

Pay Equity, organizing key to reducing racialized poverty

A renewed focus on pay equity, increasing the minimum wage and organizing racialized workers in key sectors like home care are critical to reducing poverty, according to panel speakers at the 2007 Canadian Union of Public Employee (CUPE) Ontario's Human Rights Conference.

As Ontario marks the 20th anniversary of its Pay Equity law, lawyer and advocate Mary Cornish told delegates to CUPE Ontario's Human Rights Conference that much more needs to be done before more women are forced to retire in poverty. The Equal Pay Coalition, of which she is a member, is looking to partners like CUPE Ontario to help hold the Ontario government accountable for enforcing the law with employers.

"It's not just about whether organizations can afford to pay for equity. We must get at the prejudice and racialization that is part of the undervaluation of work," said Cornish. "Women earn 29% less than men; however, the pay gap is even larger for racialized women, many of whom are minimum wage workers."

Cornish said that increasing the minimum wage now is like a down payment on pay equity. "It's one way of starting to close the equity gap while we grapple with the larger issues of pay equity compliance," she said.

Kelly O'Sullivan, President of CUPE 4308 and 3896, reviewed the grim conditions under which personal support workers in the home care sector struggle to make a living. The government has set their wages at \$12.15 per hour. Workers must travel between jobs, and make themselves available for 12 to 14 hours daily in order to get maybe six to seven hours of work. They have few or no benefits and no pensions.

"This sector is a poverty ghetto. Ninety percent are women and over 80% are racialized. The only hope for these women is to unionize," said O'Sullivan. She noted that, of 10,000 workers in the sector, 6,500 have yet to be organized.

John Argue, Coordinator of the Ontario Coalition for Social Justice, said that his organization and partners like CUPE Ontario are seeing some success in fighting poverty. "The \$10 minimum wage campaign, the fight to get more money for school boards and the Vote Out Poverty campaign, which forced the McGuinty government to develop a poverty reduction strategy, are all hopeful signs of change," he said.