

**Review of Selected Membership Systems:
Executive Summary**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The OPSEU Social Mapping Project (SMP) grew out of the “Living Wall,” initiated in 2004 by the Workers of Colour Caucus to track the participation of Workers of Colour at Convention and the leadership positions they hold within the Union.

Subsequently, members of the equity committees and caucuses lobbied OPSEU to do a more substantive demographic profile of its membership and played a key role in getting the SMP resolution passed at Convention in 2008, calling for a social map of the membership and a plan to create a more representative workforce.

The SMP is one of many OPSEU initiatives designed to recognize the changing demographics¹ of Ontario and serve the needs of an increasingly diverse membership². In Phase 1 of the SMP, a survey of a substantial portion of the membership provided OPSEU with a comprehensive view of its members and the realities and challenges of their work life in the current environment.

Building on the SMP Phase 1 and other equity-related initiatives, OPSEU partnered with Barbara Herring & Associates Inc. to review membership policies and documents and gain an understanding of practices related to the Election and Education systems within OPSEU.

The report is designed to help OPSEU build a stronger union that understands and responds to the membership in its full diversity. With this expanded understanding of the membership, OPSEU will be in a better position to attract and retain the energies of activists from across all demographic member groups, encourage new activism from among its members, gain the confidence of potential new OPSEU members and support all members at the bargaining table.

Method

The study focused on two membership systems:

- Elections
- Education

The report includes issues related to Leadership Development and Mobilizing Activists.

¹ Ontario demographics continue to show increasing numbers of racialized groups and First Nations/Métis/Inuit Peoples. People with disabilities are increasingly members of the workforce. As the numbers of “baby boom” workers begin to decline, young workers will make up an increasing percentage of the workforce. LGBTTTQ workers increasingly feel safe/comfortable to be recognized as such in the workplace.

² A few other examples of these initiatives include support for three provincial committees and five caucuses representing a diversity of demographic groups, commitment built into the basic aims and purpose of the OPSEU Constitution to “safeguard human rights”, equity-related policies (Harassment and Discrimination Prevention Policy, Employment Equity, Women and Affirmative Action, Family and Attendant Care Policy).

Seven groups³ were designated by OPSEU for particular study in the Membership Systems Review (MSR):

- Aboriginal peoples (First Nations, Métis and Inuit⁴)
- Francophones
- Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and transgendered and queer (LGBTQQ) members
- Workers with disabilities
- Racialized workers
- Women and
- Young workers.

The consultants conducted interviews and focus groups with the following stakeholders:

- Volunteers from each equity committee and caucus (Provincial Women's Committee, Provincial Human Rights Committee, Provincial Young Workers Committee, Aboriginal Circle, Disability Rights Caucus, Francophone caucus, Rainbow Alliance and the Workers of Colour Caucus).
- Regional Vice President (RVP) from each region,
- Chairs of divisions/sectors (OPS Divisional Leader, CAAT-A Chair, CAAT-S Chair, BPS Chair of Chairs),
- Staff who could provide information about the Election and Education systems, including staff reps from each region,
- Equity Unit staff.

The names of the interviewees are included in Appendix D (Details of Field Work).

The consultants reviewed the Constitution and the Policy Manual as these relate to the systems we were reviewing.

The consultants conducted an Internet search and review of Innovative Practices related to the target systems, focusing on public sector unions across Canada.

Conclusions

▪ Leadership

Board members have enormous and largely unconstrained authority within their regions to select and develop candidates for leadership positions and to influence the election of these candidates. Local presidents have a comparable power at the local level. While incumbents must stand for election every two years, they can remain in office for an unlimited number of terms.

³ See Definitions section for a detailed description of each group.

⁴ Although the category includes Inuit, the SMP survey and focus groups identified no Inuit members of OPSEU.

The power of board members includes all aspects of replacing themselves. They have decision-making power over:

- Choices of who to support for leadership development
- Selection of these members for educationals and high profile assignments
- Timing – when to step down in order to give the best chance to their chosen successor.

Board members significantly influence:

- Election of members to Local Executive Committees (LEC)
- Election of members as delegates to regional meetings and Convention
- Election of candidates at regional meetings/Convention.

Local presidents with their LECs control who knows about and feels welcome to attend local election meetings.

Local presidents significantly influence:

- Election of members on LECs
- Election of members as delegates to regional meetings and Convention

There are few accountability mechanisms restricting this authority other than elections.

The power of the leadership to affect the union career of potential candidates means that few members would choose to challenge their authority.

This tight cycle of power is difficult for a new member to break into. Because of “cloning” – the tendency for people to socialize with, trust and promote people like themselves, this cycle is most likely to replicate the demographic composition of the current leadership. A common term for this phenomenon is “clique.”

The Social Mapping Project survey shows that the current composition of the leadership does not represent the demographics of the membership. The survey analysis indicates that women, racialized groups and young workers are currently under represented in leadership positions.

While the current report contains many recommendations to promote change in this composition, the single most important conclusion we draw is that change will be very difficult unless the leadership agrees to “change the rules,” knowing that it will substantially weaken their own influence.

Even if the literal diversity of the leadership changes, the impact on the membership as a whole may change very little if the new diverse leadership conducts union “business” in the same way as always. Additional supports are needed to encourage members to bring different perspectives to their leadership role. In his book *The Wisdom of Crowds*⁵, the

⁵ Surowiecki, J. *The Wisdom of Crowds: Why the Many Are Smarter Than the Few and How Collective Wisdom Shapes Business, Economies, Societies and Nations*. Pub. Doubleday; Anchor, 2004.

author distinguishes between situations that create “groupthink” and those that create crowd wisdom:

“Collective decisions are most likely to be good ones when they’re made by people with diverse opinions reaching independent conclusions, relying primarily on their private information.”

Diverse members will add a diversity of opinion and strategy to the Board only if members are empowered to contribute their own opinions from their own unique store of knowledge. To the extent that board members from the groups of focus must answer to the numerical majority of delegates, they may not be able to represent the opinions or concerns of the group of focus to which they belong. This would be unfortunate since the unique perceptives they bring is, in part, as a member of a group of focus.

Thus, some of the recommendations are designed to support and encourage a diversity of members to feel empowered to advocate for new and different leadership models.

▪ The Equity Majority

The demographic groups we focussed on make up 80% of the OPSEU membership⁶. This majority could represent an important counter-weight to the current structure. But the power of this majority will only be realized if the individual components can mobilize together and with other allies as a single force.

It appears that the equity committees and caucuses have the potential to mobilize their constituent groups if their members see a benefit in terms of workplace issues.

At the moment, the mandate of the committees and caucuses does not include workplace issues. Thus, our conclusion is that, in order to mobilize their constituency groups, the committees/caucuses will need to put additional energy into:

- organizing to support the important workplace issues of their constituencies,
- for the caucuses, developing a local and regional structure and
- learning how to use this constituency to gain political aims.

The equity groups may need to examine some of their own stereotypes and prejudices about the other groups and focus on the common ground they share.

⁶ According to the SMP survey, women make up 69% of the membership. By calculating the % presence of each other group of focus among the men (and assuming that disability, youth and French language speakers are distributed equally among the all groups), the groups of focus total at least 80% of the membership.

▪ Accommodation

Members are busy people, pursuing career, community and personal/family responsibilities. While the report includes many strategies for improving accommodation for each of the groups of focus, the single most pervasive barrier is the requirement to be present in the room in order to vote or attend educationals. In addition to improving access and accommodation of the groups, OPSEU should also consider expanding its use of distance strategies.

Highlights of the Recommendations

This section contains some of the key recommendations to address the above conclusions. In some cases, only the main part of a recommendation is provided here.

The reader is encouraged to review the complete list of the 45 recommendations found in the Summary of Recommendations chapter. To be most effective, the consultants highly recommend that the OPSEU consider implementing as many recommendations as possible, since each is needed to address the highly interconnected systemic barriers of the organization.

▪ Provide Leadership

Establish demographic-based board seats elected by members of the groups of focus to ensure that the Board represents the concerns of a wider diversity of demographic groups. (Recommendation 1)

Encourage OPSEU leaders to show more support for equity issues:

- Coach the caucuses to communicate effectively with the Board and achieve their political goals,
- Make public statements highlighting the equity achievements of OPSEU and supporting ongoing equity actions,
- Confront and counter anti-equity backlash,
- Appoint board members as “Diversity Champions”, one board member for each group (Disability-related issues, francophones, First Nations/Métis Peoples, LGBTTTQ issues, racialized workers, women, young workers). Work with the committees and caucuses and the Equity Unit to describe the mandate, role and responsibilities of the Champions.
- Challenge the attitude that the committees and caucuses represent “special interest groups,” for example by noting that a) together the equity groups make up 80% of the

membership⁷ b) the groups represent segments of the membership just as the regions do, and c) OPSEU needs to serve each of its members in the best possible manner rather than focusing on the “majority.” (Recommendation 40)

Support the continuous development of equity skills among all leaders and activists in OPSEU. Encourage board members to engage in ongoing learning regarding equity issues⁸ and provide them with information about relevant equity/diversity training. (Recommendation 15)

With input from the committees, caucuses and the leadership, consider, pilot, model and practice alternative leadership styles. (Recommendation 27)

▪ **Ensure Equitable Representation among Delegates**

Develop measures so that the demographics of the delegate body more closely represent the demographics of the membership. (Recommendation 3)

▪ **Develop Leaders**

Identify members from each of the groups of focus for possible leadership development, including women, other groups of focus and newer activists. Support the development of these leadership potentials. (Recommendation 24)

Encourage locals to mentor new stewards, particularly from the groups of focus. (Recommendation 40)

Encourage board members and other leaders to take actions to encourage (more) diverse members to consider leadership positions, including:

- Provide visibility for caucus/committee members,
- Provide opportunities and budget for members of the caucuses⁹ to gain more visibility within the regions and locals,
- Speak with members of the caucuses about how to use their caucus experience as a basis for further leadership development. (Recommendation 24)

Require the regions to comply with Education Policy on choosing a diversity of members for all education opportunities. (Recommendation 12)

⁷ According to the SMP survey, women make up 69% of the membership. By calculating the % of each other group among the men (and assuming that disability, youth and French language speakers are distributed equally among the all groups), the groups of focus total at least 80% of the membership.

⁸ E.g., Build equity components into the annual Board retreat.

⁹ We note that members of the committees have more formal opportunity for regional and local visibility.

▪ Build from the Ground Up

Expand the mandate of the committees and caucuses to include a focus on workplace issues. Use a (proposed) local committee/caucus structure to directly address workplace issues. (Recommendation 28)

Begin to build a local and regional structure for the groups of focus:

- Develop strategies for choosing caucus members that link back to a substantial membership base, rather than relying on informal caucus contacts.
- Develop a consistent local equity structure related to each of the provincial committees and caucuses. This could include local equity committees, equity officers on the LEC and/or equity stewards.
- Hold annual Equity Regional Meetings in each region organized by the committees and caucuses.
- Where there are too few members in a particular group for a local structure in a particular region, develop a regional support structure, for example, positions as regional equity stewards occupied by members of the groups of focus.
- Communicate to the locals that these members are available to assist the local steward when a member has a concern related to his/her demographic status or requests the equity steward.
- Develop Policy to include input from and/or representation of local groups of focus on bargaining teams. (Recommendations 29 and 30)

Provide a structure for staff reps to develop closer contacts with the committees and caucuses. (Recommendation 11)

Examine ways to use the Building Local Capacity (BLC) program to support equity goals at the local level. (Recommendation 11)

▪ Promote Important Messages

Normalize the idea that groups of focus will be interested in addressing disadvantages of their own group:

- Heighten board awareness of the demographics of the membership (e.g., the demographics presented in this report),
- Discuss with board members and other leaders why it's OK for diverse members to advocate for group-specific workplace and union issues,
- Encourage leaders to communicate this to the membership with messages such as -
 - Everyone needs the opportunity to address the workplace issues that they are most passionate about,
 - Each of the groups of focus has workplace disadvantage¹⁰ so the union needs the perspective they bring,
 - They know their issues best,
 - They help the union to address the full diversity of workplace disadvantage,
 - We need everyone at the table,

¹⁰ For example, data from Census Canada 2006.

- The committees/caucuses represent 80% of our membership. (Recommendation 41)

In communications about equity-related education, ensure that equity training is “framed” as basic for understanding the membership, serving a wider range of needs and attracting new activists. (Recommendation 16)

Consider ways to use regional and local educationals to encourage members to become union activists, including young and contingent workers. (Recommendation 38)

Upgrade the OPSEU website to attract potential activists from the groups of focus:

- Highlight positive equity-related information (e.g., OPSEU’s equity accomplishments, educationals, community actions, etc.) on the OPSEU home page,
- Consider providing a basic welcoming message to members in many languages on the home page,
- With input from the committees and caucuses, design the equity specific pages to be more attractive and informative for members of their demographic group. (Recommendations 35 and 39)

▪ **Develop Distance Participation Strategies**

Incorporate the option of distance voting into all voting processes (Recommendation 20) starting with pilot locals, which track the impact on participation of demographic groups. (Recommendation 18)

Develop alternative ways that LEC officers can provide their “signature” and recommendation for applicants for regional educationals and as delegates (e.g., by email). (Recommendation 13)

Put resources into developing local and distance alternatives for OPSEU education. In developing both content and technologies, consult with the committees, caucuses and other groups most likely to benefit from these measures. Monitor participation of the groups of focus in these alternatives. (Recommendation 21)

▪ **Provide Accommodation to Level the Playing Field**

Further improve the systems for accommodation for delegates with disabilities, for example, establish a policy so that accommodations allow delegates with disabilities to participate fully in all aspects of the regional meetings and Convention both before, during and after formal sessions. Use the model established by the provision of child care. (Recommendation 17)

With input from the committees and caucuses, develop a protocol for resolving competing accommodation needs on an individual basis (such as between members who want a smudging ceremony and members with allergies). (Recommendation 17)

Facilitate the provision of French language education for francophone members, with input from the Francophone caucus. (Recommendations 17 and 19)

▪ **Build in Accountability**

Develop systems for accountability for equity:

- Continue with the Review of Membership Systems and, on the bases of the review, develop an Equity Plan of Action,
- Require the leadership to set yearly equity goals with success criteria and, at the end of each year, to report to the membership on their related actions and accomplishments. Include in these goals all equity-related resolutions from Convention. Publish the goals and outcomes on the website. Report yearly to Convention on actions and accomplishments related to Convention equity resolutions.
- Monitor yearly the success of informal processes of selecting diverse groups for mentoring. If this is not productive, discuss more targeted processes. (Recommendations 43 and 44)