders in the political sphere.”

Higher Expectations of Women in Leadership

For those women who do achieve leadership positions the demands can be more onerous than those attached to men. These women can be perceived as “superwomen” who can take on limitless work and achieve the impossible. One group had a woman who was the local’s first female president. They said, “There are heavier expectations of women in leadership. There is an expectation that she would fix everything.” Another group said, “Unreasonable expectations on the part of the membership make many women reluctant to get involved; our members need to be educated about this. This is closely related to the need to simply be more respectful with each other as union brothers and sisters.”

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Some groups mentioned that the locals with unpaid presidents were more likely to have women presidents than those with full-time presidents. They said, “Unpaid union presidents, who tend to be women, burn out quickly because of working too hard”. Some members commented that people may be less respectful of a woman president and find it easier to criticize her. Some members said, “We are all socialized to believe that men are stronger and tougher — so better union leaders”.

Backlash to Women’s Equality

The difficulty of moving into leadership positions can be exacerbated by attitudes and structures within the union. In some cases, members spoke about open hostility, unwritten rules, and entrenched loyalties to an “Old Boy’s Club”. They expressed concerns about a backlash to women’s equality concerns and to women’s active and equal participation. One sister said, “There is a certain type of man, with fixed views regarding equality — the union is for them and women have no business in it”.

One group identified “Backlash — often when women get involved they have members who will not deal with them because they are women and some employers refuse to afford women the same level of respect that they would give to male union leaders”.

Several members spoke of the opposition they experience when they raise equality issues. They spoke of the ways that women and other equity seeking groups are silenced and marginalized by these behaviours and attitudes. One group said, “People are reluctant to identify as having a disability for fear of how they will be perceived.” They said there is an “automatic assumption that you will be an ambassador for that group”. Another group talked about “Discrimination and racism among some elected members — causing visible minority folks to feel uncomfortable and as a result don’t often attend meetings or union functions. They are also more apt to turn to management for help because often they don’t feel the union supports them.”

Male Intimidation

Many women said they were intimidated by “discriminatory, chauvinistic attitudes from union brothers and male-dominated management”. Many groups spoke about an “Old Boys Club”. In one group, members said, “Women feel bullied, unappreciated and are afraid to speak up. Men actively prevent women from being in positions of power and even try to kick active women out of the local.” Another consultation said, “Women don’t really have an opportunity to advance as men are holding them back or refusing to move on to make room for women”.

One sister spoke of the inevitable rallies and solidarity support events that are organized at conventions. Very often there are no provisions made for members with disabilities to participate.

In some groups harassment was cited as a systemic problem. Some of these sisters said, “The first step is to acknowledge the existence of harassment even within our own institution. We believe that we have not even reached this starting point for a discussion. The women’s task force cannot let this historic opportunity, to change things, slip away.”

For women of colour, immigrant women, or women with disabilities there is further discrimination. Some members cited the “perception that if you are from a certain culture you would only represent this group”.

Barriers to Women Getting to Conventions

Connected to the problems of male dominated leadership preventing the involvement and advancement of women are the barriers that prevent women from attending conventions where elections take place. One group mentioned, “The process — we need to manoeuvre through the system at the local level just to get to conventions; it’s daunting especially for women where the executive at the local level is not supportive of women”. In some cases this is related to the fact that many locals can only afford to send one member and it is usually the president, who is often a man.

For those women who do try to attend conventions, conferences, or educational schools some felt there were barriers because of the “lack of system to travel to CUPE events/convention/meeting. Women may not have a credit card, need to share hotel rooms.” Others said, “Lots do not want to travel alone for safety reasons. They don’t know where to go. Conventions can be very intimidating.” These concerns include the perception that only some members can participate actively because “the same people continue attending union activities, in particular always executives”. One group said, “Union money is used to send members within the existing “status quo” group to events”.

For women with disabilities, participation in conventions poses particular challenges. One sister spoke of the inevitable rallies and solidarity support events that are organized at conventions. Very often there are no provisions made for members with disabilities to participate. In addition, the informal processes that contribute to advancement in leadership are not available for women with disabilities. Events organized during lunches, outside convention business hours are part of the process of getting elected. “It is at these times that elections for positions often occur. If women cannot attend additional activities due to a barrier, then women will likely not hold leadership positions. It is

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during these extra curricular activities that additional learning, networking, etc. occurs and women must have the opportunity to participate.” A participant said that it is demoralizing to have to continually ask for accommodation. She said she “needs to depend on interpreters or attendants volunteering their time in order to participate in after-hour Convention activities — don’t want to ask anymore”. She says the “assumption is that it is up to the individual members to request accommodation rather than event planners”.

Unwritten Rules Around Elections

Many women said that they face pressure not to challenge male leaders for election. They referred to what they regard as unwritten rules about not challenging incumbents. One group said, “Elections are acclamations. There is an unwritten rule against challenging incumbents.” Another said, “Backroom deals decide who’s running”. They spoke of a “glass ceiling” that women can’t get beyond. Others said that decisions are made before meetings even take place, including at National Convention. One group said, “Things are predetermined before going to National so why even vote”.

The meeting processes used are very formal, confusing, confrontational and intimidating. Many members spoke about the limits of parliamentary procedure and Roberts’ Rules of Order. In some groups members reported

that the local president tells them who to vote for at conventions, councils, and in local meetings.

In addition, some consultations felt that union leadership positions are held too long by the same people. They said, “Paid positions are filled by brothers. Sisters feel that they cannot go up against the established brothers.” They felt that executive members held on to their positions and were unwilling to make room for new people and that “bylaws support continuation of who gets to go where”. One group said that it can be risky, “running or speaking against a long-term president/leadership. If you run, you are then a target and there is backlash towards you.” Several consultations expressed the view that cliques are running the union. One group said, “Local executive members are closely knit and don’t let new people in”.

Training and Skills Development

Some consultations said that lack of training and skills development inhibits women’s ability to pursue leadership positions. They suggested that women are sometimes nervous about speaking at microphones, uncomfortable and unfamiliar with meeting procedures, reticent about public speaking and worried that they’ll make mistakes. “Lack of knowledge and assertiveness is a barrier”, said one group. Another group said, “Many women don’t see that they could do

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the union work. There is a lack of education, lack of confidence.” In one consultation a woman said, “I feel I can lead at a local level, but what makes me so powerful? I’m terrified to get to convention. Where do we find the knowledge, skills and energy to do it?”

Disagreement That Barriers Exist

It is important to point out that in some groups that the Task Force members met with, the members expressed the view that they do not see any barriers and that there is no need for action to address women’s equality issues within the union. They expressed frustration with the attention these issues receive and felt that women just have to “work their way through the ranks”.

Some members strongly disagree that there are particular barriers faced by women and questioned the need for the Task Force. Both

men and women expressed these opinions. One sister said, “As a woman, I feel that we have the power and tools at hand to utilize advancement in CUPE and all have the opportunity to use them. We are a “union”, doesn’t that mean we are all equal?” She said, “No one person or group should be singled out for any special treatment”. One group said, “There are no gender barriers — perceived or otherwise”. They said, “Barriers exist across both genders”. They also felt that some barriers are self-induced. Several sisters and brothers felt that if women want to participate actively and take on leadership positions they face no barriers.

Although these attitudes were present in many of the groups, the majority of the groups did identify barriers for women in the union as well as concrete solutions to address the barriers.

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Solutions to Make Our Union Stronger

There were literally hundreds and hundreds of suggestions about what could be done to address the barriers faced by CUPE women. Clearly there are larger social and political issues that may be outside CUPE's ability to control, but not outside our ability to pressure and influence. One group said, "Women need equality at home and at work and this will require deep-rooted social change — CUPE could become involved in social campaigns around women's issues, not unlike what we do around elections".

However, there are also many suggestions that are within CUPE's capacity to address and the members who participated in these consultations have put them forward.

Improve Women's Lives Through Collective Bargaining

Many groups talked about changes to collective agreements to introduce or strengthen provisions that will improve women's lives in the workplace and in the community. According to one group we need to "negotiate better

collective agreement language that supports union activism".

The economic pressures faced by so many women members have to be addressed through collective bargaining for secure, well paid, permanent jobs with benefits and pensions. Many members said, "Make women's issues a priority in bargaining (better wages, maternity top-ups, personal time, relief workers)". One group suggested that we find ways to make employers accountable for the workload pressures they create when they are understaffed. They said, "Negotiate a provision that makes the employer put all wages generated by not replacing staff while on union leave into a special account to fund educational, professional development activities". Another group said, "Focus on contract language which will provide some security for women with respect to hours of work, flex time and personal leave provisions".

One group said, "There was a feeling that if CUPE is able to assist the members in terms of improving some of the workplace problems then perhaps there would be more participation in the union, as people would

“There was a feeling that if CUPE is able to assist the members in terms of improving some of the workplace problems then perhaps there would be more participation in the union, as people would see the union as having made an improvement in their daily lives.”

see the union as having made an improvement in their daily lives and also, they would not be feeling so stressed and burned out”. One group suggested that we should “achieve in bargaining better language for relief or casual workers to accrue seniority”. Another said, “Bargain caps on part-time hours; create full-time positions”. Benefits for young workers was identified as a definite need. One group said we “Need better collective agreement language for reserve flight attendants who are generally younger”.

Several groups said recognition of family responsibilities and other family-friendly language should be a bargaining priority to improve women’s lives. Many said that we need better union release language with replacement time in our collective agreements. Some members said we need to focus on “contract language that provides better union leave and replacement provisions. This needs to be coordinated and its importance as a barrier to involvement needs to be recognized.”

Challenge the Negative Perception of Unions

Several groups spoke about challenging the negative view of unions that persists in society. The idea that union work is narrow and self-serving, that unions are confrontational and negative was identified as a barrier and some suggested a concerted public

relations campaign to challenge these views. Many members talked about the ways union involvement has improved their lives and what it has meant to them. One sister said, “I learned so much from the union movement that I would have never learned from the employer and I am thankful for that — what an opportunity for learning!” She commented that since her retirement she has missed “the camaraderie of the union sisters and brothers who work together for effective change for everyone in the union movement”.

Some groups spoke of the importance of working in communities to better conditions for everyone. One consultation suggested the union “should take on other issues such as “greater good” social issues as well as working with the local community to tackle general social issues”. A consultation with young members said we “Need to change the image and perception of unions as power hungry, greedy, self-interested”. Another group of young workers suggested we “Attend labour schools and talk to young members about labour history”.

Some town hall meetings with women of colour and Aboriginal women suggested that work in community coalitions is key to challenging these views. “Creation of community-based alliances and coalitions would create a greater comfort level for a lot of women, who may feel (or come from families who express the view) that unions are negative, self-

“Creation of community-based alliances and coalitions would create a greater comfort level for a lot of women, who may feel that unions are negative, self-serving institutions. When unions are seen as part of the community, women feel more comfortable.”

serving institutions. When unions are seen as part of the community, women feel more comfortable.” Another group suggested that CUPE should “Offer wider workshops that other groups would also be interested in participating in that would help bridge gaps between groups and reach out to other groups”.

The pushback against unions and against equality rights are connected and some participants argued that CUPE has a role to play in promoting the positive role of unions and the requirement for equality rights to be respected and promoted. Some members said, “We need to name what’s going on with women and with members from equity seeking groups. Opposition forces are much more open in pushing back now. We need to be more vocal and brave.” Another groups said, “We have to talk about the facts of today — women face discrimination and it’s systemic. Women of equity seeking groups face even more barriers. That’s the truth. We cannot shy away from the discussion. We need to be provocative.”

Bylaw Changes to Support Women’s Participation

Many participants addressed bylaw and constitutional changes. Issues around reimbursement for participating in events were raised many times. Many participants felt that there should be consistent, fair, trans-

parent reimbursement policies including advance payments for expenses and per diems. Some suggested that there should be a national position on lost wages. Payment for childcare and dependent care expenses was raised frequently as a necessity for women’s involvement. Several members suggested that the national union should “circulate model bylaw language that addresses the real issues around providing a practical dependent care policy in locals”.

Many groups also discussed the issues of balancing the diverse obligations that many women have. One consultation suggested, “Getting unions to promote work/life balance through collective bargaining. For example, family leave provisions and flexible working hours.”

Constitutional Changes to Ensure Women’s Participation

Many participants suggested that there should be bylaw changes to allow for job-sharing executive positions. Another frequently raised suggestion was for term limits on leadership positions and mechanisms such as designated seats to ensure fair representation. Some suggested more full-time officers for the national union with guaranteed gender parity. Others promoted the idea of mandating the numbers of women on committees, executives and the National Executive Board. One group said we need

*“We need proportional representation
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at all levels of the union.”*

“proportional representation with targets and timetables to ensure women’s participation at all levels of the union”. Another group said we need “Bylaws that provide a gender balance with representation for women leaders”. This suggestion was repeated in a variety of ways with targets between 60 and 80% to reflect women’s numbers in the union.

The need for all our bylaws, the constitution, and all CUPE documents to be written in clear, gender-neutral language was expressed in many of the consultations.

Reform Union Meetings

The experience of union meetings generated a lot of discussion in many of the consultations and there were many ideas about how to make the meetings more productive and enjoyable. One group said, “Hold union meetings that are more respectful, welcoming, less long-winded, less negative, and well-run, following Rules of Order”. Another said, “Make meetings less formal, less complicated”. There were suggestions that more relevant topics, less formality and more skilled facilitators or chairs would improve meetings. “Learning how to run effective meetings that will engage people is key. It has got to be a pleasant experience to attend a union meeting.” Several participants made the point that “meetings need to change — shorter agendas, more flexible times, more accessible locations, workplace visits, provision of childcare, etc.”.

There were several suggestions about meeting times and locations including rotation of times, days, and locations. Several members advocated fewer and shorter meetings, more going out to members and meeting them in the workplace. One group said, “Because of pressure not to leave the home in the evening, it would be helpful if more union meetings could be held during the workday, maybe at lunch periods”.

Provide Food at Meetings

There were many suggestions about how to make meetings more inclusive. Many members talked about providing food at meetings or after meetings. Several women felt that these issues have significant impact on how welcome and included they feel. Some said, “Be attentive to visuals and food and how these are experienced by women to ensure they do not reflect culture of ‘old boys club’”.

Provision of Childcare at Union Meetings

Some groups said we should “encourage members to bring children to meetings, not just provide childcare”. They suggested both onsite childcare at general meetings and reimbursement of receipted childcare expenses. One group made a specific suggestion about how to include children. “The municipal meetings are held in a recreation centre and there is a gym that could be used

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for the children of members while the union meeting is being conducted. Women felt that if the play was supervised they would be more likely to attend a meeting and bring the children.” Another group said, “Allow children at meetings, including executive meetings, local activities. ‘Children welcome’ needs to be explicit.”

Many groups suggested that attention needs to be paid to the issue of caring for other dependents as well. One group said, “Elder care allowances should be considered by unions for the same reasons as child care allowances”.

Orientation to Conventions

In addressing convention meetings, participants suggested different ways to make conventions less alienating, not only for women but also for all first time delegates. One group said, “Explain processes and practices more clearly at convention. Follow procedure, explain what a resolution is.” Another suggested “caucus at conventions should be more of a social event to make it more inviting for newcomers and sisters. Having a breakfast meeting for new members would be a good idea while providing them with some knowledge of what conventions are like.” Another group suggested, “Division executives and NEB must mandate and have set up a women’s caucus at every convention. Find a good woman to keep the caucus

going all convention.” One group would like “a first delegate laminated sheet with a single explanation of the process of the meeting”.

A group of Aboriginal members strongly supported, “clear, brief union communications about what is happening”. They suggested that it should always be in point form. Another group suggested, “Event planners should have a checklist and should include members of our workers with disabilities committees when checking out facilities”. Some members felt strongly that the onus should be on the union to ensure accessibility. They said, “The question should be “Do you need this accessibility measure?” Not always expecting the member to request it.”

Education and Training for Women

Education, training and mentorship were identified consistently as key to addressing the barriers facing CUPE women.

There was major support for mentorship programs including job shadowing, buddy programs and other ways of supporting women to take on the responsibilities of involvement and leadership. One sister said, “It was other women in my local that encouraged me to become involved”. She said, “I was so excited to learn that the union was promoting equality for women and wanted to do some changes in my local!”.

“In the end it all goes back to mentoring. Older women need to take on the younger ones to bring them up through the ranks.”

One group felt that mentoring will take a concrete commitment throughout the union. They said, “It is going to take time and a lot of work on the part of the leaders. There needs to be a mentorship to help women to be ready for these positions.” This group said, “In the end it all goes back to mentoring. Older women need to take on the younger ones to bring them up through the ranks. Some older women are holding back the information — “I made it, I earned my stripes and it made me stronger. Now you do the same.” Power is knowledge. There is a lack of willingness to teach.” One group suggested, “Women who have reached positions of leadership could share some of their experiences and let others know how they overcame any difficulties. Perhaps role models could speak at special union meetings for those that are interested in moving forward. Knowing what others have gone through can be a great incentive to empowering women. It certainly worked for me when I attended various women’s conferences, especially international ones.”

Some groups suggested that we need more women staff in CUPE who can then be role models and assist in the mentoring of women activists. One group said that we “need more mentoring and overlap between executive members so that the new presidents can be appropriately trained by outgoing presidents. Also it would be helpful to have staff reps work alongside presidents during the initial period.”

Several groups spoke about the need for more women staff but also for staff from equity seeking groups. One group said, “CUPE needs a recruitment strategy at all levels and a resourced mentoring programme — for leaders and staff”. A group of Aboriginal members suggested an Aboriginal communications liaison person in every local that has Aboriginal members. They said that “this human communication is crucial to getting our Aboriginal members involved in the union”.

Training in assertiveness and public speaking in particular were mentioned many times. Also, orientation and training in parliamentary procedure was identified as critical. One group said, “Develop courses such as a toolkit for women activists which would include modules on public speaking, parliamentary procedure, assertiveness training, etc.”.

Many members spoke of the frustration of having courses cancelled and felt that a priority has to be placed on education, even when the numbers are low. Many felt that educational schools could be held during the week and it would be easier for women to participate. One group suggested, “Hold courses in more rural locals so that more women can attend without having to leave home overnight. This will mean holding courses regardless of low registration numbers.”

“Develop courses such as a toolkit for women activists which would include modules on public speaking, parliamentary procedure, assertiveness training, etc.”

There were also specific suggestions for educational topics that would be helpful. Many of the current courses such as Women Breaking Barriers and Facing Management were cited as examples and there were ideas for more education on such topics as dealing with difficult management, women’s activism in unions, and workshops for women on how to be a local president. One group said, “Provide basic training to women (and members) on how to write a motion, how to chair a meeting, how to lobby, how to organize”. Another group said there should be “Courses for activists, to educate them on what members with disabilities need and help them value all people for who they are”.

Several groups suggested a specific education program for women’s leadership. Some suggested a formal leadership development program with resources attached. One group suggested that there should be a concerted attempt to reach out and identify women for the program. They felt that the usual requirement of having a history of union activity should be changed since it would reduce the number of women who could participate. They also suggested that “Part of the program would be time spent with various union leaders — for example, one week with a vice-president, one week with a president, one week with a secretary. Doing that will show what is involved — it’s not a mystery and something that women can learn to do.”

Several also suggested that education should be targeted to first-time participants with specific scholarships for women attending workshops and schools for the first time. This was identified as a specific requirement to involve young women. One group said, “Sponsor young women to get them involved. A sponsorship program would have a positive impact on young workers.” Some participants suggested that the amount available for scholarships needs to be increased; “provide sisters in our locals with more access to scholarships and this should include not only a higher amount of scholarships but also an avenue to access the scholarships. That is, if you don’t know they exist, how will you take advantage of them.” One group suggested an education fund “specifically earmarked for women, should be in place across the province and/or country. This would allow women to work toward potentially better wages and to gain self-confidence.”

Orientation Kit for New Members

Many groups talked about the need for an orientation package for new members that explains the history of CUPE, the accomplishments, the structures, how to get involved, how to run for office, and how to get elected, in clear, practical terms. “Get a new members’ welcoming kit. Explain the *raison d’être* of a union. New members don’t

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know the past of the labour movement and the gains the union has made for the workers over the years.” This suggestion was repeated several times. Some others said, “Education is key — education about the union and its successes; education about how to run a meeting effectively so as to be inclusive and welcoming, but still get business done”.

Challenging the Union Culture and Harassment

Members had a lot to say about the union’s culture and practices and ways that they could be improved. They promoted changes that could improve behaviour and suggested that disrespectful behaviour be subject to consequences. Ombudspersons for every region and harassment committees were some ideas discussed. Having Equality staff in every province was a suggestion.

There was talk of how to use the Equality Statement more effectively and discussion about how to enforce it. One group said that a “statement should be made at educationals and conventions that drinking and partying excessively will not be tolerated and those not participating should be asked to leave”. Another said, “Educate and train union staff in cultural and gender sensitivity. If they don’t learn, don’t hire them. We don’t need CUPE’s future to be bleak and to continue discrimination and ignorance.”

For sisters who experience harassment in their locals there were recommendations for a special committee to deal with harassment processes and procedures. They proposed, “That CUPE establish an ad hoc committee to study and develop a fair and equitable complaint process for dealing with harassment. This committee will have a mandate to analyse what is done elsewhere and to bring back, to CUPE, the ideal process for us. This process must include CUPE’s accountability and remedies for the victims.”

Make Union Work Less Demanding

With respect to the overwhelming nature of union work there was support for allowing people to enter into union activism with less of a “sink or swim” approach. One group said, “Allow members to do the small job they accepted, being supportive and not expecting more which leads to disappointment and burnout”. Another group said, “There is a need to communicate with members about reasonable expectations. The staff reps and presidents can’t do it all.”

Since the issue of burn out is closely related to the heavy amount of voluntarism associated with many of the locals where women are in leadership one group suggested that “CUPE needs to assist locals in their campaigns for full-time presidents (ie. research to support the benefits of dues increases to provide for paid, full-time presidents)”.

*“Systems and processes in CUPE
need to be re-examined to be made
more transparent, accessible, so that the ‘game’
can be played more fairly and will include everyone.”*

Many members in the consultations were looking for recognition of their contributions and said, “CUPE at all levels should acknowledge good work in both big and small ways. Those in leadership positions should be trained that acknowledging good work by others is not a threat to their own work.”

Transparent Rules and Practices

The unwritten rules that so many spoke about were discussed. Many thought that transparency would help. One group sug-

gested, “Put unwritten rules in writing. Turn them into policy. Make it transparent.” Another said, “Systems and processes in CUPE need to be re-examined to be made more transparent, accessible, so that the ‘game’ can be played more fairly and will include everyone”. Many felt that more transparency would lead to more women contesting elections and putting themselves forward for leadership positions. One group suggested that we need a guide “to explain union structure and how elections happen and work”.

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that will engage people is key.
It has got to be a pleasant experience
to attend a union meeting.”*

Conclusion

The consultations of the National Women's Task Force have been one of the most extensive consultations ever conducted by our union, and they reached not only activists, but also many of our less active members who do not attend provincial or national CUPE events. We also heard from many members who often feel they have no voice.

The National Women's Task Force will review and analyze all the comments, suggestions and proposals that emerged from the face-to-face consultations, along with the results of two surveys (a survey of CUPE members and a survey of local unions in CUPE). Through its discussions, the Task Force will identify key areas for action and develop recommendations to the union.

Appendix A

National Women's Task Force List of Face-to-Face Consultations with CUPE Members, 2006

Region	Total # of Consultations	Communities Reached	Total # of Women	Total # of Men	Total
B.C.	30	24	279	21	300
Alberta	37	9	220	70	321
Saskatchewan	18	13	98	13	131
Manitoba	10	7	264	77	341
Ontario	39	23	274	35	384
Quebec	6	5	184	29	213
N.B.	11	11	71	0	71
N.S.	10	9	95	5	100
P.E.I.	6	3	40	0	40
N.L.	3	3	36	0	36
National	9	3	55	26	81
Airline	14	8	32	1	33
HEU	3	3	43	0	43
TOTALS	196	121	1,691	277	2,266*

**Grand total of women plus men does not equal total participants as breakdown not always available.*

Note: This list covers the face-to-face consultations the NWTF held but does not include the dozens of presentations made by Task Force members that reached thousands of CUPE members.

Appendix B

List of Communities Where NWT Held Consultations

Amherst, NS	Denare Beach/ Flin Flon, SK/MB	Medicine Hat, AB	Richmond, BC
Antigonish, NS	Edmonton, AB	Miramichi, NB	Saguenay, QC
Baie Verte, NF	Edmundston, NB	Mississauga, ON	Salmon Arm, BC
Barrie, ON	Edson, AB	Moncton, NB	Saskatoon, SK
Bathurst, NB	Fort McMurray, AB	Montreal, QC	Sault Ste. Marie, ON
Belleville, ON	Fraserwood, MB	Moose Jaw, SK	Smithers, BC
Brandon, MB	Fredericton, NB	Moosomin, SK	St. John, NB
Bridgetown, PE	Grand Falls, NF	Nanaimo, BC	St. Stephen, NB
Bridgewater, NS	Halifax, NS	Nanaimo/Malaspina, BC	Sudbury, ON
Bruce Mines, ON	Haliburton, ON	New Glasgow, NS	Summerside, PE
Burnaby, BC	Inkerman, NB	North Battleford, SK	Surrey, BC
Calgary, AB	Kamloops, BC	North Bay, ON	Swift Current, SK
Campbell River, BC	Kelowna, BC	Ottawa, ON	Sydney, NS
Castlegar, BC	Kenora/Fort Frances, ON	Oxbow, SK	The Pas, MB
Charlottetown, PE	Kindersley, SK	Penticton, BC	Timmins, ON
Chéticamp, NS	Kingston, ON	Peterborough, ON	Toronto, ON
Chilliwack, BC	Laval, QC	Petrolia, ON	Vancouver, BC
City of Kawartha Lakes, ON	Leduc, AB	Port Hardy, BC	Vaughan, ON
Cobourg, ON	Lethbridge, AB	Portage la Prairie, MB	Victoria, BC
Coquitlam, BC	Lindsay, ON	Powell River, BC	Waskesiu, SK
Courtenay, BC	Liverpool, NS	Prince Albert, SK	Westlock, AB
Cranbrook, BC	London, ON	Prince George, BC	Weyburn, SK
Creston, BC	Lumsden, SK	Prince Rupert, BC	Whitby, ON
Crows Nest Pass, AB	Mackenzie, BC	Quebec City, QC	Windsor, ON
Dalhousie, NB	Markham, ON	Red Deer, AB	Winnipeg, MB
Dauphin, MB	Marystown, NF	Regina, SK	Woodstock, NB
Dawson Creek, BC		Richibucto, NB	Yarmouth, NS
			Yellowknife, NT
			Yorkton, SK

Appendix C

Members of the National Women's Task Force

Newfoundland and Labrador

Donna Ryan, CUPE Local 488
Lynn McDougall, National Representative

Nova Scotia

Barbara Moore, CUPE Local 3912 (Co-Chair)
Elizabeth Borden-Paris, CUPE Local 2330
Jacquie Bramwell, National Representative

New Brunswick

Odette Robichaud, CUPE Local 1840
Danielle Savoie, National Representative

Prince Edward Island

Donalda MacDonald, CUPE Local 1770
(NEB Member)

Quebec

Lucie Levasseur, CUPE Local 2051
Annick Desjardins, Equality Representative

Ontario

Candace Rennick, CUPE Local 2280
(NEB Member)
Helen Kennedy, CUPE Local 79
Joanne Martin, National Representative

Manitoba

Arlene Macklem, CUPE Local 998
Maureen Morrison, Equality Representative

Saskatchewan

Hitomi Suzuta, CUPE Local 2419
Geraldine Harris, CUPE Local 3967
Elaine Ehman, National Representative

Alberta

Shelina Hassanali, CUPE Local 4731
Marie Boyd-Robinson, National
Representative

British Columbia

Sheryl Burns, CUPE Local 1936
Conni Kilfoil, Equality Representative

HEU

Donisa Bernardo, CUPE-HEU Local 6014
Margi Blamey, HEU

Airline

Cidalia Ribeiro, CUPE Local 4092
Marilyne White, National Representative

Coordinator

Cheryl Stadnichuk, Research Representative

National President

Paul Moist (Co-Chair)

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