



CUPE BC 2022 CONVENTION WOMEN'S COMMITTEE REPORT

The CUPE BC Women's Committee acknowledges that the work of the committee takes place in our province of British Columbia and on the homelands of 203 distinct Indigenous nations and cultures, with over 30 different languages and close to 60 unique dialects spoken in the province. We ask all participants to reflect, acknowledge and honour in their own way the First Nation land on which they live, work and play.

Over the next two years of our term, the CUPE BC Women's Committee is committed to building the membership capacity and participation necessary to work towards the elimination of barriers faced by, and encouraging the participation of, cis or trans women in our union generally and in CUPE education particularly. This includes identifying opportunities for succession planning and creating safe spaces as well as advancing women's rights to allow for women to develop and become leaders in our union.

The CUPE BC Women's Committee met for the OBCM, on October 20th, 2021, where we established ourselves as a new committee, with our chair, Sheryl Burns, co-chair, Patricia Skalozub, and Tara Box, recording secretary. We also established our plan for building our committee through action. The Committee met further on November 4th, 2021 and January 17th, 2022, and welcomed young worker appointee, Sister Bridget Barker, during the January meeting.

Education

CUPE 5523's newly appointed Women's Committee, chaired by sister Kim Doucette, gathered at their local union office on March 8th, International Women's Day, to participate in a webinar entitled "Women's Health & Safety in the Workplace".

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The webinar recognizes that all workers face health and safety issues at work, injuries, workplace hazards, diseases, and stress. Many of these issues have a gender dimension - they affect women in particular ways. This webinar gave an overview of the challenges women face in the workplace and ways to take action that address ongoing inequities.

In Our Communities

On October 3rd, 2021, Women's Committee representatives attended the *Red Dress Vigil* to honor the MMIWG2S+ (Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, Two Spirit and Non-Binary People). This event was held at Bear Creek Park in Surrey, BC and co-organized by Debra Merrier, a Metro area Regional Vice-President, and HEU. Debra Merrier provided powerful testimony of the impact of the missing and murdered Indigenous Women and Girls on her life and the lives of other Indigenous people.

Representatives of the Women's Committee also attended December 6th vigils across British Columbia to commemorate *The National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women*, in honour of the 14 women killed in the L'École Polytechnique Massacre in 1989.

Sister Harjit commemorated International Women's Day on March 8th, in Fort St. James with a very touching gesture of personally distributing 100 roses (donated by Save On Foods) to all women at the elementary and secondary schools. Flowers were also distributed to Fireweed Safe Haven to support and enlighten their members on this special day. We must remember in our hearts to continue to support and empower vulnerable women to stand up and fight for gender equality and break the bias.

Indigenous Activities

Red Dresses and Allyship by Shelley Saje Ricci and Theresa Pidcock

Shelley and Theresa, both from CUPE 728, Surrey Schools and members of the CUPE BC Women's Committee collaborated to share how active allyship within union systems can work to bring awareness and commemoration of the MMIWG2S+.

Along with their local, and their work on the CUPE BC Women's Committee, Shelley as an Indigenous Activist and Theresa as an Active Ally began working together to create awareness and explore how they can make a difference using the tools and structures of union activism.

There are three days to commemorate Indigenous women, girls and two spirit people who have not returned home and come into harm's way: February 14th (Women's Memorial March), May 5th (National Day of Awareness of the MMIWG2S+), and October 4th (Sisters in Spirit / National Day of Action for MMIWG2S+).

On February 14th, 2022, Shelley and Theresa attended the 31st Annual Women's Memorial March in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, along with other CUPE leaders and activists. It was emotional to hear the families tell stories of their daughters, nieces, mothers, sisters, and aunties who are missing or murdered, many still not found and often without justice served and without answers. The march served as healing and coming together in community with common stories. Theresa noted that it was important that allies heard the stories and experienced the march.

This march was unique in that a separate group of young activists used the march as a time and place to topple the 'Gassy Jack' statue in Gastown. Speakers stood over the fallen statue and spoke about the history of Jack Deighton and his ties to Squamish Nation young brides. Controversy surrounds this act of resistance in many ways, including Squamish Nation stating its nonsupport of the unexpected toppling. However, to witness the tearing down of a man

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glorified in statuesque metal standing over unceded Coast Salish territory as an “owner and influencer,” was indeed a very emotional and unforgettable day.

The march continued, stopping at all the spots where the women, girls and two spirit people were killed or where they were last seen. The Elders did considerable work that day, dropping roses and conducting ceremonial rituals of healing.

There are other marches, films, dance groups (Butterflies in Spirit), and memorials centered around the MMIWG2S+. The Highway of Tears is a 725-kilometre corridor of Highway 16 between Prince George and Prince Rupert, which has been the location of many missing and murdered Indigenous women beginning in the late 1960's.

Recently, Indigenous activists from the north have released a film called *Adaawk The Film: The Stories of Missing Indigenous Women Along the Highway of Tears*, which Shelley attended virtually when shown to the MMIWG2S+ Coalition on February 24, 2022. Pronounced “A-Dow-ick” (oral history) this documentary is directed, produced, and told by family members along the Highway of Tears. The film ends by showing raising of the “Grandmother” totem pole in Kitsumkalum, Tsimshian Territory, as a commemoration and a place for families to go to remember their loved ones. Film makers can be reached at www.adaawkfilm.com or Adaawkfilm@gmail.com or to arrange for showings.

Theresa did her own learning by ordering a documentary film called *Highway of Tears* (2015), which she “bought” and shared on social media for others to watch.

(<https://highwayoftears.vhx.tv/>)

This is active allyship. Learning the truth takes time, research, emotional labour, and a commitment to show up. Shelley spoke about the MMIWG2S+ at the Vancouver District Labour Council for International Women's Day, March 8th, 2022, where she shared a resource called the *Indigenous Ally Toolkit* by Dakota Swiftwolf, and Theresa was in attendance.

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Theresa found this toolkit extremely helpful. She learned about titles such as accomplice and co-resistor in taking allyship further, and to examine her own motivations for wanting to be an ally. She knows that she can use her privilege to push for Indigenous voices at tables of influence and continue her own learning about how to be a better ally, accomplice, and co-resistor. Finally, she can 'act accordingly,' knowing that awareness and education is only half the work – that action is required to be an ally and change maker. She must show up at events, offer whatever she can with skills, privilege, financial or emotional supports. She can be on union committees and partake in creating more awareness events and campaigns, such as the planning committee for the May 5th *Red Dress Gathering*.

CUPE 728 will be hosting its first May 5th *Red Dress Gathering* at Bear Creek Park in Surrey on the unceded territory of the Katzie, Kwantlen and Semiahmoo First Peoples. The theme will be #ItsTime for the men of the union to stand in solidarity at events and gatherings that honour and commemorate the MMIWG2S+. All are invited and requests for Red Dress donations will be gratefully accepted. It is also important to note that CUPE 728 collaborates with HEU (Hospital Employee Union) Activists to host Red Dress Events and that HEU will be releasing a "How to Host a Red Dress Event Toolkit" this spring or early summer.

October 4th is the *Sisters in Spirit Vigil*, also known as *The National Day of Action for the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women* (MMIWG2S+). HEU has led Red Dress Events with the support of CUPE 728 since 2019, where Shelley was invited as a speaker in her capacity as the BC Federation of Labour Indigenous Workers Representative. Shelley invited the CUPE 728 Women's Committee and Executive to show up with a tent and volunteers, sharing refreshments, and a partnership was born. This will be the 4th Red Dress Gathering hosted by the two sibling unions, HEU and CUPE. This is active allyship. Union tools and strategies including active allyship and prioritizing reconciliation encourage us to work together to make change. That is the base of solidarity or Namwayut (We Are All One in the Kwak'wala language of Northern Vancouver Island).

One of the priorities for all CUPE BC committees is reconciliation. The Women's Committee has committed to learning more, by reading relevant UNDRIP Articles, Calls to Action, and

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Calls for Justice before meetings. Our committee has also created a pamphlet about the unusually high child apprehension rates, has advocated for sex work to be considered work, and supported 10 paid days' leave for survivors of intimate partner violence. These actions and recommendations not only advance awareness about advocating and supporting women in general but are particularly relevant to Indigenous women and children. This type of committee work supports decreasing violence and trauma that Indigenous families experience in colonial systems such as health care, social service, education, and justice. Public unions such as CUPE are uniquely positioned to reach a lot of people and can further reconciliation when it is made a priority. There is much work to be done, and reconciliation is now part of CUPE BC's priorities.

To end, Grand Chief Stewart Phillip famously said, "Reconciliation is not for wimps." Theresa and Shelley promise to warrior up and work together as activists to "listen, ask, build, research and continue to support and act in meaningful ways."

Indigenous Ally Toolkit:

segalcentre.org/common/sitemedia/201819_Shows/ENG_AllyToolkit.pdf

2021-2022 Activities

The chair and co-chair of the Women's Committee attend the BC Federation of Labour (BCFED)'s Women's and Gender Rights Committee on behalf of CUPE BC. Many salient issues are discussed, such as paid leave for survivors of sexual and intimate partner violence, support for sex trade workers including the decriminalization of sex trade work, pay equity and the particular impact of COVID-19 on women and those who identify as women, particularly women with disabilities, racialized, and Indigenous women.

As with the CUPE BC Women's Committee, the BCFED Women's and Gender Rights Committee strives to explore women's and other gender diverse people's experiences from an intersectional lens. CUPE BC has made a significant effort to create increasingly diverse committees and thus the CUPE BC Women's Committee is able to draw from the experiences

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of racialized and Indigenous women, women with disabilities, women who support sex trade workers, and 2SLGBTQ+ representatives. This is critical if we are to represent the perspectives of women and gender diverse people in our union.

The Women's Committee has also focused on the high rates of child apprehension in the Indigenous Community as well as from parents with disabilities. The committee, in coordination with the Indigenous and Persons with Disability, has created a campaign to educate others about the reasons for these high rates of child apprehension and to call for action in an effort to stop the senseless removal of children from their families.

While the provincial government legislated 5 days of paid leave for survivors of intimate partner and sexual violence, the Women's Committee believes this must be extended to 10 days. Survivors of such violence require time to recover emotionally, to find new homes and to navigate the criminal and oftentimes, family legal systems. Five days of paid leave, while welcome, remains woefully inadequate, if women are to be enabled to flee abusive situations. Sex trade workers are often driven underground due to the criminalization of their work, increasing the dangers of this work. The CUPE BC Women's Committee firmly believes sex trade is legitimate work and that those who work in this profession should be entitled to the same rights and privileges of other workers. Decriminalization of sex trade work and formal recognition of sex work as a legitimate profession would help increase safety for sex trade workers and enable sex workers to better negotiate the terms and conditions of their employment. The Women's Committee is committed to supporting the decriminalization of sex work and recognition of this work as a viable profession.

Increasingly, our communities have begun to understand that gender is a social construct, and that the binary model of gender in which there are two genders excludes gender diverse people and those who identify as "agender." In recognition of this reality, other committees such as the BC NDP and BC Federation of Labour have changed their committee names to the Women's and Gender Rights Committee. The CUPE BC Women's Committee recommends that we do the same.

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Resolutions at Convention

The Women's Committee has worked diligently and thoughtfully on the three resolutions for submission to the 2022 Convention on the following topics, in order of priority:

- Lobbying for the decriminalization of sex work and for CUPE BC Policy recognizing that sex work is work
- Support existing campaigns calling for 10 days of paid leave for survivors of intimate sexual and partner violence
- Constitutional amendment, to change committee name to "Women's and Gender Rights Committee"

Please take the time to review and take a stand with us on these very important issues.

Future Focus

Existing through and during this pandemic has been difficult for everyone all over the world. As studies and statistics roll in, it has become apparent that the pandemic has hit women harder in many ways. The pandemic has taken a toll on everyone, more so with women in vulnerable situations, where staying at home has increased the risk of abuse, domestic violence, substance and alcohol abuse, and death. The most recent incident in Fort St. James, where a 39-year-old Indigenous woman died after she was assaulted by her partner at home, has affected the whole community. There is still so much more work needed to help women in vulnerable situations. Trust, respect, confidence, and uplifting every woman is vital in giving women the support when it is needed the most and providing more services and accessibility in the northern BC region so less women become victims.

The Women's Committee has prioritized the need for mental health supports for women and gender diverse people in our union, recognizing the particular impact COVID has had on women. It is primarily women who work in the health care and social services sector who have experienced significantly higher rates of unemployment and have taken on the burden of

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childcare when our province was in lockdown and education was provided virtually. We know that the rates of violence against women sky-rocketed during the pandemic as women were made more vulnerable due to forced isolation. This had a particularly damaging impact on women with disabilities, who were increasingly dependent on their partners for care.

The members of the CUPE BC Women's Committee would like to thank CUPE National, CUPE BC, the Locals we are from, and our friends and our families for their continued support over the next two years. We are excited to be a part of this important committee and look forward to all that we can achieve on behalf of all CUPE Women.

Respectfully submitted:

Sheryl Burns, Chair
Patricia Skalozub, Co-Chair
Tara Box, Recording Secretary
Bridget Barker
Rena Bens
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