



**Prioritizing Equity:  
Charting a course for a more inclusive  
and representative Federation**

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**Executive Summary**

This document advocates for a strategic focus for equity within the Federation. Such an undertaking provides a mechanism to develop more internal equity-focused processes in the interest of diversifying union representation and strengthening internal solidarity. This work requires a measured, thoughtful, and evidence-based approach. This begins with an “audit” to understand the Federation’s demographic composition. This work involves the collection of demographic information about the organization’s members, comparing this with broader labour market data to identify gaps in representation. It serves as an *initial step* to uncovering problematic issues within the organization. Subsequent work necessitates deeper organizational analysis of practices contained within policies, practices, and culture. This work invests in organizational transformation by making a formal commitment to equity and inclusion that also works to hold employers accountable in taking on *meaningful* equity measures of their own.

### **Equity in Organized Labour: Why it Matters**

Equity can be defined as providing people with **access** to the same resources and opportunities by considering what barriers exist that limit their participation, admission, benefits, engagement, belonging, and, even, basic human rights. Changing labour market demographics and socio-economic conditions require organizations like FPSE to actively confront racism, sexism, ableism, numerous other forms of discrimination, and oppression *within* the organization if there is any possibility of remaining relevant and responsive to the restructuring of our sector. In fact, labour scholar, Janice Foley, asserts that equity is the “central prerequisite”<sup>1</sup> for union renewal because it is not only materially relevant to the lives of union members, it also addresses deficiencies in union participation and engagement.

Acknowledging existing differences can increase “the potential for a transformed, inclusive and activist union”<sup>2</sup> and situates the demands of equity-seeking groups more clearly within the labour context. The historical York University strike of 1997 was effective because it was energized by women and other equity-seeking groups, revealing how unions can serve as a pathway to grass-roots participatory action from otherwise inactive or apathetic union members. The voices of equity-seeking groups can be amplified in ways that has material benefits for all aspects of post-secondary education, including greater solidarity among campus organizations, informing collegial governance through a focused equity lens, and challenging academic administrative practices that perpetuate discrimination. Further, this work can inform collective bargaining efforts through the production of union-driven data collection.

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<sup>1</sup> Foley, J. (2010). Introduction. In Janice R. Foley and Patricia L. Baker (Eds). *Unions, equity, and the path to renewal*. <https://www.ubcpres.ca/asset/9549/1/9780774816809.pdf>, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Briskin, L., & Newson, J. (1999). Making equity a priority: anatomy of the york university strike of 1997. *Feminist Studies*, 25(1), 105. <https://doi-org.proxy.ufv.ca:2443/10.2307/3216673>, p. 110

## **Data in Organized Labour: Why it Matters**

Unions require data to **survive**. As data specialist and union advocate Jenny Andrews points out, data is key to the survival of unions because it can “reboot” union engagement by providing meaningful insights into membership behaviours, needs, and changes.<sup>3</sup> An example of this work is the *Data for Black Lives* project which describes itself as “Data as protest. Data as accountability. Data as collective action.”<sup>4</sup> The *Indigenous Data Network (IDN)*<sup>5</sup> is another example of how taking control of data advances the interests of equity-seeking groups by controlling the collection, management, and interpretation of data to reclaim agency. In a union example, Public Service Alliance of Canada tackles employment equity through tools like *The Employment Equity Toolkit*<sup>6</sup> which provides its members with statistics, context, and mythbusting to support members in petitioning for employment equity in their worksites.

### *Data Within FPSE*

Despite the Federation’s efforts to address representation through committees, there is a paucity of actual data about its membership. This is revealed in committee discussions and resolutions that repeatedly request surveys and other data collection as a means to understand the problems they face. Leveraging data within the Federation is also mitigated by the quality and transparency of information sharing within the organization and has been a recent topic of discussion among executives and Presidents’ Council. Limited access and management of Federation data becomes another obstruction to equity work.

Understanding member demographics is ultimately the responsibility of the Federation, as evidenced by the equity and anti-racist work of other unions and labour organizations (e.g. Unifor, OPSEU, BCGEU, Canadian Labour Congress, CAUT). Despite many locals having collective agreement language that requires employers to report on demographic information, it is rarely forthcoming. Relying on employers to lead the way and share information remains a

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<sup>3</sup> Andrew, J.. (2018). Embracing data is key to the future of unions. *OpenDemocracy*. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/embracing-data-is-key-to-future-of-unions/>, para. 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Data for Black Lives*. <https://d4bl.org/>

<sup>5</sup> Indigenous Data Network (IDN). <https://mspgh.unimelb.edu.au/centres-institutes/centre-for-health-equity/research-group/indigenous-data-network>

<sup>6</sup> Public Service Alliance of Canada. (2018). *Employment equity toolkit*. <https://psacunion.ca/sites/psac/files/attachments/pdfs/employment-equity-toolkit-updated-2018-july-en.pdf>

constant struggle. Further, this information may not adequately support the priorities of the Federation which requires the application of a labour and social justice lens.

This is evidenced in labour history which speaks to the varied ways union and worker activism dismantle systems of power that contribute to inequity. Indeed, standing by and waiting for matters to resolve themselves or relying on cooperation with employers, who are frequently hesitant to forfeit their own privilege is, quite simply, irresponsible. Examining the issue of gender inequity in Canadian employment, Commissioner Rosalie Abella reminds us that the obstacles

*are so formidable and self-perpetuating that they cannot be overcome without intervention. It is both intolerable and insensitive if we simply wait and hope that the barriers will disappear with time.<sup>7</sup>*

For this reason, FPSE not only needs to focus efforts on collecting data about its membership to understand its composition, it requires building an information-sharing platform that allows equity-seeking members and representatives access to data for support their work.

The application of data is frequently viewed as somehow neutral and “scientific”. Even within unions it can perpetuate power dynamics that fuel equity issues. Thus, it is critical that its collection and use evolve from a carefully built framework so that it can be leveraged by the Federation to engage in new *evidence-based* forms of union activism that are equity focused. In addition to the development of comprehensive demographic information about its own membership, the Federation can strategically partner with other labour and labour-affiliated organizations like the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. This, in turn, ensures that aggregated data can be used to ensure equity across employers in the sector as well as within the Federation’s own practices and representation.

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<sup>7</sup> Abella, R. S.. (1984). *Equality in employment: A royal commission report: General Summary*. Canadian Women Studies, 6 (4), 7. [https://www.crrf-fcrr.ca/images/stories/Equality\\_in\\_Employment.pdf](https://www.crrf-fcrr.ca/images/stories/Equality_in_Employment.pdf)

## **Applying an Equity Lens to FPSE**

Understanding equity does not end with the collection of data. The implementation of an equity audit is a *starting point* and, ideally, involves a comprehensive assessment of organizational practices. An equity audit applies an equity *lens* in systematically determining the degree of (in)equity present in Federation. This involves data but also requires an *analysis* of how the experience of equity-seeking members are valued and recognized, policies, visioning documents, decision making processes/practices, organizational “traditions”, and broader equity research/trends.

This process allows for the examination of guiding documents to assess whether these tools are equitable and inclusive. For example, of the 22 principles and purpose outlined by *FPSE’s Policy & Procedures Manual*, many highlight the importance of working with members and other groups to advocate for both post-secondary education and the environment which contextualizes this sector. FPSE’s Values Statement explicitly highlights the importance of equity, “*British Columbia’s public education system should support equity in terms of learners, educators and curriculum,*” acknowledging that:

People should be made to feel welcome and supported in all aspects of educational life regardless of race, colour, ancestry, place of origin, political belief, religion, marital status, family status, physical or mental disability, sex, sexual orientation, age, financial circumstances or geographic location. <sup>8</sup>

While this value statement assumes equity as a general value, there is no other reference to equity as a value, purpose, or principle relating to the Federation’s *approach to its own membership*. Because the framework of the Federation and its identity are defined by its constitution and bylaws, it would be ideal if the Federation could speak directly to matters of equity in relation to its own structure.

Contract administration and bargaining are viewed as core elements of FPSE’s service provision, made evident in FPSE’s budget priorities. Despite inherent assumptions that bargaining and defence of collective agreements are about fairness and equity, it is unclear how FPSE’s processes support the interests of equity-seeking groups. To address this, FPSE needs to evaluate how (and if) equity-specific bargaining priorities are identified, monitored, and evaluated. For example, how are the needs of those who are systematically (and personally)

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<sup>8</sup> FPSE. (Sept. 2019). FPSE policy & procedures manual, p. 58.

discriminated known and prioritized in bargaining? In contract administration? Are there formal guidelines used by bargaining teams, committees, and stewards that ensure an equity perspective is applied to their work?

Culture plays an integral role in perpetuating power dynamics that limit inclusion and diversity. Like most white-dominated organizations, FPSE is not immune to traditions and “ways of doing things” that fuel various forms of inequity. Often invisible (or ignored) to those in power, these cultural practices reinforce structures that limit diversity and, even, actively dissuade people from stepping forward to participate. Elections and appointments are examples of areas where power circulates through back-channels and, often, those in power are able to influence who steps forward for representative positions. It is a complex matter but seeking out the stories and perspectives of marginalized members is likely to reveal the manner in which these activities exclude participation. Another example lies within the communication channels exercised through the Executive and Presidents’ Council. The assumption is that the business of the Federation funnels, almost exclusively, through Presidents’ Council to broader membership. This practice serves as a “gateway” to members that warrants interrogation if there is any commitment to developing a high participation organization.

A comprehensive examination of FPSE’s practices and policies will provide the necessary structure for developing a truly inclusive organization. This “requires a ‘special blend of what is necessary, what is fair and what is workable.’”<sup>9</sup> It begins with a commitment from local presidents to prioritize this work.

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<sup>9</sup> Abella, 7.

## **Conclusion**

Confronting racism is a central aspect of equity work and it is impossible for FPSE to ignore its significance in its own governance structure and activities. In the words of Janice Foley, “Unions must now cater to the needs of women and racialized and Aboriginal groups if they hope to attract new members, satisfy and retain existing ones, increase membership participation levels, and develop strong ties with their local and international communities.”<sup>10</sup> Equity work requires concerted prioritization. It is never convenient or easy and it is quite likely to be disruptive. Indeed, it is entirely possible that the process “will tell us that some of our processes, structures and traditions are no longer fit for purpose.”<sup>11</sup> In fact, Rachna Singh, BC’s new Parliamentary Secretary for Anti-Racism Initiatives, is mandated to examine legislation that is to “pave the way for race-based data collection essential to modernizing sectors like ... education.”<sup>12</sup> This is a clear signal that if the government is prioritizing issues of equity and anti-racism, we need to be doing the same.

It is not possible to renew the Federation and ensure its sustained relevancy by inserting equity-seeking groups into its existing structures without first understanding its role in the broader equity narrative.<sup>13</sup> Representing 20 individually certified associations, the Federation of Post-Secondary Educators of British Columbia is ideally positioned to advance the needs of its members through an equity lens and join organizations like CAUT, BCGEU, CUPE, and others in being more inclusive and representative agents for change.

***Equity is a means to end and is fundamentally about supporting human rights.*<sup>14</sup>**

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<sup>10</sup> Foley, J. (2010). Introduction. In Janice R. Foley and Patricia L. Baker (Eds). *Unions, equity, and the path to renewal*. UBC Press, p.1 <https://www.ubcpres.ca/asset/9549/1/9780774816809.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Andrew, J. para. 10.

<sup>12</sup> Horgan, J. (2020, Nov. 26). Parliamentary Secretary for Anti-Racism Initiatives Mandate Letter.

<sup>13</sup> Kainer, J. (2010). Gendering union renewal: Women’s contributions to labour movement revitalization. In Janice R. Foley and Patricia L. Baker (Eds). *Unions, equity, and the path to renewal*. UBC Press , p. 32.<https://www.ubcpres.ca/asset/9549/1/9780774816809.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> OCUFA Status of Women. (2018). *A Strategic approach to equity: To build unions*. <https://ocufa.on.ca/assets/SWEC-equity-handbook.pdf>



*The next section lists recommendations to assist the Federation in prioritizing equity and anti-racist initiatives.*

## **Recommendations**

Because equity work is emotionally draining, labour intensive and, simply, difficult, it should be appropriately resourced. To carry out any/all of the following recommendations (or subsequent edits), it is essential that those performing the work do not suffer from the same barriers that exploit their labour elsewhere. For example, our workplaces already call upon extensive levels of volunteerism and service that is more accessible to those who are not systemically discriminated against. An effort must be made to ensure that underrepresented groups are not left behind or left with the bulk of the work. Further, those who seek to serve as allies in the greater effort for equity, must take it upon themselves to *listen* and do their own work to answer questions about racism, sexism, ableism and other forms of discrimination.

### ***Develop an Equity Plan.***

#### **1. Establish an Equity Task Force**

*Purpose:* To oversee the development of an equity audit and consult with the FPSE executive on its deployment and reporting. Their role may be expanded according to the needs determined by the Federation.

*Composition:* This group should consist of equity-seeking individuals from within the Federation. Ideally, they should not already occupy positions of formal leadership within the Federation but consist of others whose voices have been traditionally silent within the Federation. This offers opportunities for new perspectives and engages new participants within the Federation.

Note: ongoing discrimination and oppression against equity-seeking groups may impact the formation of this task force. Deliberate efforts to remove barriers will have to be made to ensure that the composition of this group is representative and able to perform its work.

#### **2. Hire an equity consultant/coordinator for the purposes of administering an equity survey to all FPSE membership.**

This work may also involve qualitative work, including semi-structured interviews and/or focus groups. This work will collect data about members and whether they identify with equity-seeking groups and explore the best practices and challenges faced by members within their local contexts. This also creates an environment for members to learn more

about equity, its meaning and its role in the Federation and union work. This project could, conceivably be broken down into two parts: a) census of Federation membership and b) qualitative assessment of systemic problems and opportunities.

This work requires adequate resourcing and careful deployment. It is advisable to recruit industry expertise to ensure that the work is done. The Equity Task Force would oversee this project.

### **3. Develop a charter of inclusion**

Whether it is called a Charter, Statement, or some other term, this would be an *expression of commitment* to developing a more inclusive organization and advocating for equity as a broader goal. Such a statement will intentionally prioritize equity work within the Federation. It may be developed through the Equity Audit process.

### **4. Assess the FPSE policies and practices.**

Analyze the Federation's current policies and practices through an equity lens. This can be facilitated by the incorporation of existing assessment tools, including Jojo Geronimo's outstanding *A Leader's Guide to Strengthen Unions* which walk organizations through reflective exercises and questions that surface behaviours, attitudes and assumptions that perpetuate discrimination. Geronimo describes assessment tools as helping identify "where the organization is at and help reveal possible equity issues" raising "the profile of equity, increase everyone's awareness and empower those directly affected – especially members colour – to speak out and act" and provide "a sense of urgency."<sup>15</sup>

This endeavor will assist the Federation in developing necessary training programs, removing systemic barriers for more diverse leadership representation, and identify funding needs to equity groups.

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<sup>15</sup> Geronimo, J. (2014). *A leader's guide to strengthen unions: Moving beyond diversity to strengthen unions*. Toronto & York Region Labour Council, 10.  
[https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/torontoyorklabour/pages/80/attachments/original/1550092276/equity\\_handbook.pdf?1550092276](https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/torontoyorklabour/pages/80/attachments/original/1550092276/equity_handbook.pdf?1550092276)

## **Appendix A: Definitions**

**Equity:** providing everyone with *access* to opportunities to participate. It is important to note that this concept asserts that the playing field is NOT equal and that some people face greater barriers than others. OCUFA’s Status of Women Committee offers a helpful way of assessing barriers:

*They are organizational policies and practices that are:*

- *seemingly neutral (everyday ways of doing things)*
- *equally applied to all (treating everyone the same way)*
- *without intent to discriminate (no ill intent or overt bias)*
- *experienced with a differential impact on historically disadvantaged groups<sup>16</sup>*

**Diversity:** In the workplace this is about differences in *identity*. This can include race, class, and gender but it can encompass so much more including things like familial relationships (*sister, mother, father, brother, etc.*), abilities (*physical, emotional*), education/training, and so much more. A workplace that is homogenous (or the same through), is an impoverished environment because it limits perspectives that enrich decision-making and, ultimately, responsiveness.

**Inclusion:** people with differences (think of diversity) being valued and welcomed in an environment. Being valued includes having ideas heard, work acknowledged and work leveraged/used. Inclusion is more than a policy – it is an actual practice that people embrace. No matter how many inclusive-sounding policies a workplace has, there has to be a willingness and a turn-of-mind to act inclusively.

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<sup>16</sup> OCUFA Status of Women. (2018). *A Strategic approach to equity: To build unions*. <https://ocufa.on.ca/assets/SWEC-equity-handbook.pdf>, p. 4.

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