

Women's Convention 2023

It was a chance to connect with CUPE members from across the country. The weekend convention included keynote speakers, panels, and skills-building sessions.

On Sunday evening, we started with a Meet and Mingle event. They provided us with materials, mocktails, and food. Among the materials, they had created a bingo sheet which required us to collect signatures from members in other locals. We carried this sheet with us, and by the end of the weekend, we had struck up endless conversations with members from across the country. I found this activity to be very engaging and interactive, as the bingo sheet had many different categories, making it inclusive for all locals. For example, categories like "Someone from the power sector," "someone who is on their local executive," and "someone who has a child in the youth camp this weekend" were included. Afterwards, we attended the opening Plenary meeting where remarks were given by Mark Hancock, the National President, and Candace Rennick, the National Secretary-Treasurer. We also heard from the keynote speaker, Judy Darcy, a Canadian health care advocate, trade unionist, and former politician, who spoke about "How did we get here? CUPE feminist breaking barriers." She shared stories of deeply personal and highly political feminist struggles, painting a picture of how far we've come and the work still ahead.

On Monday morning, we started our day with a smudging ceremony led by Debra Merrier. Smudging is traditionally a ceremony for purifying or cleansing the soul of negative thoughts. Debra had her own blend of local sacred medicines, including tobacco, sage, cedar, and sweet grass. The medicines were burned in a cast iron pan, and the embers were fanned with an eagle feather. We formed a circle of silent members while we each waited our turn for her to approach us. We washed our hands in the smoke and then carried it to our eyes, nose, mouth, and ears. We wafted it over our head and body, then turned clockwise while she used the feather to waft the smoke over our backside, afterwards grazing our shoulder with the feather to turn around, bless us, and dismiss us. I had never attended a smudging ceremony before and was not quite sure what to expect. However, I felt encompassed by positive energy and found myself looking forward to it each day. We listened to two different Plenaries on Monday. The first was a discussion with panel members on the topic of "Where are we now? The political landscape for women workers." The second presentation was titled "Up with women's wages: Blueprints for fair equitable pay." For our first skills-building session, we attended "You've been elected; now what?" We explored tools to help us sustain support leadership and bring others up with us. This included a spectrum of allies and new ways to tackle emerging issues. One of the examples was that different locals felt very strongly about having diverse sub-committees, giving people a voice to boost inclusive engagement. These workshops were very hands-on and a great way to engage with members from other locals.

On Tuesday, we started our morning with the smudging ceremony again for a positive boost. We then attended two Plenaries, a skill-building workshop, and a regional meeting. The first Plenary panel discussion was titled "How do we build? Organizing for victories." The second panel discussion was on "Putting equity at the Forefront." In today's skill-building session, we discussed "Women leading change through member engagement." We explored how communication is integral to peer involvement and how to have one-on-one conversations to build connections. The key points emphasized the need for a strong, united team. Later, we attended a regional meeting where we broke up into conference rooms based on district, led by Karen Ranalletta, our CUPE BC president.

Wednesday was our last day of the convention and to attend the smudging ceremony. It was uplifting yet disappointing to know that this would be our last time to start our mornings in such a beneficial manner. We then attended our last skills-building workshop, titled "Implementing the Anti-racism Strategy." It offered practical skills for developing an action plan to execute anti-racism strategies within our own local. We had group discussions on the 10 goals CUPE is focused on from 2021 to 2027. We centered around specific goal Number Three, which was to develop and engage in anti-racism education. We listed different hopes for this goal and discussed what it would look like if achieved. Later, we attended our last Plenary, "Reflecting back poets in residence." It was a witness and documentary piece reflecting on the convention. We heard closing remarks from Candace Rennick, National Secretary/Treasurer, about "Where do we go from here? The future of CUPE's fight for gender justice." The summit ended with goodbyes and thank yous presented from the childcare youth education camp.

In conclusion, I was amazed by this trip and the opportunity to attend this conference. The knowledge, tools, and connections made during this event are immensely beneficial for our membership as a collective. It was eye-opening to hear about the varying levels of progress in different collectives' agreements, with some being far ahead and others lagging behind. I strongly encourage other members to take advantage of these learning opportunities and strive for positive change in their own locals. The insights gained from this conference have been invaluable, and I am motivated to apply them in my role as a member of our union.