



BUILDING OUR POWER FOR CHANGE



EQUITY FOR ALL!

PSAC BC Regional Conference for Racially Visible Members
February 28, 29, and March 1, 2020
Vancouver, BC





Report on the PSAC BC Regional Conference for Racially Visible Members – 2020

From February 28, 29, and March 1, 2020, close to 50 Racially Visible members in B.C. gathered under the conference theme, “Building Our Power: Equity for All!” This is only the second time the regional conference for Racially Visible members has been organized since being mandated at the PSAC National Triennial Convention in 2015 to be held in each region once every three-year cycle.

The objectives of this conference:

- Develop strategies to work across workplaces, locals, regions, and components to build partnerships, coalitions, and networks for advocacy;

- Broaden the base of activists by recruiting, training, and mobilizing new and less engaged racialized members, such as young workers and those from equity-seeking groups, in political action, campaigning, bargaining, representation and generally, advocating for workers’ and human rights;

- Identify political priorities for PSAC racialized members and empowering them to advance their goals; and

- Contribute to the development of a PSAC policy to address systemic racism.

The Organizing Committee was chaired by Stephen Torng, Regional Council Racially Visible Equity Coordinator, and comprised Reena Birk, Colin Cheng, Shong Chow, and Lea Serron. This volunteer group worked together over several months to identify potential speakers, choose topics for some of the workshops, and provide input around other content and flow for the conference.



The conference began with the acknowledgement of the Indigenous territories by Debra Sparrow, Musqueam Representative. Debra shared some of the specific geographic history of Richmond for the Musqueam People Debra then spoke on the current struggles of the Wet’suwet’en People and the need for solidarity and action from all people.

Jamey Mills, PSAC Regional Executive Vice-President for BC, greeted everyone a Happy Black History Month and acknowledged historical instances of racism against Racially Visible people in B.C. He connected it to the current rise in racist instances the most recent of which related to the COVID-19 virus and some Canadians reactions to the solidarity actions taking place in support of the Wet'suwet'en struggle.

Out of respect for the space the conference provided to Racially Visible members Jamey left soon after his remarks but shared that he looked forward to hearing and supporting the conference outcomes.

Friday's panel, workshop and social

Shong Chow, Organizing Committee member, facilitated a Building Our Power panel, which featured different speakers addressing this theme from a union, workplace, or community experience.

Sharon de Sousa, PSAC Regional Executive Vice-President for Ontario, spoke from a union perspective and shared her journey to union leadership, being only one of few racialized folks at the national level of the PSAC. Sharon also talked about seeking out allies to be champions of equity issues and not letting it be assumed that those from equity groups will always be the one to advocate on these issues.

Suneela Chopra shared her experience in various Federal Departmental managerial roles. She also provided a historical reminder of the struggle to have "visible minority" even added into the Employment Equity Act noting it was the last group to be added at the time.

Nihal Elwan, from Tayybeh Syrian Food, shared the story behind creating a social enterprise catering/food truck company. With an international development background, but being newly arrived in Canada herself, Nihal recognized that many Syrian refugee women needed an opportunity for social interaction beyond their immediate families, a chance to become more acquainted with Canada and its systems, and to also generate some income.

Nihal organized these women to help prepare and cook Syrian food for small simple dinners, that soon grew into a catering service and food truck. It was heartening to hear of her struggles with becoming an entrepreneur in a foreign country and also being

*"The panelists were all very inspiring!"**

"Nihal used her skills to help the Racially Visible women in order to meet their needs."

*"She told her story that empowers me to do the same in the future."**

responsible for these women, many of whom suffer from PTSD from the war. Several questions from delegates asked for tips and lessons from all women on how to continue onwards in the face of adversity.

Exploring Workplace Diversity was a session that followed in conference plenary, facilitated by Monica Urrutia, PSAC Regional Representative. It was a session adapted from the Joint Learning Program's "Respecting Differences/Anti-Discrimination" course. Delegates discussed concepts of diversity and the session also included exercises for personal reflection on privilege.

Before the evening session was to begin, participants took part in a group conference photo, as well as a banner-signing activity that the Organizing Committee had encouraged earlier in the morning, in support of PSAC members demands for proper compensation for the Phoenix debacle that they have been experiencing for the last four years.

Lea Serron, Organizing Committee member, emceed Friday evening's events. It included a fun networking game that provided PSAC prizes and other donated items. The evening also included African drumming and dance by Jacky Yenga and Friends, who lead an incredibly interactive program which had almost all delegates singing and dancing, while learning about life in an African village.

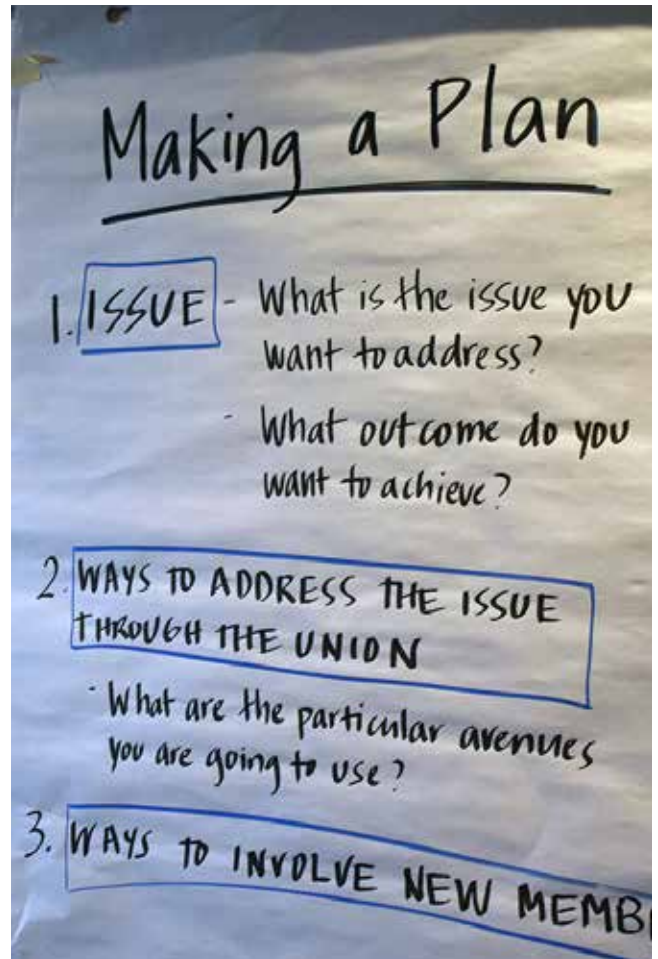
Workshops on Saturday

Saturday brought a day filled with workshops. Beyond Bias – Diversifying Your Union Network, facilitated by Varinder Johal, PSAC Regional Representative, helped delegates identify different types of bias, how it relates to union leadership roles, and diversifying union networks.

Building Racialized Workers' Power for Change allowed delegates to identify barriers they face as Racially Visible members to union participation, become aware of avenues available within the union to address workplace issues, and understand and feel empowered to mobilize members to create workplace change. Hetty Alcuitas, PSAC Regional Representative (Developmental) and Lindsey Sparks, PSAC Regional Representative, co-facilitated this workshop.

*"I didn't recognize there are different kinds of bias. The workshop helped to find ways to resolve or overcome those biases."**

*"The Systemic Racism Session dived deep into each of the types of racism and issues within the system."**



The Systemic Racism Policy Session was offered at each regional Racially Visible conference. This session was lead by Seema Lamba, PSAC Human Rights Officer. It was held to examine existing PSAC statements on systemic racism, identify key areas and issues in the workplace, union, and community in which systemic racism exists, and have delegates provide direct input into a policy statement on systemic racism.

Each delegate cycled through all three workshops. This provided them with networking opportunities as each group was different.

Resolutions and wrap-up on Sunday

Sunday began with Monica providing a session on resolutions to the conference plenary. It provided delegates with the opportunity to get general information on resolutions, including tips on writing and speaking to resolutions and how they reach decision-making bodies such as Union Conferences and/or Conventions. Perhaps, more importantly, it provided delegates time to discuss in small groups the importance of strategizing weeks and days in advance of those Union events to gain support for their resolutions.

The rest of the morning was spent on resolution debate. It is important to note that this is the first time the regional conference for Racially



Visible members included a process to accept and debate resolutions. Stephen chaired the debate with Sharon as his Parliamentarian and technical advisor. The Resolutions Committee was made up of Celine Ahodekon, Committee Chair, as well as Nielene Chand, Sukhpreet Heir, and Eamon Miyagi, with staff assistance provided by Varinder.

Two resolutions were discussed, the first called on PSAC to provide Regional Committees with the same representation and voting entitlement as Area Councils. The second called on PSAC to further their work with poverty reduction groups campaigning for immediate action towards housing, safe spaces, and public facilities for the homeless. After a very vibrant debate and respectful discussion, the conference will forward both resolutions as their two priority resolutions to the PSAC National Conference for Racially Visible members.

Before reaching the conference end, it was important for the Organizing Committee to ask delegates to fill out a personal pledge card indicating what form of action they commit to taking as a result of this conference.

***“One voice can be powerful,
but collectively they can become more
powerful!”****

Stephen began the conclusion of the conference by thanking everyone for their participation and appreciating the time they gave up for the conference before calling Debra up.

Debra formally closed the conference with comments that made connections with the issues both Racially Visible and Indigenous peoples experience, including issues of loss of homeland, homelessness and connecting with individuals on a human level. She ended on a call for more than just meetings, the need for action, and for all people to get along because we all want what’s best for our families and children.

* Feedback received from Conference participants