



# **OUR RIGHTS AT WORK**

## **Steelworker Human Rights Committee Guide**



# **OUR RIGHTS AT WORK: STEELWORKER HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE GUIDE**

## **Human Rights: The foundation of freedom, justice, and peace**

It's been over 50 years since the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. The Declaration, originally drafted by a Canadian, was written after World War II. The preamble to the declaration recognizes the inherent dignity and equal and inalienable rights of all people as the "foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world."

Since the Declaration was signed in 1948, member nations have debated and ratified conventions and declarations to eliminate discrimination against women, on the rights of the child, the rights of persons belonging to national or ethnic or religious or linguistic minorities. There are declarations and conventions on the rights of disabled persons; economic, social and cultural rights; and civil and political rights.

In 1919, the International Labour Organization, based in Geneva, was created to adopt standards to help ensure working conditions were protected around the world against inequality and injustice. Over 180 conventions and 185 recommendations have been adopted on social policy, and human and civil rights matters. Considered fundamental to workers are conventions on freedom of association and equality.

The General Assembly of the United Nations, in 1948, called on people of all nations to educate and promote respect for fundamental rights and freedoms but more importantly, to measure their growth and achievements against the standards set out in the Declaration. Similarly, we measure labour and employment laws against the conventions and resolutions of the International Labour Organization.

## So how are we doing?

The United Steelworkers represents workers in virtually every economic sector from coast-to-coast-to-coast. Transportation, rubber, aluminum, glass, forestry and university workers have all joined with steel and mine workers. We have brought together a rich history of struggle and of success, promoting a human rights agenda. Together, we have achieved legislation and employment standards to provide for

## Today's challenge

Today in Canada, one in five children lives in poverty. Women earn 60 cents for every dollar earned by men. Over 50 per cent of older women live in poverty. Visible minority persons earn 30 per cent less than white people. People of colour are 2.3 times more likely to live in poverty than white people. People with disabilities experience staggering levels of underemployment and unemployment.

Globally, the picture is no better. Over one half of the world's population lives on two dollars a day or less. More than one billion people are living on less than one dollar a day. Despite calls by international aid and development agencies, governments have done little to address global poverty. And, the spread of HIV/AIDS is decimating the population of continental Africa, having a particularly devastating impact on women and children.

equal pay, anti-harassment protection and employment equity provisions.

- Over 40,000 front-line workers and managers have now participated in the **Steelworkers Anti-Harassment Workplace Training Program**.
- We have negotiated precedent-



setting **employment equity** language for aboriginal employees.

- **Steelworkers developed SES: A Simple Effective Solution to Pay Equity and Job Evaluation** for bargaining units negotiating gender-neutral and equitable compensation systems.
- Policies and conferences have raised awareness of what the Union can do to effectively **accommodate** injured workers and workers with disabilities.
- **Days of celebration:** International Women’s Day, the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and Pride Days are opportunities for the Union to showcase our policies and the activists who make sure the policies are practised.
- Through **global and strategic alliances**, Steelworkers are forging relationships to advance labour, social, environmental and equality rights in contract negotiations and trade agreements.

Success in advancing an equality agenda depends on the work of local and workplace union activists standing up for their sisters and brothers, and challenging harassment and discrimination. Steelworkers must stand together for equality, fairness, and justice. This guide, together with resources available on the Steelworkers website and through the education program, should help your unit and local get started and continue a proud tradition of defending and promoting human rights as workers’ rights.

## **A history of accomplishments**

Our success today to combating sexism and racism is rooted in the struggles of our past. The Steelworkers’ first leaders in Canada, working

with our political partners in the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), and later the New Democratic Party (NDP), took the lead in lobbying and fighting for legislation to address the sexism and racism that was dividing the workforce and undermining the strength of unions.

The federal and provincial Human Rights Codes and Human Rights Commissions were established as a result of Steelworker leaders and activists working side-by-side with community and labour groups. These coalitions have continued to work together to advance human rights. As members of equal pay coalitions, alliances for employment equity, provincial federations of labour and the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) Women's and Human Rights Committees, Steelworkers are working for proactive legislation and provisions to break down barriers to women, gays and lesbians, visible minority persons, people with disabilities and aboriginal people.

Through the Steelworkers Humanity Fund, Canadian Steelworkers are providing assistance to partner organizations in countries around the world. Projects emphasizing equality, fairness and justice are promoted. Joint campaigns of women's and

human rights committees have helped to raise awareness of, for example, the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights, the World March of Women, the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, and the campaign to stop the spread of HIV/AIDS. Local and regional events on International Women's Day (March 8), the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (March 21), Aboriginal Persons Day (June 21), Pride Days and Labour Day are opportunities to celebrate our successes and lobby governments where globalization and the corporate agenda threaten working people.

## **Achieving equality**

Over the years, Steelworkers have adopted strong policies to help achieve equality in our workplaces and through our laws. At International Conventions and Canadian National Policy Conferences, delegates passed resolutions and policy statements on: preventing harassment; fighting racism and discrimination; balancing work and family; accommodating people with disabilities; and working in local, national and international



## **A constitutional requirement**

The Steelworkers' International Constitution calls for every local union to set up a Human Rights/Civil Rights Committee. 'Civil rights' are normally understood as basic political rights (e.g., the right to vote; freedom of speech; equal treatment before the law). 'Human rights', as we use the term in Canada, includes those basic civil and political rights and the broader range of social, economic, cultural, and anti-discrimination rights that are codified in the UN Declarations.

groups to raise awareness and protect human rights.

But there is a long way to go. Members continue to experience harassment in the workplace. Many workers of colour and women continue to face a "glass ceiling" in the workplace, segregated into lower-skilled and lower-paid positions with barriers to advancement. Lack of community supports like affordable child care or home care for relatives requiring assistance, and without proactive employment equity legislation leave many workers without access to training or promotional opportunities. There are also those who are essentially shut out of our workplaces, like aboriginal persons and people with disabilities. Everyone can apply for a job but there are certain groups within our society that are far from having equal opportunities because they have been treated differently for so long. Employers fail to accommodate traditional, cultural or physical needs in the design of the workplace and workplace policies.

The Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms allows for programs to improve the conditions of disadvantaged groups. Unions and

designated human rights committees have an important role to play.

## **Human rights committees in the Steelworkers**

Human Rights Committees exist at all levels of the Steelworkers. The National Human Rights Committee, established in 1996, has representatives from each of the Canadian Districts. The Committee advises the National Director on Human Rights issues and plans activities and events to help achieve

equality inside and outside the union for working people and their families.

One of the objectives of the National and District Human Rights Committees is to establish local or regional human rights committees. Human rights are at the core of unionism. We need to make sure diversity in the membership is a cause for celebration, not division. Solidarity can never come at the expense of human or civil rights.

### **Who should be on a Human Rights Committee?**

Whether you are in a large amalgamated local or a small single workplace local, ideally, the human rights committee should be reflective of the diversity in the membership, and representative of the different shifts or work performed in the workplace.

There are some workplaces where there is not much diversity and people perform similar work. Is it still necessary to have a human rights committee? YES. Human rights work is not just the work of people of colour, and it isn't just women's work. It is OUR work. If we can educate our co-workers and promote human rights at work, the message will be passed on to family members, neighbours and unorganized workers in our communities. And, when it comes to lobbying for legislative change, or campaigning for a progressive candidate in an election, we need all the support we can get from our activists and committees in all our workplaces.



## **Appointed or elected?**

Generally, members are appointed by the Local Union President or Unit Chairperson, and may include the President and Grievance Chairperson or chief steward. The committee does not have to be large. But, the members need to have the confidence of co-workers as well as the unit and local officers.

Members need to be prepared to “walk the talk,” helping to build an atmosphere in the workplace and at union events of mutual respect and understanding of diversity. Members need to be good listeners, letting people know they are available to answer questions, discuss current and sometimes difficult issues, and work together to find solutions that help foster respect.

## **When should the committee meet?**

Scheduling meetings can be difficult. Trying to find a time and a location to meet everyone’s needs can be a challenge. Meetings don’t have to be long and may be best scheduled during a lunch break or right after work. Try to find a location in the workplace, union hall or office central to where people are coming from. Make sure the location is accessible to people with disabilities. If anyone requires child care or any assistance to attend meetings, talk to your Local Executive about making the arrangements. Many locals now have by-laws to provide child care at union meetings.

## What does a Human Rights Committee do?

### Communicate:

- Provide advice and guidance on how to prevent and deal with harassment and discrimination.
- Promote the union's anti-harassment policies, procedures and workplace training program.
- Make recommendations to the Negotiating Committee on key provisions or changes to the collective agreement to ensure compliance with the law and the union's policies.
- Monitor the hiring practices of the employer and work with the negotiating committee to bargain fair hiring practices.
- Use the workplace or union bulletin board or the Local newsletter to share your successes and communicate human rights information.
- Communicate with the District Human Rights Committee.
- Send your success stories to the Steelworkers website ([www.usw.ca](http://www.usw.ca)).
- Add your committee to the e-mail and mailing lists of the union.

### Educate:

- Promote the union's human rights policies.
- Work with local union committees and the membership to promote fairness and mutual respect inside and outside of the workplace.
- Educate the membership on their rights and responsibilities under the Charter

and Human Rights law.

- Participate in the "You and Your Union" and "Basic Steward" courses to discuss human rights and the need to speak out against harassment and discrimination.
- Act as mentors and a support group to individuals in traditionally disadvantaged groups.
- Assist in the planning and organization of local schools and conferences to ensure the content, speakers and participants reflect the diversity of the union's membership.

### Motivate:

- Use the Steelworkers' calendar to recognize special days and traditions in a multicultural society.
- Encourage participation in union events to mark International Women's Day, the International Day for the Elimination of Racism, Pride Days, and Labour Day.
- Post information of community events (e.g., African Heritage Month in February, or Asian History Month in May).
- Work with progressive partners in the community and through labour coalitions to raise support for legislative changes to protect and advance human rights.
- Work with the union's organizers to reach out to unorganized workers.



## **Does the Human Rights Committee investigate complaints of discrimination and harassment?**

In some Locals, the Human Rights Committee investigates and mediates complaints of discrimination or harassment. Members of a Human Rights Committee should work with the grievance and other committees of the Local to ensure harassment complaints are dealt with effectively. The union's network of anti-harassment counsellors may be able to assist Locals in educating and supporting members of human rights committees on these issues.

## **Take Stock: Build a human rights profile of your workplace and local union**

Over 50 per cent of women are sexually harassed at work. Visible minority workers and workers with disabilities are twice as likely to face harassment and discrimination in the workplace than white able-bodied workers. Despite growing numbers of visible minority people in the workforce, workplaces are predominantly white in most communities in Canada. People with disabilities and aboriginal persons experience high levels of unemployment.

Develop a profile of your workplace or the workplaces in your Local or region, and examine some of the issues that need to be addressed by the Human Rights Committee. Study your collective agreement for discriminatory provisions against women, visible minority people, gays or lesbians, people with disabilities or aboriginal persons.

### **A few examples of what to look for:**

- Who is working where? Note the composition of the units in your Local Union, and the job classifications of members of traditionally disadvantaged groups.
- Compare overall composition of the workforce with the population in the community.
- Are training opportunities available to everyone? Are hiring procedures equitable, and postings available in community newspapers and websites?
- Do workers know about anti-harassment policies and procedures for complaint investigation?
- Are there restrictions on use of e-mail, computer screen savers, pin-ups and graffiti?
- Does new worker orientation include an overview of the policies to prevent and deal with harassment? Is there a record of human rights-based issues that have come up in the workplace?

## **Steelworkers Anti-Harassment Workplace Training Program**

The Steelworkers “Yellow Sheet”, read at every union event, states clearly that harassment strikes at the heart of human rights and solidarity. Policies, procedures and training help to ensure members have the skills to identify workplace and union practices that may be discriminatory or act as barriers to women, visible minority persons, people with disabilities and aboriginal persons.

The District and National Human Rights Committees have played a valuable role in helping to promote the Steelworkers Anti-Harassment Workplace Training Program. Steelworker members trained as facilitators, lead two to four-hour sessions for groups of workers during working time. Sessions are structured to ensure maximum participation. Discussions focus on harassment and discrimination, prevention, and dealing with incidents of harassment.

Training in the workplace during



working time is helping to improve communication and understanding of differences. The training focuses on respect and the fact that “we can’t make people like each other” but that, as unionists, we have a responsibility to make sure that people are working together safely. That means that people need to be able to do their work without worrying about whether they are going to be the subject of a joke or the object of someone’s racist or sexist comment.

A human rights committee can help lobby an employer for anti-harassment training. While some employers will wait until they have a human rights complaint before offering training, most recognize the benefits of taking a proactive approach in preventing harassment and discrimination.

## **Steelworkers Education Program**

While all Steelworker courses include sections and discussions on human rights issues, there are specific courses designed for union members to focus on these areas:

### **To help break down barriers for members living with disabilities:**

- Include questions to help members from traditionally disadvantaged groups identify their issues in workplace and bargaining surveys.
- Audit workplace accessibility for people with disabilities.
- Audit the union office and union events for accessibility to people with disabilities.
- Develop a referral guide to help people access workplace and community supports for people living with disabilities.

### **Human rights are workers' rights**

This course helps equip local union activists to challenge the myths that lead to stereotypes and misunderstandings in the workplace. The course helps identify how we can build an atmosphere of tolerance and mutual respect in the workplace and the union. It explores the laws and jurisprudence on human rights issues to help activists "draw the line" when necessary, whether at the bargaining table or in a discussion with a co-worker.

### **Globalization and International Solidarity**

This course explores globalization and how trade unions and community organizations are responding to it in Canada and around the world. It focuses on the Humanity Fund as a tool for Steelworkers to become active in global issues.

### **Women of Steel**

This course is for women members, including those already in leadership roles and those who have the potential to become involved. The course helps develop communication and leadership skills, confidence and self-esteem. Participants gain a better understanding of how the union

works. Different strategies for overcoming barriers and working with sisters and brothers locally, nationally and globally are addressed.

### **Women's Committees: Building Local Union Power**

At the Steelworkers' 32<sup>nd</sup> Constitutional Convention in April 2005, delegates voted unanimously to amend the Constitution to require each local to establish a women's committee to encourage women's activism and leadership development. "Women's Committees: Building Local Union Power" assists in setting up and mobilizing women's committees. This one- to two-day workshop helps women take a more active role in the union.



## Reach out and get more people involved

Connecting with our members is the only way our union can build the solidarity necessary to take on the challenges of today and tomorrow. Talk to your co-workers about issues in the workplace and how they can add their voice to support the union. Not everyone has to show up at a meeting but everyone can be “in the loop”. Use your workplace bulletin board or newsletter to let people know what your human rights committee is doing. Post information on a day of celebration or public event that helps build understanding, tolerance and respect.

Identify ways of integrating human rights issues and learning into your meetings. **Invite a speaker** to your Committee or General Membership meeting. Look for creative ways of **celebrating the ethnic diversity** in your workplace. Some workplaces have organized multicultural potluck lunches as a way of starting a discussion about the different traditions and practices of people in our communities.

**SPEAK OUT.** Women, visible minority persons and others who have faced discrimination or harassment will have more confidence to get involved in the Union if they see you, the leadership, “walking the talk”. Be prepared to stand up and challenge a racist or derogatory remark or demand that graffiti be cleaned up. We have to be clear that our events and meetings are free from harassment. Read the Yellow Sheet. It is available in many different languages. Post it so that it is visible.

## **Make a date**

Another step in planning the work of your committee is to set up a calendar. An audit of your membership will help identify issues to consider. Note dates of negotiating committee meetings, union conferences, community events and cultural days of celebration. Pick a couple of days or events to work on as a Committee. Don't try to do everything in the first couple of months! Focus on a couple of initiatives and do them well. Then, build on your success. Success also attracts more help. And, to win a new provision at the bargaining table or gain enough support for a resolution at a convention, you will need lots of help on the ground, in the workplace and at your union meetings.

### **Here are a few suggestions for starting your calendar:**

- February is African Heritage Month. How well do you know Canadian Black history? Can you name some of the early Black trade union leaders and pioneers against racism, segregation and discrimination in Canada? Invite a speaker or storyteller to your committee or local meeting in February. Collect information about Black history and post it on your bulletin board or include an article in your newsletter.
- International Women's Day (March 8) is another opportunity where local unions have worked with community-based organizations to plan events, rallies and demonstrations on women's issues and women's rights.
- International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (March 21) is an opportunity for Locals to come together in celebration of our diversity. Music, food, storytelling and dance can be featured.



- Aboriginal Persons' Day (June 21) is a chance for locals to reach out to aboriginal members and organizations to recommit to the struggle for recognition and rights of aboriginal persons.
- Pride Days (held in June or early July) are celebrated by our members together with thousands of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered workers. The solidarity of our members on issues of sexual orientation and the fight for same-sex spousal benefits is important. Many Steelworker members are still afraid to "come out" because of fear of violence. Even with the legal requirement to negotiate same-sex benefits, negotiating committees continue to come under attack from members who don't want such provisions in their collective agreements.
- Days of worship and celebration: Many workplaces now have festive or end-of-year parties to celebrate Christmas, Hanukkah and Kwanzaa. Consult with your co-workers and plan your calendar. Don't lose sight of the objective and have fun too.

## Elections

Democracy in the Steelworkers is a source of great pride in the membership. Every three years, members elect Local Officers and committees. Every four years, every member has a vote in the election of the International Officers, Canadian National Director and District Directors.

One member, one vote means that every member has an opportunity to elect the leadership of the union. For members of equity-seeking groups, this aspect of internal democracy is very important. While we still have a long way to go before candidates and elected leadership truly reflect the diversity of the membership, allowing every member a vote provides for their participation in the election process, and ensures the accountability of candidates and elected leadership to the membership as a whole.

Human Rights Committees can help to make sure that resources and support are available to women, visible minority members and other members of equity-seeking groups who are interested in running for elected office in the Steelworkers. *Step-by-Step to Elected Office: A Steelworker Affirmative Action Guide to Local Union Elections* provides activists with descriptions of each position and tips on how to run a successful campaign.

## **Equality for the people**

Your Human Rights Committee needs to keep track of legislative changes that may have an impact on the workplace and the collective agreement. Your other task is to work together to lobby for legislative change to benefit all working people.

Human rights laws and regulatory bodies didn't just happen. They are a result of union and community activists working together to lobby governments. Steelworkers are members of equal pay coalitions, alliances for employment equity, ethnic advisory committees to the New Democratic Party, and members of the Canadian Labour Congress Women's and Human Rights Committees and working groups. These groups develop strategies to improve and enhance human rights laws and government practices.

While Canada is a member of the United Nations and participates in the International Labour Organization, it must also be lobbied to sign-on and implement the conventions, resolutions and declarations. Canada also needs to take a leadership role in trade negotiations to ensure fundamental rights are enshrined in all trade agreements to which our country is party.



## **Organize, organize, organize**

The single best way to help close the wage gap and address issues of harassment and discrimination in the workplace is for women and visible minority workers to join and get active in a union.

It is no surprise women and visible minority persons are more likely to view unions positively and express interest in joining unions. Workers join unions for better wages and job security but it is often dignity and respect that top the list of demands for unorganized workers looking for a union.

Contact ethnic groups or organizations representing people with disabilities or aboriginal persons to talk about unions and the role they play in addressing inequities. In organizing drives, it is not unusual for employers to target employees who are new immigrants or have limited literacy levels with threats of what joining a union will mean to them. Building support in community groups and organizations can help provide assistance to workers during organizing drives or attempts by employers to de-certify the union.

## Who you gonna call?

Put together a contact list of human rights organizations and related services in your community. You might want to include contact names and phone numbers for the following:

### **The Local Union:**

(e.g., Unit Chairperson, Executive Member and Committees)

### **Community Contacts:**

(e.g., Employee Assistance Program, Labour Council, Immigration Counselling Services, Ethnic organizations and Cultural Centres, Injured worker organizations, NDP Riding Association)

### **Staff Representative:**

### **District Director:**

### **Emergency Contacts:**

(e.g., sexual assault centre, emergency shelter for battered women, aboriginal health centre, police)

### **Designated Anti-harassment Counsellors:**





For information about the  
United Steelworkers, please call:  
**United Steelworkers National Office**

234 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 800

Toronto ON M4P 1K7

**416.487.1571**

**E-mail: [info@usw.ca](mailto:info@usw.ca)**

**[usw.ca](http://usw.ca)**

**District 3**

3920 Norland Avenue

Suite 300

Burnaby BC V5G 4K7

**604.683.1117**

**310.JOIN (5646)**

**District 5**

565, Crémazie Est,

Bureau 5100

Montreal QC H2M 2V8

**514.382.9596**

**1.800.361.5756**

**District 6**

200 Ronson Drive

Suite 300

Etobicoke ON M9W 5Z9

**416.243.8792**