

**Remarks by Barbara Byers, Executive Vice-President of the Canadian Labour Congress
to an Official Side Event “Equal Pay For Work of Equal Value”
for the 58th Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women
organized by the Government of Finland and the International Labour Organization
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Bonjour et Merci. Thank you to the Government of Finland and to the ILO for the invitation to be with you for this important discussion on equal pay for work of equal value; or pay equity. It is important to ‘reignite the flame’ for pay equity as the call to end gender based wage discrimination has been more muted since the economic and employment crisis of 2008.

In preparation, I asked Raphael Crowe from the ILO if I should focus on the Canadian situation or an international perspective. He suggested I deal with both – and all within seven minutes!

In the international trade union movement we have been talking about pay equity for decades however our progress has been very, very, very slow.

Previous generations made huge strides forward to achieve equal pay for equal work and then equal pay for similar work. We are not advancing quickly on pay equity; and it is not for lack of trying by our international and national trade union organizations.

Women of my generation were told that the wage gap would close if we just got more education, if we went into other occupations, if we took less time off for responsibilities connected to children and other dependant care.

It did not.

In Canada, the wage gap is about where we were when I first started to learn about pay equity in the early 1980’s.

One of the guiding questions the panelists were given was “What are the negative consequences of unequal pay and why is it important to address them?”.

In the atmosphere of UNCSW 58’s focus on the Millennium Development Goals pay equity is absolutely crucial.

Gender based wage discrimination exists throughout all workplaces and occupations. It determines a woman’s financial ability to get an education, to provide for her family, to find decent housing, to have healthy food, to pay for quality childcare, to have retirement savings, to participate in her community and so many other things. As the Minister from Finland said earlier, wage discrimination affects women throughout their lives – inside and outside of the workplace.

Decent work and poverty eradication means that we have to eliminate wage discrimination. Women cannot wait 75 years to inch toward pay equity.

The announcement for this Official Side Event says that unequal pay “... is a subtle, chronic problem ...”. I agree that unequal pay is a chronic problem, however I do not agree that it is very subtle. Women see and live the unfairness every time we get paid!

Fair pay means that the work women and men do is equally valued and respected. Unfortunately, this is not the reality for many workers in Canada, where there is still a big gap between what women and men earn.

I am very tired of repeating these statistics however it is important to remind ourselves how far we have not come. In Canada, the average weekly wage for women is 70% of what men earn. If you are a woman of colour it is 64%. If you are an Aboriginal woman it is 46%. If you are a woman with a disability it is extremely difficult to even get a job; and those who find jobs find that it is often precarious and low-wage work.

Governments take great pride in providing the statistics of how many women are entering professions such as law and medicine and engineering. They don't however tell you that those women will be caught in the same gender wage discrimination as women who enter other more traditional occupations for women.

The closest women come to closing that wage gap is if they belong to a union where women earn 84% of what men earn. Still not 100%.

In 2004, after two and one half years of study – probably the largest and most in-depth study on pay equity done anywhere at any time – the federal Pay Equity Task Force made a number of important recommendations to address the gender wage gap in Canada. Their report also recognized that amplified wage discrimination exists for people with disabilities, Aboriginal workers and racialized workers.

Unfortunately, the Liberal government at that time did not act on the Task Force Recommendations.

And, since the election of the Conservative government in 2006 there has been a constant attack on women's economic equality, including a major piece of legislation that removes the right of unions to represent their members in pay equity cases!

Why would any government prohibit unions from representing their members to end gender based wage discrimination.

Simply, unions have been in the forefront on advocating for pay equity. We did not close the wage gap in unionized workplaces by hoping employers and governments would do 'the right thing'. Governments and employers know that when unions achieve advances for women workers then women in non-unionized workplaces begin to expect the same thing.

Often, advancing pay equity complaints on behalf of our members has come at great cost in terms of union finances and human resources.

The case advanced by the Public Service Alliance of Canada – our largest federal public sector union – took over 9 years before women received financial compensation.

In the private sector, the pay equity case of telephone operators initiated by the Communications Workers of Canada against Bell Canada took over 15 years. At the end of it all, when the pay equity cheques were issued many of the women were no longer working as operators as many of their jobs

had been phased out or outsourced. And in fact, around 18% of the women had died so payments had to be made to their estates!

Millions of dollars had been spent on legal fees that could have been spent on women's economic equality that would have increased their capacity to provide for themselves and their families and contribute economically and socially to their communities.

Those women would not have received their pay equity compensation if they did not have their union prepared to go to great expense to 'do the right thing' for their members.

Only two provinces – Ontario and Quebec – have proactive pay equity laws covering both public and private sector workers. Under these laws employers must take active steps to identify and eliminate wage discrimination.

Unions are the leaders around the world in calling for proactive pay equity laws to make sure that workers in both the public and private sectors have their rights respected.

In Canada, the labour movement has been pushing to ensure the 2004 Pay Equity Task Force recommendations are not forgotten and that they are enacted. Sadly, 10 years after the Task Force Report the same gender based wage discrimination exists for women workers across Canada.

Finally, panelists were also asked to touch on what we can all do to tackle pay discrimination.

Time will allow me just two points.

First, make it easier for women to join unions.

No matter where you live in the world, collective bargaining significantly reduce the wage gap for women.

On average, in Canada, women with unions earn \$6.65 per hour more than women without unions. That is because, together, women and their unions negotiated pay that reflects their skills, education and responsibilities.

That union advantage translates into \$552.5 million more every week that is paid into women's pockets to spend on their families and in their communities.

I wonder why, in this time of governments and corporations talking about reviving the economy, would any government or corporation oppose union rights that provide – at a minimum - an economic boost to our country of \$552.5 million every week?

By the way, this means that unions must make belonging to a union more attractive to women; and that means moving pay equity to the front of their bargaining and legislative agendas - where it was 20 years ago.

And unions must change their processes and structures to ensure women have a larger voice and influence in their union and their labour movement. We have a responsibility to not only make demands of employers and governments. We need to make changes in organizations to increase

equality in the labour movement.

My second point is that ending gender based wage discrimination is about more than pay cheques. In order to achieve equality there must be social supports as well.

Governments need to develop education and employment strategies that promote women's participation in the workforce. Government supports need to improve access to education and training and to affordable and quality childcare so women can balance work and family responsibilities.

In the labour movement we use the words "Bread and Roses". We will not give up the struggle for economic equality – the 'bread'. And we will not give up the struggle for social equality – the roses like childcare, education and workplaces that recognize our roles in the family and in society.

We need to have more discussions about pay equity. Women who are working today and those who will enter workplaces and unions in the future are depending on us to ensure they have lives of "Bread and Roses".

Thank you. Merci beaucoup.