



HEU equity conference delegates commit to building a stronger, more inclusive union

More than 160 HEU delegates and guests joined together in Vancouver this week for the union's 2019 equity conference under the theme *Making Space: Building a diverse, inclusive and equitable union*.

Over two-and-a-half days, members participated in a number of workshops to gain a better understanding of the concepts of equity, diversity and inclusion; to hear from community leaders about their equity work and campaigns; and to share and learn from one another.

In her opening address, HEU secretary-business manager Jennifer Whiteside said, "As every one of you here already knows – racism, Islamophobia, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and ableism all rear their ugly heads in our workplaces and in our communities.

"Whether it's blatant or covert, disguised as a joke or revealed through an unkind remark, whether it's face-to-face or online, it all adds up to intolerance and discrimination. And it has absolutely no place in our union."

HEU's five equity standing committees – Ethnic Diversity, Indigenous Peoples, People with disAbilities, Pink Triangle and Women's – held individual caucuses to discuss issues specific to their equity-seeking group and to elect four members to their standing committees. The other three members of each committee will be selected through an application process.

On the second day of the conference, an interactive "equity mixer" was held for delegates to learn more about the work and mandates of HEU's equity committees. Each one hosted a meeting space, and delegates rotated between the five rooms for 20-minute presentations by the current equity standing committee members.

Guest facilitators from community organizations also presented or led discussions on immigrants and refugees, accessibility for people with disabilities, aging out, violence against women,

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HEU's Ethnic Diversity caucus was one of five equity-seeking groups to participate at the union's 2019 equity conference in Vancouver, March 25 to March 27, at the Hyatt Regency Hotel.

psychological safety, faith and the labour movement, and youth activism.

One highlight of the conference was the Blanket Exercise, co-facilitated by members of the HEU Indigenous Peoples Standing Committee, which taught participants about Indigenous history, including colonization, residential schools, the 60s scoop, and truth and reconciliation.

During the main plenary sessions, delegates heard a keynote address from non-binary trans storyteller Ivan Coyote, who spoke about their experiences navigating through airports and the medical system as a trans person; and from HEU's top three officers – who, for the first time in HEU's history, are all women.

“We can't let fear stop us from fighting back against racism, bullying, harassment, discrimination and violence,” said HEU's first woman president Barb Nederpel. “We know that racism and other forms of discrimination exist in some of our HEU locals. And we have a high number of racialized workers in the lowest-paid occupations. We can do better. And we will do better.

“We will never be a strong, inclusive, equitable and diverse union unless every single member of our union feels safe, valued and respected for who they are – no matter what skin colour, religion, ability, gender expression, or sexual orientation... We have to walk the walk, and talk the talk every single day.”

In her greetings, HEU's financial secretary Betty Valenzuela told delegates it's critical to see themselves reflected in the union's leadership, and that change can truly happen if we use our collective voice in solidarity to speak out against injustices.

“As a woman – and a woman of colour – it took me a long time to find my voice,” said Valenzuela. “In my early years at Vancouver General Hospital as a full-time shop steward and secretary-treasurer, my voice was not encouraged. And it certainly wasn't welcomed. But that's why we are activists. My mother called me a rebel. Many of us are rebels [because] we speak out when people want us to shut up. That takes courage, determination, and passion.”

Whiteside echoed the strength activists find when working together for the greater good, and when leaning on each other in troubled times.

“I want to acknowledge that the challenges before us are immense,” said Whiteside. “And sometimes, we can feel like we are sinking under the weight of it all. Some of the situations you face every day create pain and trauma that you carry with you.

“But the union is a place where we come together and where we can find solidarity in the struggle. Through the sharing of trauma, we can find support. We can find our burdens lessened. And we can forge the spirit to fight back. This is what we can do together.”

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