

Presentation to the Special Advisors to the Changing Workplaces
Review, June 18, 2015

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Good morning,

My name is Kelly Orser and I have worked for the past 25 years at
Queen's University in Kingston in various support staff roles.
Approximately, 1100 administrative support staff became certified with
the United Steelworkers in 2010 after a campaign that started in 2008.

Yes, it took us 2 long years to become unionized employees.

It took such a long time not because Queen's employees are different
than other working people in Ontario.

It took so long, for the most part, because the organizing process, as
defined by the provisions of the Labour Relations Act, makes organizing
pretty difficult.

Let me tell you a bit about our workplace.

We are spread out across Kingston in over 100 buildings, at multiple campus locations, and with some of our colleagues inside highly secure facilities. Communications with this employee group are difficult at best.

As University employees, we are committed to our supportive roles in educating our youth, many of us are highly educated & skilled, and we can certainly be described as confident contributors to our workplace and to society. We work in an environment where freedom of speech, diversity, multiculturalism, and differing opinions are widely accepted and often encouraged.

Unfortunately, when we began considering unionization as a large group, I witnessed the erosion of these qualities in our workplace and also of the confidence of many of my colleagues.

Too many people were fearful about the effect on their working lives if the Employer became aware of their union support.

And this level of concern and sometimes outright fear seeped through our ranks so that over time you could see the change in staff who normally operated daily at a very high and professional level with the Employer.

Staff had a fear of engaging in open discussions, and of meeting in small or large groups to discuss the union and sign cards.

Some of our cards were signed during coffee breaks when people would quickly just 'happen' to show up in the same staff bathroom, away from any knowledge of managers. Some colleagues would only meet off-campus in an effort not to be seen.

Managers would not allow informative materials to be posted on bulletin boards, bulletin boards where all manner of other material was already posted. If you have seen a university bulletin board, you will know what I am talking about. Management initially barred us from meeting on campus. The only space on campus that we were eventually allowed to gather in was one single building that was one co-governed by our Student Government Body (the AMS) and as such was not under the full control of the University.

You have to understand our University's room booking policies to truly realize the significance of what I've outlined. Members of the community can book rooms and meet on campus, church groups, children's clubs, and interest groups of all types.

Yet when we - the Employees ourselves - booked a room to meet over our lunch hours, we were refused for the duration of our campaign, and our ability to communicate as employees was stifled. If we wanted to talk about organizing, we had to do so much of it outside the work location.

So this begs the question... how do you reach out to over 1000 employees, in over 100 buildings, many of them locked-down day and night, to even begin an open dialogue concerning our rights as workers?

It is supposed to be our right under the law to be able to engage in communication during non-work time in the workplace about unionization. But in reality this is not the case, even when employed by a relatively benign employer like a university.

As employees, it is our right to join a union if we so choose. But how can we make that choice if we're not afforded the right to educate ourselves, ask the necessary questions, talk it through together, and come to consensus in climate free from fear of discrimination?

In addition to the imbalance in communication and access, we had no firm information as to the number of staff that might be in our bargaining unit.

It took us months and months to build a list of possible employees. How can that be fair? The current process ensures that the employer has all of the information while employees and the unions with which they are working have almost none.

Employees in Ontario could see their rights enhanced if they were provided with appropriate access to a list, provided by the Employer, which would at least identify the eligible employees with contact information so that fruitful and open discussions could follow.

Currently, the Employer is not obliged to provide a list until 2 days before the vote. In our case at Queen's, it took us months to determine who 'we thought' could vote. The whole process could have been shortened and determined for all parties in a much more effective and

efficient manner, if an overall list were provided at the beginning of the process.

Another area of great concern to us was the location of the vote. When it was time to cast our ballots, it was in a room on campus and employees received an email indicating their rights to go and vote.

Unfortunately, Queen's also emailed management staff indicating that they too, regardless of obvious ineligibility, should also take the time to vote. This caused great anxiety among the Employees who were legitimately eligible to vote. They had to stand line for over 2 hours (average time), beside or close to their Supervisors and Managers to vote. Some left as they didn't want their Managers to see them in the line-up. It also caused the wait-times to vote to increase, as many were in line that shouldn't have been there.

If the vote was not held on the Employer's property, but in a more neutral location, our Employees would have felt much more comfortable and able to vote more freely.

In closing, the rights of employees to organize need to be simplified and made more democratic. Too many barriers exist that make it difficult for us to exercise our rights under the law. As a society we often talk about fair and equitable practices and the need to ensure these principles. As it relates to organizing rights for workers in all workplaces, we need to get back on track and ensure that these principles are truly reflected in the legislation.

Thank you for your time.