



Tackling misinformation: a Q&A factsheet from CUPE Ontario

A lot of misinformation was circulated before and since the actions on September 20, 2023, when a group calling itself the “1 Million March 4 Children” held anti-trans demonstrations across the country.

Out of our experience as trade unionists, parents, and community members involved in the counter-protests to those demonstrations, CUPE Ontario has produced a combined Q&A factsheet. The contents can serve as talking points for local leaders, staff, or anyone who wants to answer questions from members (or others) about the labour movement’s role in the counter-protests and beyond.

The actions on September 20 were very divisive; why would a union pick one side over another?

Unions do not exist to be neutral. In fact, our movement was created to support one group over another: workers over bosses. Yes, unions exist to improve the material conditions of their members by negotiating better wages and benefits; we also bargain collectively for safer workplaces, language that protects workers against discrimination and harassment, and many other important matters. We choose “sides” because we care about workers as whole people – not only about their economic well being, but also about their safety at work and in their communities. This is particularly true for CUPE as a public sector union, since the work of our members provides the public services that everyone relies on.

Why was my union involved in the counter-protests on and around September 20?

The entire labour movement stands behind the actions taken by unions participating in counter-protests on September 20, and our involvement is based on democratic decision-making.

The Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) is the umbrella organization for the entire labour movement in Canada. At the CLC’s convention in May 2023, delegates unanimously passed several resolutions, including an emergency resolution about defending trans rights and fighting hate against 2SLGBTQI+ people. The resolution included the establishment of anti-hate “flying squads” to support the important work being done to fight hate in communities.

Just a few weeks later, similar resolutions were passed at CUPE Ontario’s convention, and they specifically called on us to participate in the anti-hate flying squads.

But our support of the counter-protests is about more than our resolutions. Unions were created to give a voice to the voiceless by representing workers and negotiating with their bosses in order to fight for justice collectively. But none of us exists in isolation. We are all part of families and workplaces and communities and societies, so unions will always choose to fight hate that destroys communities, makes workplace unsafe, and endangers workers.

Why is CUPE the only union concerned about trans rights for students?

We aren't. Yes, CUPE has a proud history of fighting hate and discrimination in all its forms and CUPE members in Ontario elected the first openly gay president to represent them. But as described above, the entire labour movement stands behind the actions of counter-protesters.

Unions bargain wages – period. Trans rights for young people have nothing to do with unions; why doesn't the union stay in its lane?

Unions exist to improve the lives of members. We do that primarily through improvements to wages and benefits, working conditions and workplace safety, but also by advocating for such things as stronger public services and human rights protection. As a union, we know that the forces that want to repress our rights as workers are the same ones that want to divide us and our communities. That's why CUPE and all unions are vocal on a wide array of issues, like affordability, strong public services, and human rights. We stand by our commitment to our public services remaining accessible by being safe and equitable.

We care about our members, their families and their communities and we build solidarity to win improvements for them. So when any group tries to divide us and divide our communities – when they try to spread hate, splinter us into factions, and endanger youth with their lies -- it is absolutely a union issue to fight back against it.

Why are you fighting parents?

These protests are called by, funded by, and sponsored by organized, longstanding hate groups, or "concerned parents." The people behind the 1 Million March 4 Children are the very same people behind other manifestations of far-right ideology, like protests against immigration, the yellow-vest movement, and the convoy. This has been documented extensively by groups like Press Progress and the Centre on Hate, Bias and Extremism.

We saw an example of this kind of organization at protest at a North York high school on September 22. The event was organized by "Billboard Chris" – a professional full-time hate peddler from BC – and was designed to draw media attention for him and PPC's Maxime Bernier, who turned up for a quick hit of self-promotion.

CUPE Ontario members and staff witnessed their actions: both these hate-protest organizers recorded a few quick videos for themselves, gave quotes to a couple of reporters, then they took off. They left behind a small group of angry protesters to yell at high school students, neighbourhood residents, and counter-protesters.

Why would CUPE be against concerned parents?

Unfortunately, there are people – including CUPE members – who have been duped into thinking their kids are in danger in our schools. This fear is based on lies that have been circulated about the Ontario curriculum and it is meant to enlist parents into this wider far-right hate movement. We must engage with those who have been fooled into believing dangerous lies and we must educate them about the actual contents of the Ontario curriculum and about what rights for trans kids really means.

Those who are putting memes up, spreading lies, and fuelling hate are not "concerned parents." They are the same right-wing organizers who ramp up opposition to immigration, who fuel Islamophobia, and spread misinformation about vaccination. They organized the convoy in Ottawa last winter and efforts like 1 Million March 4 Children is their latest attempt to build hate. That's why we must see their message for what it is and why we must resist it.

But parents are worried – shouldn't they have a say?

If parents are worried, it's because they hear and believe lies about what's in the school curriculum. "Gender ideology" is not being taught in our schools and there is no "trans component" of the math curriculum – yet these lies and others are being spread by hate groups on social media.

Such lies are there to play on the love parents have for their children, and exploit the reality that too many people still don't understand anything about what it is to be gay or trans. The simple reality is, you can't make someone into something they are not.

We can help educate parents who believe that their children are at risk of being made into something they aren't, but we can't let them victimize a minority of students because of a concern that is based on ignorance, misinformation and distortion.

If there are parents who have lent their support to these hate groups, we encourage them to take a closer look at who the groups' leaders are and how they are funded and resourced.

What about parents' rights to have a say over what their kids learn?

In Canada, parents already have the right to exempt their children from sex ed/health classes. Not that denying students sex education is a good idea – kids need that support and knowledge, and they need to receive information from credible sources. It's been proven in study after study that problems like teen pregnancy, deaths by suicide among young people, and STD infections all decrease dramatically when young people are empowered by knowledge about their sexual health.

Still, if a parent prefers to keep their kids out of sex education in school, they can make that choice. However, the Ontario curriculum is developed by the Ministry of Education and no parent is allowed to dictate what *all* kids learn, nor can they demand that some people's lives be erased. And that's what it would mean if schools never spoke about 2SLGBTQI+ lives.

Isn't Fred Hahn pushing his own agenda around "1 Million March 4 Children"?

Fred is the elected leader of CUPE Ontario. As such he is duty bound by our constitution to carry out the democratic will of the membership. Members voted for CUPE Ontario to join actively with the rest of the labour movement in fighting against 2SLGBTQI+ hate.

Why is CUPE Ontario President Fred Hahn so vocal on this issue?

The foundation of the lies being used here is that young people can be convinced to change who they really are. Here is a reply from Fred himself:

"I was raised in a working-class Catholic family in rural Ontario. Every book I read, every song on the radio, every movie I watched was a product of the straight world. Every person in my family and everyone I knew was straight. I wasn't, and I knew I wasn't.

I was picked on and bullied mercilessly at school. There was a time when, if I could have changed who I was, sadly I would have. And yet here I am – a proud gay man – despite all the forces that told me, pushed me, showed me that I don't or shouldn't exist. The same is true today -- no one can turn a young person into anything they are not."

Isn't Fred Hahn is a gay man who is using the resources of CUPE inappropriately for his pet project and/or to groom young people?

Fred Hahn is a proud gay man and provincial president of CUPE, the largest public sector union in Canada. He has a long a proud track record of defending workers' rights -- on picket lines, in the courts, and in the streets with coalition partners.

When Fred attends demonstrations, as he has of late, he is doing exactly what he was instructed to do by delegates who represented the members of CUPE Ontario.

CUPE Ontario, like other parts of the labour movement, is a democratic institution and governed by democratic principles. Its annual convention is the highest decision-making body in CUPE Ontario. At its May 2023 convention, delegates passed resolutions that directed the union to form anti-hate flying squads and fight hate and misinformation about queer and trans people, to defend drag story times and to redouble our efforts to ensure our members are not sucked in by lies. These resolutions were brought forward by municipal workers, library workers and school board workers.

These resolutions have been put into action, and we anticipate CUPE Ontario members will continue to see their leaders and members in action in this capacity, fighting the attempts to spread hate in our communities.

Why would right-wing extremists try to get ordinary people to join a “phony war” about trans rights?

The labour movement has a proud history, not just of standing up for workers, but of defending human rights and tackling hate and discrimination. If we are going to achieve our goals as working people, we don't have the luxury of being divided from one another – we have to stand together.

One of the greatest challenges that the 1 Million March 4 Children poses to our movement is the toll it has taken on our time, energy and resources. But its real victory would be in creating lasting damage to the solidarity we have as workers.

If you've spent any time on social media, you'll have seen the meme “They got you fighting a culture war to stop you from fighting a class war” – meaning that, while we've spent time fighting anti-trans hate, corporations have kept profiteering, CEOs have kept paying themselves tens of millions a year, and Doug Ford's PCs have kept favouring their wealthy cronies at the expense of ordinary folks.

Meanwhile, our attention has been diverted from the affordability crisis, the rent and housing crisis, the climate crisis, and the multiple crises in health care, education, our municipalities, and long-term care – the things that truly affect our members.

Right-wing extremists want to divide working people, and keep us distracted and arguing with one another, so that we don't take on the people and issues that we should be taking on. We can't let them succeed.