



OPSEU'S Coalition of Racialized Workers held its first-ever conference March 1-3 at the Chelsea Hotel in downtown Toronto. Left to right: Daniel Peters, Annette Bouzi, Sandra Smith, Robyn Maynard, Kola Iluyomade, Peter Thompson, Adam Ly, Carol Mundley, Elizabeth Ha.

OPSEU'S COALITION OF RACIALIZED WORKERS • In March 2019, the Coalition of Racialized Workers at the Ontario Public Service Employees' Union (OPSEU) hosted its first-ever conference, "Realities of Racialization: Seeking Solidarity."

Over 200 people gathered over three days in Toronto to attend discussions and panels on topics like Cultural Expression, Racialization and Work, and Restorative Justice. Robyn Maynard, author of *Policing Black Lives*, and Dr. Charmaine Nelson, professor of art history at McGill University, were the keynote speakers.

Coalition member and conference co-emcee Kola Iluyomade describes the conference as "impactful" saying that "it previewed the work for the immediate future, which is to demand human rights within and outside the union. It was deftly informative [and] quite provocative at times concerning the plight of Black and racialized communities."

According to Iluyomade, this was the first time an OPSEU conference was emceed by racialized workers.

The conference has been years in the making, says coalition vice-chair and

co-emcee Elizabeth Ha. "I knew it was gonna be awesome," she explains. "But at the end of that weekend I was so happy and so proud that my union did something like this."

The coalition (previously known as OPSEU's Workers of Colour Caucus), was formed in 2004 and, "Like the other equity committees and caucuses within OPSEU, its goal is to remove some of the barriers within our union and the labour movement so that more racialized workers can participate in union events," says Ha.

A member since the coalition (then a caucus) was first created, Ha explains that the coalition's work includes "putting OPSEU out there" by attending and hosting events. The coalition has been involved in Toronto's Caribana and AfroFest, for example, and has hosted picnics and events for Black History Month.

One of the coalition's first major accomplishments was bringing about OPSEU's Social Mapping Project. In 2010, OPSEU surveyed its membership in order to track the demographics of OPSEU workers, including how many belonged to marginalized communities.

OPSEU presented the results, gleaned from 27,000 responses, at the 2011 International Conference on Diversity in Organizations, Communities & Nations, held in Cape Town, South Africa. Before OPSEU passed the resolution to take on this project, members of the coalition were doing their own surveys as part of a project called the Living Wall, which tracked the participation and involvement of racialized members in the union.

"We kind of did our own little statistics, and we did it for a few years," explains Ha. "And we noticed that during an election year there were less racialized people, and when it wasn't an election year there were a little more racialized people. At a convention or any type of OPSEU function there is predominantly white people. And we know that that doesn't truly represent our workplaces and the workforce in Ontario."

The data the coalition collected as part of the Living Wall Project demonstrated the need for a larger survey. It showed clearly the barriers to union leadership experienced by marginalized folks.

"We used that information to show OPSEU that there is a need for them to make changes within the union's structure, and that there was a lot of systemic barriers in place that prevented racialized people from attending [events]."

The coalition's work includes making recommendations to union leadership on how to better support and include racialized members in voting, education, bargaining, membership services and accessibility, along with other areas. Practical examples include creating private polling stations for those who don't feel comfortable filling out ballots at roundtables and meetings, making meetings more physically accessible and providing French-language and sign-language interpreters for members.

The coalition has advocated for the active inclusion of racialized members in OPSEU's Membership Development Trainee program, which gives people the knowledge, skills and tools to pursue staff roles with the union. The coalition is also implementing educational initiatives to combat Islamophobia.

Following the Ontario government's recent moratorium on suspending racialized workers within the public service (while the province reviews how racial discrimination complaints are handled),

the coalition put together a proposal for action within OPSEU to tackle the same issue.

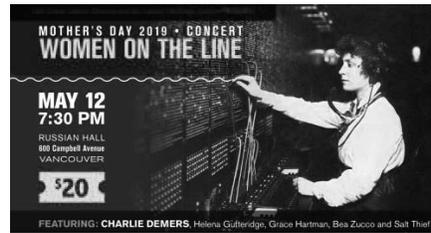
"We put a proposal in to train 14 racialized members to become investigators and advisors around harassment and discrimination," explains Thompson. "And these members are going to represent and help represent the union staff people that don't understand these issues."

"I'd like to give kudos to my union," Thompson concludes, "because they are one that is definitely ahead of others. But we can't go and pat ourselves on the back. We have a lot of internal issues that are still plaguing us, like colonialism and how it's embedded within the bureaucracy of our union. Although we've made some great steps, we still have a long way to go."

Haseena Manek
Dublin, Ireland

SINGING OUR STORIES • "Women on the Line: 100 Years of Fighting" offered a well-polished evening of songs, skits and stand-up comedy this past Mother's Day.

Held at the Russian Hall in Vancouver's oldest neighbourhood of Strathcona, the rousing tribute to a century of women's labour activism was inspired by female telephone workers — they were the first out and the last back in during the Win-



nipeg General Strike of 1919. Joey Hartman, former president of the Vancouver District and Labour Council and the first female elected to that office, hosted the event for an audience of about two hundred people.

Holding centre stage for much of the show was the Left Coast Labour Chorus, conducted by professionally trained Peggy Hua. Comprised of 32 members, the pitch-perfect choir sang spirited lyrics in delightful harmonies. Short videos and a five-member acting troupe, directed by Joan Bryans of Vital Spark

Theatre, recounted labour stories, each one paired with a song performed by the choir.

First up was the story of the Vancouver steam laundry workers' strike of 1918. Three hundred workers — most women — at seven laundries fought for a first contract, as told by an actress playing the role of union organizer Helena Gutteridge. After four months on volatile picket lines, workers at two of the laundries won a closed union shop, and the provincial government set a minimum wage. The choir followed the retelling with "Bread and Roses." As they sang the words "we are marching, we are marching," the drumming repetition of their voices conjured the spectre of those embattled but determined women.

Sympathy strikes during the Winnipeg General Strike spread across the country, including in Vancouver. An actress introducing herself as telephone employee Leona Copeland proclaimed joining a union pays — literally — and pointed to telephone operators in Vancouver gaining the highest paid wages among working women in North America during the 1920s. A union version of Johnny Cash's

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The 32-member Left Coast Labour Chorus in Vancouver, conducted by Peggy Hua, took part in the May 12, 2019 event, "Women on the Line: 100 Years of Fighting."

tune "I Walk the Line" underscored Leona's message.

On Mother's Day, 1935, hundreds of women marched to Vancouver's Stanley Park, as recounted by another actress dressed in depression-era clothes. Holding signs calling for the abolition of relief camps, mothers gathered in heart-shaped formation, with unemployed men in the centre. The Vancouver Post Office sit-down strike of 1938 was also recalled, as was a protest over Vancouver union organizer Arthur Evans being evicted from his home. The Re:Sisters, a quartet of female singers who are also members of the choir, followed up with the song "Hard Times."

A three-minute vignette, one of 30 in the documentary "Working People: A History of Labour In BC" was shown. It featured teacher Connie Jervis who, in 1939, spearheaded a battle with the Langley school board, protesting their undermining of an arbitrated contract agreement. "Rockin Solidarity," sung by a swaying choir flashing "jazz hands," followed the teachers' tale, which concluded in victory.

Jonnie Rankie was featured in another vignette, "Home Front, Work Front." She worked tossing rivets to

welders in a North Vancouver shipyard during the Second World War, a period when thousands more Canadian women entered the labour force. Jonnie also spoke out for equal pay for equal work on the shop floor and in the union newsletter "The Main Deck." The choir reflected Jonnie's unwavering spirit with a rendition of the labour standard "Union Maid."

Next came the story of Bea Zucco, the wife of a hard-rock miner who contracted silicosis on the job. Bea took her husband's grievance to the steps of the BC legislature in 1956 after the Workers Compensation Board refused to recognize his fatal lung disease. She protested for several years before legislative changes were made. The choir's subsequent song, "More than A Paycheque," reflected the wider message of Bea's struggle.

More women joined the workforce — and unions — in the decades after the war ended in 1945. The final skit featured an actress portraying Ontario-based Grace Hartman, President of the Canadian Union of Public Employees. She went to jail for 45 days in 1981 for refusing to direct striking members back to work. The follow-up choir

song, "We Were There," called for unity between private and public employees because "we are all in this together."

Vancouver-born comedian and author Charlie Demers opened the second half of the show with a stand-up act. Along with other witty observations, he noted that he never imagined he would be dealing with fascism and measles a hundred years after the Winnipeg General Strike.

Salt Thief, a musical duo of brothers John and Tony Kastelic, sang and played foot-stomping fiddle music. The lyrics of their contemporary song "Promised Land" described the plight of debt-ridden young people dwelling among Vancouver's half-empty condo towers.

The Labour Chorus rounded out the informative and entertaining evening with "Stand Together," audience members joining in the chorus: "When the people stand together, ain't no power ever stronger. . . ."

"Women on the Line: 100 Years of Fighting" was co-sponsored by Left Coast Labour Choir (leftcoastlabour-chorus.com) and the BC Labour Heritage Centre (labourheritagecentre.ca).

Janet Nicol
Vancouver, BC