

Forming a Local Union Women's Committee



UNIFOR
women | femmes

Why have a Local Union Women's Committee?

Women need unions today more than ever and unions need women more than ever as well. Unions are only as strong as the involvement and determination of their members. Local Union Women's Committees are a key part of building our union.

Section D of Article 15 of the Unifor Constitution states that all Local Unions should establish the following Standing Committees: Human Rights; Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans (LGBT); Aboriginal and Racialized Workers; Young Workers; Workers with disAbilities; and Women's Committees. A local union may decide to consolidate committees or establish additional committees. Local Union Standing Committees may be elected or appointed by the Local Union Executive Board.

Local Union Bylaws will further define the role of the Women's Committee including any potential funding the local wishes to provide.

Setting up a new Women's Committee will involve:

- Talking to other women in your workplace and other workplaces in your local union.
- Setting a date for your first meeting and publicizing it!
- Set some goals (more on that below).
- Spread the word! As your Committee work gets going, invite others to join.

A Local Union Women's Committee is a place for women to gain leadership skills, to raise issues and organize for change within their local union. Unifor's commitment to equity can only be realized if we have people who are dedicated to seizing opportunities, building allies, explaining the issues, and making connections with and between our members and our various communities.

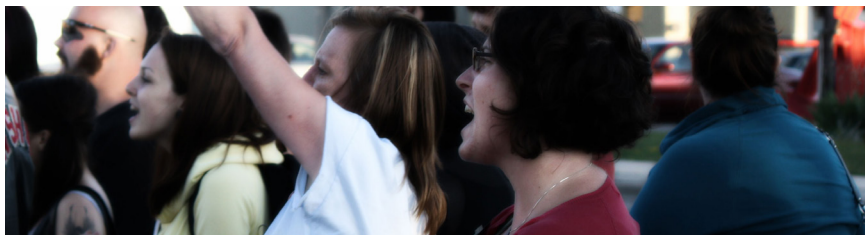
Why isn't there a Men's Committee?

Occasionally members in the local will be resistant to the Women's Committee being set up. They may say, "Where's the men's committee?" In most of our workplaces, men make up the majority of the committees and leadership positions. Their voices and concerns are part of the conversation. Even in workplaces where women are the majority, it is useful to have a Woman's Committee that focusses specifically on women's equality. Women still, on average, earn less than men; we are still responsible for a greater portion of child/family/home work; we are still more likely to be victims of violence; we are still less likely to be in positions of leadership and power than men in most institutions, from our unions to Parliament, etc. Until these barriers to equality are removed, women require spaces to discuss, analyze and organize toward solutions.

Women's Committees can:

- Encourage more women to participate in union activities and seek out and support women to run for elected positions.
- Ensure that pay equity, employment equity, anti-harassment policies and the duty to accommodate are union priorities, and ensure that members, activists and leaders understand their importance and the basics of how they work.
- Participate in all National Union women's and human rights campaigns.
- Provide support to existing leadership by offering information on equity issues and opportunities to learn and do more.
- Actively support the development of new leaders from equity seeking groups. Women's Committees can be a great place for workers to build the confidence and skills necessary to become active in their local unions and communities, develop relationships with other activists, work with community groups and other union committees, and be part of making meaningful change.
- Work with other standing committees and equity caucuses to support one another's issues.
- Work with local labour councils and women's organizations to coordinate and support events and campaigns in your area. (Contact your local union leadership to find out who your labour council delegates are.)
- Ensure all members have access to at least some form of anti-harassment training. Work with the leadership, the Education Committee, and the Human Rights Department to identify gaps/needs and fill them.
- Connect with community groups, and bring a trade union and working-class perspective on issues like poverty reduction, child care, shelter services, etc.
- Be creative in working to ensure that the diversity of the membership is reflected in the overall composition of the leadership and steward base of the union.
- Put an 'equity lens' on all issues within the local union, and actively support changes to collective agreements, by-laws, local union practices, and union 'culture', that will lead to greater inclusion of all members.

These goals can be reached through establishing regular monthly meetings. Sub-committees can be set up on issues such as: education, bargaining, community involvement or women's health.



Responsibilities of Women's Committees

Being part of a committee carries with it some responsibilities.

- ✔ Keep your leadership in the loop - maintain good communication around ongoing activities and ideas for potential activities. Seek leadership support early.
- ✔ Hold committee meetings on a regular basis.
- ✔ Post meeting notices in advance and circulate an agenda.
- ✔ Decide things democratically.
- ✔ Tell other members about the work of the committee - make reports at membership meetings and write in the local newsletter or web page.

All locals develop their own traditions and practices, check with your local leadership and your local union by-laws to determine if your Woman's Committee has additional responsibilities.

Sample Projects

Women's Committees will function slightly different across the union depending on the local and workplace structures and needs of the membership. Here are some sample projects that Women's Committies have focussed on in the past:

- Workplace Fact Sheets: some committees have worked in coordination with the National Union to develop and/or distribute fact sheets to the members on large issues such as emergency leave rights, health & safety rights at work connected to pregnancy, breastfeeding accommodation rights and anti-harassment;
- Equity audit of collective agreement and employer policies;
- Increasing members Internation Women's Day participation in local events;
- Development of a Local Women's Committee Handbook with terms of reference and evaluation tools;

- Highlighting education opportunities within Unifor including gathering sufficient interest to request 1 or 3 day courses in the area.
- Organizing a movie night
- Fundraising for local women's shelters
- Mobilizing around changes in the laws that effect women.

It is important not to get slotted as the "fundraising committee." While fundraising is important, the Women's Committee has a crucial role in making change in the workplace, local and community. This involves taking steps beyond fundraising for outside causes.

Setting Priorities & Responding to Current Events

Let's face it - the work we could do on issues important to women is endless, and we can't take it all on.

Women's Committees need to make strategic decisions on where to apply their energy and resources. Women's Committees tend to bring together people who are passionate and committed to issues. This is a strength, but it's also a challenge. We all want our priorities dealt with first! Make sure you have a process so that the work you decide to do is strategic and balances priorities. Here re some things to think about when planning your work:

Workplace or community? How much of our committee's energy are we going to put into the workplace, and how much into the community? Is it 50/50? Is it 70/30? Is it 30/70? It might be a good idea to decide on a ratio (say, for a one - year period - it could change, of course). There is a tendency for some committees to do only community work, and not get involved in workplace issues at all. The workplace needs to be part of the focus.

Reactive or proactive? Are we a committee that just responds to issues as they arise (say, in the workplace, or in the news?) or do we have a yearly plan? If so, does our yearly plan leave any room for us to deal with issues as they arise? If everyone in our workplaces is suddenly talking about migrant workers, can the committee organize a speaker on the topic, or circulate a petition demanding full labour, citizenship, and immigration rights for migrant workers? Engaging members at time of hight interest will help keep the committee fresh and active.

Local or global? Some Women's Committees include a focus on international issues, some don't. What's your mandate?

A committee for all women? Do an audit of your activities - overall, when you are dealing with sexism, are you also including a lens for racism, homophobia/transphobia, disability discrimination in your workplace?

Negotiation or legislation? Our union has a proud history of not only negotiating equity, but demanding that it be legislated too, so that all workers benefit, whether they belong to a union or not. When we have a breakthrough in negotiations, join the call to have it included in legislation, provincially and federally.

Education or action? Well, as we like to say, eduACTION! If your committee is taking a stand on something, make sure your members understand what the issues is, and why we're involved. If we don't educate, any gains we make are fragile. If we just educate, well, that's a very, very slow road to change. Ask yourselves when you're taking on an issue or campaign - what are we doing to educate, and what's our action?

And, as far as action goes, action happens at many levels. Wearing a button is an action, so is signing a petition. So is joining a first nations' blockade, or getting on a bus to go to Ottawa in support of the right to choose, or pitching a tent at an Occupy event. People on your committee will have different comfort levels around action - talk these through - decide if you're going to agree on a diversity of tactics, with everyone participating up to their comfort level, or whether you're going to go with on tactic that everyone agrees with.

Charity or solidarity? Are you collecting for the women's shelter, or fighting for a national child care program? Or both?

- If you're raising money for a women's shelter, can you also show a film wherer the issue is politicized?
- If your local is sponsoring a toy drive, avoid buying toys made under unfair or unsafe working conditions. And don't fall into the trap of gender-labeling the toys - putting all the sports equipment, puzzles and science kits in a 'boy pile' and all of the stuffed animals in a 'girl pile'. Be consistent in your politics, wherever possible!

Where you can, choose projects/activities and social partners/community groups that are focused more on solidarity than charity. And help our members connect the dots between the issues, and from the immediate issues to broader issues of political, economic and social justice.

People power? Do we have the people to pull this campaign/program off? Is this a campaign or issue that will attract new people and grown our committee? If so, that may be reason enough for taking it on. In any case, make sure your objectives and tasks are in line with a realistic assessment of your people power.

Energy check? Will this campaign/issue give us energy? Do a go-around at your meeting and ask: do you have energy for this? Will it give you energy? If the answer is not a resounding "YES!", pick something else and come back to this at a different time., or only ask those who declare they have the energy to get involved (and set your goals accordingly).



Be Realistic: The Option of No

When you hear about an issue or campaign, do you automatically think: “our committee should do something about this!”?

And maybe you should - maybe it will give you energy; maybe it will be an opportunity to connect with others - which is important in the long run; maybe your contribution will ‘tip the balance’ to making the campaign successful; maybe your credibility in the union or the community hinges on getting involved; maybe your committee has something unique to contribute.

Or maybe this is a moment where you can publicly endorse the campaign, find one small key thing that is useful to do, but trust that others are doing a solid job of it and keep your eyes on the priorities you’ve already set. You could just pick up the phone, call the group leading the campaign, acknowledge the importance of the work they’re doing, and ask if there’s one tangible thing you can do to support them. Maybe they want you to send an email out to your mailing list? Maybe they want to come and talk at a local union meeting - that could be something you could work through your executive (and easier than building your own campaign on the issue). The group most closely connected to the issue should be leading it - providing access to your members isn’t hard but is a significant contribution.

You can’t get directly involved in everything that comes along - sometimes your role is to cheer others on, re-print their articles (you don’t always have to write your own), and stay focused on issues that are getting less attention so that they too will have their day. Remember, you have limited resources - you have a responsibility to use them wisely.



Making Meetings Effective

Every committee meeting should include something useful and educational for members - an interactive quiz, a quick report back from all of the committee members (and their workplaces), a short video, a short discussion about a newspaper article, a guest speaker, a book review, etc.

Here are some additional tips for making your meeting more successful:

1 Have a purpose

Ask yourselves, why are you meeting? What do you hope to accomplish? Are you meeting to plan an event, to learn, to re-energize and to deal with standard items, or just one of these things? Be aware that some members see the Committee's work as about 'getting things done', and other members may see it as providing informal support for their issues - both of these perspectives are valid and they represent needs that should be met in a meeting.

2 Consider how often you need to meet

A good meeting gives people energy - a poorly planned, unfocused meeting sucks energy. Nobody likes to meet for the sake of meeting. Don't meet if you don't have a plan - and if you're meeting to develop a plan, think carefully ahead of time about a good process for developing on and for reaching a consensus.

3

Plan ahead

- Where will the meeting be held? If space needs to be booked be sure to do this in advance.
- Be strategic about the timing of your meetings (i.e. can you hold them to coincide with membership meetings so that you can bring you issues forward?).
- Do you want new people to attend your meetings?
- If yes, how will you get the word out? Studies show the majority of people get involved in social movements because someone asked them to (not because they saw a poster, or were even committed to the issues). Don't assume people will show up if they're interested - people need to be invited. Again. And again.
- As well as making personal contact, use your local union newsletter to invite people to join the Women's Committee - by making it sound interesting and letting them know they're needed.
- Consider what it would be like to be a new person at one of your meetings - how are new people welcomed? How are they brought into the discussions so they don't feel left out?
- Provide child care at meetings, or at least a play area set up with age-appropriate toys, books, games, etc.
- Distribute an agenda in advance so people can prepare.

All committees will have an ebb and flow of attendance at meetings. Attendance will be increased when people feel there is progress made on projects identified as important. Leaving the meeting with clear ideas of actions that have been agreed on and who has agreed to take these actions. Remember that tasks need to be spread out to develop skills and to ensure we don't burn out.

Some locals have found alternating between meetings in-person and online or by conference call have been effective.

Remember to keep the Women's Department updated on your projects & successes!

Women's Committee Resources

Unifor Constitution

The Unifor Constitution sets out the core principles, structures, objectives and functions of the union. The Constitution is written in plain-language, and can be accessed online at: unifor.org/en/about-unifor/constitution.

Unifor Website

Unifor's website is filled with useful information and resources for the members and activists, including current news stories, campaign information, member services, and more. There are specific sections on Human Rights, Women, Aboriginal Workers & Workers of Colour, LGBTQ, Workers with disAbility and Young Workers. Please visit www.unifor.org.

Unifor Women's Regional Council Standing Committees

Unifor is comprised of four regions across the country (Atlantic, Ontario, Prairies and British Columbia), and also Quebec. Each of these regions maintains its own Regional Council, a parliamentary body that includes elected delegates from the various local unions in those jurisdictions. These Regional Councils meet once or twice per year.

Each Council has its own set of bylaws, and maintains its own Standing Committees - including Women's Committee. The Committee is made up of three elected representatives, including one chairperson. The Chairs from each region comprise Unifor's Canadian Council Women's Committee that meets, in person, once every 3 years.

To learn more about the Regional Council Committees and the Quebec Council Committee, email: women@unifor.org.

Unifor Women's Area Networks

Our union has hundreds of Women's Committees in local unions from coast-to-coast-to-coast, many have set up Area Networks. These networks aim to connect them all together locally, and facilitate campaigns, communication and information-sharing.

To join, or for more information on setting up a Women's Area Network, please email: women@unifor.org.

Unifor Women's Conferences

Unifor holds a National Women's Conference every year at the Unifor Education Centre. Conference call letters are sent out to every Unifor Local in the country, encouraging leadership to send delegates. Conference call letters are also circulated through existing Women's Committees and on the Unifor website. All costs of attendance are the responsibility of the Local.

Canadian Labour Congress and Provincial Federations of Labour

Unifor plays an active role in the Canadian Labour Congress' (CLC) Women's Committee, as well as with various Women's Committees at the Provincial Federations of Labour.

Official appointments to these committees are made through the Unifor National Office (often, federations require that each affiliate submit one person as an official representative on the committee, sometimes for voting purposes).

For more information on the CLC and Provincial Federation Women's Committees contact your local president or email: women@unifor.org.


Education Courses

The Unifor Education Department offers an extensive labour education program both in the areas where our members live as well as at our Unifor Education Centre in Port Elgin, Ontario. The union offers courses on a variety of subjects that range in length from one-day workshops to intensive four week programs. Unifor boasts one of the most comprehensive and sophisticated education programs for union members in Canada with courses aimed at developing women's leadership skills including Women Activists, Women in Leadership, Women and Health & Safety and Collective Bargaining for Women.

Stay Connected!

Follow the Women's Department on social media:

 facebook.com/uniforwomen

 youtube.com/user/UniforCanada

 [@UniforWomen](https://twitter.com/UniforWomen)

To receive e-blasts of upcoming events and other Women's Department information please send your contact information to women@unifor.org.



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