

one union many colours

an HEU handbook
for ethnic diversity members





The Hospital Employees' Union
Summer 2000

one union, many colours

an HEU handbook for ethnic diversity members

A true measure of the strength of our union is the diversity of its membership. Again and again, the Committee for Ethnic Diversity has used education and action, at the workplace and in our union, to make us all aware that **there is unity in diversity.**


Contact the Committee for Ethnic Diversity at the HEU provincial office – ask for the committee's voicemail box.

Hospital Employees' Union
Provincial Office, Vancouver Site
2006 West 10th Avenue
Vancouver, BC V6J 4P5

telephone: (604) 734-3431
toll free 1-800-663-5813
fax: (604) 739-1528
HEU on the Internet: <http://www.heu.org/>

First edition Fall 1998

Raymond Liens, equity officer, direct line: (604) 739-1521

compilation and layout by Nadene Rehnby  44



contents



this handbook is for you 5

about the committee 6

committee for ethnic diversity 7

other HEU equity committees 9

about unions 10

a beginners guide for new activists

how unions work 12

the Hospital Employees' Union 13

HEU education 14

HEU structure 14

you are the labour movement 16

how to get involved 17

ethnic diversity 18

racism is a union issue 19

a history of racism against workers in Canada 20

HEU members' experiences 22

an injury to one is an injury to all 23

the CLC anti-racism task force 24

the BC Federation of Labour on racism 25

legal protection against racism 27

“ An injury to one
is an injury to us all. ”



this handbook is for YOU

- Minority members are an important part of the union. The union depends on your contribution.
- Some members of the Committee for Ethnic Diversity are new to unions. We've set out some basic information about unions to help you get started.
- For some members of the committee, English is not a first language. This handbook gives you basic information about unions in plain language.
- Finally, this book is for our allies – our friends. It gives information to help people who are not a part of the Committee for Ethnic Diversity to understand the issues, and to bring new activists into our movement.

This is the first handbook for the Committee for Ethnic Diversity. We look forward to hearing from you, and encourage you to send along your ideas for future editions of this handbook.



“ Our committee members come from many different backgrounds. There is a vast wealth of experience within our committee. ”



committee for ethnic diversity

At Convention 1994, HEU members established four equity caucuses – including the Visible Minorities Caucus – “to increase the involvement of their members through the many integrated programs of the union and propose and advise on programs to eliminate discrimination and inequality within the union and the workplace.”

In 1995, HEU held its first equity conference. Members of visible minority caucus decided that they needed to be more inclusive and reflect the diversity of members, and changed the name to the Committee for Ethnic Diversity.

Since 1995, HEU has had an equity officer on staff to coordinate the work of the equity committees.

In 1996, HEU members at the biennial convention voted to amend the constitution to recognize four standing committees including Ethnic Diversity. The mandate for the committees includes outreach and advice on education in various programs and activities of the union.

In April of 1997 and May 1999, members of the equity groups gathered at equity conferences to elect standing committee members and develop concrete action plans.

Our committee members come from various ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds. Our committee aims to break down barriers to develop a better understanding among HEU members. We educate each other in the diversity of our backgrounds, and reach out to those members who have been ignored in the past. HEU becomes stronger by accomplishing this.

The Committee for Ethnic Diversity meets regularly to address issues, such as racism and discrimination in the workplace. Our education activities have included speakers at various local meetings, workshops and seminars, as well as a video produced by HEU on discrimination in the workplace. The committee's other work to raise visibility and awareness, and promote sharing, includes the Caucus Cookbook, which contains recipes from committee members across the province.

We have also worked in solidarity with other social justice groups on issues of race and discrimination.

The committee also provides support to ethnic diversity members at HEU workplaces.

To find out more about the Ethnic Diversity Committee, contact us through the provincial office.



solidarity knows no bounds

The Committee for Ethnic Diversity works in solidarity with other HEU equity committees to help build a stronger union.



The **First Nations Committee** seeks to educate all HEU members about First Nations culture and raise awareness of First Nations issues within the union. Any First Nations member (off or on reserve, status or non-status) is welcome to participate.



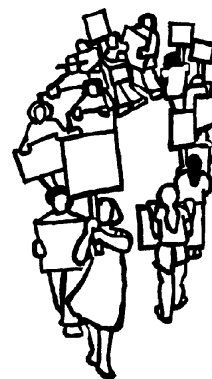
The **Lesbian and Gay Committee** works to improve and enhance awareness of lesbian and gay issues. The committee provides support to guarantee HEU members a safe, positive, and harassment-free workplace.



The **People with disAbilities Committee** is for HEU members who are visibly/invisibly disabled in the workplace, on Long Term Disability (LTD) or Workers' Compensation Board (WCB) programs, or who have been off of work sick for a long time. The committee also works to help people recognize the contributions of workers with disabilities.

To set up an awareness session about equity issues for your local, contact HEU provincial office.

“ I learned that I don't have to be scared any more, because I have the union behind me. ”



unions

a beginner's guide for new activists

When a worker acts alone in the workplace, they have the power of only one voice. If a worker wants better working conditions, a fair wage, or if they are treated unfairly by an employer, going to the boss on their own may mean that they are ignored, treated worse, or even lose their job.

When workers act together, they have the power of many voices. Organizing together – by forming a union – workers can decide together what is good for *all* workers, and go the employer as a group. Workers stand in solidarity with each other and don't allow a boss to single-out one person.

The union's job is to represent the needs of its members. It does this in many ways:

- negotiates a collective agreement with the employer;
- acts for all workers to make sure the collective agreement is enforced;
- acts for each worker to make sure they are getting what they need in the workplace;
- provides services to members to help them in their workplace;
- advances the needs of its members with the government and other institutions; and
- works in solidarity with other organizations – in the community and around the world – to advance the goals of all workers.

All members should have some basic documentation about HEU:

- a copy of the collective agreement – explains your rights and responsibilities in the workplace;
- a copy of the HEU constitution – explains your rights and responsibilities in the union; and
- a members' kit – the *HEU, YOU are the union!* members' kit gives you basic information about the union.
- information on HEU equity standing committees.

how unions work

Unions start with you.

As a worker, you have rights and responsibilities in your workplace through the collective agreement. The collective agreement is made by union members, who decide together what their priorities will be. Then the members elect a bargaining team to represent them in negotiations with the employer. When an agreement is reached, it goes back to the members to vote on it.

Union members have stewards to represent them and help them get what they need from the employer or the union. Some workplaces have several kinds of stewards – for example, a steward who is responsible for health and safety in the workplace. There may also be committees in your workplace – for example, a committee that meets with the employer about training for members. You can ask your steward for more information.

Workplaces often organize together into locals, and the locals are often organized into a provincial or national union. HEU's structure is explained on pages 14 and 15.



the Hospital Employees' Union

HEU represents 43,000 members in 500 health care facilities and agencies. It is the oldest and largest union in health care in BC, and now represents people in all kinds of health care fields.

Since it began in 1944, workers organized together in the Hospital Employees' Union have won a number of gains:

- better working conditions;
- better wages;
- shorter work week;
- medical and dental plans, long term disability insurance, life insurance and pensions;
- health and safety protection and safe workload levels;
- paid leaves of absence for personal or family emergencies;
- paid leaves of absence to get married, celebrate the birth of a child (father), or welcome an adopted child;
- seniority rights that help protect workers from being treated unfairly;
- employment security; and
- many other gains for its members.



HEU has also been a leader in fighting to protect vital social services like medicare and education, and plays an active role in bringing progressive change to provincial health care reform.

Because government decisions have an impact on the lives of health care workers, HEU members have supported their union leaders getting involved in politics. HEU leaders and staff work hard to protect members' interest by lobbying politicians and educating the public through the media.

HEU education

The union offers a number of workshops in the regions for members who are interested in learning new skills and knowledge to be active in HEU and the labour movement.

For instance, members can take introductory shop steward workshops, advanced shop steward workshops, and occupational health and safety workshops. There is also a provincial summer school where a wider range of workshops are offered.

HEU also coordinates other educational opportunities for its members, paid for by the employer. For instance, the Basic Skills Program offers a learning opportunity for workers to study literacy, numeracy, English as a second language, and communications. The 24-week program is offered on-site during working hours.

HEU also works with other unions and labour organizations to provide educational opportunities. The union provides some scholarships for members who wish to pursue labour-related studies at colleges and universities. The provincial office has a library with resource and reference materials for members, including a video library.

Look for notices on the union bulletin board.

HEU structure

At HEU, every member is part of a local. The local has one or more shop stewards, and an elected local executive.

Members of the locals elect a provincial executive at a convention every two years. The provincial executive is made up of a president, financial secretary, vice-presidents, members at large, trustees and regional vice-presidents who meet regularly between conventions to conduct the business of the union.

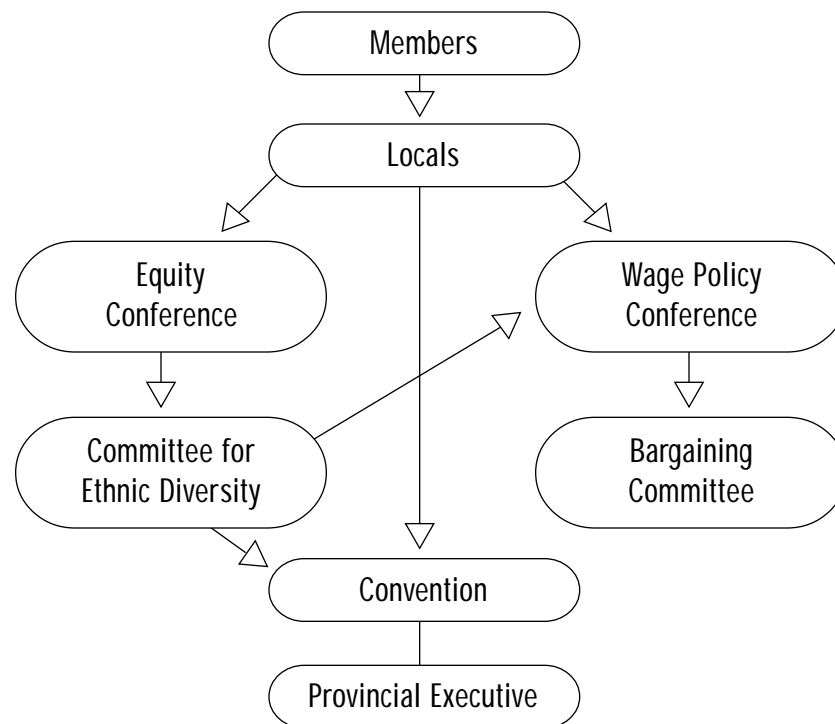
Convention ratifies the provincial executive appointment a full-time secretary-business manager to be the chief administrative officer and the main spokesperson for the union. The secretary-business

manager is a member of the provincial executive and sits on all subcommittees.

The provincial union has full-time paid staff who work hard to represent members' interests at the bargaining table, in arbitrations and with government.

The union holds a provincial wage policy conference before collective agreements are negotiated. Locals and committees can tell this conference what they think is important for the next round of bargaining. Through the conference, the agenda is set by the members.

How the Committee for Ethnic Diversity fits in at HEU



you are the labour movement

Unions work in solidarity with each other in a number of ways, such as working together to support workplace goals, respecting picket lines when other union members are off the job, joining together to lobby governments for progressive change, or conducting international solidarity with workers and unions around the globe.



The Hospital Employees' Union is BC's largest health care union. HEU works in solidarity with other unions on issues of joint concern.



HEU is now part of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, the largest union of health care and public sector workers in Canada.



HEU is a member of the British Columbia Federation of Labour, which represents 450,000 members of affiliated unions in more than 1,100 locals. The goals of "The Fed" are best exemplified by its slogan: "What we desire for ourselves, we wish for all."



Through the BC Federation of Labour, HEU is also a member of the Canadian Labour Congress, Canada's largest labour organization. The CLC has a number of district labour councils in BC communities.

how to get involved

Attend union meetings. The union has a fund to pay for the costs of accommodating members with disabilities. Contact your steward or the event organizer in advance. If the day, time or place is a problem, or if you require childcare or a translator, ask your local executive for help.

Know your rights. Make sure you have a copy of the collective agreement and your constitution. If you have questions, ask your steward.

Know your sisters and brothers. Don't be afraid to introduce yourself. Get to know your stewards and local executive officers – you can set a time to meet with them privately if you like. And talk to your fellow union members!

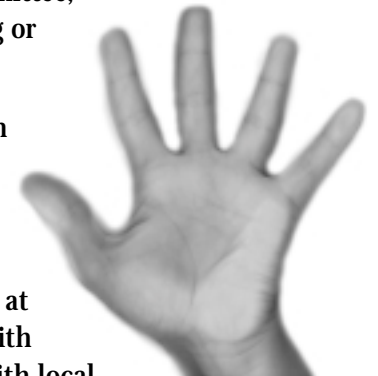
Become a steward, or run in the elections for the local executive. Talk to your steward or your local about when and how to get involved.

Join or form a committee. You can volunteer to be on a committee, or if a group of workers wants a new committee, present the idea at a membership meeting or to the local executive.

Participate in union education. As explained on page 16, HEU offers a number of education opportunities for members.

Be a delegate. You can run to be a delegate representing your workplace or your local at HEU conventions or in solidarity work with other parts of the labour movement, or with local coalitions.

Keep informed about union issues. Look for the union bulletin board at your facility, read *The Guardian* – HEU's award-winning newspaper, visit the website at <http://www.heu.org> and, during contract talks, call the bargaining hotline.



“ We don't have to take this anymore. You have to start standing on your ground. Start breaking down the barriers. ”



ethnic diversity

in the workplace • in the union • in the labour movement

Ethnic diversity members know well that racism appears throughout our daily lives. In workplaces – and unions – members continue to experience direct discrimination based on our ethnicity, our language, or our cultural background. We need to address institutionalized oppression that assumes things about us, and makes us invisible.

racism is a union issue

Employers use racism to divide workers by:

- promoting workers of one background rather than another;
- giving more overtime, or compelling unwanted overtime, to workers of one background;
- giving one kind of job to people of one ethnic origin, and another kind of job to people from another; or
- treating workers better or worse depending on their ethnic background.

Workers also experience racism on the job in a number of ways:

- remarks, jokes, innuendos or taunts about a person's racial background, comments and imitations of people's language with the intention to make fun, practical jokes;
- insulting gestures or physical confrontation or assault, vandalisms;
- showing racist pictures, graffiti or materials;
- refusing to talk to, work cooperatively with or train a person because of her or his ethnicity; and



- assuming things about a person based on their ethnicity, or making their racial or ethnic background the most important part of who we are.

Discrimination on the job hurts our members and our union. It can endanger a worker's job performance through stress; create an environment where more serious forms of discrimination and abuse can happen, and creating a racist climate that often leads to conflict and mistrust among workers.

a history of racism against workers in Canada

Racism experienced by workers in Canada began with the arrival of European settlers on First Nations land. European treatment of First Nations people was brutal, and continues to be largely unresolved today.

Canada then began to limit non-European settlers through its immigration policy. For instance, the Canadian government admitted about 15,000 Chinese men into British Columbia to work on the western section of the first trans-Canada railroad, against the objections of the (white) English population there. When the railroad was complete, however, racist laws were made to keep Chinese out of the country. In 1903, the Canadian government raised the head tax on Chinese immigrants to \$500. No white immigrants had to pay a tax.

Employers benefited from racism because they could pay immigrants lower wages and could use them as strikebreakers; in this way, they could undermine the labour movement of the time. As a result, immigrants were blamed for taking away jobs, as they still are today.

In reality, ethnic diversity members have always been a strong part of

building the labour movement. For example, they were leaders in organizing unions in mines, lumber camps and factories and they organized strikes in Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg and Vancouver to demand a shorter workday and work week, overtime pay, a living wage, the right to organize unions, and to protest against immigration policies.

From 1914 to 1945 Canada went through two world wars and a serious economic depression. Immigrants who were active in the labour movement were singled-out as troublemakers, arrested and deported. Many of those who were citizens had their rights taken away. Working people were not allowed to have a meeting if it was in a particular language. Organizations like the Chinese Labour Association were banned. The government passed laws to keep many from voting – some were not changed until 1948.

By the 1950s, industrial expansion forced the government to open up the country to more immigrants, and in the 1960s the government turned to developing countries for workers.

Today, Canada's workforce is made up of workers from different countries around the world.

But employers still see immigrants as a cheap source of labour, and feel they can intimidate those who they think are weakest in society.

Because of racism, many workers today still:

- have the lowest paid jobs;
- have the least important jobs; and
- have lesser chances for job advancement or training.

Many companies continue to give jobs to immigrants because they believe that immigrants will work harder for less money, and because they think that immigrants don't know their rights, and because language is a barrier to getting full rights. Also, many immigrant workers have a high level of skills and education from their home countries that are not recognized here.

Recent changes to Canada's immigration policy are a step backwards. New rules for immigrants – in particular a fee similar to the headtax – is more likely to hurt people from non-European countries.

HEU members' experiences

Racism continues to be experienced by HEU members on the job. At an HEU conference, members of the ethnic diversity explained how they experienced racism. Here are some of their stories.

“Every morning at work, I was greeted by one of the RNs with “here comes little VC.” This I ignored, as I thought she was just being cute, saying little VC. This went on for awhile. Finally, I asked my husband what is VC? And he asked me why, so I told him that this RN keeps calling me little VC. So when he said it means Viet Cong, I was very upset and hurt. I started crying. I said, but I am not Viet Cong. The RN had been a nurse in Vietnam. My husband told me to tell her that I am not comfortable with her calling me VC. I said yes I will, but I never did. I was too scared, and this went on for awhile. I resolved the problem by avoiding her.

Yes, that is how I used to deal with those situations, simply don't say anything and leave it be. I was weak, and very scared. I didn't know what to do. But since I have become an activist, I have learned a lot. I have become more assertive. I can now deal with most problems right away.”

Mary Lee Jetko

“Yes, I have experienced similar stories in my workplace as well. Before I was an activist, I was a very scared and weak person. I didn't know how to deal with my problems. Since I have become an activist, I have learned a lot. I can never forget the first equity conference I attended in 1995. I used to be a very shy person, hardly ever talked, just sat in the back and listened to the problems of other brothers and sisters and the hardships they had to face in their workforce. The conference was very emotional. I learned a lot being in the conference. I learned that I don't have to be scared any more because I have the union behind me.”

Asha Dhak



an injury to one is an injury to all



In fighting racism, the labour movement has built its work around the belief that an injury to one is an injury to all. As a recent Canadian Labour Congress report explained, “Without living this principle, in society, in the workplace, in our own unions, our solidarity erodes and ultimately disappears.”

The labour movement recognizes the important contributions of all workers, and that without challenging discrimination, the labour movement will not be able to advance its goals. “When a local president refuses to intervene on behalf of a Sikh member being disciplined unfairly by the employer, who wins and who loses? When a union puts women's issues on the back burner, who will fight for the issues on the front burner? A lesbian member harassed by fellow workers will not likely work to build local union solidarity. A minority member who hears racist jokes at a union meeting will not likely participate in union activities.

“We do ourselves lasting and permanent injury by failing to represent all of our members, involve those equality-seeking members, and encourage them in union activism. At a recent national conference on human rights sponsored by the Canadian Labour Congress, we learned that many workers who are members of visible minorities and equality-seekers are not willing to participate in their union. Not only do they fear their bosses, and fear reprimands – many have a lack of confidence in their union that largely explains the fear. From the shop floor level to the highest echelons of the labour movement, they are subject, far too often, to exclusion and overt racism within our movement itself.

“Who can possibly benefit from this but the employer?”

the CLC anti-racism task force

In 1994 the CLC set up an anti-racism task force. “Challenging Racism: Going Beyond Recommendations,” the report of the task force was released in October 1997.

The Task Force held meetings with union and community activists across Canada to identify problems and solutions for ending social and institutional racism. Participants at these hearings included local, federations of labour and national union leadership, anti-racism activists, community activists and CLC staff persons.

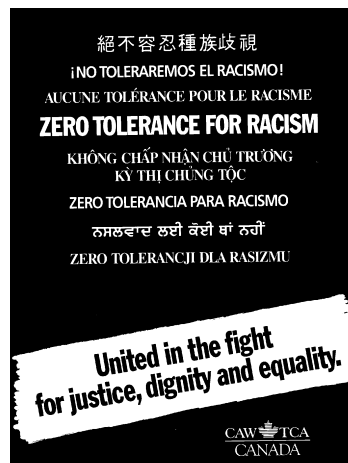
Members of the task force critically looked at the labour movement in terms of our work, principles and made recommendations which will strengthen our movement. They have pointed to the existence of systemic racism at all levels of our unions including staffing and leadership structures.

Recommendations from the task force

Internal union structural change: adoption of anti-racism action plans, establishment of anti-racism office, representation in every department and work.

Internal union democracy: full participation in the political life of the union, constitutional amendments to ensure representation at conventions and conferences, abiding by anti-racism principles as a condition of holding union office or staff position, survey of membership and self organizing support.

Education: education plan of action, anti-racism courses developed by and aimed at Aboriginal Peoples and People of Colour, worker to worker organizing materials, evaluating and monitoring the delivery of anti-racism courses, education and counselling centres and the hiring of education staff from the two communities.

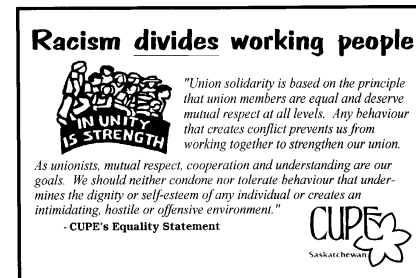


Research: one-year project to integrate anti-racism analysis into public policy work, regional research centres, one-year research project on the contributions of Aboriginal Peoples and People of Colour, quarterly anti-racism research bulletins, anti-racism library and the hiring of researchers.

Communications strategy: anti-racism newsletters and bulletins, anti-racism media centres, equality days of action public service announcements, and a six-month youth project.

Organizing: anti-racism organizing plan, union organizing campaigns, hire Aboriginal Peoples and People of Colour – and youth as union organizers.

Follow-up consultation forums taking place next year are a direct outcome of anti-racism activists insisting on their participation in the implementation strategies, thereby ensuring that the task force report does not just sit on the shelf.



the BC Federation of Labour on racism

It is a fact that minority workers are less visible in positions of union responsibility than dominant group workers. Why is this a union problem?

1. A divided workforce can be further exploited. Employers have, in the past, and continue in the present, to pit different groups of workers against each other to: undermine organizing drives; weaken union strength at the bargaining table; break strikes.

2. Workplace racism is stressful for all workers. Name calling, racist remarks and graffiti create unease and stress among workers. Victims of the remarks never know what other forms of harassment this will lead to. Dominant group workers may fear that minority workers think they are all racist. The longer these actions are allowed to continue, the harder they are to stop. The situation creates stress for everyone. While

harassment may not initially be uncomfortable for the offender, in the long run the stress produced in the workplace does not benefit this person either.

3. Unions need increased strength in hard economic times. Unions must count on the support of all members for their policies and for participation in campaigns to change economic policies.

4. The unions need allies in the community. About 45 per cent of workers in BC are unionized. Broader public support is needed for the labour movement's efforts to protect and advance workers' rights. Making the union a champion for human rights breaks down the negative public image of unions as self-protective and elitist institutions.

What can the union do about racism?

Include human rights and anti-racism education at regular union meetings. (e.g. invite speakers, show films, etc.) Take a clear position against all forms of discrimination and communicate this to all members. Consider bargaining for an anti-racial harassment clause in your collective agreement and for employer-paid literacy and language training for those who have English as a second language. Provide basic information to workers on union and human rights.

Consider offering services through the union of particular help to minority workers, for example, translation and legal assistance. Consider translating notices, publicizing union meetings and events. Ensure that job postings are translated into other languages when appropriate.

Continue to challenge legislation which threatens the human rights of all workers and in particular minority workers, for example, farm workers and domestics. Continue to support other struggles for human rights and link these issues where possible to similar struggles in our own workplaces and communities. Encourage minority workers to participate in all the union's activities.

Colour, religion, size, abilities, beliefs....

Wouldn't life be boring if we were all the same?

John Shields
President

Diane Wood
Secretary-Treasurer

B.C. Government and Service Employees' Union



legal protection from discrimination



The collective agreement

The collective agreement is a legally enforceable document. All HEU collective agreements include protection from discrimination and set out the process for making and resolving a complaint. If this process does not result in a satisfactory resolution, the complaint can go through a legal procedure – such as a grievance or arbitration – as set out by BC's labour laws.

The BC Human Rights Code

British Columbia has a human rights code that protects from discrimination because of race, colour, ancestry, place of origin, political belief, religion, marital status, family status, physical or mental disability, sex, sexual orientation or age or because of unrelated convictions or offences. The code includes areas like employment, wages, accommodation and services, including unions and associations.

The Canadian Human Rights Act

The Canadian Human Rights Act protects from discrimination on the federal level, such as a government policy or a national employer. The Act protects on the grounds of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, family status, disability and conviction for which a pardon has been granted.

The Charter of Rights and Freedoms

Canada's Constitution, in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, protects from all discrimination, including race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability. As it is the supreme law of the land, all laws in Canada must comply with it.



