

## **Provincial Women's Committee**

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

#### **Convention 2003 to February 2004**

The Provincial Women's Committee's work plan for 2003-04 focused on Building Safe and Healthy Communities. It also highlighted building the mandate of female members in our union. The outcomes achieved are reflected, briefly, in the development of a health and safety course for women, a package of pertinent resolutions brought to convention and the setting up contact mail networks among OPSEU women activists.

The Committee involves itself in several hot button issues for women and families, including:

- Lobbying for a National Child Care Program in concert with the Ontario Child Care Coalition and Campaign 2000
- Representing OPSEU at OFL and CLC forums: Equity for women of colour and women with disabilities; organizing contingent workers; organizing new workers into the labour movement
- Lobbying toward ensuring that access to affordable post secondary education is included in the Peoples Charter (OFL)
- Bringing issues affecting low income parents such as housing and income supplements to the labour agenda

Working with coalitions and affiliates, the PWC provides OPSEU representation on groups such as the Ontario Federation of Labour Women's Committee, the National Union of Public and General Employees Women's Advisory Group, Campaign 2000 on Child Poverty, the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care and the Cross Sectoral Violence Against Women Strategy Group.

In addition, members the PWC ensure our union is represented at peace rallies and picket lines around the province.

#### **Convention 2003**

The PWC hosted the first International Bread and Roses Breakfast. For the first time emerging leaders in each region were recognized, as well as Sister Marg Simmons won the Annual Bread and Roses Award for her leadership and support as the OPS team chair. Special recognition was given to our retiring member Doris Rossi, Region 7 after over 20 years of dedicated service Breakfast

In addition, over \$400 was raised for the Canadian women in support of Afghan women to assist the Anna Nazoo School for girls in Afghanistan.

#### **OPSEU Women's Agenda for the Provincial Election**

The PWC formed a political action subcommittee in anticipation of the provincial election. OPSEU's membership is 65 percent women. We researched each of the party's positions on key issues -- health care, poverty, childcare, dependant care, education and violence against women. The Committee developed materials on the OPSEU's Women's Agenda and made sure our members had the information to help make their vote count.

#### **OPSEU Women's Conference**

The 2004 Convention marked the 20th Anniversary of the Provincial Women's Committee as a Constitutionally appointed committee. Women in OPSEU have celebrated many gains since the creation of the PWC in 1984. However, women's lives are still bound by legal and social inequities, at home, in our communities, in our workplaces, and even in our union. Eight years of Conservative provincial government has made the road to equality particularly rough, and the impact has been greater for women of diverse communities.

Following the adoption of the Equity Framework by Convention in 2003, the Chairs of the PWC, the Provincial Human Rights Committee, and the Equity Caucuses met with OPSEU leadership to plan its implementation. In particular, the gathering recognized the overarching role of the Equity Framework in a new province-wide initiative, "Rebuilding Ontario: Talking to the new government".

### **Theme and Objectives**

The theme and objectives for the 2003 Conference were informed by the PWC's assessment of women's gains during the committee's 20-year history, and by the developments outlined above. The objectives were twofold:

1. Develop a shared analysis of issues and impacts facing different groups of women in OPSEU
2. Draft key elements of a Provincial Women's Committee agenda which advances equity in OPSEU

They were set within the overall theme, "Herstory: Bridging Communities."

### **Outcomes**

#### **Recommendations**

Six pages of recommendations were captured in the final list presented at the Sunday plenary, to aid the PWC in building an equity agenda within OPSEU. Another three pages of recommendations were geared specifically toward priority issues to take up with the new Liberal provincial government. The following is a brief summary of the major recommendations.

#### **A. Leadership Development**

Participants saw the need to represent, mirror, and reflect the diversity within OPSEU throughout the union. Recommendations urged work to be done locally, regionally, and provincially to develop diverse OPSEU women, including mentoring and recruitment of more diverse staff. Mentoring ideas included: recruiting women to attend meetings and caucuses, developing women-specific new member orientation information, and leadership development.

#### **B. Organizing/Mobilizing**

A variety of initiatives were proposed to encourage the participation of new women members in union activities, and to make meetings accessible to women. Gender- and equity-specific education was a high priority. The idea that locals be required to survey the diversity of their membership was also explored.

#### **C. Collective Bargaining**

A wide array of bargaining-related recommendations was advanced. Participants expressed the overwhelming view that OPSEU must make bargaining for equity a priority. Training for bargaining teams and negotiators/staff reps, as well as the dissemination of model language on equity was identified a priority. It was also suggested that teams themselves reflect the diversity of the membership, and that they seek protection and/or enhancement of such equity rights as childcare and elder care.

#### **D. Communication**

Participants expressed the desire to receive more information about the PWC, including its meeting minutes, and about the Provincial Women's Conference. It was also suggested that OPSEU take a multi-language approach to communications, beyond just French and English.

#### **E. Community Links**

It was advised that OPSEU undertake a number of initiatives to strengthen links with community groups, such as the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI). It was further advised that OPSEU lobby the provincial government on a number of issues relating to services and rights for refugees and immigrants, particularly their ability to work and their rights on the job.

## **F. Internal barriers and changes to OPSEU policies and practices.**

Participants recommended that a dues increase be implemented so that more staff is hired -- including support staff -- and that employees are provided with more training on equity issues. Action was requested to prevent diverse women being "ghettoized" in lower-waged positions in OPSEU. The participants desired the Conference to be officially an annual, women-only event.

### **NUPGE Women's Leadership Forum**

Twenty-seven women from across Canada attended the NUPGE Women's Leadership Forum in Wakefield, Quebec from October 19-21 2003. Elaine Bagnall and Helen Riehl represented OPSEU. Speakers at the conference included: Dorothy Sue Cobble, Professor of Labour Studies, History and Women's Studies at Rutgers University, who addressed the issue of women and union leadership; Gloria Mills, Director of Equal Opportunities of UNISON, who facilitated and spoke about a parallel union structure; and Dr. Isla Carmichael, Senior Researcher and Educator, on women's pensions and former member of OPSEU PWC and staff member.

Two themes emerged from the workshops:

- 1) Women are the majority in public sector unions
- 2) The lack of funding for women's committees results in a negative reception of the committees by the membership. Therefore, they are viewed as ineffective.

### **Bargaining**

A review of existing collective agreements is needed to ensure that equity language exists and if not, we need to develop it. An equity screen is of the developed and negotiated is needed.

### **Barriers in our Unions**

Participants broke into sector groups and discussed actions needed in our committees and within the union structures. As elected and constitutional committee members, both the provincial women's committee and the provincial human rights committee need to be valued as a part of the elected leadership. This led to a discussion about inclusion vs. exclusion. For example, the PWC requires the support of OPSEU to develop an achievable work plan that is focused, as well as, flexible. As a committee we don't tend to publicize our gains; therefore, we must look at how this can be achieved. We spoke about the possibility developing a discussion paper in the future.

As a Union, OPSEU must view everything through an equity lens. The PWC is committed to continuing to develop resolutions that are thought-provoking and forward thinking. Nonetheless, the PWC's current budget limits the Committee's work. The major portion of the current budget is consumed by attendance at Committee meetings; projects and campaigns the committee would like to undertake require additional funding.

Five recommendations that were presented to the Board including: leadership education at least once a year, developing a method to track the gender balance, increasing PWC budget, promoting the PWC and PHRC members as leaders within OPSEU and, consulting with the Committees when policy is being developed.

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

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