

CAW PRIDE POLICY STATEMENT

Over a decade ago, a small but a committed group of activists within the CAW began to raise gay and lesbian issues. In the last ten years our union has moved rapidly to advance issues for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) workers.

We took on the fight around same-sex benefits, both with employers and legislators. We launched a new CAW national newsletter, *Pride in Print*, for our LGBT members, allies and leadership. We began a visibility campaign, with flags, posters, t-shirts and pins to demonstrate our pride in representing our LGBT members. We now hold bi-annual national and regional pride conferences. Our regular education programs have been updated and expanded to include material on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues to educate and support our bargaining committees, stewards, and activists. We have developed specific workshops on Confronting Homophobia for area schools and local unions. We have active regional LGBT caucuses across the country and recently local unions have begun to establish pride committees.

We are actively working to eliminate homophobia from our workplaces, by demanding stronger action from employers and by expanding our anti-harassment workplace programs. We continue to call on the federal government to amend the Criminal Code to include hate crimes against the LGBT community. We work together with other unions and community groups that offer support, education, and workplace information on LGBT issues.

Today, our union is seen as one of the leading unions in Canada demanding equality (in the workplace and in the union) for our lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender members. We have come a long way on these issues in a short time, and we can be proud of the role we have played representing workers. The international community understands that Canada is a leader on same-sex benefits and LGBT rights in large part because strong trade unions have led the way in the fight for equality. We can take some credit for shifts in society's attitudes and government reform.

But there is more to be done. Homophobia continues to be a major cause of harassment in many of our workplaces. In society more generally, anyone perceived to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender can be targeted for brutal beatings and even murder. Laws continue to ignore or dismiss the realities of gay and lesbian families. Employers continue to discriminate in hiring practices, using traditional gender stereotypes to disqualify or slot workers out of (or into) certain jobs. The disproportionately high number of gay and transgender youth who work in the sex trade is a testament to the barriers they face accessing safe, regulated work. The high number of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth who are part of our homeless population speaks volumes to the lack of parental support, societal acceptance, safe housing, appropriate services, and available jobs. Despite changing attitudes, suicide rates among LGBT teens continue to remain at twice the national average.

Human rights issues are central to the overall work and commitment of the union. This means that LGBT issues are also central to the overall work and commitment of the union. It means that when we go about our daily union work, we include members of the LGBT community and their issues. When we organize new workplaces, we can welcome our new LGBT members, and find out about their workplace issues. When we talk about the impact of cuts to health care or education on our members, we can include the impact on the LGBT community, on women, on people of colour, people with disabilities, and other uniquely affected groups. Workplace campaigns, such as HIV/AIDS awareness, can connect and strengthen our activism in the areas of gender and sexuality, health and safety, rights of the disabled and international solidarity.

As working people, as trade unionists committed to fairness, justice, equality, dignity, respect and safety, we need to re-double our efforts to ensure the voices of our LGBT brothers and sisters are heard, and that their issues truly become issues for our total union.

WHAT'S NEEDED?

Education: To some extent we focus on educating the next generation -- when the decision makers (the policy-makers, the school boards, the bargaining committees, the union reps) could make better decisions if they had the opportunity to re-think and educate themselves. We can demand better resources for our children on LGBT issues, but there's more for us to learn too.

We will continue to offer and promote our one-day Confronting Homophobia Course for members and activists, and make particular efforts to ensure that leadership have ample opportunity to participate.

Safe unions, safe workplaces: Dignity, safety and respect on the job – that's mainly why workers organize unions. We need to support our anti-harassment policies and procedures, review and change them if they are not protecting our members and ensure that they provide specific coverage for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender members*. Our members need to have faith that the union will stand with them in cases of harassment.

We will be pro-active in enforcing our anti-harassment policy, and set a higher standard of respect in our workplaces. We will continue to negotiate CAW anti-harassment training programs in all of our workplaces.

Bargaining: We have made gains at the bargaining table. And yet, nearly half of our agreements, continue to remain silent on the issue of same-sex benefits**. Our collective agreements need to recognize same-sex partnerships in the definition of spouse established in our agreements. Even though it's now the law, spelling it out means we aren't vulnerable to regressive changes in government policy, it means that our LGBT members don't have to risk their safety or privacy to access their rights, and it means we send a message to employers and to our own members that we consider these issues important. We must also go further to ensure equality - our collective bargaining checklist on LGBT issues includes other collective agreement provisions that can be obtained in bargaining***. For example, we can bargain to ensure that HIV/AIDS drug coverage is not exempted from general policies. Furthermore, we can bargain protection for transgender members; these workers are exceedingly vulnerable in the workplace, particularly while they are transitioning from one sex to another. At some levels this issue is complex -- but it's also pretty simple. Transgender workers deserve the same rights as all workers: to come to work and feel safe, free from harassment, free from violence, respect for who they are, a right to privacy, full benefit coverage, and medical leave as required.

We will include same-sex benefits in our collective agreements and expand upon these rights to ensure no other barriers to our LGBT members are present in our agreements. We will negotiate transgender rights and stand together against discrimination and harassment.

Representation: As more and more of our members become aware that we are willing to fight for their issues, they are becoming involved in the broader work of the union. There have always been lesbian and gay shop stewards and unit chairs -- increasingly there is some safety in coming out. This is important and these brothers and sisters need our support.

Local unions and the national union will make substantial efforts to provide opportunities for LGBT members to become involved, and to review and remove barriers to participation. At the national level, the CAW Council and Quebec Council will create an LGBT Advisory Committee to Council.

The voices of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans members need to be heard. This can only happen if forums are created to move the informal activism of our LGBT members into the formal levels of our organization. We can do this by working to improve representation at CAW Council and Conventions, local union executive boards, bargaining committees, human rights committees, health and safety committees, newsletter committees, and women's committees. We have made great strides in changing attitudes and policies -- by formalizing LGBT participation we can make certain that our actual practice reflects these changes.

Legal changes: Our governments change laws only when the pressure mounts. We need to continue to work with the broader labour movement and the LGBT community in Canada to push for full equality for LGBT members of our society.

We will continue to demand the Criminal Code of Canada be amended to include hate crimes against the LGBT community. We will call on the federal and provincial governments to include gender identity within human rights codes to ensure protection for transgender individuals. We will demand that provincial governments acknowledge the reality of gay and lesbian families and amend government documents such as birth certificates that assume heterosexual parenting. We will continue to press the federal government to pass legislation allowing same-sex couples the right to marry if they so choose. We will also press the provincial governments to amend their corresponding legislation covering the licensing and registration of marriage.

In conclusion

Our 1997 **Working with Pride** policy statement reminded us that “Lesbians, gay men and bisexuals are everywhere: they work beside us, they are active in our unions, they are our neighbours, they are church members, community activists, professionals, athletes, elected officers and politicians. They are our mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, spouses and our friends.” This is still true, though many of us are more aware today that these issues do, in fact, hit home.

We are a strong union. Our strength comes from taking on tough debates and defending working-class issues. It is in this spirit that we will continue to push for respect, safety, dignity, equality and justice for our lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender members.

* Anti-harassment and non-discrimination language should include sexual orientation, same-sex partnership status, and gender identity under prohibited grounds.

** Of the 275 English-language CAW contracts contained in the federal government's Negotech database, just 64 (approximately 24%) included the term “same sex” or “spouse of the same or opposite sex”. The CAW's own internal database of contract provisions, the “State of the Union”, shows that of the 190 new or renewed contracts reported since 2001, 101 (53.58% include same-sex coverage). Source: “The CAW's Response to Change and Restructuring in Industrial Relations: Does ‘Fighting Back’ Make a Difference?”, Jonathan Eaton, University of Toronto, 2002.

*** The CAW Checklist for Bargaining LGBT issues is available on-line at:

http://www.caw.ca/whatwedo/pride/bargain_check.asp

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