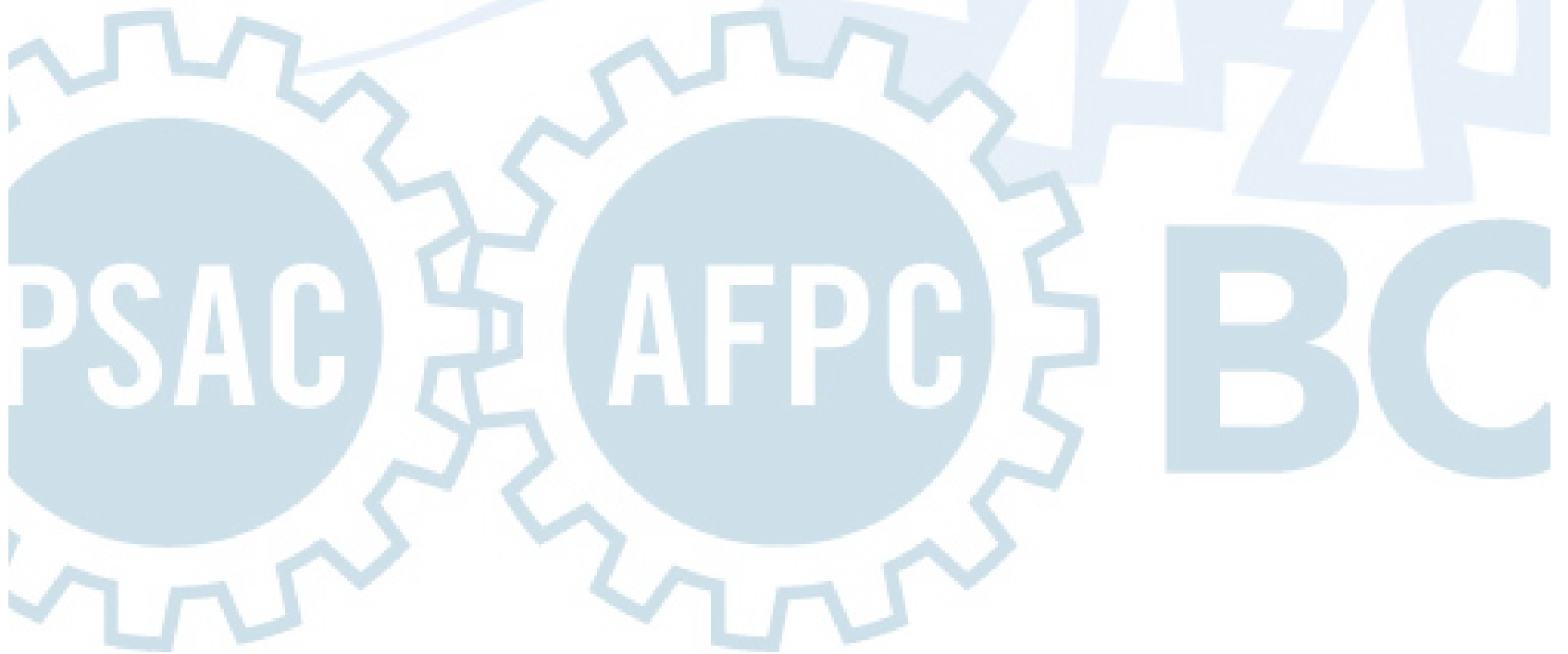




Race Forward:

**Our Union, Our Community,
Our Future!**



PSAC B.C. Regional Conference for Racially Visible Members
May 13-15, 2016
Burnaby, BC

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Our Union, Our Community, Our Future!



2016 PSAC BC Racially Visible Conference



The first PSAC B.C. Regional Conference for Racially Visible Members was held from May 13-15, 2016 in Burnaby.

Under the theme, “Race Forward: Our Union, Our Community, Our Future!” thirty-four members from across the province engaged with the union at this historic gathering.

The conference successfully brought together a diverse group of racialized members in hopes of achieving three objectives:

- ➔ To discuss, strategize and mobilize on issues impacting racially visible members in their region;
- ➔ To share experiences and network with other racially visible members in the region; and
- ➔ To empower and inspire racially visible members to become active in their union, community, and workplaces.

In order to achieve these objectives, the conference had articulate speakers, vibrant workshops, and an energetic facilitated discussion to help identify the key issues facing racialized workers, and how and what the PSAC should do to address them.

Jennifer Chieh Ho, Conference Chair, first introduced **Debra Sparrow** as the indigenous representative, who welcomed participants to the event. Sister Sparrow gave a traditional indigenous greeting and spoke about the uniqueness of cultures. She talked about the good in preserving our uniqueness as human beings and warned against becoming a melting pot.

Sister Chieh Ho then officially opened the conference. She acknowledged the work that activists, including allies, had put in over the years to get these regional conferences. Sister Chieh Ho also acknowledged her active organizing committee made up of **Celine Ahodekon**, **Suwinder Jassal**, **Vic Johal**, **Aly Kanani**, from the membership, and **Monica Urrutia**, PSAC Staff. Sister Chieh Ho recognized the fact that the conference was being held in May, which has been designated as the month to celebrate Asian Heritage for over 15 years in Canada. She shared with participants that the social evening would be filled with Asian flavours and performances.

Robyn Benson, National President of the PSAC, shared a message with the participants. Sister Benson provided regrets for Regional Executive Vice-President for B.C., **Bob Jackson**, as he was unable to bring greetings to this conference. Brother Jackson was in Kamloops at the time to attend the B.C. Federation of Labour Conference as one of the Federation’s Officers.

Sister Benson’s message addressed the particular issues racialized members face in B.C. She also talked about how the regional conferences, and their outcomes, would feed into the National Equity Conference scheduled for March 2017. She spoke on



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the need for an action plan for racialized members and their issues. She fielded questions and then wished the participants well. While not attending the remainder of the conference, she shared that she was confident that she would hear about the results and committed to working hard on her end to achieve change in the PSAC.

The Conference keynote speaker was **Marie Clarke Walker**, Executive Vice-President of the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC). Sister Walker highlighted how racialized members in the labour movement have fought for equity rights historically. Some of those struggles helped give rise to the establishment of the first Human Rights Commissions in Canada. She discussed current struggles in addressing racism in the labour movement and in Canada. Sister Walker also shared a short video on the CLC's Rise Up Conference coming up in October 2016, and encouraged all to attend.

A panel followed first featuring **Darla Tomeldan** from the West Coast Domestic Workers Association who addressed the topic of Precarious Employment. She spoke about temporary foreign workers using narratives depicting different experiences of domestic and service industry workers, as well as stories of mail order brides, and the difficulty with family reunifications after years of separation. Sister Tomeldan connected the conditions in the Philippines, including poverty, but also environmental degradation that has resulted, in part, by Canadian mining companies, to the reasons workers are desperate to go abroad. These workers are not here looking for an easy road but are making sacrifices for their families, moving great distances away to help them get a better life.

Next on the panel was **Natasha Tony** from the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees Local 891. Sister Tony talked about her experience in facilitating conversations on oppression with and between workers and managers, often through the lens of health and safety at the workplace. She tackled the psychosocial impacts of bullying and harassment on racialized workers as a health and safety hazard that needs to be addressed by employers, supervisors, workers, and the union. Using powerful images and reviewing foundational terminologies such as discrimination, racism, intersectionality, and internalized oppression, Sister Tony concluded by connecting this hazard to mental health impacts. She emphasized that positive steps are being made to change workplace culture around mental health.



The final presenter of the morning was **Lorene Oikawa** from the Greater Vancouver Japanese Canadian Citizens' Association. Sister Oikawa focused on defining what employment equity is and why it is needed in our society. She explained that employment equity was not to bring certain workers down, but instead, a way to try and bring all workers up. For racialized PSAC members who took a survey in preparation for this conference, employment equity was one of the top issues of concern.

Friday afternoon there was the first of three conference workshops. *Racial Discrimination: The need for Equity in our Workplace, Union, and Community* helped participants come to a common understanding of anti-oppression terminology using their own experiences and a provided glossary. The workshop highlighted examples of racial discrimination in Canada, ranging from long ago to present day. With this knowledge, the triangle of oppression was introduced as a tool to help explain how and why racism occurs. This led to understanding the need for equity in our society, particularly employment equity in our workplaces, and debunked some equity myths.

After the afternoon workshops, there was an optional after-session social. May, being Asian Heritage Month, inspired the food and performances for the evening. The **Kathara Pilipino Indigenous Arts Collective Society**, a local group, played Filipino instruments and performed indigenous Filipino dance. Creative networking and team building games followed as an icebreaker for conference participants that resulted in fun prizes.



Saturday morning began with the workshop on *Removing Barriers: Pushing Our Issues Forward*. Participants reflected on the issues that affected them as racialized people in their workplaces, union, and/or communities. They shared their experiences and wrote them on paper boulders, visually representing barriers, which were posted creating a rock "wall". Then in small groups, they collectively came up with ways to empower people to overcome the barriers and wrote these solutions on paper leaves. The leaves were added over top of the boulders to show how the solutions can help



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members overcome the barriers they face. A short exercise followed on developing a common way to talk about barriers and how to overcome them. Participants then tackled scenarios of oppression happening in the workplace, union, and in the community and were asked analytical questions to help deepen the conversation on oppression and how to address it.

Over lunch, the participants heard from **Christopher Wee**, who began by encouraging dialogue amongst people to deepen understanding and respect. He spoke about his life experiences, including different instances of racism and stereotyping. He explained that he ran for Mr. Gay Canada in 2014 with the mindset of being able to do advocacy work for his LGBTQ+ community and his role as a human being in society.



Brother Wee was the first racialized person to win this title. He touched on the challenges of being a racialized person in a position of leadership trying to access other leadership bodies. He challenged participants to look within the PSAC with a critical eye and work to ensure that the union's leadership is representative. He ended with asking participants to be a voice for change and to take action now.

After lunch participants went to their final workshop, *Building Our Networks, Strengthening Our Solidarity*.



The workshop began by having participants define what networking meant to them. The participants then gathered in small, like-minded groups and developed a definition of solidarity. A discussion ensued to determine the link between networking and solidarity. From there the participants took steps towards building a regional network. They first identified the structure(s) and leader(s)

in place to help forward the issues of racialized members. Participants then literally began to build their own network, with themselves at the center. The network was encouraged to be used as a tool even beyond the conference itself. Finally, participants put thought toward what lies ahead. Using important upcoming events as timeline markers, participants discussed different activities they would undertake at different points of the timeline over the next three years until the next regional conference. This included one personal commitment per participant, which they made to themselves.

On Sunday, participants were in several different round tables and participated in a facilitated discussion. The discussion addressed a number of issues taken from a draft discussion paper and fact sheets that all of PSAC's Racially Visible Regional Conferences will provide input on. This input will be incorporated into a national discussion paper that will be discussed and debated at the National Equity Conference in March 2017.

In the spirit of solidarity, the organizing committee appealed to conference participants and staff and gathered \$175 to go towards the rebuilding of Fort McMurray given the forest fire devastation. This was matched by the Union of National Employees B.C. and Yukon Region resulting in a grand total of \$350! The organizing committee shared their appreciation for the prize donations from the CEIU B.C. and Yukon Region and from the B.C. REVP's office that helped with the fundraising and the meet and greet games night.

Sister Sparrow returned to help close the conference. After an important group photo, Sister Ho announced the first-ever PSAC B.C. Regional Conference for Racially Visible Members be adjourned.

Being the first-ever conference, participants felt its historic value and appreciated the opportunity in participating.



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Participants shared their thoughts on priority issues for the PSAC, which included representation, outreach, education, and campaigns:

Representation - Participants felt there is a need to draw more attention to issues that racialized workers face and would like to see more representation of racialized members within the union hierarchy thus ensuring representation in senior positions in the workplace and in union roles. Specific resources to build racially visible leadership will be needed to achieve this, including more funding for more members to be able to attend conferences like this.

Outreach - Participants felt that more outreach to the community, especially youth and advocacy to government would be helpful.

Union education - The participants would like to see more PSAC courses geared towards the needs of racialized members.

Campaigns - The participants suggested several campaigns that PSAC should engage on: Precarious employment, including involving our communities in this fight; Protection of temporary foreign workers, including cooperation with other unions to gather accurate data; A plan to develop a committee and formal mechanism outside the grievance process that only deals with discrimination issues in the federal public service. Participants also felt there was a need for changes to the way staffing is undertaken in the federal public service, including more union consultation, and more involvement of racialized persons in the staffing process.

PSAC B.C. calls on the conference participants to continue to build on the groundbreaking conference by deepening the connections that were made between members and implementing the strategies that were developed.

