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Placing Equity and Human Rights Issues at Centre Stage at Equity and Human Rights Conference

Through the generous support of the University of Regina’s Faculty Association (URFA), I had the privilege and honor to attend the Regina and District Labour Council’s (RDLC) Fifth Annual Equity and Human Rights Conference in Regina. The conference began on Friday evening (February 3rd) with a “Meet and Greet” at a local restaurant. Along with being with workers from other unions and associations, the highlight of the evening was the talk given by lawyer Larry Kowalchuk who specializes in justice issues such as equity and human rights. Mr. Kowalchuk provided a moving update about the gains, challenges, as well as the visions for human rights in Saskatchewan today. Accompanying Mr. Kowalchuk was a family of three from Saskatoon who shared the personal story of their journey of acceptance and support for their transgendered child. This inspiring family revealed some of the struggles and successes they have experienced in getting schools to provide a gender neutral restroom for their child and to ensure that their offspring enjoys all the human rights promised (but not necessarily lived) by the Saskatchewan and Canadian human rights codes. Those in attendance gave rapt attention to the stories of hardship and the victories achieved by the family and by Kowalchuk. When the family terminated their compelling narrative about their lived engagement with equity and human rights matters in Saskatchewan, the entire audience leapt up with thunderous applause of appreciation and respect. After listening to Kowalchuk and the family, I felt grateful to URFA for supporting my learning and development and hope to share what I learned in one-to-one conversations with URFA members and in future Equity Committee meetings.

After a stirring evening, the conference continued the next day, Saturday, February 4th at Luther College where keynote speaker New Democrat MLA, Trent Wotherspoon delivered an informative talk. Wotherspoon talked about the current fiscal situation in Saskatchewan and the need to protect gains made by Saskatchewan workers/people as well as the importance of working together to ensure that the educational, economic, housing and other interests of marginalized and disenfranchised groups are advanced and addressed by the current as well as future governments. Similar to their response to Kowalchuk and the Saskatoon family, conference delegates responded to Wotherspoon with solid applause and a standing ovation.

Following the keynote, delegates had the opportunity to attend a variety of sessions (e.g. Temporary Foreign Workers, Turtle Island Parts One and Two, Poverty Simulation etc.). I chose to participate in the presentations about Turtle Island because I wanted to broaden and deepen my knowledge about Indigenous peoples in Saskatchewan and elsewhere in Canada. These sessions were excellent. Participants learned about the history of Indigenous peoples, their ongoing resistance to colonial oppression, victories and perspectives on equity and human rights. Overall, the conference was a meaningful opportunity to grow, learn and act in solidarity with others to achieve a just and equitable Saskatchewan for all. This day and a half event was appreciated by the delegates sponsored by URFA. As we wrapped up the day, I found myself posing and answering the following question: What does URFA do for me? Among many other concrete benefits, URFA contributes to the learning and development of its members. It does this for me and I am truly grateful.

Submitted by Barbara McNeil