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The role of unions in supporting equity employment

Unions can play a crucial role in integrating minority groups into the workplace and providing equal opportunities for them to succeed. Equal opportunities alone, however, do not necessarily result in equity employment. Under the same circumstances, for instance, a person with a disability might not be able to achieve the same accomplishments as someone with no disabilities. Therefore, a shift in our understanding of equity needs to take place, where employment fairness is defined as embracing differences and providing support for everyone to build their careers based on their unique abilities and backgrounds. The career development attempts of equity seeking groups are likely to be hindered by different factors including ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, socioeconomic status, physical or mental disability, etc. Unions can be instrumental in providing support for these groups in their journey toward achieving employment equity. This essay briefly explores the ways unions can take the lead on surmounting obstacles caused by immigration, sexual orientation, gender, and mental illness and/or disability.

According to the Government of Canada's 2018 annual report to parliament on immigration, British Columbia has the highest immigration rate after Ontario and Quebec. Most of these immigrants are in the "economic" class, which includes skilled workers, businesspeople, and caregivers. The report claims that "Canada sets an annual target for immigration and selects newcomers who best contribute to the country's economic and social well-being" ("2018 Annual Report to Parliament on Immigration," 2019). Immigration applicants in Canada undergo

detailed scrutiny based on their education and work experience in specific fields and occupations. They must also meet the minimum language requirements in either French or English. Everything seems to be planned to set these newcomers for success in their careers. However, many of them struggle to find employment opportunities matching their education and skills, especially in the first ten years after landing in Canada. Statistics Canada shows that there is a quite large gap between the employment rates of immigrants and Canadian born citizens, which “narrows based on time since landing, although it does not disappear” (“Analysis of the Canadian Immigrant Labour Market, 2008 to 2011,” n.d.). The main reasons for this problem are a lack of Canadian work experience, networking opportunities, and knowledge about North American career-building skills. This is where unions can come into play to promote and foster equity for immigrants and newcomers by leveraging their position and resources in the social and cultural milieu of employment.

Unions’ ideal position as centres where professionals come together in unity gives them the power to mobilize resources for those prospective professionals who are on still on the outside but have the potential of joining them in the near future. Even if unions cannot directly help job seeking immigrants, they can provide a platform where mentors would guide immigrants to find information about employment opportunities, the ways of gaining further qualifications (such as taking courses and certificates), and improving their career skills (e.g., preparing for job interviews). Moreover, by providing career support for the family of their members, unions can reach targets in this equity seeking group. As an immigrant, I am applying for this scholarship as the family member of a PEA union member, which can be a great example of this type of indirect support for immigrants.

In addition, unions can boost equity by helping newly employed immigrants and other ethnic minority groups who do not always have access to professional development opportunities. Activities such as professional networking are very important not only in “job searching” but also in “moving along the career ladder” (Doyle, 2019), a concept that is a direct corollary of employment equity. Unions can leave a positive impact by helping immigrant employees overcome socio-cultural and linguistic barriers. Organizing workshops or offering one-on-one sessions would work best, in my opinion. They can provide information for ethnic minority staff on subjects such as cultural nuances, taxation acts and regulations, health care system, workplace etiquette, finding different resource for career counselling, internal job postings and promotions, etc. This can be a substantial help in the acculturation of immigrants to their work environment and will lead them to success in their positions.

Sexual orientation is another factor that can interfere with employees’ performances and their success in receiving promotions. Workplace discrimination towards members of minority groups, such as the LGBTQ community, can be overt in the form of harassment or workplace incivility. However, the bias against members of oppressed social groups “has become covert and subtle rather than overt and explicit, and such experiences lead to negative outcomes for targets” (Zurbrugg & Miner, 2016, p.1). Workplace inequity has many consequences for productivity, job satisfaction, and career growth. Unions can play a crucial role in this regard as well. To illustrate, they can form diversity committees that are responsible for educating employees on the subject of different sexual orientations through workshops or pamphlets. They can also guide all employees to be more inclusive and use the proper language by avoiding heterosexual bias (using gender-neutral pronouns, for instance). Inviting activists from the LGBTQ community to help run these workshops can be very constructive.

It is very hard to recognize the bias towards women in the workplace. Since discrimination based on gender is illegal, decision makers will never admit that they have promoted a male candidate over a female one with equivalent education and experience. But in reality, the fact that female employees might not be as available due to maternal responsibilities can affect receiving promotions or layoffs. However, it is very hard to prove that those decisions have been made based on discriminatory measures. According to Konrad (as cited in Immen, 2010) “how we find the hidden bias is to look at the numbers.” For instance, in the analysis of careers of 22338 employees in Canada “white women were 11 percentage points less likely to receive promotions within their first five years than white men, and minority females were almost 29 percentage points less likely to be promoted than a white male with equivalent education and experience. Minority men were only slightly less likely to get an early promotion than a white man” (as cited in Immen, 2010). These numbers clearly depict a bias against women and other visible minority groups. Unions can contribute to the advancement of employment equity by adopting a proactive approach towards this matter. Their bargaining position allows them to be great allies for their female members in securing women rights. They can also engage all members especially managers and decision makers in constructive dialogues about equity and the significance of providing fair opportunities for all employees. Unions can also assist and expedite investigation processes regarding the complaints of those who have experienced any form of discrimination in the workplace.

Finally, unions can protect the rights of those with mental illness and/or disabilities to an equitable workplace. According to the website of the Canadian Mental Health Association, “disclosing [one’s mental illness] can lead to stigma or discrimination... There are laws to prevent this kind of discrimination, but it can still happen. Workplaces have different

attitudes and cultures, so everyone will have different experiences” (“Mental Illness in the Workplace,” 2016). Unions can be very influential in removing this stigma and fighting any possible discrimination against employees who are suffering from mental illnesses. Negotiating a gradual return to work after a medical leave on behalf of the employees, requesting special accommodations for them, and providing information on available counselling resources are some approaches a union can take in order to facilitate the employees’ full recovery and accordingly, their career growth.

As we see, unions are located in a position where they can offer much support to those disadvantaged groups that would best benefit from equity in the workplace. The unique strength they have to offer, i.e., that of the collective, is exactly what marginalized individuals need to protect their rights, put their skills and abilities into practice, and eventually build successful careers. By being the voice of the voiceless, unions can continue to attract the power of society’s human resources, who in turn can help other equity seeking groups and individuals in the future.

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