

# STEELDRUM

USW1998 NEWSMAGAZINE

SUMMER 2026 | Vol.24 No.1

## Making Her-Story!



### **INSIDE THE STEELDRUM:**

*Women and Politics - 11*

*Indigenous Ancestors and Sacred Objects - 36*

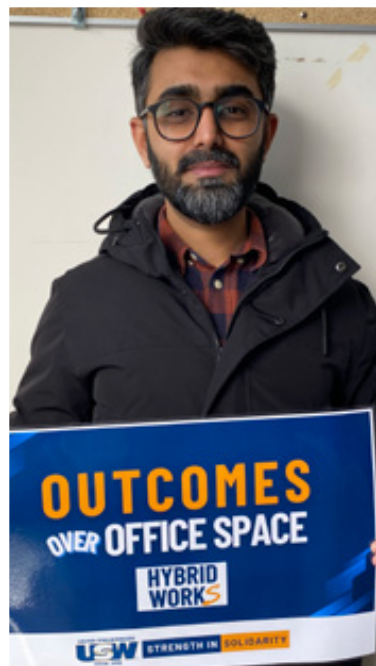
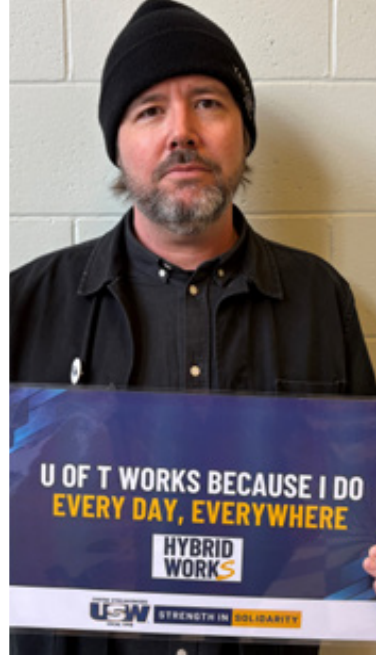
*Argentina's Stolen Generation - 44*

UNITED STEELWORKERS  
**USW**  
LOCAL 1998

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*Cover: Dynamic duo USW International President Roxanne Brown and Anishnaabe traditional grandmother Kim Wheatley at the Women of Steel Conference in Toronto*



# PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



**T**he Local continues to prepare for the five upcoming sets of collective bargaining that will take place in 2026 and early 2027. We expect negotiations for a new Staff Appointed Unit contract to start in the latter part of June, with bargaining in our Casual, Victoria University, St. Michael's College and University of Toronto Schools units coordinated so that they support each other and so that they can benefit from any gains made in the Staff Appointed Unit. The process of electing bargaining teams in the Casual, Victoria University and St. Michael's College units is underway, with the necessary preparations for negotiations starting soon.

Collective bargaining in 2025 for our UTSC Residence Advisors, Living Learning Advisors and Community Advisors resulted in a tentative agreement that was ratified by the members in December. Compensation for August training, more flexibility in meal plans, hiring preference for returning Advisors and increased compensation, including pay for work done during the winter break, were some of the achievements reached through negotiations with the University. The support by the membership for their bargaining team was strong and significantly contributed to the success of negotiations.

Last spring, Dons at St. Michael's College voted in favour of joining the United Steelworkers. Collective bargaining for our newest unit recently concluded with the membership ratifying their first contract with a 100% vote in favour of the tentative agreement. The collective agreement includes a compensation increase, improvements to job security, and other contract language that would bring the members' rights in line with their fellow Dons and Residence Advisors at the University of Toronto. The worker solidarity demonstrated by the Unit's members created strength that contributed significantly to our collective success. The union's slogan during bargaining turned out to be prophetic: *Forged in Steel, Dons Get the Deal*.

The Hybrid Work Fightback Campaign in our Staff Appointed Unit continues with the issuance of the open letter to President Melanie Wooden, a second round of newly created posters, a broadened social media campaign and preparations for dealing with the issue in collective bargaining. The Fightback Steering Committee is meeting regularly as they work with Tamara Vickery and me to develop the action plan, and our overall strategy is rooted in ideas contributed by the unit's membership. Hundreds of members have attended Hybrid Work-focused town hall meetings and in-person outreach events.

We recently held a town hall meeting that focused on input from members who are in jobs that, because of the nature of their duties, are not conducive to remote work. In addition to hearing the concerns of the town hall attendees, we talked about how fighting back against President Wooden's decision to diminish the hybrid work program can strengthen the bargaining unit as a whole and benefit those members who cannot work remotely. For instance, the University is spending millions of dollars renovating workspaces and building new office space in order to accommodate the increased demand for workspace that is created by having more staff working on campus. The money being spent on those projects diminishes the amount of money that the University will have available when we are negotiating for monetary gains in our Staff Appointed and Casual units. If we do not fightback against the attack on hybrid work, the University will be encouraged to launch more attacks that could negatively affect our members who cannot work remotely.

On February 28, long time union activist Christine Beckermann retired from her U of T job. Christine played a key role in the creation of our Local. In 1998, she participated in the organizing drive that led to the vote in favour of U of T staff joining the Steelworkers. Christine then served on six Local 1998 Executive Committees, acting at different times as a Guard, Guide and Recording Secretary. When she was not on the Executive Committee, Christine continued to act as a Steward and as a member of the Staff Appointed Unit's Communication Action Team. We have all benefitted greatly from Christine's union activist work. The magnitude of Christine's contributions to the Local cannot be overstated. Her day-to-day participation in the life of Local 1998 will be greatly missed. Best wishes, Christine, for a happy and fulfilling retirement.



*Christine Beckermann and John Ankenman in front of the Union Hall before joining other USW members at Queen's Park for a "Keep Education and Health Care Public" rally.*

*John Ankenman, USW 1998 President*

# USW International President Roxanne Brown Makes Her-Story!

**O**n March 1, 2026, Roxanne Brown became only the 10th International President of the United Steelworkers, North America's largest industrial union, since its founding in 1942.

Brown is the first woman and the first Black person to lead the Steelworkers union. Born in Kingston, Jamaica, and raised in White Plains, New York, she has served as USW International Vice-President since 2019.

"Earlier this month, our union made a little history. Or should I say 'Her-story!'" she said at the Women of Steel Conference in Toronto, Ontario, from March 29-April 2, 2026. "I am joining giants in the honour of serving our union. We have produced some of the most incredible leaders in the global labour movement. It's a privilege."

A passionate advocate for working families, Brown joined the union's Legislative and Policy Department in Washington, D.C., 27 years ago.

Her testimony before state legislatures, the U.S. Congress, the U.S. International Trade Commission, regulatory agencies and international forums helped to position the USW as a champion of good union jobs in North America and a leading voice for issues that matter most to regular folk: workplace safety, health care, job and retirement security, and the impact of ongoing shifts in trade, economic cycles and working environments on just about everyone.



*USW International President Roxanne Brown charms her audience at the Women of Steel Conference in Toronto, Ontario (Mar 31-Apr 2, 2026)*



*International President Roxanne Brown flanked by International Vice-President at Large Amber Miller (L) and District 11 Director Cathy Drummond (R) as they ascend the elevator to lead the Women of Steel Rally in Toronto*

"It's our job in the labour movement to meet the moment - to organize, to educate and to lead the fight for real economic justice," Brown said at her installation of the USW's International Executive Board.

Brown acknowledged that by stepping into the president's role, she embodies an achievement that moves the USW - and the entire labour movement - forward.

"We have some powerhouse women leading international unions and federations in the U.S. and Canada. And a lot of them have done so for decades. But in the U.S., there has never been a woman leader of an industrial union. Until now."

Her message resonates for her sister Women of Steel delegates: "Never let the world try to tell you who it thinks you are," Brown said. "You are a leader. An inspiration. A powerhouse. You are wonderful reflections of this union that we love."

*Rebecca Chua  
Editor, Steel Drum*



*USW International President Roxanne Brown with eight-year-old daughter Eden Rose. Fittingly, the theme of the Women of Steel Conference was "Education for a New Era"*

# International Executive Board

**The United Steelworkers** is an international union governed by a 19-member International Executive Board led by President Roxanne D. Brown. She heads an international union that serves 850,000 members across the United States, Canada and the Caribbean.

The USW represents 13 districts across North America including three regional districts in Canada.

The Canadian contingent on The Canadian contingent on the USW's International Executive Board includes:

Myles Sullivan, elected to his second term as the USW's International Secretary-Treasurer, and previously served as USW District 6 Director.

Marty Warren was elected as United Steelworkers National Director on March 1, 2022, representing the union's more than 225,000 Canadian members. s National Director, as of March 1, 2022.

Nicholas Lapierre serves as Director of District 5 - Quebec, Kevon Stewart as Director of District 6 - Ontario and Atlantic Canada, and Scott Lunny as Director of District 3 - Western Canada, representing 5,000 Canadian members. He succeeded Ken Neumann, who retired after serving as USW National Director for 18 years.



*Myles Sullivan, Secretary-Treasurer of the International Executive Board, with past President Dave McCall*



*L to R: Directors Nicholas Lapierre, Kevon Stewart, National Director Marty Warren and Scott Lunny*



# Ken Neumann Appointed SOAR International President

## **F**ormer Canadian National Director

Ken Neumann became the fifth International President of the Steelworkers Organization of Active Retirees (SOAR) on March 1, 2026. He is also the second Canadian to hold the post, succeeding Bill Pienta, who has served as SOAR President for the past 13 years.

Neumann was appointed by past USW International President, David McCall, who has passed the baton on to Roxanne Brown, currently the 10th International President and the first woman to lead USW. Neumann served as USW Canadian National Director from 2004 to 2022, when he retired.

"I'm proud and delighted to be able to continue serving my union and its members - particularly seniors and retirees - in my retirement," Neumann said. "I like to stay connected, and if I can make a contribution by advancing the interests of union members in their retirement, I am honored to do so."

Marty Warren, who succeeded Neumann as Canadian National Director in 2022, was thrilled with Neumann's appointment. "Congratulations, Ken! We are so fortunate to have you serve as International President of SOAR. We are happy to have your energy and experience on the front lines of all the fights for working people -

now with a focus for seniors and retirees," said Warren.

As an affiliate of the Steelworkers, SOAR provides opportunities for Steelworker retirees to stay on the frontlines as activists, helping to advance the policies and programs working families need. Membership is open to individuals 45 and over who want to remain active and continue to fight for working people. SOAR was formed in 1985 by then USW International President, Lynn Williams, as a way to keep retirees connected to activism and to their union. Upon his retirement, Williams became the first Canadian to become SOAR President, serving from 1997 to 2007.

*P. C. Choo, SOAR Trustee, District 6, Chapter 1 (Toronto/Mississauga)*

# In Memoriam: Leo Gerard

**Leo Gerard was** a titan among Steelworkers in Canada and the United States. He was the longest-serving union president in the history of the United Steelworkers, beginning in 2001 until his retirement in 2019, and only the second Canadian to head the union.

I first met Leo Gerard in 2004 when I led the first Local 1998 delegation to the United Steelworkers Press Association (USPA) Convention in Nashville, Tennessee. At that time, Leo had been International President for just three years.

Even then, my first impression of Leo was that he was a mover and a shaker. It was at this time that I first heard Leo utter the phrase, “Male, Pale and Stale” to describe the composition of the USW International Executive Board and the upper echelons of the Steelworkers Union.

Two years later, Carol Landry became the first woman to serve as an International Vice-President of USW and on the USW International Executive

Board. When Landry retired in 2019, she was succeeded by Roxanne Brown, who assumed the role of the USW Legislative Director in the USW Office in Washington, D.C. I had no doubt in my mind that Leo was instrumental in pushing for a more inclusive and diversified structure at the highest levels of power within the Steelworkers Union.

Today, we recognize the fruits of Leo’s efforts: Roxanne Brown was sworn in as the new USW International President on March 1, 2026. She is USW’s 10th International President and the first Black woman to lead the Union. Today’s Steelworkers is no longer “Male, Pale and Stale.” It is more inclusive and more diversified than at any moment in its history. There are three women and three Black members on the International Executive Board. Thank you, Leo, for your foresight in guiding our Union to where it is today.

Leo also had a deep sense of humour. At our first meeting, we learned that he was fluent in three languages: English, French and ‘Flowery Language’. He had no compunction in denouncing corporate bosses and robber barons in flowery terms. Long before FAFO (F\*\*k Around and Find Out) became a popular social media rejoinder, Leo used to regale us with stories about how he warned corporate bosses not to “f\*\*k around with the Steelworkers” or else suffer the consequences.



*Local 1998 delegates with their United Steelworkers Press Association awards in Pittsburgh in June 2006. (L-R): Lidia Mestnik, Jenny Fan, Glenda Gillis, then USW International President, Leo Gerard, & P. C. Choo.*



*Leo Gerard was a giant of the labour and social justice movements*

Despite his position as International President, Leo never forgot his Canadian roots. When Local 1998 made headlines by winning several major United Steelworkers Press Association (USPA) awards, including the Raymond W. Pasnick Award for Editorial Excellence, the Michael Enos Award for Best Website Design, the Best Feature Story Merit Award, the Best Local Union Coverage Merit Award and the Civil Rights Department Award, all members of our delegation took turns to go up on stage to represent our Local in accepting the awards.

This did not escape Leo's attention: "P.C. is asking his colleagues to come up and accept the various awards instead of him coming up alone several times [to do so]. That is the hallmark of a great leader." Coming from Leo, that meant a lot to me personally, although I replied modestly, "They did all the hard work and I get all the glory." Leo told us how proud he was, as a Canadian, with our accomplishments. He also told us that he read every single issue of *The Steel Drum* and asked that we put him on our

mailing list so he would not miss a single issue.

The delegation we sent to our first USPA Conference in 2004 was 80% female - I was the only male and the only non-white participant - and marked a change from the "Male, Pale and Stale" mentality at the then Steelworker higher echelons of power. It demonstrated that, amidst the camaraderie, optimism and pride, we all truly belong in the Steelworkers family.

Leo always had a photographic memory. Years after our initial meeting, Leo still remembered my name, my Local and the Steel Drum. According to my mentor, Jim Coleman, then Secretary of USPA, "One of the things that amazed me about Leo was his memory of events. At my retirement, he recalled the work I did as a local union editor 25 years ago."

As former Canadian National Director, Ken Neumann, wrote: "Leo had a big heart, a big brain, a big laugh, and an even bigger spirit. He found joy in the life of the Steelworkers, and inspiration in the hard work being done every day by our rank-and-file members, by our stewards, grievance committees, bargaining teams, health and safety champions ... and the people doing the hard work of trade unionism on the shop floor. The best way we can honour Leo's work and commitment - to workplace justice, equality, and a progressive, democratic future - is to ensure this work continues."

Rest in power, Leo!

*P. C. Choo, former Vice-President of Local 1998 and former Editor of The Steel Drum, SOAR Trustee Chapter 1 (Toronto/Mississauga).*

# WOMEN AND POLITICS

Speech presented at USW Women of Steel Conference  
Mar 31-Apr 2, 2026, Toronto, Ontario



*Arushana Sundaraeson at the podium at the Women of Steel Conference*

How many women have ever thought about running for government at all levels of your province, state or country? Even just a little bit?  
And how many have talked themselves out of it?

Yeah... I've been there too.  
When we talk about women running for elected office, we're talking about power.  
We're talking about voice. We're talking about who gets to make decisions- and who doesn't.

Because whether we're in those rooms or not -  
Decisions are still being made.

I studied political science at Brock University during my undergrad years, and I spent a lot of time in rooms filled with men -

Men who were louder,  
More confident,  
And sometimes made it very clear they didn't think I belonged there.

I had my intelligence questioned.  
I had people talk over me.  
I had people tell me -  
"You're not going to make it here."  
And for a moment- I believed it.

But I didn't leave.  
I stayed.  
I spoke up.  
And I proved them wrong.  
And I know I'm not the only one in the room who has felt that.  
In your workplace.  
In your union.  
In your life.

That feeling of being underestimated - that is exactly why we need more women in leadership!

Today, I serve as an Executive Vice-President of the Ontario New Democratic Party (ONDP), and I chair the Labour Caucus.

And I want to say this clearly - we made history. For the first time, the Labour Caucus of the Ontario NDP (ONDP) is being chaired by women- myself, and my fellow co-chair Shahad who is from the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC).

Two women... in fact, two brown south Asian women from labour, working together - and that matters!

Because we're not just in those rooms any more - we're helping lead them.

Right now, I've been reading *107 Days*, the book written by former US Vice-President, Kamala Harris, and it reinforces something important: You don't wait until you feel ready.

You step forward - even when it's uncomfortable.

And I've seen that in real life too.

I worked with a woman who ran for the NDP leadership, while she was pregnant with twins and completing her PhD.

And watching her - show up anyway - changed how I saw leadership.

And I want to be honest with you.

There's a by-election in my riding right now.

And I've been asked if I'm going to run.

And the truth is - I'm not ready yet.

And that's okay.

Because readiness isn't one-size-fits-all.

Maybe one day I will be.

But just because I'm not ready right now- doesn't mean I won't ever be.

And this isn't just about me.

This is about all the women who face the same predicament.

Because I know there is a woman - many women - who should be running.

So, think about it: what would happen if you said yes?

You don't need to be perfect. Trust me, I am learning that as well.

You don't need to have all the answers.

You just need to be willing to step forward.

Because we're already leaders.

There will always be people who doubt you.

Who question you. Who tell you, "You can't do it."

I've heard it. You've all heard it.

But my advice is simple: Prove them wrong.

Prove them wrong by showing up. By speaking up. By taking up space.

Because when you do - you don't just change your path - you change it for every woman coming after you.

*Arushana Sundaraeson,  
Communications and Political Action Staff  
Representative, USW District 6  
Executive Vice-President, ONDP*

# Gender Equity:

## Building Collective Power for All Workers



**Gender equity is** a union issue. It is not a side issue, but a core concern about whose labour is valued, who is safe at work, who gets promoted, whose voice is heard at the bargaining table, and who gets to retire with dignity. Most importantly, it's about the kind of movement we are building.

Unions are vital because they provide an opportunity for all workers to be brought up together. A collective agreement ensures no one in a bargaining unit is left behind, and, historically, unions have raised the bar for employment standards for all workers. Marginalized people, whether unionized or not, have the most to gain from the collective strength of unions.

### The Data on Gaps and Union Power

Despite making progress, the fight for gender equity continues, and we must do more than just talk.

- The gender pay gap persists. In 2022, average hourly wages for workers covered by a union contract in Canada were nearly 12% higher than for those without a union contract. This benefit was significantly higher for women (20%) than for men (6%).
- Unionized workers are more likely to have crucial benefits, including supplemental health and dental care, pension plans, maternity or parental top-up coverage, disability insurance, and workers' compensation.
- Over half of union members in Canada are women, primarily working in the public sector (health care and social services, education,

and public administration), where wages tend to be higher than in the private sector.

- Union coverage for all women reduces the gender wage gap, and this effect is significant especially for Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) women.

However, not all workers benefit equally from union coverage. Workers of equity-deserving groups, regardless of gender, are significantly less likely to be covered by a union than those who are not (by just over 8%). This gap is even higher for equity-deserving women than for equity-deserving men. The disproportionate impact of the pandemic on immigrant, Black, Indigenous and other equity-deserving women underscores how unionization can help reduce these gaps for our most marginalized workers. Furthermore, greater economic security is key to decreasing the risk of gender-based violence and allowing those experiencing it to exit and recover from abuse.

### The Backlash Against Equity

Now in 2026, we are witnessing a massive backlash not just against gender equality, but against the very idea of equity. There's a narrative that fighting for justice for equity-deserving groups, LGBTQ+ rights, or gender inclusion is a "threat," when in fact, it is at the very core of building strong, united working-class power.

This backlash manifests in numerous ways:

- **Political Attacks:** We are grappling with a far right, anti-woke sentiment and challenges

from governments, both south of the border and in Ontario. For example, the closure of Brescia University College—the only women’s university in Canada—in 2023 was a concerning move given the increasing threats to the safety of women and trans people. The violent attack on a professor and two students in a gender studies class at the University of Waterloo, motivated by anti-“woke ideology,” is a chilling reminder of the threats we face.

- **Academic Cuts:** There are increasing cuts to academic programs that teach about gender inequities, racial justice, and Indigenous histories. Programs like Indigenous studies, Jewish studies, gender and women’s studies, East Asian studies, and Spanish have faced temporary suspension or defunding, dismantling, and erasure. This will change the future of our young people and generations to come, particularly on what they are not learning about. These specific program cuts are not chosen by accident.
- **Precarious Work:** Cuts across sectors affect the most precarious workers. The closure of Brescia, for instance, led to all sessional faculty members losing their jobs. At OCADU, over 20% of sessional faculty lost their jobs, and at Carleton, close to half are facing possible layoffs. While comprehensive data is lacking, surveys suggest that the majority of these precarious jobs are held by women. Massive layoffs in the College sector – the

largest mass layoff of public sector workers in our province’s history, like in most public sectors, are driven by a continuous starving of the system, by decades of chronic provincial underfunding

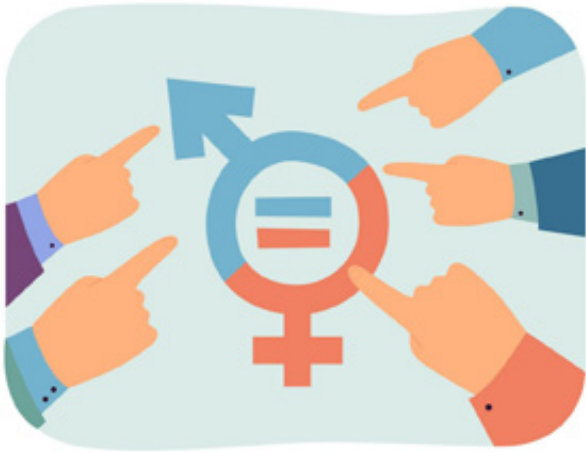
- **Economic Instability:** Tariffs are hammering many sectors of our economy. Inflation and layoffs disproportionately affect precarious, low-wage, and equity-deserving workers. Recessions also lead to increases in mental health problems and suicide, especially among socioeconomically disadvantaged populations, and research shows that gender-based intimate partner violence increases during these times.

### Equity is the Beating Heart of Unionism

We must remember that gender equity is not separate for us as trade unionists; it is the beating heart of it. Unions have always fought to lift everyone up, not just equally, but **equitably**.

The principle of equity—providing resources based on need—is exactly what collective agreements do. That is the difference between equality and equity. We negotiate rights and accommodations, like employment equity and disability protections, targeted mentorship, and promotion programs, to level the playing field for workers who face structural barriers.





The fight against the Ford government's Bill 124 is a powerful example of solidarity and collective power. This legislation restrained public sector wage increases and disproportionately impacted the lowest-paid and precarious workers, many of whom were health care and social services workers during the pandemic. A coalition of 40 unions challenged the law and succeeded in having Bill 124 repealed on the grounds that it violated the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and interfered with collective bargaining rights. This victory allowed some unions to negotiate retroactive wage increases, with some affected non-unionized groups also benefiting from the gains. [Editorial Note: The unions that received retroactive wage increases after Bill 124 was repealed were those that do not have the legal right to take job action and thus have their across-the-board wage increases awarded by an arbitrator. Subsequently, some arbitrators did award retroactive across-the-board wage increases. However, Local 1998 does not have the option of having across-the-board wage increases determined by an arbitrator.]

## **Making Space and Building Power**

If we want true equity, we must be honest and look inward and **change our structures**. We say we fight for the most marginalized, but are we making space for those same workers to lead?

Union activists from BIPOC and other equity-deserving groups, especially women, often feel invisible; their leadership and ideas are overlooked or challenged more than others. They often work twice as hard to get half the recognition. We must ask:

- Who is being mentored and supported?
- Who is on the executive and the bargaining team?
- Are Indigenous, equity-deserving, trans, nonbinary, disabled, and immigrant workers being invited into leadership and supported when they get there?

Unions are key places where new leaders and perspectives can rise and thrive. We must seize opportunities for systemic change from within our structures while organizing these workers into our unions.

Building solidarity and collectivism is more crucial now than ever as austerity, anti-wokeism, and division are being weaponized against us. We must keep building our collective power, fighting back TOGETHER, against every effort to divide and silence us, and standing up for those being pushed out, priced out, laid off, or erased.

This is where I see hope – for our youth, for Indigenous, equity-deserving, immigrant and women, for trans- and non-binary workers

It means making room at the table, and sometimes, stepping back to let others lead. Most of all, it means building a movement that reflects the inclusive world that we want to live in!

*Jenny Ahn, Executive Director, Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA)*

# FIGHTING FOR FAIRNESS: AN UPDATE ON THE AWA CAMPAIGN



## A New Presidency, An Old Direction?

On October 3, 2025, University of Toronto President Melanie Woodin issued a [memo](#) that signaled a significant shift in return-to-office expectations and Alternative Work Arrangements (AWA).

Two weeks later, in her initial [address](#) following her installation as the University of Toronto's first female president, Woodin described the university as "a place where we can think, freely, together - about what it means to be human, what it means to live in society," and "a place where we can talk, openly and respectfully, about how to build a better world."

Yet for many members of the Local's Staff-Appointed Unit, this statement stood in stark contrast to her earlier memo where, instead of open dialogue and respectful engagement there was confusion and uncertainty. Emails poured in from members, responding to the memo, expressing concerns about the security of arrangements tied to caregiving responsibilities, chronic health conditions, commuting realities, and financial stability. Amid those concerns, a deeper question emerged: how do we reconcile a commitment to thinking freely and building a better world together with an abrupt policy shift that uproots workers' lives?

## USW Local 1998's Immediate Response

On the same day the memo was released, Local 1998 President John Ankenman and

Vice-President Tamara Vickery met with Labour Relations, seeking clarity about the intent, scope, and implementation of the directive. They asked the hard questions members were asking: What does this mean for existing AWA? How will decisions be made? What protections remain in place under the current collective agreement?

At the same time, USW Local 1998 issued a statement to the membership. Transparency matters in moments like this. Rumours spread quickly when information feels incomplete, and it was important to let members know that the union was actively engaged and advocating on your behalf.

The conversations did not stop there. USW Local 1998 leadership continued meeting with Labour Relations, pressing for clearer guidance and fairer implementation. The union also met directly with Kelly Hannah-Moffat, Vice President of People, Strategy, Equity & Culture, to elevate the broader concerns members were sharing, particularly around the disproportionate impact on women, caregivers, and members with disabilities, and Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) staff.

USW Local 1998 hosted multiple town halls, ensuring that staff questions were not only heard but formally raised at senior levels. They brought forward the real stories - the health considerations, the caregiving schedules, the commuting realities so that this issue would not be reduced to abstract policy language.

From the outset, USW Local 1998 has been clear: this was not simply an operational update about physical presence. It was about equity. It was about accessibility. It was about workplace stability and respect for the commitments that had been made to staff.

## The Real Impact on Members

Through town halls, emails, and one-on-one conversations with members, the same message was heard again and again: the impact has **not** been neutral.

- 65% of our bargaining unit members are women.
- Members with caregiving responsibilities are facing immediate strain and instability.
- Members of visible minorities face greater generational wealth gaps, forcing them to live further away and costing them hours in commuting time<sup>1</sup>.
- Members living with chronic or invisible disabilities have experienced heightened anxiety and uncertainty.

When flexibility is restricted, the consequences are not shared equally. They fall hardest on caregivers balancing school pickups and elder care. They fall on BIPOC workers who already navigate structural inequities in the workplace. They fall on members managing health conditions who rely on flexibility to remain productive without compromising their well-being.

For many members, this was not a small adjustment. It was destabilizing. The stress and uncertainty have been real, and they have been deeply felt across our membership.

This conversation is not simply about where work happens. It is about fairness. It is about equity. And it is about whether flexibility is treated as a privilege, one that can be withdrawn, and recognized for what it truly is: a necessary part of a modern, inclusive workplace that respects the realities of our members' lives.

USW Local 1998 will continue to push for solutions that reflect those realities.

**HYBRID WORKS**

I am Vaish.

I am living with an invisible disability.

I am fighting for an accessible workplace.

**I AM U OF T**

A flexible, hybrid work place is essential for employees with disabilities. As the University implements policies that create barriers to access, alternating between on-site and remote work allows me to manage flare-ups and continue performing my role effectively. A flexible workplace is an equitable workplace.

U OF T WORKS BECAUSE WE DO!

UNITED STEELWORKERS  
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LOCAL 1998

**STRENGTH IN SOLIDARITY**

## Organizing Together & Where We Are

In response, a dedicated steering committee was struck to organize and coordinate a collective strategy and ensure that members' voices were heard across our workplaces. As part of the Fight Back campaign, the committee mobilized several key initiatives:

- Designed and distributed posters across worksites to raise awareness and keep the issue front and centre.
- Collected impact statements from members to document how these changes are affecting real people and real lives.
- Organized pop-up outreach to connect directly with members and encourage engagement.
- Launched a second phase of poster messaging to maintain momentum and ensure the conversation does not dissipate.

Together, these efforts are about more than visibility: they are about bringing members' experiences forward and ensuring their voices remain part of the conversation.

Additionally, Local 1998 has filed **17 policy grievances** challenging aspects of implementation that conflict with our collective agreement and established rights.

The AWA campaign has always centred on impact. We have moved from confusion to coordination, from distress to structured action. Bargaining is approaching, and the concerns raised through this campaign will inform our priorities. We are currently on step 3 of the collective bargaining timeline with further action to come, and you can learn more [here](#).

## Where We Are Headed

The campaign continues to move forward, but we need **YOU** to keep it going. Here's how you can continue to build momentum:

- **Prepare for bargaining** by staying engaged and ready to mobilize.
- **Sign up for the [Communication Action Team \(CAT\)](#)** and stay involved.
- **Sign the [open letter](#)** to President Melanie Woodin to show your support.
- **Identify a bulletin board** in your workspace for campaign materials.
- **Sign up for [picket captain training](#)** and be ready to support the Local in the event of a strike.
- **Share your lived experience** if you are willing: your story strengthens our collective case.

This campaign is about dignity and equity. It is about collective strength and banding together to put pressure on the University. Not all work can be done in a hybrid environment, but our rights at work are collective, and so is our union's strength. Where there is strength, there is solidarity.

As an activist, a steward, a labour relations professional, and a fellow worker, I remain committed to ensuring that flexibility and fairness are not treated as optional but rather as rights worth defending.

*Vaish Vijayan, Immunology*

<sup>1</sup> Eliot Bush, "Why Hybrid, Remote & Flexible Work Appeals Even More to BIPOC Employees," Great Place To Work, February 8, 2022, <https://www.greatplacetowork.com/fr-ca/resources/how-racial-inequities-make-hybrid-remote-flexible-work-even-more-appealing>.



**OFL Convention**  
**November 17-21, 2025 Toronto, Ontario**

# CHARTING THE COURSE FOR ONTARIO'S LABOUR MOVEMENT

**A** quintet of us attended the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) Convention as delegates. We participated in elections, voted on resolutions to be brought back to our unions, and met members of the broader USW District 6 and other prominent public and private sector unions. The week was a powerful blend of solidarity, strategic debate, and political action, focused on building worker power under the theme "We Are One."

Day 1 began with opening statements and procedures, including speeches from Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler of Nishnawbe Aski Nation, representatives from various unions, and Mayor Olivia Chow. The President, VP, and Treasurer of the OFL presented their reports throughout the day, with some controversy surrounding the financial reporting of the Treasurer. These crucial reports formed a backdrop for the executive elections scheduled for the next day.

On Day 2, we returned for early morning elections, followed by an afternoon day of resolutions, especially those pertaining to procedural and constitutional matters. Laura Walton was re-elected as President, and Ahmad Gaied was re-elected as Treasurer. In a shocking upset, Michael Hamilton put his name forth for Vice President after losing the presidential election and defeated incumbent Jackie Taylor.

USW District 6 had proudly supported fellow Women of Steel member Jackie Taylor (Local 9042), Donna St. Louis and, of course, Laura Walton. Following the elections, District 6 issued



this statement, "While these were not the results we had hoped for, we stand with our sisters today and always. Once a Steelworker, always a Steelworker. We will work with the elected officers on the critical issues facing Ontario workers."

The elections occurred with a blind vote – using an online system called DOTS, and doors were tiled such that those not in the room couldn't vote. There was quite a bit of concern amongst members of the delegation that the use of an online voting system would allow for those who were not present to impact the vote, but the OFL chose to go on with the DOTS system, nonetheless.

Day 3 lacked the excitement of elections but made up for it with an address from MPP Marit Stiles, Leader of the Ontario NDP, who reminded us of the need for strong public services, and the continued fight for strong labour rights and affordability in Toronto.

Thereafter, we marched to Queens Park to protest Bill 33, which undermines the strength of the Ontario educational system, and demand that the Ontario government "repeal 33", which had passed even as we were marching up.



*L to R: Melanie Fujs, Anjelica Buha, Richard Waters and Spencer Ki outside Queen's Park  
Photo by Melanie Fujs*

Day 4 was another big day for resolutions, many of which centred on human rights and social justice. It began with a Transgender Day of Remembrance ceremony, which was followed with a call for the protection of gender affirming care, and resolutions to enshrine this in the OFL. We also addressed resolutions around injured workers, and heard from the "rights don't retire" campaign, pushing for WSIB to not end loss of pay benefits for workers once they turn 65.

Delegates unanimously agreed that older workers should be able to continue to receive benefits beyond the age of 65, especially as many of them are unable to receive satisfactory pensions due to their time out of the workforce. We also addressed resolutions which took a stand for our comrades internationally, accepting

a hot cargo resolution against Israeli goods and weaponry being used for the oppression of Palestinians, recognizing anti-Palestinian racism as a problem in our workplaces, and calling for the USA to get their hands off Venezuela. By Thursday afternoon, delegates were becoming impatient with the speed of debate, and many began to call the question after a few speakers in order to increase the number of resolutions that could be addressed.

Day 5 was a short day, ending at noon with an Indigenous closing ceremony. We covered a few resolutions, watched the federal NDP leadership videos, and set priorities for the next 2 years. A delegate moved for the 100+ resolutions that had not been yet heard to be decided upon by the resolutions committee in private. This passed with ease. Overall, the week was long, energizing, exciting, and productive, and allowed each of us to have a say and get more involved with the labour movement.

Key resolutions addressed a wide range of member concerns:

- **Equity & Human Rights:** The week began with a Transgender Day of Remembrance ceremony and included strong calls to protect gender-affirming care and combat anti-Palestinian racism.
- **Worker Safety & Justice:** Delegates advocated for improved WSIB benefits for injured workers over 65 and emphasized the ongoing fight for safer workplaces.
- **International Solidarity:** Resolutions were passed supporting hot cargo actions and calling for fair treatment of Venezuelan sovereignty.
- **Our Local Priority:** Notably, **USW1998 delegates successfully advocated for hybrid work arrangements**, securing OFL support to champion this modern work issue on a broader platform.

Richard Waters took to the mic to advocate for resolution R128.- Lobby for the reversal of Return to Office mandates in front of 1,500 other Union delegates.

At Local 1998, our membership passed a motion to spend up to \$100,000 on a campaign to fight back against the University's erosion of hybrid work arrangements, which disproportionately impacts women, those of equity deserving groups, and members with disabilities.

The OFL Convention was an opportunity for us, the USW 1998 delegates, to get the resolution passed and to gain additional support to fight back against the erosion of hybrid work arrangements at the University of Toronto.

**Richard Waters** made this presentation from the floor:

*My name is Richard Waters; my pronouns are he/him. I proudly represent USW Local 1998, serving members at the University of Toronto,*



*Victoria University, St. Michael's College, and University of Toronto Schools. This is my first time at this microphone and my first time as a delegate at the OFL conference.*

*I want everyone to know that I have a disability. I am profoundly deaf. The type of hearing loss is where I should not have the ability to speak and to listen, but here I am today, defying the odds by speaking with OFL delegates today.*

*In 2023, the staff appointed unit was successful in bargaining a stronger language on Alternate Work Arrangements which includes hybrid remote work, a compressed work week, and remote work options. It allowed our members to benefit from an improved work/ life balance, provide family care, and promote well-being. Remote work does not reduce productivity; in fact, members are often as productive, if not more so, than working on-site.*

*On October 3, 2025, we received a memo from the UofT president on RTO. It is unfortunate that the first broad-based policy from U of T's new president Melanie Woodin implemented in her new role will harm the wellbeing of many staff members and their families. It is even more unfortunate that the first ever female U of T President is taking an action that will put our members at a disadvantaged position, which will harm the careers, particularly of female and employees from equity-deserving groups, and create a significant burden to our members with family care responsibilities. Women account for 67% of the 6,200 members of Local 1998's Staff Appointed Unit. We are concerned that the impact of the University's decision will affect members of equity deserving groups, including those with disabilities.*

*Richard Waters at the mic advocating for Hybrid Work*

*Photo by Anish Arif*

*One example of the feedback that we received from our members came from a single mother, who is the primary caregiver to a child with special needs as well as an elderly parent with chronic illness. She commutes 1.5 hours each way and she is the sole income earner for her family. The current alternate work arrangement plan provides her with flexibility to drop off her special needs child at school, and continue to take care of her elderly parent, while working remotely 2 to 3 days a week.*

*But when new directives came down, management already decided. No consultation. No voice. Meanwhile, funding cuts have gutted her team, morale is low, burnout is high, and the pressure is crushing.*

*She said, "I am a human being." And she's right. These policies aren't abstract—they affect real people with real lives. If she's forced back to the office five days a week, she will be in a vulnerable position. And she's not alone.*

*So, I ask you to support the resolution. Demand that the government and upper management at many institutions respect their workers and uphold the principles of fairness and inclusion. We must ensure that progress is protected.*

In passing this resolution, the OFL and other Unions agreed to apply political pressure to the Ontario Government and upper management at other institutions to reverse return to office mandates and to respect workers' right to alternate work arrangements and hybrid work as protected by our Collective Bargaining Agreements. The resolution will allow the Local to work with other unions in campaigns to protect our collectively negotiated rights to hybrid and alterative work arrangements as we face unilateral management decisions to erode our hybrid work options.

## **Personal Reflections**

### **Anish Arif**

Attending my first OFL Convention as a USW1998 delegate and Co-Chair of the Women of Steel Committee was an incredible learning experience. It was powerful to connect our local work on equity and member support to the broader provincial movement. From advocating for hybrid work to honouring past USW President Leo Gerard's legacy, I saw firsthand how our local union's concerns are part of a larger fight for justice. I return energized with new ideas, stronger connections, and a deepened commitment to building a union that fights for all workers. In solidarity, what connects us is truly stronger than what divides us.

### **Spencer Y. Ki**

As a member of the NextGen and Political Action Committees, it was really energizing to see the priorities of those standing committees addressed on the provincial stage.

A constitutional resolution submitted to establish a Young Workers' Fund dedicated to supporting "young worker summits, regional workshops, and participation subsidies was passed in amended form.

There was broad consensus on the convention floor about the dangers of exploitative artificial intelligence implementations – a particular focus of our Local's Political Action Committee. Delegates unanimous passed a resolution jointly submitted by OPSEU/SEFPO, ACTRA, and the Toronto & York Region Labour Council called for the OFL to "bring together affiliated unions via AI Labour Table [sic] to share research, collective agreement language, support restrictions on AI, and pro-actively [sic] ensure fair labour standards and consider how workers can set the agenda for the use of AI in their workplaces."

*Anish Arif, Statistical Sciences*

*Anjelica Buha, Kinesiology and Physical Education*

*Melanie Fujs, UTM Campus Safety*

*Richard Waters, USW Local 1998*

*Spencer Y. Ki, Arts & Science*

**CLC Lobby Day**  
**Nov 24-25, 2025 Ottawa, Ontario**

# LOBBYING FOR A BETTER TOMORROW

**O**n **November 25, 2025**, we joined the United Steelworkers' delegation of around 30 members to partake in the annual Canadian Labour Congress Lobby Day on Parliament Hill. Every year, the Canadian Labour Congress organizes a lobbying day in which union members across Canada come together to lobby their federal politicians on key issues that impact everyday working people. This year, Lobby Day saw over 350 participants from across different Canadian unions.

This was Mary-Marta's first experience of formal lobbying in parliament, whereas Richard had experience lobbying both his city councillor and his Member of Provincial Parliament, but it was his first time lobbying at the federal level.

The delegates converged on November 24th at the Ottawa Convention Centre to hear from leaders such as Bea Bruske, President of the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), and to learn

about the lobbying process. In the training session, we learned about three key, current priorities for labour:

1. [Services that make life more affordable](#)
2. [Trade that puts workers first](#)
3. [Infrastructure that builds up Canada](#)

We were put into groups, whenever possible, in our own federal electoral districts. We exchanged contact information with our fellow delegates and developed strategies as to who would speak to which priorities, based on our industry and focus, and on the priorities of our members and constituencies.

At the United Steelworkers caucus on the first day, we heard from our National Director, Marty Warren, on key trends and priorities in the Steelworker sectors, particularly the serious impact that the U.S. tariffs have had on many industries such as steel, forestry and paper, with some industries facing up to 50% tariffs.



*USW District 6 delegates with Canadian National Director Marty Warren (furthest in the back)*

As Mary-Marta's regular Member of Parliament (MP), Chrystia Freeland, was not present, she was paired with Julie Dzerowicz for Davenport and Vince Gasparro for Eglinton-Lawrence. Richard, for his part, met with Iqra Khalid, MP for Mississauga-Erin Mills.

The following day, Richard and Mary-Marta proceeded to their meetings with the MPs.

To address the crisis in post-secondary education, Richard lobbied his MP to provide federal stopgap funding to make up for the shortfall in provincial funding across Canada. This was identified as one of the priorities under the Services that Make Life Affordable theme.

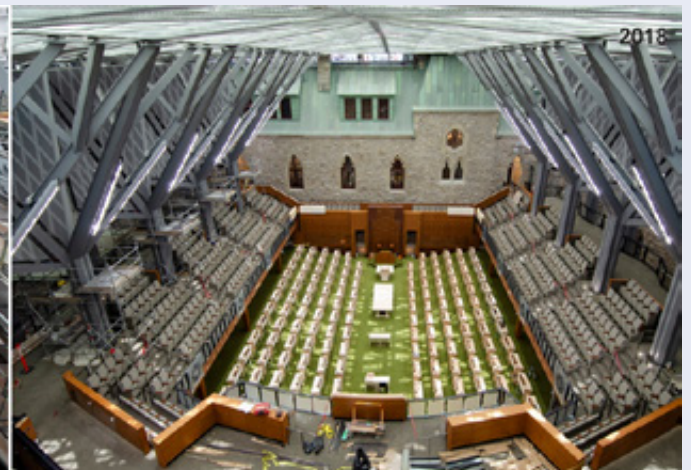
Mary-Marta's first meeting was in the West Block of the Parliament buildings. Having been to Parliament almost two decades earlier, Mary-Marta was taken aback by the extent of security both in the structure and formation of the Parliamentary Protective Service, which was formed in 2015 under RCMP leadership following the murder of Nathan Cirillo, the Canadian soldier who was on sentry duty at the National War Memorial when he was fatally shot on October 22nd, 2014. Going through the security checks made quite an impression, with the entire process taking more than 45 minutes from arriving on the Hill to gaining access to our waiting area in the parliamentary building. This was such a contrast to taking a tour almost 20



Mary-Marta (second from left) and other Union delegates meeting with Julie Dzerowicz, Member of Parliament for Davenport (centre).

years before, which largely involved walking through the parliament after a brief security check.

Mary-Marta's group first met with MP Julie Dzerowicz and, like Richard, Mary-Marta spoke to the impact of government cuts to international students and emphasizing the value that students bring to our institutions as well as the very real impact of the cost-of-living crisis on all Canadians. Both Richard and Mary-Marta stressed the importance and value of international students and their contributions to both our institutions and country. Mary-Marta made her way to her next meeting with MP Vince Gasparro, where the focus turned to the health care sector. One of her fellow delegates was a Personal Support Worker (PSW) who spoke passionately about the need



Renovations to West block on Parliament Hill in 2016 and when completed in 2018

for investment in public services, including stronger wages and protections for workers in the health and caring professions, particularly for PSWs.

One goal of the lobbying visits was to share lived experiences and bring to life the issues rather than rely on statistics and talking points alone. While research is important to back up any statements, sharing authentically seemed to be more impactful.

Since corporations and other powerful interests are always lobbying and campaigning for their profitable interests, it's crucial for labour to also have a voice to speak to our elected politicians to remind them of the needs of ordinary people whom they are mandated to serve.

Mary-Marta's key takeaways from her lobbying experience are twofold: firstly, you should not be intimidated to reach out to your elected representatives at all levels of government; they are regular people who are supposed to serve us, the public; and secondly, in light of the formality of parliament, you may have a better chance of connecting with your representatives by attending events in your community, at constituency offices, and/or by reaching out to MPs' parliamentary staff.

Richard realized that his MP was passionate about education and listening to other delegates' issues and lived experiences, and how many of the issues discussed impact them. The opportunity to lobby in Ottawa also allowed delegates to impress upon the MPs the importance of these issues to workers who have been raising them in their communities.

For more information about the Canadian Labour Congress and their priorities, please see:

<https://canadianlabour.ca/>

*Mary-Marta Briones-Bird, Job Evaluation, USW1998*

*Richard Waters, Treasurer, USW1998*

## Indigenous Lobby Days

The Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) holds **Indigenous Lobby Days**, bringing together Indigenous and settler union activists to advocate for Indigenous justice on Parliament Hill. These events allow union members to meet directly with Members of Parliament and Senators to push for legislative and policy changes.

The CLC held its first-ever Indigenous Lobby Day in 2019, bringing together 129 participants from 21 union affiliates to meet with 78 parliamentarians.

Delegates continue to focus on several critical priorities:

- **Clean Drinking Water:** Ending all long-term drinking water advisories on reserves.
- **Justice for MMIWG2S:** Taking concrete action on the recommendations regarding Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit people, including the establishment of a national **Red Dress Alert system**.
- **Truth and Reconciliation:** Implementing all 94 [Calls to Action](#) from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), including funding for searches for missing children at former residential school sites.
- **Indigenous Education:** Supporting better funding and resources for Indigenous-led education initiatives.

# Gifted & Black Workshop & Gala February 19-21, 2026 Toronto, Ontario

## THE TRUE ESSENCE OF FREEDOM

*Written as a Spoken Word monologue, and inspired by the Underground Railroad movement of Freedom Seekers, for Toronto, Steelworkers' District 6 Human Rights Committee Black History Month Celebration 2026.*

We're going to Canada You'all! We're going to this place call Canada. They say that it is mighty, mighty cold up there but we'll be free as a bird. This place call Canada! They say just follow that bright Northern Star and you'll end up there. This place call Canada where we will be free as a bird.

Now imagine listening to the voices of our Ancestors and our past and present leaders on the eve of their freedom. Imagine hearing the voices I said of our Ancestors and our past and present leaders on the eve of their freedom.

Imagine those courageous journeys by Sister Harriot Tubman, She said, "Ain't nobody turning back so just keep on moving" on the eve of her freedom.

Imagine that bold stand by Sister Rosa Parks and Canada's Nova Scotian Sister Viola Desmond. They both said "I'm not getting up! I'm tired" on the eve of their freedom.

Imagine the uplifting speeches delivered in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Toronto, Ontario and Harlem, New York by Marcus Mosiah Garvey. "He said the Black Skin is not a badge of shame but a glorious symbol of greatness on the eve of his freedom

Imagine the Legendary Redemption songs of Bob Marley! One Love! on the eve of his freedom.

Imagine the Grenadian born Canada's Honorable Sister Jean Augustine and imagine



*Fitzroy Dixon's powerful spoken word performance captured pain, strength and hope in a meaningful way*

Canada's former Governor General, Sister Michaëlle Jean, both rose from humble beginnings in small villages in the Caribbean, hear their joy on the eve of their freedom.

Imagine My Dr. Natasha Henry Dixon! She said, "We must continue to excavate the Identity of our Ancestors" and let their stories be told" on the eve of Her freedom.

Imagine our SteelWorker's International President Sister Roxanne Brown and imagine our District 6 Director, Brother Kevon Stewart, they both showed us that it doesn't matter how long the journey has been. Being recognized as "The First" is Black Excellence on the eve of their freedom.

Imagine the patience and joy of Madiba, Nelson Mandela! He said "We can achieve peace in

this time! In this generation" on the eve of His freedom.

Imagine those before us who pursued freedom and realized that the ultimate and the true essence of freedom is to embrace the love of God in their lives. Imagine listen to their voices. Imagine and hear their joy.

The moment of freedom is finally at hand! We are Free! We Are Free!! The Patience! The Joy! The Faith! The Journey! The Battle! O'Yes, that mighty stand.

No more bondage, no more captivity, no more being contained and confined for it has all faded away, as we look ahead with utmost anticipation to be free once again.

What can stop the hands of time from proceeding along and Men and Women to obtain mental and spiritual realization in which we Toronto Steel Workers as children of God, we have to understand reality and pursue the very means of freedom in order to find prosperity among ourselves.

O' freedom! O' freedom!! like the butterflies and the birds that drifts with the gentle push of the wind, roaming the world with means of direction but by instinct. But men and women can only face the world with a spirit of peace and love.

O' freedom! O' freedom!! to come into acceptance with our past and to realize that remaining angry would only be a waste.

Now here we are now free in this world and all that our Ancestors and our past and present leaders have been through are now refreshed in our minds even though hate and racial discrimination at times we may find.

But my Steel Worker Brothers and Sisters, let us look to God sincerely in prayer to give us a sense of guidance in our choice of direction and protection in our strive of ambition. To grant us foundation and stability in our lives, so that we can adhere to the very means of being free and not take for granted the importance and the True Essence of Freedom!

May the Legacy of our Ancestors be kept alive and their stories continue to be told.

We Must Carry On!

*Fitzroy E. Dixon  
United Steelworkers Local 3950*



# GIFTED AND BLACK: CELEBRATING POTENTIAL AND PROMISE



*(L to R:) Charleeka Thompson, USW International NextGen Director, with Kevon Stewart, District 6 Director, and Anita Bryan, District 6 Coordinator, celebrating excellence at the Gifted and Black workshop*

## **T**his year's Black History Month

Workshop and Gala brought USW District 6 members together under the theme, "Gifted and Black: Celebrating Potential and Promise" – a reminder that leadership, resilience and brilliance already live within our movement.

The planning, organization, and hospitality were excellent. We were informed well in advance, and when we arrived, we were welcomed warmly. These small gestures made a big difference.

When people feel valued, they participate more, they open up, and they feel safe to share.

Day 1 began with opening remarks from Anita Bryan, District 6 Coordinator, while Local 8300's Desmond Clarke gave the land acknowledgement. It was meaningful and respectful, and it reminded us that justice must begin with truth, grounding the entire room.

We then stood for the Black National Anthem. That moment was powerful. It reminded us of the strength, resilience, and excellence of Black communities, and it brought a strong sense of unity.

We heard updates connecting this workshop to the broader work of our union,



*Stunning hues of red and white as dancers take to the floor at the 2026 Black History Month Gala*

showing that this was not just an event, but part of building a stronger labour movement. The workshops were inspiring and educational. Charleeka Thompson, USW International NextGen Director, delivered a compelling presentation on how NextGen members and marginalized communities can use collective action, union tools and solidarity to build power and create pathways to leadership.

One of the most impactful activities was the USW National Anti-Racism Committee's exploration of privilege. Based on recognizing that individuals begin from different positions in life, it highlighted how unequal starting points shape opportunities and experiences. This encouraged deep reflection and helped build awareness and empathy without blame, sparking intense discussion and insightful exchange about lived experiences in the workplace and beyond.

Day 2 continued with the same strong energy. Chris Wilson of the Canadian Labour Congress Ontario regional office led a powerful discussion on environmental racism as a labour issue, highlighting how racialized communities are disproportionately impacted and the responsibility of unions to advance meaningful change.

These sessions on environmental racism, solidarity, and history showed how justice, health, safety, and dignity are all connected to labour rights. We were reminded that Black workers have always played a vital role in building unions and fighting for fairness. We closed with a powerful spoken word performance by Fitzroy Dixon that captured pain, strength and hope in a meaningful way.

The workshop was well organized, the speakers were impactful and the conversations were honest and necessary. If I could suggest one improvement, it would be to extend the sessions by another day. The discussions were deep and meaningful, and more time would allow even greater participation and learning. It was a workshop that not only celebrated excellence and encouraged reflection, it strengthened solidarity among us.

*Jeyakumar Rajathurai  
United Steelworkers Local 3950*

# From Next Gen to Local Legend

## Q&A with Kristy Bard

### How did you become a union activist?

My only ambition when I graduated from university was to get a union job because I knew that was my best chance of having job security, benefits and decent pay. As a teenager, I worked a bunch of hard, low-paying jobs in agriculture and as a cleaner. When I worked as a housekeeper in a hotel, there was an unsuccessful unionization drive. I will never forget the demoralization and disappointment of my co-workers, resigned to the fact that, without a union, things were never going to get better.

One summer when I was home from university, I got my first union job through my stepdad, who worked at Union Gas. Back then, the company would do a raffle to determine which employee's kids in post-secondary school would get the few summer student jobs available. So, that was my first union job, and it was so much better than any job I'd ever had before. Those experiences as a teenager caused me to develop a strong work ethic and a deep sense of workers' rights and social justice.

I applied to work at U of T in part because I knew we had a good union. I was so grateful when I was finally hired that I immediately became engaged by going to the union orientation, local meetings and events. I signed up for stewards' training shortly after passing probation. Getting involved was a small way that I could try to make the world around me just



*Kristy Bard at the 2019 Climate Strike march in Toronto.*

a little bit better. And immediately in the union, I found my people: folks who were as equally outraged at injustice as I was.

### How did you help get the Next Gen Committee off the ground?

I was co-chair of Next Gen, along with Sean Hayto, from 2013-15. We started the committee after attending a District 6 Next Gen conference, where delegates were encouraged to start Next Gen committees in their locals. I reached out to young members like myself, whom I thought would be interested, and invited them to a dinner at Mother's Dumplings to discuss launching the committee. I also invited some "local legends", long-time activists who could support us and teach us valuable lessons about union activism and our local's history.

Our first event was a wine and cheese, where I gave a presentation on tips and tricks for working at U of T. It included info about the various perks as well as union rights. Later, when I started working as a Grievance Officer, I adapted that



Kristy Bard demonstrating in -22 °C weather as part of the 2019 Women's Day march in Toronto.

presentation into what became Knowing Your Collective Agreement. Another early Next Gen event was a movie screening of Norma Rae, where we invited now Steelworker Toronto Area Council President, Carolyn Egan, to first talk about her experience with our local's unionization drive in 1998.

### **Can you share more about the campaign to promote the divestment of U of T's University Pension Plan (UPP) from fossil fuels?**

As Next Gen co-chair, I wanted to explore opportunities to merge my union activism with my passion for sustainability and climate change mitigation. I thought this would be a good way to engage younger members, who generally care a lot about these issues too. At the time, [Toronto 350 had a student campaign calling on the University to divest from fossil fuels](#) and I wanted the unions on campus to support that. The students presented a brief to the U of T President detailing why divestment mattered. In response, the President struck a committee to look into it and this committee solicited feedback from the campus

community to inform their report and recommendations to the President.

Some faculty in my department drafted a letter supporting divestment and asked me to help get others to sign it as our department's Green Ambassador. The letter we sent to the committee included several signatures from faculty and union members as a result, though many more workers were supportive but afraid to sign.

We organized some great Next Gen events around this issue. There was a panel discussion on the role of the University in the fight for climate justice with participation from one of the President's committee appointees, student leaders, a rep from Blue Green Canada, and Carolyn Egan, who spoke about the labour movement's Good Green Jobs campaign and her involvement in drafting the Leap Manifesto. We did some info sessions about why the local should endorse the [Leap Manifesto](#), a motion that was later passed at a GMM and generated a lot of member interest and engagement.

We organized [a joint letter](#) on divestment signed by four unions on campus encouraging U of T to divest. Though then President Meric Gertler did not initially accept his committee's recommendations to at least partially divest, he did create the President's Advisory Committee on the Environment, Climate Change, and Sustainability (CECCS) to explore other sustainability actions the University could take. In 2021, not long after [U of T announced their divestment plans](#), I was hired as a Project Manager for CECCS. So, our divestment campaign was eventually successful, and my activism around making the University more sustainable helped me get a new job.

The work around UPP fossil fuel divestment came later, with my



involvement in a faculty, student and staff coalition called [Divestment & Beyond](#). Unfortunately, our pension plan has not yet divested, but our local is on record advocating for it along with the U of T Faculty Association, the same way we did with U of T's divestment ([see our 2024 open letter to UPP here](#)).

### **How did you help grow other committees such as the Local's Women of Steel (WoS) committee?**

After I passed the co-chairship of Next Gen on to others, I became co-chair of our Women of Steel committee with Mary-Marta Briones-Bird from 2015-2021.

Around 2017, there were online threats of violence against feminist classes on campus. I remember a Women and Gender Studies professor crying in my office at Anthropology. She was afraid for herself and her students, who were scared to come to class. Someone had also put hateful anti-women graffiti on the Department of Anthropology building sign. There was a palpable sense of fear in my department as well as others. I wanted our committee to do something to address it. This led to a series of self-defence workshops to empower women. At the time, you would occasionally see self-defence workshops offered for students, but nothing for staff. So, we organized Wen-Do workshops with Deb Parent and the Community Safety Office that were open to staff and students, as well as to the daughters of staff. It was hugely successful, and now the Community Safety Office regularly does these workshops for staff and students.

We similarly organized an assertiveness training event in collaboration with the Organizational Development and Learning Centre (ODLC) (now the Learning and Leadership Centre (LLC)). Collaborating with others outside our union to build community on campus is something that I'm really proud of.

### **You've been outspoken about climate change, particularly on the convention floor at the 2017**

## **Kristy's Many Roles**

- *Steward, Arts & Science, 2009-2017*
- *Guard, Executive Committee, 2010-2012*
- *Chief Steward, Arts & Science, 2012-2017*
- *Recording Secretary, Executive Committee, 2012-2015*
- *Co-Chair, NextGen Committee, 2013-2015*
- *Member Facilitator, 2015-2021*
- *Co-Chair, Women of Steel Committee, 2015-2021*
- *Co-Chair, Grievance Committee, 2016-2018*
- *Grievance Officer, 2017-2021*
- *Editor, Steel Drum, 2022-2025*

### **Constitutional Convention in Las Vegas.**

It was terrifying, standing up at the microphone in front of thousands of delegates, up on the jumbo screen about to say things I knew would divide the room. My heart was pounding so hard, but I felt an obligation as a delegate representing our local. Not just at that convention, but at other conferences such as the National Policy Conference as well. If the local was going to pay to send me as a delegate, I took the responsibility to read through all the resolutions in advance to see if there were any I felt I needed to speak to or share my experience on.

In this particular case, the resolution was pure hypocrisy. On the one hand, it said Steelworkers cared about the environment, supported good green jobs, and understood the importance of addressing climate change. But in a nod to all our members who work in the fossil fuel industry, the resolution also supported so-called "clean coal" and fracking. There's no such



*Kristy Bard with a copy of the USW 1998 Strike Mandate Vote*

thing as “clean” coal, and fracking is known to contaminate drinking water in addition to causing catastrophic climate change. I felt compelled to call this out, and what I said was powerful. Delegates who were there still remember it and talk about it. I was loudly booed by all the oil workers in the room, but others cheered or later expressed support.

It's not to say I don't feel solidarity with those oil sector workers as fellow Steelworkers: I do. I understand their perspective; they want to earn a salary to support their families. That's why advocating for a just transition to good green jobs is so important. Our union shouldn't pretend we care about climate change, the environment, or Indigenous rights without acknowledging that these industries can't continue forever. There are no jobs on a dead planet.

The most impactful thing for me, and why I'm glad I did it even though it was so scary—and the resolution passed anyway—is that USW had a unionization drive for the University of Pittsburgh's faculty at the time. Some of those faculty were at the convention and met with our 1998 delegation and other USW university workers. They told me they were seated near the oil workers during the convention and felt somewhat alienated. But, hearing me at the mic denounce that resolution made them realize there was a place for them in this union too. Not all Steelworkers will agree on everything, but to see there's space for real debate helped them feel more comfortable becoming Steelworkers. It's nice to know I had a

small role in that.

### **Can you describe your experience accessing benefits under the collective agreement, such as the self-funded leave plan, education assistance, or tuition waiver for dependents?**

I've never done the self-funded leave plan, but I took advantage of unpaid leave a couple times. I benefited from educational assistance by taking several continuing studies courses in French and Spanish and earned a second BA in Human Geography with minors in Spanish and History. I did a summer abroad through Woodsworth, where I earned a credit at the University of Hong Kong. I took unpaid leave for the five-week program, after which I spent several more weeks travelling in China, Vietnam, and Thailand. I also took unpaid leave the year after I bought vacant land, so I could spend the entire summer camping there. It was amazing and helped me realize that I wanted to devote myself to living on, caring for, and sustaining myself on that land.

My partner also earned a BA at U of T using our tuition waivers, and went on to get a Master's here. The educational assistance was another major reason I wanted to work here. With the tuition waiver, I just had to pay the ancillary fees, which gave me access to the Athletic Centre and Hart House. I started taking aerobics and yoga classes; I loved it. It was good to remind myself what it felt like to be a student. I think that helped me better relate to, collaborate with, and ultimately serve and support them during my time here. Working here has never just been a salary for me. I've always wanted to contribute meaningfully to this community.

### **Aside from working as a Grievance Officer, you were one of the longest serving stewards at Local 1998. What is your advice to members about knowing their rights in the workplace?**

It's super important to read and understand your collective agreement. Even if you don't

have time to read the whole thing, get in the habit of going to the PDF version online and use "Control F" to search for what the CBA says on topics that interest you. There are a lot of things the collective agreement is silent on, so if you can't find something or it doesn't make sense to you, contact your steward and ask. Or, better yet, take the stewards' training yourself. We always need more stewards. Some rights are based on past practice and not written in the CBA. It can be fascinating to learn about all that, so you can protect yourself and your co-workers. I've always cared about the people I work with, which is why I've been a union steward, and it has led to some really great opportunities as well.

### **What would you say to members about the importance of getting involved in the union?**

What's the point of being in a union if you aren't going to get involved in it? One of the ways I've encouraged people is that when they complain to me about something negatively impacting them, that they perceive the union isn't doing enough about, I tell them they would make an excellent advocate on that issue. I also suggest that they consider joining a committee to work on the issue or serving in the next round of bargaining so that they can sit at the table with the University and explain what's needed. Don't just put it on other people to fix your problems, but play an active role in making things better, in collaboration and solidarity with others. Working together with other members is more fun than trying to resolve problems alone, and you form friendships that will last a lifetime, and make the work that much more rewarding even when you don't always achieve what you hope to.

It's also important to have appreciation of previous hard-fought battles and multiple rounds of bargaining, where many members have worked so hard. Sometimes I think that work is invisible. It's important for other people to experience what it's like to serve in bargaining, or on a committee or as a steward, to fully appreciate all the things that we've won up to now, and the importance of

making sure we keep it.

I can only help so many people, but if I can inspire other people to step up, then my overall impact is greater. I've tried to channel my outrage at injustice into something positive by helping others. If I can make one person's life a little bit better by giving them good service, or just being kind and respectful, then my life has value. That's what has guided my union work and what I hope I've inspired in at least a few others. Be kind, help others, hope they pay it forward...this is the only way I know how we can make the world better.

### **What do you think is your legacy?**

I recently met with the two new co-chairs of Next Gen. To hear their exciting plans and how many members they are engaging, I know they are going to do great things. I recognize and have felt burnout, how sometimes you get tired of it all; sometimes you need to step back, and that's fine. That's why it's so important to constantly be encouraging and supporting others. That's why I did it, because I knew I wasn't going to be a Grievance Officer or committee co-chair forever. I wanted others to take over so I could move on, knowing the good fight will continue and our local will continue to thrive.

My advice is to get involved in the spirit of collaboration and solidarity, peace, love and empathy. Avoid petty infighting that will weaken the union. Have courage to speak your mind and fight for what you believe in while supporting those around you. Take the time to understand why things work the way they do and consider carefully how you might contribute to making the union stronger.

*Mary-Marta Briones-Bird, Job Evaluation, USW1998*

*Tamara Vickery, Vice-President, USW1998*

## What Others Say

### Sue Romulo, Chief Steward, UTM

My first interaction with Kristy Bard occurred during a challenging period with a previous department. During our meetings, she listened with intent, validated my experience, and provided clear options.

Shortly after, I attended a stewards' training session and was happy to see Kristy as one of the trainers; she was a familiar and trusted face in that space. Through Kristy's mentorship and our interactions, I realized I wanted to support our members with that same level of care. She is the reason I became a steward for the UTM campus. Now, every time I advocate for a colleague, I strive to carry forward the legacy of dedication she left behind.

Union work can be tough - there are days when it feels like we're fighting an uphill battle. But when I look at the tangible impact our local has made, I'm reminded why this work matters.

I find so much inspiration in our members. Whether it's at a general meeting or a town hall, hearing a colleague raise issues I didn't even realize we shared reminds me that none of us are in this alone. If I can encourage a member to learn about the union by introducing myself to a new hire, listening to a colleague's concerns over coffee and providing them with the right resource or the confidence to speak up is why I do this and the reason it is all worth it.

Although Kristy has moved on from the union and the university, I am thrilled to see her fulfilling her long-held dream of pursuing sustainable farming. I want to thank her for the incredible passion, enthusiasm, and advocacy she brought to our local's members - she truly changed lives, mine included. As she begins this new chapter, I wish her nothing but light, positivity and happiness.

### Justen Bennett, Grievance Officer

Kristy was my Grievance Officer when I reached out to her for a question about new duties I was assigned in my position at the time. She took the time to explain to me about how management rights worked but also encouraged me to attend Stewards' Training. That led to me becoming a Steward and eventually to being a Grievance Officer, where she was a trusted colleague. I frequently went to her for advice and support. If it weren't for Kristy, I don't know that I would be a union activist.

Kristy fought hard for members and that fierceness she brought to her grievance presentations, as well as her excellent knowledge of the Collective Agreements was inspiring and something I look to still. She also was aware of her boundaries and did well to protect her own time and not let the fight take over her life, and that's something I want to work harder at so I can keep the fight going for longer.

### Scott Eldridge, Casual Unit President

Kristy Bard was indeed a profound and inspiring advocate for membership engagement. I first met Kristy when I was a delegate to the International USW Civil and Human Rights Conference in 2019. Kristy, at that time, co-chaired the Local's Human Rights Committee and was interested in having me relay my experience at the conference.

Even though I had been a delegate to a conference, I was very new to the ways and means of the Local. At that time, I did not even know who the President of Local 1998 was. She told me that it was Colleen Burke.

Kristy Bard's initial encouragement shaped my current union and human rights activism. She demonstrated a solid foundation for me to follow, especially as it relates to the Casual Unit. Kristy was that one-of-a-kind union activist, a compelling, positive role model, not only for me, but for so many other members at the Local.

# REMATRIATING INDIGENOUS ANCESTORS AND SACRED OBJECTS



*Thiviya Vairamuthu in front of Walter Yarwood sculpture at the Archaeology Building*

**Content note:** The following article contains subject matter that some may find triggering and/or difficult to read, including references to human remains and colonial harm. Please practise self-care, as needed.

*I wish to acknowledge this land on which USW Local 1998 and the University of Toronto operate. For thousands of years, it has been the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and the Mississaugas of the Credit. Today, this meeting place is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island, and I am grateful to have the opportunity to live and work on this land.*

Thiviya Vairamuthu serves in the University of Toronto's Department of Anthropology on the St. George campus. As the department's Repatriation Technician & Curator, a unique and important role she has held for the last three

years, she exemplifies how committed Local 1998's members are and how instrumental they are to the university's success, making it a world-renowned teaching and research institution.

It is a sunny, double-digit day in November 2025 when I meet with Thiviya online to discuss her role. Although I had gained some knowledge of her responsibilities in caring for and assisting with the repatriation of Indigenous Ancestors and sacred cultural objects housed in the [Department of Anthropology](#), I wondered how this work supports the university's stated goals in responding to the 34 Calls to Action outlined in [Answering the Call: Wecheehetowin](#), the final report of the Steering Committee for the University of Toronto in response to the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action](#). I contemplated what it was like for a person with her own cultural and ethnic identities to care so intimately for the human

remains in the collections, often the Ancestors of disparate Indigenous communities. I was also curious about how her intersecting identities shaped her practice. Given the implementation of various institutional Indigenous initiatives, the TRC's report on the Calls to Action, and growing public discourse around Indigenous colonial harm, I thought, 'Does the weight of the role's responsibility somehow feel even greater and more urgent?'

## REPATRIATION OR REMATRIATION

I begin by asking what repatriation means. She explains that there's "repatriation," although the newer term, "**rematriation**" is somewhat more preferred. Both terms converge on the idea of returning control to a community and in the department, it usually focuses on Indigenous Ancestors and funerary objects. "And so, the idea," she says, "is you're returning control of those Ancestors and those materials to the descendant community, and you're giving control back to the descendant community to decide where and how to care for those Ancestors. It's often thought to result in reburial, but that's not always the path that happens. It depends on what the community wants...So, 'repatriation,' the word itself [contains] 'patriate,' which sounds patriarchal. 'Rematriation' is more matrilineal, which is more relevant to the Indigenous communities that we work with. That's a more appropriate term that's being adopted and becoming more widely used."

## THE TEACHING AND RESEARCH COLLECTIONS

The Department of Anthropology website provides a summary of the contents and uses of various [collections](#), which are organized into the research and teaching collections, with the latter consisting of materials and remains that have either been purchased or acquired specifically for teaching purposes.

She explains, "The teaching collections include a range of archaeological artifacts and objects, different types of lithics, for example, and fossil casts and faunal materials that are used for foundational teaching in archaeology and anthropology. There are also human remains in those teaching collections. This is an interesting part of the collection that's currently under review as many institutions are revisiting their teaching collections because there's this realization that the collection's history is problematic, so it's just recently come up, and more institutions and scholars are discussing this. So, there was a period where institutions could legally purchase 'teaching skeletons.'

Most of the Western world's medical, anatomy, and anthropology institutions have these purchased skeletal remains, but it's come up that these skeletal remains were probably unethically sourced. So, they are still part of our collection, but we're currently reviewing..." She catches herself for a moment, acutely aware of the sensitivity of these collections and the impact



*Casts of male (left) and female (right) gorilla skulls. Photo courtesy of the Department of Anthropology.*

that this could have on others. It's a heightened awareness that has woven its way through all of our conversations and I appreciate the deep empathy and respect she shows for the collections in her care.

She circles back to the teaching collections, which contain purchased materials such as human remains, fossil casts and artifact casts. In addition to the teaching skeletons, there are plastic and plaster casts of fossils and skeletal material, as well as anatomical models, typically used on the anthropological side. On the archaeological side, she alludes to a range of artifacts, casts of artifacts, and examples that were used for teaching. In contrast, the research collections are dedicated to research purposes only. She segues into speaking about the [J.C.B. Grant Collection](#), a major skeletal collection in the department. I learn that Grant was the head of the Division of Anatomy and that the Grant's Atlas of Anatomy and Grant Museum at U of T, are named after him. He created this documented skeletal collection, which was transferred from the Anatomy Division to the Department of Anthropology.

The research collections also include materials that were archaeologically derived, mainly from Ontario. "So, during the 20th century, there were a lot of excavations—often salvage excavations—when land was being quickly developed, before there were heritage laws," she says. "Professors or researchers affiliated with the university would go and try to recover whatever they could and they would take students, so it was a learning experience as well and those materials were brought to the university. So, we care for a range of archaeological and human skeletal remains of Ancestors from those contexts in Ontario. Again, these are only supposed to be used for research. Currently, the Department does not allow research with any of the archaeologically derived human remains because of the history and context, in accordance with communities' wishes. It's just the artifact collection that's currently available for research and the J.C.B. Grant collection, which is a historical collection comprised of individuals from Toronto from the early 20th century whose bodies were skeletonized. They're not from Indigenous graves or burial sites; it's a different pathway. That's the only skeletal collection currently available for research."

## REMATRIATION PROCESS

I ask about the steps taken to repatriate or repatriate a cultural object, as an example, fully understanding that the magnitude of the process will be difficult to convey concisely. She explains that there are different pathways, but that the most robust model used since the repatriation policy was developed is a reactive model. Generally, it starts with a request for information. For instance, an Indigenous community might contact the department to ask if it houses anything or anyone from their territory or affiliated with their community. Following that initial contact, the department works to compile and provide a list, or inventory, of individuals and materials that may be affiliated with the particular community, which members of that community would then review.

One possibility is a request for return, but there are multiple pathways. Thiviya tells me that she typically tries to locate answers that respond to what the community is looking for and will provide information that leads to many discussions. She admits that it can be complicated in Ontario where there have historically been sizeable movements or displacements of Indigenous communities, often resulting in more than one community being linked to a specific geographical region. In cases like this, discussions with all communities who are involved are necessary, and the department strives to either return objects or Ancestors to their communities or continue caring for them, as directed by the community.

## COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

"And what's interesting about Canada," she continues, is that "Canada has no formal legislation for repatriation compared to the States that has a very formal prescribed legislation. There's obviously cons to that because there's no requirement to do this anywhere, but what's nice about it is we have the freedom to let the community drive the process. So, there's no prescribed way that this has to be done. Those barriers aren't there and if the community just wants to know what we have in the department, we [can] tell them and leave it to them to drive the process. When they're ready to move forward, then we move quickly."

Thivviya points out that it is unusual to remove Ancestors and funerary objects from their resting places and therefore protocols or reburial ceremonies may not be available. This presents a challenge and requires time to determine how to repair the harms that were done in a way that is acceptable to everyone in the community. She describes how Indigenous community members often want to visit their Ancestors or cultural objects, and that thanks to U of T's more recent smudging protocol, such visits can be arranged more easily while respecting and accommodating the communities' cultural practices and requests, wherever possible. The repatriation process is often slow, depending on the specific wishes of the community and resources allocated by the University. If reburial or relocation of Ancestors or objects is requested, it takes time to make those arrangements. There are also legal considerations which typically involve more formal agreements to ensure that everything is documented accurately, and everyone involved is comfortable. While a community's request can be the catalyst for repatriation of an Ancestor or object, sometimes the staff are able to identify something and the Department may reach out proactively to the community, but only when they are certain and there is strong provenance—typically, the history of an object's ownership—evidence that links the object, for example, to a specific community. In cases like these, Thivviya says that they typically inform the community of their findings as soon as possible, allowing community members to guide the process by advising the department on how it can continue to care for objects or Ancestors while determining how they would like to proceed.

## CHALLENGES AND JOYS

What is the most challenging aspect of her role, and which part gives her the most joy and pride? She considers for a moment before responding that the most difficult aspect is realizing that there is some information that can never be known. "Because of historical record-keeping practices and early excavations with poor documentation, there can be gaps," she elaborates. "I know there's some things we will never be able to answer, just because movement has occurred through different hands, different institutions, different researchers...There was an era where

some researchers were just sending each other human remains for analysis. There was an era where people, if they found human remains in their backyard, they [would] just mail them into the university and say, 'Oh, can you do this analysis for me?' When there's no provenience [generally refers to the specific location where an object was found or excavated, i.e. its "findspot"] or there's no context...I think that's a hard part to come to terms with - knowing that you can never fully know."

She clarifies, "That's not the most challenging, but that was a hard part, and then I found a way to make peace with that because there's different things, different paths you could [take] because it's not unique to our institution. I think the most difficult part, actually, is just seeing the racism and the harm that resulted in these situations and that even today, even though there's a lot of progress, there's still a lot of people who don't get it or who are misconstruing what we're doing. When you come across the history, it's so disturbing sometimes...it's this part of the job that's the hardest. And then being a person of colour and trying to explain that to an audience that's mostly [from] very privileged backgrounds, and mostly non-racialized. And knowing that even at the times when these [harms] were done, it was known that this was unethical and wrong. Knowing that that's why these marginalized or racialized people were targeted—that part's really difficult. But then it's also the part that brings me a lot of pride because something that's so heavy and dark and horrible, I get to have some small part in trying to...not resolve or rectify, but trying to make things right, trying to bring justice, or trying to bring some kind of more positive conclusion."

I can see that a deep chord has been struck and emotion can be heard in Thivviya's voice as she continues, "So, when I work with communities, for me, it's so emotional because you get to see the people who are actually impacted and it feels like the work I do is meaningful, and that, I think, is the most valuable part of the role that makes me proud and brings me a lot of joy." I share that while the harms have been and continue to be traumatizing for so many Indigenous communities, there is hope that there are people who care deeply and are doing work like this, which deserves to be recognized and underscored.



*Casts of male (left) and female (right) orangutan skulls.*

*Photo courtesy of the Department of Anthropology.*

## TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION

Inevitably, we address the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and its Calls to Action. I start by saying that the university necessarily needs to do more work on this front, and I ask how she views the repatriation work as aligning with some of the specific Calls to Action, and whether they act as a driving force. Thivviya circles back to the previous question, reflecting thoughtfully, “So, I said it was really challenging to engage with the dark, heavy, racist history, but the other part is not being able to talk to people about it because I’m the only person in my role. I don’t have a team or an office full of people doing this kind of work.”

“In terms of the TRC, I don’t usually see my work as linking directly to that because this started way before the Calls to Action came out and attention was given to the Calls, to the TRC. This started decades ago, when communities were protesting and lobbying to protect their Ancestors, and to have laws to help them and to return their Ancestors to them. This work really started and blew up in Canada in the 90s. And that’s in line with other legislation that came out in the States, but I find there is a shift now. For example, the work started in the 90s, but it was really basic and maybe performative to some extent; it wasn’t very progressive. It was very... ‘Okay, we’ll do this, but we’re also doing all this other stuff to make sure we can still do research.’”

“There [were] a lot more rules and barriers and it seemed like it was harder to actually successfully complete a repatriation in the early days. Since TRC, since attention to Reconciliation, all of this has really gotten a lot of attention; I find people

are more on board and they’re not questioning and fighting and there’s more resources that are being provided and dedicated to this kind of work. And then there are specific members, I think, that really push that forward in our department as well. In terms of repatriation, I think there is this shift and there’s more awareness and acceptance or more people buying in and more people not questioning it. Because of that, we can move quicker. Now, when we bring this up, it’s, ‘Oh, of course we have to do this. We have to fund it, we have to do as much as we can, this is a really important initiative,’ anytime there’s an opportunity to complete a repatriation. I think in the past, it was really hard to get resources to do the work because there’s a lot of work involved, very technical work.”

## INDIGENOUS ACTIVISM AND PROTEST

I appreciate her clarification that Indigenous communities were raising the issues a long time ago and not being heard, long before the TRC was established and its final report was made public. Thivviya interjects, emphasizing that the communities were lobbying and protesting and that it took a long time for the field to finally respond or take it seriously and they held a lot of power. She clarifies that there were no laws in Canada preventing academics or institutions from doing what they were doing until the 1970s. She alludes to the [Tri-Council Policy Statement \(TCPS2\)](#) and tells me that it wasn’t formally adopted until almost the early 2000s, so a lot of time had passed before there were any policies, regulations or legislation.

“There’s a long history before that, but I do think that more recently, the work has been more

accelerated and there's less barriers to get it done. There's less people you have to convince. Anyway, U of T has been really good because they're really responsive. You don't have to explain why this is so harmful anymore; people get it now, or they say they get it and they know it's important and that they need to do this."

I ask a question I have been reflecting on since Thiviya first agreed to be interviewed for the Steel Drum. I tread carefully as I ask, "What does it mean to you personally, as a racialized settler on Turtle Island, to be so deeply involved in repatriating or rematriating Indigenous Ancestors and cultural objects? What is the impact of that? I feel like there's something a lot deeper there that resonates, so what is that?"

## COLONIAL HARMS

Without hesitation, she shares, "So for me, the reason I'm here is because of colonial harms that happened to my Ancestors; they escaped and came here to live. For me, I think there's that connection with Indigenous communities because their lives are still impacted by all of these colonial harms that happened to their Ancestors and that continue to happen to them. Being here as a settler but doing work to help the original communities...I think there's something there. I feel like I'm doing something to help someone. I was born here so it's really awkward because it's not something I chose to do, but I probably wouldn't have survived if my parents didn't come here. I probably wouldn't exist. That's how bad it was, so being in a place that provided my parents peace and survival, but giving back in some way to the people of this land that gave me..." I hear the emotion in her voice as she wipes away tears before continuing, "So, I think that's the meaningful thing and I grew up in a small Eastern Ontario town in a time where there were very few racialized folks around me, but there was a reserve and a lot of the people I connected with growing up were Indigenous. When I think of the racism that I faced growing up, I saw them face that, too. So, when I do this work, I feel like I'm honouring them. I can't do stuff for my Ancestors, but I feel like [I'm] doing something for someone to get peace and reduce harm. That feels meaningful to me."

## CULTURAL SAFETY

Next, I return to a subject Thiviya and I have discussed in the past, which is how her role engages in cultural safety practices. Given the frequent need to collaborate with various Indigenous communities, some of whom may be experiencing the effects of intergenerational trauma, I ask her how she prioritizes care and cultural safety in her interactions with different communities.

"I try to come from a place of no judgement and just understanding and every time I engage with communities dealing with repatriation, I remember that they're the voices that need to be heard, and I'm part of the institution that did some harm. I'm always ready to address their directives and I think I'm always understanding of their perspective. It's a hard one to answer. I've done a lot myself to learn about cultural protocols and how some communities might view Ancestors, different perspectives on that. For example, there's this [book](#) that was written by the [Haida Gwaii Museum](#); they did it in collaboration with the Royal BC Museum. But they wrote this guide, it's like a handbook for Indigenous people engaging in repatriation. It's written by Indigenous folks, for Indigenous folks. It's a really accessible read, but it really talks about all the different things to think about. So, I tried to learn as much as I [could] to put myself in their shoes. I also remember and think about it as 'someone's relative was stolen.' That's kind of what it is actually, and that's really messed up, and that's really harmful. When I engage, I try to be as respectful as I can, and I try to reassure them that I'm here to help voice their concerns and get their needs met."

"Rather than coming and being like, 'Here's our policy, blah, blah, blah'... I try not to sound like a bureaucratic person; I try to just be a human, and I try to get to the foundation and just remember we're dealing with humans and emotions. It's not a transactional thing; I don't even see it as a negotiation. I see it as, 'You tell us what you want and we make it happen.' Because that's what it should be, right? And that's how it is with the people I work with, that's the perspective we've been taking. People respond to that and once they feel safe, it's easy for us to just progress and do some positive work."

She describes how she generally asks Indigenous community members if there is anything specific they need in terms of cultural care. One of the first things she does when the department identifies an Ancestor from a particular community, she says, is to ask the community how she can care for their Ancestor in a way that respects their customs and meets their needs from a cultural perspective. Some things are general; for example, she tries to avoid the use of synthetic plastic which is traditionally used in museum curatorial work. Instead, she automatically opts for muslin when working with Ancestors since it is a natural, raw cotton material. She discusses learning general practices from engaging with others doing this type of work, reading materials authored by Indigenous people, and directly requesting guidance and instructions, whenever possible. She finishes by responding, "I think that level of care...it makes people more comfortable and trusting, right? They shouldn't have to ask for it; I should be prompting it and [asking], 'What can we do?'"

## PRACTISING SELF-CARE

I ask about the personal practices or rituals Thivviya incorporates into her day to take care of her mental and emotional well-being, considering the gravity of her responsibilities. She responds humbly, "I think I just remind myself that lots of bad things happen in the world, but this is one small thing that I'm doing, even though this is hard to engage with and know. I think I have a lot of hope that even though I'm doing one little thing, it's making a difference to someone."

"The other thing is I have to take breaks from it because it's a lot, especially when you start reading things and looking into things and doing the research. What's nice about my job is there's so many things I have to do, so I [can] really stagger it so it's not every day that I'm spending all day on it. I think that's the main thing I do; I kind of space it out, but if there's an opportunity to make progress with something, then I spend all my time in that headspace thinking about it because I'm like, 'Let's get this done; this is



*Teaching cabinet with skull casts of male and female primates.*

*Photo courtesy of the Department of Anthropology.*

great.' I found a lot of strength in reading the work and perspectives of racialized people who work in this industry like Lucy Bell who [is] one of the authors of the Haida Gwaii Museum's handbook, [Indigenous] Repatriation Handbook. I've read her perspective and the way she had framed it was, even though this is heavy, heavy work, it's also really positive work because what you're doing makes such a difference. So, engaging in things like that and shifting my perspective, yeah, a lot of really bad things happened and it's horrible that it got to this. But the work itself is really important and valuable; it can be very positive and it can bring a lot of closure, relief and healing to communities. So that's the part I focus on when I can. And then there's racialized folks working in museums. I try to engage with their talks or anything they put out, and that's been a big source of strength for me."

I ask Thivviya what the most significant takeaway is for fellow union members, in terms of the work she is engaged in. She tells me that the one big takeaway is how complex the work is and that it requires a great deal of time, resources and dedication. She wants others to understand that the job and the work are really important, though it has taken a long time to reach this point and there is still much more to accomplish. "I think there's ups and downs with every job, every

department, and every environment, so if you [can] find something that's really meaningful to you in your job, that helps a lot. I experienced the same thing and it's not all flowers and rainbows; there's lots of challenges but just having that strong connection and meaning to the work I do is key."

By the end of our hour-long discussion, it feels like we have just begun. I have intentionally deferred a more hopeful question until this moment: How would she envision the work of the department evolving over the next five or ten years? She quickly responds that she would like to have a dedicated team rather than working alone due to the challenge of completing the work in a timely manner. Each investigation or request often takes weeks or months since documentation can be obscure, and although she has built connections with other institutions and arrangements are in place, they too have surpassed their capacity.

She laughs as she says that the addition of one assistant would make a difference and emphasizes that the role should lie with staff, since faculty members have their own responsibilities, biases and conflicts to consider. She feels there would be greater continuity if staff performed the work whereas the work could be compromised if it were assigned to faculty, for example, in the case of research output and teaching conflicts.

I note that departments tend to rotate through Chairs and that these changes often result in slightly different objectives or departmental priorities, depending on who holds the position. "Now that you say that," Thiviya replies, "my actual ultimate dream is to have it be a dedicated team, but with the protections and stability of a tenured professor."

Thiviya excitedly adds one final item to her wish list for the department: an internal advisory board or committee that is more representative, ideally made up of a diverse group of Indigenous people and individuals with lived experience who would be tasked with providing input and feedback on the work being done, and collaborating on addressing ethical dilemmas.

The Hope for Wellness Helpline offers immediate help to all Indigenous people across Canada. It

is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, to offer immediate support and crisis intervention. Call the toll-free Helpline at 1-855-242-3310 or connect to the online chat at [www.hopeforwellness.ca](http://www.hopeforwellness.ca).

Liesl Josen, *Job Evaluation*, USW 1998

**Author's Acknowledgement:** Sincere thanks to Thiviya Vairamuthu for generously sharing her thoughts, insights and time. Thanks also to the UTSG Department of Anthropology's Jessica Wollmann and USW 1998 member, Naomi-Nicole Bramer, for kindly contributing the photos.

## Resources

- "Deepening Understanding Through Land-Based Learning," Steel Drum, Summer 2025: [https://www.usw1998.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/SD-Summer-2025\\_03\\_LR.pdf](https://www.usw1998.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/SD-Summer-2025_03_LR.pdf)
- Department of Anthropology website: <https://www.anthropology.utoronto.ca/>
- Department of Anthropology Repatriation Policy: <https://www.anthropology.utoronto.ca/resources/policies/repatriation-policy>
- First Nations House: <https://studentlife.utoronto.ca/department/first-nations-house/>
- Indigenous Repatriation Handbook: <https://haidagwaiimuseumgiftshop.ca/collections/books/products/the-repatriation-handbook>
- National Indigenous History Month (June): <https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1466616436543/1534874922512>
- The Office of Indigenous Initiatives website: <https://indigenous.utoronto.ca/about/>
- Reports, Initiatives & Protocols, Office of Indigenous Initiatives: <https://indigenous.utoronto.ca/initiatives-protocols/>
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: <https://nctr.ca/about/history-of-the-trc/truth-and-reconciliation-commission-of-canada/>
- United Steelworkers Bargaining Guide for Advancing Indigenous Rights: <https://usw.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/BargainingGuideAdvIndigenousRights-2022-EN.pdf>
- Ziibiing website: <https://indigenous.utoronto.ca/ziibiing/>

# REMEMBERING ARGENTINA'S STOLEN GENERATION



*The Grandmothers continue to march on the Plaza de Mayo half a century after they first started their protest against the military regime*

**O**n the morning of March 24, 1976, Argentina awoke to the rumble of tanks. A military junta had seized power and overthrown the government of President Isabel Perón, ending democratic rule. Marcela Solsona Sintora was born into this darkest time in Argentina's history. During the years of the Dirty War (1976-1983), 30,000 people were killed or "disappeared," and an unknown number of newborn infants were abducted under the military dictatorship.

Pregnant detainees were kept alive until they had given birth, then their newborns were immediately taken and placed with military families or regime supporters who wanted to adopt the trafficked children, having already specified their ideal physical characteristics such as sex, hair and eye colour.

For decades, many of those children grew up unaware of their true origins. Some discovered the truth in adulthood, when they were in their 40s, 50s or 60s, learning that their entire lives had been built on a lie and that their biological parents had been tortured and killed. Even today, nearly 50 years later, individuals can still be brought up on charges if they are found to have

illegally taken a child during the dictatorship, and there is no statute of limitations.

## COURAGE AND DEFIANCE

But even in the early days of brutality and terror in 1977, a small group of women had begun gathering in an act of resistance at the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The mothers and grandmothers of these "disappeared" children and grandchildren were determined to find them. They carried photographs of the missing children and wore white scarves tied around their heads to simulate diapers, marching in silence, demanding answers, even when none ever came. These mothers were initially called Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo (Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo) and became a symbol of courage and defiance.

Today, they are better known as Las Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo (Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo) and their mission continues. Half a century later, they still walk the plaza every Thursday. Many of these grandmothers are well into their 80s and mid 90s, and one of the grandmothers recently passed away at the age of 103.



*An Abuela confronting the military about the children who had “disappeared”*

Among the estimated 500 babies taken, 140 have been identified to date and reunited with their biological families through the tireless work of the Abuelas. Marcela Solsona Sintora is the 129th found grandchild who has been reunited with her biological family. Marcela’s mother, Norma Sintora, a young pregnant woman, was held in captivity until her baby was born and then murdered.

For decades, Marcela did not know that the family she identified with was not her biological one. Growing up, she wondered why she did not look like anyone in her family and longed for a big brother. Otherwise, hers was a normal, happy childhood, and she still has fond memories of the man she learned to call her father, who died when she was 19.

Unlike other “disappeared” children who actively search for their biological parents, Marcela’s case came to light when the doctor who had delivered many of these babies was identified, and the records of the mothers of these missing children were discovered. Marcela was contacted by the Abuelas and, when she saw the photograph of the young Norma Sintora, she was struck by the uncanny resemblance. A DNA test would prove maternity once and for all.

Still, Marcela was wracked with overwhelming guilt and fear. The loyalty she felt for the only family she had ever known was being tested. “If I do this (go for DNA testing), will it cause problems for my mother?” she wondered. Marcela also feared betraying the man who

had raised her. “I felt like a traitor,” she says. For nearly a decade, she chose not to pursue contact. The turning point came through the persistent work of the Abuela who, through their investigations and legal intervention, finally persuaded Marcela to go ahead.

When asked what the work of the Abuelas means to her, Marcela’s voice carries deep emotion.

“There is not enough life in me to say thank you,” she says. “Their strength and perseverance are remarkable. They never gave up. They are always seeking the truth and wanting justice.” For Marcela, their work is not abstract human rights advocacy; it is the reason she knows who she is today.

Although many recovered children struggle deeply with identity and belonging, Marcela’s network of friends and family supported her before, during, and after the DNA testing. Her biological family, too, treated her with care and dignity. Now, with the truth in her hands, she feels whole. “I feel like a complete person,” she says. “I can’t imagine myself today without my biological family.”



*The young Norma Sintora*

Marcela learned that her biological father, Carlos Solsona, had been forced into exile. It was then that he met a woman named Ana and they had a son together. Marcela discovered that she had a big brother after all, Marco, as well as a stepbrother, Martin, the son of Ana and Carlos.

Marcela was relieved to find out that her foster parents had no connection to the dictatorship or repressive forces, a fact that proved profoundly important to her sense of peace and helpful in building relationships with her biological family. The bond with her brothers developed easily. With her father, the adjustment took a little more time. "I tried to understand him," she says gently, "but I felt that he didn't always understand me." Still, respect has guided their path forward.

## HONOURING MY MOTHER

Today, Marcela is telling her mother's story both as a responsibility and as remembrance for all those who lost their lives. "To be able to tell my mother's story, is to honour her suffering and know she did not die in vain," Marcela says. Like many women who gave birth in captivity during the dictatorship, her mother endured unimaginable pain and torture. "I am lucky to be



*Marcela Solsona Sintora speaking about how she came to be the 129th found grandchild*

alive," says Marcela, and often wonders, "Did she have the possibility to hold me, just for a moment?"

At 25, Marcela moved to Valencia, Spain, for work. Today, her life spans countries and histories. Her foster family remains in Buenos



*L to R: Carlos Solsona with Marcela and her brother, Marco, and stepbrother Martin*

Aires. Her biological father and younger brother, Martin, live in Uruguay and her older brother lives in Argentina.

For those who may suspect their origins are not what they seem, Marcela offers a message grounded in lived experience. "The truth will make you free," she says. "I know first-hand that it is very hard to make the decision and look into the past, but now I know it's the best decision I have made in my life." The search, she believes, is not only for oneself but also for the next generation. "The history belongs to our children. It's necessary for my children to grow up knowing the truth."

Although democracy returned to Argentina in 1983, the wounds of the dictatorship still remain. Nearly five decades later, the grandmothers still march, survivors still search for their identities and families still wait for answers. Every year on March 24, the country observes the Day of Remembrance for Truth and Justice, honouring those who were "disappeared." It is a day of mourning and commitment to ensuring such atrocities never happen again.

For the labour movement, the lessons are simple. Many of those targeted were union members and organizers, people who believed in workers' rights, social justice, and democratic participation. Authoritarian regimes often begin by attacking unions because organized workers represent collective power and resistance. That's why it's important to remember what happened in Argentina not only to honour the dead and defend the truth but to also uphold the right of all people to live in their country without fear of their own government.

*Margaret Bucknam, Communications and Outreach, USW 1998*

# LABOUR MARCH



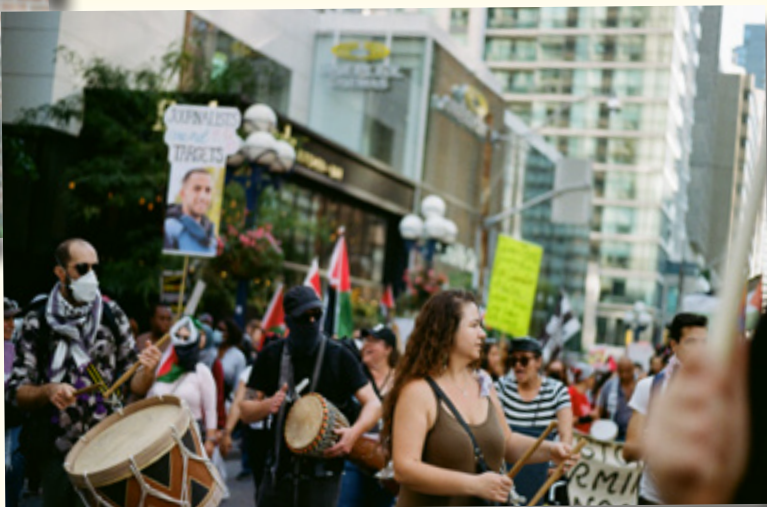
The Labour Day March started in 1872, when members of the Toronto Typographical Union allied for a 9-hour workday. It was one of the earliest and largest marches at the time, mobilizing nearly 10,000 workers in support of the Toronto printers. Unions were illegal at the time, but the furor prompted Prime Minister John A. MacDonaldd to pass the Trade Unions Act, thus paving the way for workers to unite and Labour marches to be held everywhere.



Today the Toronto Labour Day march is the oldest and the biggest Labour Day march in North America.



Photos by: Feyisami Adara, Grievance Officer, USW Local 1998 with a Minolta x 700 on Kodak Gold film.

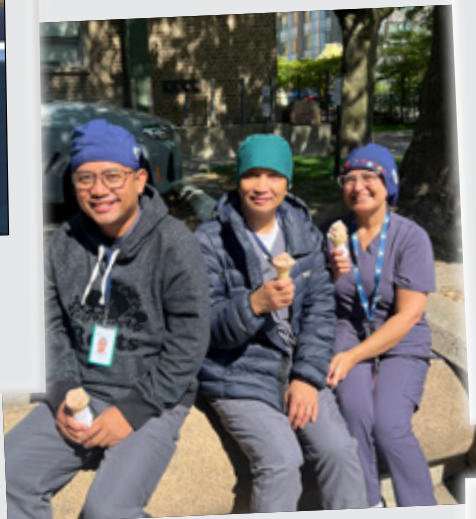


# USW 1998 Happenings

Photos by  
Margaret Bucknam,  
Meredith Rappaport &  
Zhanina Bregu



Madhu Akula and Margaret Bucknam, Outreach & Communication Coordinator, pose at a union social event at United Steelworkers Hall.



Members enjoy sunshine, soft serve, and union solidarity at an outreach pop-up at the Faculty of Dentistry.



Adonica Huggins, Naomi Klein (author) and Avi Lewis (Federal NDP Leader) with Zhanina Bregu.



University of Toronto Casual Unit members oversee a polling station on election day for the unit's 2026 collective bargaining committee.



John Ankenman, Local President, speaks with University of Toronto Staff Appointed Unit members about collective bargaining at a USW 1998 outreach pop-up at OISE.



Tamara Vickery, Local Vice-President and Staff Appointed Unit President, speaks with a University of Toronto Staff Appointed Unit member about collective bargaining at a Local 1998 event at UTSC.



Local President John Ankenman and Audrey Fong exchanging heartfelt hugs at the 2025 retirement luncheon.



University of Toronto Casual Unit members Michelle Colasuonno and John Warwick pose with Scott Eldridge, Casual Unit President, at an outreach pop-up at UTM.



University of Toronto Staff Appointed Unit members show their bargaining-year solidarity at an outreach pop-up at UTSC.



USW 1998's Hybrid Work Fight Back Campaign: Workers know what works!



Members at UTSC enjoy a union social event at Highland Hall.



*St. Michael's College and University of Toronto Residence Dons Unit members show their collective power at a Solidarity Social for residence dons.*



*Members enjoying their meal at UTIAS Winter Social.*



*Health & Safety Coordinator Katrina Marshall and member Cecilio Manrique attend bargaining-year outreach pop-up at the Faculty of Dentistry.*



*Member Chayan Anand brings energy, solidarity, and a winning smile to a USW 1998 outreach pop-up at OISE.*



*Spencer Ki and Feyisami Adara, Grievance Officer, enjoy a board game night hosted by USW 1998's NextGen Committee.*



Victoria Lubitch, Jen Cypher, UTS Unit President, and Rachel Wang with a Hybrid Works Poster.



A member discusses the personal impact of the University of Toronto's reduction and elimination of hybrid work schedules with Christine Beckermann, USW 1998 Guide.



A really warm UTSC Welcome!



Tamara Vickery, Local Vice-President and Staff Appointed Unit President speaking with members at the OISE Bargaining Outreach pop-up event.



Two members with Rebecca Chua, Editor of SteelDrum Newsmagazine at UTIAS Winter Social.



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To contribute to the next issue, please email  
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