
BACKLASH

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I have to admit it, I am a fan of *Jeopardy* and so when I hear people complaining about their co-workers with physical limitations who are being accommodated I say to myself “What is backlash?” And when I am at a union conference and people start complaining about the union spending too much time on human rights stuff I ask myself that same question, “What is backlash?” And finally, when I, or people I know in leadership positions, think twice about speaking up on a human rights or equity issue I say “Why am I succumbing to the fear of backlash?”

I want to address the issue of backlash from the perspective of the workforce, the union, and among leaders and activists. I also want to discuss the reasons why I see this backlash occurring and how we can deal with it.

I am not an expert on backlash. I am a postal worker, an activist, a woman, a lesbian, a feminist, and a full-time elected union representative. As such, I

have plenty of personal experience with this subject.

The term backlash can mean many different things to different people. I think when we talk about backlash we are usually talking about racist, ableism, sexist, homophobic, and other reactions to gains that women and equity-seeking groups have made. Therefore, while backlash is sometimes overt, and often more subtle, it remains racism, sexism, ableism, and homophobia, in a certain context. It is also usually overlaid by feelings of general fear and insecurity. It is always in response to some immediate or longer term gains that have been made.

So, the first area I am going to talk about is backlash on the workforce. I see this manifested in several ways. The first is when workers see their co-workers getting a perceived advantage that they are not receiving. One of the most common expressions of this is the attitude of able-bodied workers to workers who are on modified or light duties, either on a temporary or permanent basis. These injured or disabled workers are pretty routinely made to feel that they have gotten a special deal. They are told that as a result of them being on modified duties their co-workers have to work harder. They are often told that their conditions really aren't that bad and they may be accused of having managed to con their doctor, in order to get a

certificate qualifying them for modified or light duties.

The problems are more acute when workers have restrictions that do not appear to correspond with their perceived work performance or schedule of light duties.

People on modified duties may be subject to regular comments and criticism from their co-workers. Often, employers who fail to defend the workers and share the suspicions of the harassers meet this form of harassment with indifference.

It must be remembered that the reason workers are successfully accommodated is as a result of collective bargaining gains made by unions in this area, and through court decisions and arbitration awards. The Supreme Court case in Meiorin is a case in point.

Surprisingly, I am sad to report that in many ways the backlash against the duty to accommodate is one of the most constant forms of backlash I am seeing on the workforce.

Unlike other forms of workforce backlash, which are often in reaction to a specific event or series of events, the backlash against workers who are accommodated appears to be of a more ongoing nature.

The effect of this form of backlash is to add a great deal of stress to the lives of workers who are being accommodated and to discourage other injured workers from seeking accommodation.

I believe that this type of backlash can be dealt with in the following ways:

- Unions must provide ongoing education and information to their members about the duty to accommodate and about the rights of workers being accommodated;
- Employers must set an example and actively intervene to stop the workplace harassment of accommodated workers;
- There has to be more solidarity in the workplace;
- Members of equity-seeking groups must speak up when they hear comments against workers who are being accommodated; and
- Union representatives have to address the issue whenever it occurs.

Another disturbing form of backlash and/or racism that I am increasingly seeing on the workforce is pressure being put on groups of workers who wish to speak to each other in a language other than English. The pressure often comes from co-workers, the employer, and very disturbingly, workers of the same linguistic group. The workers of the same linguistic group are basically are telling their sisters and brothers not to speak in their language in order to "fit in better" and avoid the flack. I know this

issue has been a debate in my union and in other unions.

I believe that this happens because of racism, and because of people's fear of being excluded or talked about.

The next area of backlash I want to talk about is within the union. I have seen it manifested against human rights issues in general, against women, against people of colour, against gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered workers and against aboriginal people.

In terms of women's issues, I want to talk about my union, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW). In 2003 we negotiated a collective agreement that was more controversial than other ones we had negotiated in the past. Our chief negotiator was a woman and the national president was also a woman. The new collective agreement was fiercely debated. Frankly, I believe the debate, for the most part, was very positive and healthy for the union. But some of the tone of the debate clearly involved belittling the sisters on the basis of their gender, not on the basis of their position on the collective agreement.

Sadly, my union is not the only one that is seeing backlash against women. There are many examples throughout the labour movement. I know of a union convention that voted to establish a men's committee. In another union, at a recent convention, there was a

wet t-shirt contest held one evening. At the microphone the next day, a sister said that she would look great in a wet t-shirt to the accompaniment of hoots and hollers from her union brothers.

Within unions there is also backlash in terms of lesbian, gay and bisexual issues. Many unions are reluctant to actively support and encourage participation in gay pride events. I have seen instances where union representatives failed to stop gay pride posters from being ripped down or defaced.

But, I think that the most prevalent form of backlash I have witnessed deals with human rights issues. Members are frequently challenging union representatives as to why we are spending so much time, money and energy on human rights issues when we have more important issues that affect everyone.

This is often a hard issue to address, as it reflects two different, and competing, interests within the membership. First, there are the interests of equity-seeking group members who need solidarity and support from the union. Secondly, there are non-equity-seeking group members who have very real concerns and complaints about the level of representation that they receive from their union.

We need to recognize that our membership is constantly changing. Older members are retiring and new members are entering the workplace, often

without experience in union issues. The labour movement needs to constantly explain to its members why we are fighting for equity issues and how this is an important part of the union agenda. As union activists, we need to constantly reinforce this message and not be content to do a course, or put out a newsletter once year about it.

We also need to ensure that we continually evaluate where we are in regards to backlash and constantly look at developing strategy, plans, and communication approaches on the issue of racism, sexism, and homophobia, as well as other areas where our members are subject to backlash.

We also need to talk about how the fear of backlash silences us as trade union activists. The best example I know of is the case of Boni Prokopetz. Boni is a firefighter in the city of Burnaby, British Columbia. For years she worked as a firefighter enduring sexual harassment and sexism.

So, she filed a harassment claim, but her union was not very helpful. This led to her filing a sexual harassment claim with the British Columbia Human Rights Commission.

While most people I know believe that Boni's claim is just, the silence of the trade union movement has been astounding. No one has formally come out in support of her. The reason for this is that many people believe that if we support Boni we will hurt the firefighters

union and we may also end up hurting the progressive city council in Burnaby. As a result, Boni has been left to suffer in silence

So, why the silence? Well, I have to admit that I am torn about this. Every fiber of my body says that Boni is right and that she is an incredibly courageous woman who deserves and needs our support. But, on the other hand, I too am succumbing to the fear of backlash and letting that guide me. I am also first vice president of the Vancouver and District Labour Council, and could very easily have submitted a motion to the general meeting on this issue. But, I am scared of the reaction of other affiliates.

So, I am not doing the right thing because I am afraid of backlash, and I think that my feelings are mirrored by the lack of action by trade union leaders in Vancouver.

I have been thinking it over, and have come to the conclusion that I have to do what is right, despite the fear of backlash. But, the lesson I wish to draw from this is that as union leaders and activists, we often self-paralyze ourselves in regards to speaking out.

Every union activist that I know has spoken out and has taken flack for doing so. We all know that taking that flack is sometimes personally and politically hard on us. But, I think that as activists and leaders, we need to re-dedicate ourselves to standing up.

But, the most important lesson for me is that fear of backlash, especially by union leaders and activists, allows backlash, racism, sexism, ableism, and homophobia to flourish. And we have to challenge it in ourselves and in others.

Backlash silences us. It hurts us, and it divides us. We need to take steps to stop it. There are many things we need to do. It is the responsibility of the union leadership and activists to name backlash when it happens. We need to give them the tools to feel confident to do this. We need to work with equity group members and shop stewards so that they can also take on the fight at the workplace.

Unions need to be constantly educating their members about the need for equity and equality. We also have to look at our union structures. Unions need to provide committees, caucuses, and other structures for members of equity-seeking groups so that they can discuss the issues, invent, and develop strategies.

We need to provide leadership skills training for members of equity-seeking groups. We need to stop ourselves from being silent. We need to name and discuss the implications of backlash within our unions and in a cross-union context.

Most importantly, we have to ensure that fear of backlash will never stop us in the fight for equality.