

Unifor Pride Conference Reflections

Members, friends, and allies,

Between May 30th and June 1st, union delegates from across the country gathered for Unifor's Biannual Pride Conference, marking 20 years of pride activism. This year, our discussions focused on confronting the rise of the far right and supporting each other through this period of political and social attacks on the trans community.

During the two days of the conference, we heard from inspiring speakers like Henri-June Pilote, Debbie Owusu-Akyeeah from Action Canada, Fae Johnstone from Momentum Canada, and Joanna Johnstone, who challenged us to recognize the tactics of far-right movements. They all provided points which we should consider in our own activism.

Firstly, in this era of change and challenge, we need to talk to a large swath of our community and truly understand the issues they face. While many of us in the labour movement pride ourselves on discussing the issues facing working people, Ms. Owusu-Akyeeah gave an example of one issue that mainstream and left movements had completely neglected which was then left for the far right to dominate. The issue- the trauma caused by the pandemic. For many, who lost loved ones, jobs, or faced mental/financial stresses, without broad conversation in our society, the far right was able to own this issue and build strong movements like anti-vax or anti-government movements.

Secondly, we all need to lighten up, especially in the queer community. For many of us, we're trying so hard to say the right thing—like making sure we use the right pronouns—and often we don't allow others to make mistakes and learn. Fae Johnstone, a longtime trans activist, mentioned that this behaviour of policing language can make it hard for queer and labour activists to have conversations with people outside their activist circles. If people are too uncomfortable to talk, they won't engage with us. Again, the far right has acted on this sentiment and built an entire trope equating this behaviour with limits on freedom of speech.

Thirdly, we should respect game when we see it. While we might find the hate speech on the far right terrifying, we need to learn from their successes in building a movement. If we look at the convoy protest, they had a simple message, a simple action for those participating, they raised money, and while they wanted to overthrow the government, they held fun events to keep those protesting engaged (like bouncy castles and barbecues). Their work had all the successful elements of building a social movement and presents a clear and highly visible example from which union activists can learn.

The conversations we held at the conference were challenging and fraught with emotion. From those on the front lines of trans activism who are facing death threats for supporting a drag story hour, to trans youth and their parents who are not able to talk freely with their doctors about treatments due to government interference, the mental health of many of our members is low. To support one another, we held a 'nature therapy' walk at MacGregor Park and a queer-positive prom to let all the delegates be who they want to be without worry.

A special tribute was given to Stephanie Johnstone, whose tireless advocacy made Unifor's first Pride Conference possible 25 years ago. Her legacy is the foundation on which we stand.

By the end of the conference, the message given and delivered by delegates was clear: by talking openly, acting with compassion, and celebrating our strength, we as a union can bring positive change for all.

I look to adopt by report,
Akash Shanghvi