

Pride at Work, Pride in the Union: Steelworkers on Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered Issues



The United Steelworkers represents approximately 250,000 workers across Canada. In all kinds of workplaces, from offices and universities to mines, mills and factories, men and women have joined the Steelworkers' union because of a tradition of negotiating, defending and fighting for workers' rights.

Proud to represent gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered workers, Steelworkers are actively working for equality in the workplace, at the bargaining table and in our communities. Steelworkers are helping to raise understanding and respect for the diversity and differences that make us strong, proud and, indeed, Everybody's Union.

Human rights are workers' rights. When someone is harassed or isolated in the workplace because of his sexual orientation or her gender identity, their human rights and their rights as workers are violated.

Fear of harassment, violence, isolation and bullying lead many people to hide or deny their sexual orientation or gender identity.

The Steelworkers union must continue to take steps to help create "positive space" for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered workers.

At the bargaining table:

- Negotiate anti-harassment workplace training, policies and procedures. The United Steelworkers' Anti-Harassment Workplace Training Program has reached over 40,000 front line workers, supervisors and managers. The training helps people recognize and deal with harassment inside and outside of the workplace.
- Many Steelworker collective agreements now include provisions on investigating and resolving harassment complaints. The union has a trained network of anti-harassment complaints counsellors across Canada to assist local unions in investigating and resolving issues in the workplace.
- Bargain anti-discrimination language into your collective agreement. Insist that your employer recognize that gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered workers are entitled by law to equality and to a workplace free from discrimination and harassment.
- Make sure your definition of spouse includes same-sex partners. In Canada, it is illegal to deny same-sex spousal benefits. Also, check the definitions of "family members" within other contract provisions to ensure same-sex partners are covered.
- Ensure your health and welfare plan cover medical leave or treatments for transgendered workers.
- Make sure the drug plan covers medication for people with HIV/AIDS.

In the union:

- Post the union's anti-harassment policy and support human rights training. The Steelworkers Anti-Harassment Policy, known as the "Yellow Sheet" because it is printed on yellow paper, reminds members of how important a respectful and discrimination free environment is to the union's solidarity. Review the Yellow Sheet at the beginning of meetings, post the policy in the union office, and encourage leadership and activists to participate in human rights and anti-harassment training.
- Put up posters and wear a button. The Canadian Labour Congress has produced posters and buttons to help build respect and understanding of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered workers. Wearing a button or putting a poster on the union bulletin board sends a message of solidarity to our sisters and brothers.
- Start a Steelworker Pride Committee. Whether it is in your workplace, together with other Steelworker units or through the Area Council, start a Steelworker Pride Committee. Pride Committees are opportunities for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered workers and their supporters to talk about issues, and plan how to raise awareness in our workplaces and in the union of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered rights. During Pride Days (June or early July depending on the region), Steelworker Pride Committees join with other labour and community groups to hold events and parades to both celebrate and educate.

Take action:

1. Help fight HIV/AIDS. HIV/AIDS is a union issue. We work with people who have HIV/AIDS and care for people who have HIV/AIDS. We must make sure our workplaces are safe, healthy and harassment free for all workers. That means preventing harassment and discrimination of people with HIV/AIDS.
2. The best step we can take to fight HIV/AIDS is through prevention, counselling and education. Include a discussion about HIV/AIDS in your health and safety training. Make sure your benefit plan and employee assistance plan offer support confidentially to workers with HIV/AIDS.
3. The Steelworkers Humanity Fund is helping to support the work of Stephen Lewis and the United Nations to build a global fund to fight AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. Canadian workers can demonstrate leadership in raising the resources, and pressuring other countries to do the same, to stop this epidemic. Over 60 million people have been infected by HIV since the AIDS epidemic started over 20 years ago. Your donation to the Steelworkers Humanity Fund can make a difference.
4. Support changes to laws to ensure equality for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered workers and their families.
5. The Federal Government is appealing a court decision which granted Canada Pension Plan survivor spousal pensions to persons who lost their same sex partners between 1985 and 1998. Lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgendered persons paid into the CPP just like everyone else and are entitled to equal benefits. Let your Member of Parliament know that you disapprove of their wasting tax money to promote inequality.
6. The Federal Government has proposed legislation to extend civil marriages to same sex couples. The courts have made it clear that it is discriminatory under Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms to deny same sex couples the right to marry. Lobby your Member of Parliament now to ensure that lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgendered persons across Canada can enjoy this right.

7. Only one Canadian jurisdiction - the Northwest Territories - has included gender identity in its human rights legislation. Transgendered persons deserve the same human rights protection as all other Canadians. Tell your provincial, territorial or federal representative that it is crucial that a prohibition on discrimination on the basis of gender identity be added to all human rights legislation.

8. Strong and proactive employment equity legislation is needed in Canada to promote the full participation and equality of disadvantaged Canadians in the workforce. At present, only the federal jurisdiction in Canada has employment equity legislation. And it does not extend to cover lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered workers. Lobby your provincial, territorial or federal representative for strong employment equity legislation that covers all disadvantaged Canadians.