

## **OPSEU Provincial Women's Committee**

### **December 6- National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women**

**My body is not your battleground**

#### **WORKPLACE Violence**

On December 6th, 1989, a gunman killed 14 women at the Ecole Polytechnic in Montreal simply because they were women. In the process, many more were physically and psychologically traumatized.

This incident, while horrific and rare, revealed how women continue to confront hostile, sexist and deadly behaviour when pursuing non-traditional lines of work.

We know this because the harassment of women persists at many workplaces in Canada, despite workplace policies against it. This harassment that women encounter is not limited to sexual harassment. Every day, women of colour, aboriginal women, lesbians and women with disabilities are subjected to prejudiced actions, words and attitudes that are oppressive and dehumanizing.

This behaviour also manifests itself in the ways in which many women are denied the opportunity to share in meaningful decision-making within their workplaces.

While there is a greater awareness about sexual harassment, it has not gone away either. Behaviours including leering, verbal jeers, demeaning remarks, unwelcome touching, grabbing, physical assaults and demands for sex accompanied by coercion, blackmail directly continue to be part of many women's experiences at the workplace.

Violence has deep-seated roots and is perpetuated generation to generation. It is an integral part of a structure of unequal relations between men and women made more intense by an economic and social system which reserves wealth, privilege and power for a small male elite. It enforces roles, stereotypes and behaviours which confine and oppress women. It takes many forms – in our homes, in our schools, in our workplaces, in our streets, in the courts and in our legislatures.

#### **Violence is a workplace issue**

Front line violence against workers is also a problem for those who provide care to the general public, institutionalized persons and clients.

Such violence is sometimes recognized as an occupational hazard, though often it is not. Women are frequently more vulnerable to this type of violence, and when it is not recognized and confronted as a problem, women workers remain at great risk.

The labour movement's ability to fight workplace harassment has been enhanced by key decisions by the courts and human rights tribunals which recognize that all workers, including women, have the right to an harassment free workplace.

According to the Supreme Court of Canada, your employer – and your union have a responsibility to provide a harassment free workplace.

#### **If you are a woman experiencing violence, keep the following in mind:**

- Workplace behaviour can be viewed as discriminatory even if the person behaving in an offensive manner does not target his/her behaviour at one person.

- Harassment based on gender is still considered sexual harassment, even if the person doing the harassing does not use sexually explicit comments or behaviour.
- Organizations which help abused women have important things to say, and need your support.
- Sexual or racial harassment may cause lasting physical, psychological or emotional trauma, which may be covered under Workers' Compensation in some provinces.

#### **What unions must do to fight workplace based harassment:**

- Train and sensitize stewards and other union leaders through union courses and workshops.
- Negotiate employer policies on harassment, making sure the policies contain an accessible, safe redress procedure.
- Make sure regulations against violence in the workplace include harassment in the definition of violence.
- Establish union individuals or committees in the workplace, with the appropriate training, so that people experiencing harassment know who to see with a complaint.
- Respect the confidentiality of the person experiencing harassment at all times.

#### **Actions to take**

- Get this information out to your members.
- Work with women's groups and men's groups like the White Ribbon Campaign (men working to end violence against women).
- Get language into your collective agreement which supports women.
- Conduct anti-violence audits of your workplace.
- Lobby your MPP for improved laws to safeguard women and children.

#### **Resources**

Ontario Federation of Labour's kit No Longer Silent. Call 1-800-668-9138 to order yours, or visit [www.ofl-fto.on.ca](http://www.ofl-fto.on.ca)

Or visit the Canadian Labour Congress website and look under "rights" then "women" for 6 fact sheets on the issues at [www.clc-ctc.ca/web/menu/English/en\\_index.htm](http://www.clc-ctc.ca/web/menu/English/en_index.htm)

URL: <http://www.opseu.org/committees/dec062003.htm>

Direct OPSEU site: <http://www.opseu.org>