

Challenging Injustice

■ Beverly Saskoley

Thoughts about activism within a union

Every aspect of our lives is, in a sense, a vote for the kind of world we want to live in.

Frances Moore Lappé

I want to share my story of being a woman union activist. That's been such an important facet in shaping who I am, and I consider it a noble way for a woman to lead her work existence. It's my belief that once you're committed to the goals of unionism you have a natural jumping-off place for all kinds of social justice work.

I grew up in a union family in Dryden, a northwestern Ontario paper mill town. My father was very involved in the paper workers' union locally. ... Most of my union career has been with teacher federations but as I look back on earlier times there was a union thread in my work life prior to teaching.

During high school I worked part-time as a clerk at a department store. A retail workers' union from Winnipeg initiated an organizing campaign. I had been glad to join because a year previously I had asked for a nickel raise as the summer began (85 cents to 90 cents an hour).

The rather nasty store manager paid me it all at the end of the summer in nickels in a toy wheelbarrow. I didn't think employees should have to endure

that kind of nonsense. So I was one of the first to sign my union card. Suddenly that was the end of my part-time job, although I had done exemplary work for three years.

I soon found another job at Bell Telephone as a long distance operator. It was an organized (union) workplace, and during my time there I participated in the first operators' strike.

When I began to teach I soon joined the local bargaining committee and was fascinated by the negotiating process. Those were good times in education funding (1972-75), but I realized school boards were reluctant to negotiate working conditions. Teachers knew what they needed to make learning better—smaller class sizes, preparation time, compensatory time—but it was difficult to negotiate these issues. In 1975, [we got] the right to negotiate working conditions. Employers were still resistant.

At this time I also became aware of some of the discrimination against women in the profession. For example, women had been forced to resign from teaching when they became pregnant, women could not get the same life insurance coverage as men, and women were under represented as principals and vice principals. I found this shocking so I

became a voice for women's equality on the bargaining team.

When I moved to Toronto in the mid 1970s, I was a committed unionist. I was selected for a bargaining team and chosen chief negotiator by my peers in my second round of bargaining. We [had a strike] on the issue of lower class sizes. In general, teachers have had to resort to strikes to make gains with learning conditions. These decisions are always agonizing for everyone concerned.

I became a feminist when I was in my late twenties. The movement crystallized for me all the gender imbalance in society. It was everywhere – the public and private sector, the media, and home life. I vowed to do my part in changing what I could to make life better for women.

As a single woman, it was apparent to me that it was hard for women with children and/or partners to get involved in unions. Meetings often took place at night or on weekends when people volunteered their time. I've tried, during my union staff career, to advocate for more day meetings to enable fuller participation for all union members.

After a few years I made the links with other forms of oppression. In my view, one couldn't be a unionist or a feminist

without being an activist in social justice issues such as racism, homophobia, disability and poverty.

Unions offer a terrific opportunity to do equity work. The membership of teacher unions is increasingly diverse. There are more racial minority, Aboriginal, disabled and gay and lesbian members who want services geared to their specific needs. Unions have funds to do the work. Unions have united voices to advocate for change both internally and outside. Unions can be powerful vehicles in a social democracy. ...

I think one of the shortcomings of the current union movement is the tendency to stay focused narrowly on members' immediate needs. By taking a broader perspective we could be serious advocates for social change. Who knows better than teachers of the problems children face because of [discrimination] and poverty? So many of the difficulties with teaching and learning would disappear if we could effectively deal with these issues. I believe we would gain tremendous respect from the public for such work.

I've learned a lot about power and the status quo in my years in the teacher union movement, both as a member and as staff. People resist change because it threatens their own world view. Too many in the status quo are stuck and choose to remain there because it worked for them.

... The gains women and other oppressed groups have made in society are so tenuous. They must constantly be monitored and protected from dismantling by those who like the power they have and don't want to share it.

In the past 25 years I have become alarmed at concerted media and government campaigns to make the term "union" a dirty word. Mainstream media parrots a business perspective that sees unionism cutting into potential profits. Unions need to continue to challenge that narrow perspective. Unions make an important contribution to society as a counter to the profit over people motive. We need to teach labour history in schools. ...

There continue to be many challenges ahead for unions. I believe we can face these. I wanted to use my story as a vehicle to raise issues and provoke thought. That is my life's work.



.....
The late Bev Saskoley was a teacher and passionate social justice advocate. She believed that the actions of organizations must clearly demonstrate their commitment to equity and social justice work.

Resources

Leading The Way: Black Women in Canada,
Rosemary Sadlier
Fire at the Triangle Factory, Holly Littlefield
Pay Cheques and Picket Lines, Clair MacKay

Suggested Activities

- ▶ Role play the negotiation of a collective agreement. Use the backline masters Activity Sheets 1 and 2 as organizers.
- ▶ Words such as *ageism*, *classism* and *ableism* are often used to identify social attitudes. Using the Power Flower, from *We're Erasing Prejudice for Good*, identify marginalized groups within your community.
- ▶ List the reasons why they are marginalized.
- ▶ Choose one marginalized group and interview a member in that group. Create a plan to effect change. How will you know that your plan has met with some success?
- ▶ Were you aware of any negative attitudes ("isms") while you were developing and implementing your plan? Discuss.

Extensions

- ▶ Invite a union representative from your community to come and talk about the role of unions in the workplace.
- ▶ Invite a pro-union and/or anti-union management representative from your community to come and share their perspectives.
- ▶ Using cases in the media, discuss current issues; e.g., a strike or job action in a labour dispute.
- ▶ Locate your board's harassment policy and discuss the effectiveness in addressing the needs of all marginalized groups. Promote this policy throughout the schools through posters and/or presentations.

* *The Power of Story* is available from shopETFO.



Challenging Injustice

Negotiation Activity - Grade 7

Teacher Instructions for the Activity on Negotiation

1. Distribute the mock collective bargaining table (see page LP4) to all students.
2. Divide students up into groups of 9 (3 union members, 3 managers, and 3 observers).
3. Distribute the task cards to the subgroups so they are familiar with the role they will play in this bargaining session. Both union members and management should be discussing just how flexible they will be with each item once bargaining begins.
4. Allow students approximately 20-30 minutes to negotiate the terms of this collective agreement. Once settled, the observers should debrief the participants on what they noted during the bargaining process.
5. Groups will report back to the whole class on the success/failure of their bargaining session. Teacher will debrief students on the process of reaching a peaceful and fair agreement between two opposing groups.

For information about curriculum expectations that this lesson plan addresses please see *The Power of Story*, Part 1, page 153.

TASK CARD #1: The Union

You are representing the workers' union in this labour negotiation exercise. Most of your members are so-called "unskilled" labourers who have not had an increase in pay in two years. Your benefit plan covers only the basics.

Your members would like to see it cover vision care and orthodontics. Your employers are in the auto industry and are hesitant to raise wages and benefits too much, because the industry is volatile. There are some things your members might be willing to negotiate but they DEMAND a pay raise and some measure of job security.

TASK CARD #2: The Management

You are representing the management of a factory which manufactures and exports automobile parts. The industry has been volatile in the past few years due to an unstable economy; therefore you do not want to promise your workers job stability, nor do you wish to offer them a huge pay raise. You feel that these labourers should consider themselves lucky to even have jobs in these tough times, so your job is to "lowball" any offers you extend in this bargaining session. You will also try to convince them that any guarantee of hours will make layoffs more likely, so it is in their best interest to withdraw this demand.

TASK CARD #3: The Observers

You are the impartial observers in this bargaining session. Your job is to watch silently how each side bargains and the types of interactions, both verbal and non-verbal, which take place.

Some items to look for:

1. tone of voice
2. whether respectful language is used
3. body language and other forms of non-verbal communication
4. strengths and weaknesses of each team's "performance"

Challenging Injustice

Collective Bargaining Table - Grade 7

Item	Current Status	Union Demands	Management Offer	Final Agreement
Term of Agreement	2 year agreement recently expired	3 year	1 year	
Salary	Average salary is \$19,000	5% increase	1.5% increase	
	No increase in 3 years			
Working Conditions				
Hours	No guarantee of hours/week	Guaranteed 38 hours/week	No guarantee of hours/week	
Overtime	Time-and-a-half paid after 40 hours	Time-and-a-half paid after 38 hours	Time-and-a-half paid after 44 hours	
Sick Leave	No paid sick days	5 days paid sick leave	No paid sick days	
Vacation Time in lieu of vacation	4% paid weekly	2 weeks' paid vacation annually	4% paid weekly in lieu of vacation	
Benefits				
Health and Dental	90% paid by employer	100% paid by employer	80% paid by employer	
	Basic coverage	Basic coverage	Basic coverage	
	No vision care or extended dental	Vision care and extended dental	Vision care but no extended dental	