



HEU women's conference energizes, motivates and inspires activists

More than 100 HEU members gathered in Richmond this week to celebrate women activists and leaders at the union's 2019 women's conference.

Under the theme *Women to the Front: taking our space, building our power*, the conference aimed at teaching delegates about the history of women's activism, including the barriers women face and strengths they bring to leadership roles; and looking at ways to strategize on building women's participation in today's social, economic and political world.

Another main objective – during elective workshops and plenary discussions – was to encourage women to become leaders in their union and communities.

For the first time in HEU's 75-year history, three women head the union – president Barb Nederpel, financial secretary Betty Valenzuela, and secretary-business manager Jennifer Whiteside.

During her remarks, Nederpel spoke about the challenges of being HEU's first woman president.

"The struggle for women's equality is long-standing," said Nederpel. "It's now 2019, and we've come a long way. But yet – believe me – sexism is still alive and well. I experience it all the time, even in progressive spaces. I know I have to work longer, better and harder to prove myself."

Nederpel hosted a lively and informative panel discussion with NDP MLAs Judy Darcy, Rachna Singh and Mitzi Dean, who spoke about the issues they feel passionate about like education, child care, health care, the environment; and they encouraged new and seasoned activists to pursue leadership opportunities. Watch for extensive coverage in the next issue of the *Guardian*.

In her address, Whiteside spoke about how advancements for working women have often come through collective bargaining – like paid leave for women experiencing domestic or sexual violence, paid leave for pregnancy loss, and improvements to parental leave benefits.

She presented alarming stats on gender-based wage discrimination and its impact especially on Indigenous women and women of colour. And how there is much work still to be done.

...more

“Time and time again, women have shown they are not willing subjects of exploitation,” said Whiteside. “Women continue to sign union cards, often in the face of hostile attacks from their employers... And it is women who continue to form the foundation of a strong labour movement. There is such courage and strength among our members.”

One of the most exciting parts of the conference was the high number of first-time attendees to a union event and the many young women activists, who were learning about women’s history for the first time.

Valenzuela, the union’s first elected Filipina financial secretary, closed the conference with words of wisdom and advice for creating a more diverse and inclusive union for women.

“In the professional world, women are often pitted against one another,” said Valenzuela. “We are set up to compete with one another. And we are fighting for opportunities and spaces.

“But I have never viewed other women as competition. I think there’s enough space for all of us. It might be a tight space, but there’s room. As women, we need to accommodate and support each other.”

September 19, 2019