

OPSEU/SEFPO TALK

Episode #2: Being a young worker during COVID-19 (Part One)

00:06 Eddy: Hello everyone, and welcome to our second edition of OPSEU/SEFPO Talk. This podcast is one of the many ways your union is working to stay connected with you while we're forced to stay apart. My name is Eduardo – many of you know me as Eddy – Almeida and I am the First Vice-President and the Treasurer of this great union.

We'll be inviting you into our conversations on important conversations for OPSEU/SEFPO members and for the labour movement as a whole. Today we'll be hearing from two members from OPSEU/SEFPO's Provincial Young Workers Committee. Our young workers support Ontarians in every sector across the province and it's been inspiring to see how they face the challenges that COVID has brought on while taking on leadership positions in their workplaces, their union and in their communities.

I'm excited to get started with our conversation today with the Chair of our Provincial Young Workers Committee, Joseanne Job, and the Chair of our College Support Part-time Divisional Executive, Denis Martinez.

Hi, and welcome to both of you.

So just for our listeners, take a couple of minutes, and I'll start with you, Denise, if you could tell the listeners a little about you and how you see yourself and the union.

1:31 Denise: Hello everybody, my name is Denise Martinez. I got involved with the union about two years ago. I've become the VP for part-time grievances for my local 561, Seneca College. And through the experiences, I've also been elected to be the chair of both the part time divex and EERC, which is super exciting, because as you all know, we're due for bargaining very, very soon. We're looking forward to all the exciting times that we have coming to us.

What else can I tell you about myself? I am a young worker, and I'm a mother. I'm Hispanic. I'm a hard-working individual. I love the union environment and the community here that OPSEU has established.

2:30 Eddy: You sort of touched on your parents and why they came here, that was good, that was very interesting.

2:38 Denise: My parents both migrated to Canada about 20 years ago. They were both police officers in South America. So we came on down because the political situation in South America at the time were not ideal. Like every parent, we all want to do what's best and better for our children, so we came over to Canada.

When we got here, my mom became a union steward. She started to work many years for Pearson airport and eventually became very involved in her union. She would come home with stories that were inspiring and, at times, heartbreaking, but mostly were inspiring. My parents kind of established a way of life for both me and my sister with regard to being there being involved in your community. Helping out if you can, bring awareness, know your stuff, just don't speak, know what you're speaking about. And help where you can. I feel like that's part of why I became my union's steward and why I'm so

involved because, for me, I enjoy very much learning. And for me to grab that knowledge and put it to good use for a better outcome is rewarding.

4:04 Eddy: That's awesome, thank you. Joseanne, same question for you.

4:07 Joseanne: My name is Joseanne. I am an immigrant myself; emigrated from Trinidad and Tobago when I was 10. And I've been here since 1998. And it's been a journey ever since. I still don't like winter, because I came here in the middle of February. I came here in February, in jeans and sandals and I really small sweater. I didn't know what Canada was about. You see it on TV, and you think it's just a place. So you don't think you would need a parka in February because you've never had to wear one, so experiencing snow for the first time was very traumatic. So I don't like winter. I currently work with the Ontario Public Service. I work as a vice-chair assistant on the labour board, which I find to be a really interesting job because I bounced around a little bit in the OPS. With legal services being my background, I've worked in several legal departments within the OPS. And labour happens to be the one where I got the most benefit, I think. In terms of learning and education, and just being able to see the legal process of how unions come to be has been eye opening for me. Because I never know how unions formed in the first place. Although my union journey started when I was in college, and I worked for food basic, I was a UFCW member, local 375. I still remember, and I worked there for about six years. When I started in the OPS, I didn't know anything about OPSEU. I knew nothing about union representation as a contract worker. Because I'm in and I'm out, I'm not sticking around, but when things started to get a little more permanent. I said, "oh, maybe I should start learning a little more about my environments and who I'm here with." The reason I got involved with OPSEU, to be honest. There was a workplace violence and workplace harassment issue that impacted me directly while I was on contract. Part of that really shook me to my core. I didn't think people would behave that way in a workplace, and I never really understood what the purpose was for representation was at that point. But when I got into it, I was complaining to my mom, "mom, these people are being mean to me" whatever the case is, she said, you know what, educate yourself. If there is somebody there that can teach you the ropes, on stuff like that, educate yourself because once you have your education, nobody can take that away from you. So when I settled that matter, and then I started learning a little more about the union, I got more and more involved and going to educationals.

6:57 Eddy: That's funny because you actually segue into my first question. Which was, what got you involved, and I'm going to specifically focus on the Young workers? What got you involved with the committee of Young workers?

7:09 Joseanne: It started with a conversation at CLS summer school. I was there with a couple of our region five leadership. At the time, it was Jessica Secora, who was the rep for young workers. She was talking to me, and explaining what the committee was all about, how I would get involved. Eventually, she mentored me into taking on more leadership roles. She saw the passion I had for young workers and being able to educate young people as they come into the workforce. She took me under her wing, and she showed me the ropes and taught me a lot about OPSEU. Trying to navigate the political arena, but mostly just educating myself so that I can, in turn, educate others. So I will always be grateful to Jessica for that, and I've also had my EBM; Eddy Strachan has also mentored me a little bit as well and taught me more about taking on higher responsibilities. So when I did run for the first time, I had a lot of support in my corner, which was really, really good. Because sometimes it's nerve-racking when you're

up there by yourself, and you don't have anyone backing you. For me, it was about the education, and the mentorship really helped.

8:31 Eddy: Denise, same question

8:33 Denise: I went back to school as a mature student and worked part-time as a student worker there as I studied. So I got to know the roles in the college environment and working part-time and what that meant. Then when the collective agreement came out for the part-timers. There was talk and mention and keywords that I picked up from my mom's stories, and I'm like, what is this all about? I went to go see Janice Hagen, who basically told me that our new contract was up and elections were coming, so I decided, "why not." She told me it was all about helping part-timers, and so that's how I got involved. Once I graduated, I was part-timer under the collective agreement for college support staff. I got to know a lot about my rights. And I got to educate others. And the student workers there, because at that time I was also mentoring student workers. It was very eye-opening for to be involved in a union environment and be a leader within my local. To be able to educate everybody.

9:48 Eddy: I'm going to ask you first, Denise. What would you see, first off, some of the greatest challenges that you had overcome? Like the two biggest challenges you had to overcome as young workers. And what advice would you give to our listeners and our young workers out there? In regards to how you overcame them.

10:10 Denise: One of the things we encountered, for sure, is the lack of employment for young workers. So I don't know if you ever or recently was looking for a job, but I'm constantly seeing what's out there, and entry-level workplaces are asking for 2-3 years' experience. How can you get the experience without being hired? I just don't understand it. In my opinion, there is a lack of reasonable employment or reasonable qualifications for entry-level positions for young workers. The other thing I want to say about young workers is that I know that generations have perspectives of other generations. We all do; it's fine. I just feel like in this day in age, the young workers are not seen where there supposed to be seen and not being held up. I feel like we're in a day and age where information is at our fingertips, and who better to navigate, learn the new tricks, read more of what's out there than your young workers. We hold tons because we jump from, or we're involved in many things, we have a lot of skills, then an individual working the same job for 30 years wouldn't have had the opportunity to obtain. I think we're undervalued, and we have a lot to contribute. I mean, we're in an age where we're the activism generation. We're the activist of this era.

11:57 Eddy: so how do we fix it?

11:58 Denise: First of all, we have to understand that everything doesn't happen all at once. It takes time. Just because there's an idea for a solution doesn't mean it's going to happen right away. So set expectations for yourself is one that I say to myself when I say, "come up with a solution. That's one of the solutions I would say is let's adjust this level entry job requirements. I get that's not going to happen tomorrow, but on the other end, young workers can devote time to volunteering, devoting time to gaining the skills that is required and pass that off as experience. But then again, we want to be valued for our work. We want to get paid; we have bills. Not every young worker lives with their parents. I'm a young worker, and I have a child at home and pay my own mortgage as much as I want to volunteer and gain that experience to meet the requirement for an entry level job that pays minimum wage. To have 2-3 years' experience to do that job, it's kind of disrespectful, I feel.

13:11 Eddy: I agree, Joseanne?

13:13 Joseanne: So just to bounce off of what you said, Denise, absolutely, I think that we need to be doing a lot better when it comes to the employability of young workers. Because it is a vicious cycle, you know, you go to school, you get the education, you come out and need 2-3 years' experience. But you can't get the experience if you don't get the job, but you still can't get because you don't have experience. "What would you like me to do? I don't exactly know,"? I think, in offering other than field placements or maybe field placements should count for more when we're talking about leaving the education stream, maybe that could be a leg up into getting into the workforce. But really, when we're getting into it, you can't ask for unreasonable credentials for an entry-level position.

14:03 Denise: You can ask, but...

14:06 Joseanne: Will you get it? That's the thing. So when I'm looking at an entry-level position that is asking for 3-5 years of experience and a master's degree, but your master's degree has no bearing or relevance on the position because when you get in there, you realize this is literally ABC work. I'm not trying to make it sound as if the work is trivial, but for what I put myself through to go to school for 10-12 years...

14:30 Eddy: Why put that as a barrier?

14:34 Joseanne: Why is that a barrier? And if I'm in a position as a young worker and I want to be able to expand my knowledge base or build my credentials, my employer should have opportunities for me to do so. That are actually valuable and tangible. Not just one random e-learning course every six months. Because at the end of the day, how is that helping me to make your department better? How is that helping your organization if you're not giving me the tools or keeping me current on the trends of my field? Give me the incentive to want to be loyal to you. And I think right now, for young workers, their perspective of value for money has changed. In my dad generation, they stay for 20-30 years, they're like it's a job it pays the bills, we got bills bills bills, and they'll stay whether it's a good job, bad job or in a different job. But I notice with young workers today; we're more "what's my value for money"? Am I being valued as a worker, are my contributions being seen? And if they're not, they chuck those deuces, and they leave. It's not because they're fickle, and it's not because they're flighty. It's because they've realized the return on investment isn't strong enough for them to stay. That's the one thing I've noticed about young workers today. It's not necessarily a struggle or barrier; it's more like they shifted their thinking.

16:05 Denise: I'm sorry, I just want to add something to that. I also find, and in my personal experience as a young worker, I had a full-time job, I had benefits, I was comfortable. I wasn't growing. I wasn't engaged, so I decided to leave my comfortable position at that full-time job to go back to school and say do something that's fulfilling. That makes me happy and also earn my value. So with regards to your point with regards to perspective, I think also young workers, in general, are not only wanting to be valued but want to do what makes them happy.

16:44 Joseanne: Absolutely

16:45 Denise: We don't live to work or work to live.

16:48 Eddy: You're right; I think you're looking at the European model where people say basically my livelihood in regards to my work is so that I basically have a lifestyle. But I don't live to work.

17:04 Denise: Quality of life is very important. You just have got to match it up.

17:09 Joseanne: Quality of life is huge. When we're talking about work-life balance and throwing those terms out there, I think younger workers are taking those terms literally.

17:18 Denise: and they should.

17:19 Joseanne: they're accessing their vacation time, as they should. Before, it would be "well, you have vacation time," but it will look better if you never take it.

17:25 Eddy: By the way, for all the activist listening right now, that doesn't really go to you. Because when you're not working, you're actually working on the union and working as an activist.

17:33 Joseanne: Absolutely.

17:35 Eddy: But that's a passion as we had earlier discussed off camera and off of a mic.

17:40 Joseanne: So when you're looking at it from a perspective of a union member, you realize it's about my happiness outside of work. It is about my ability to grow. It is about my ability to make sure my rights are enforced properly.

17:55 Eddy: So, with that sort of thought process, what have you seen young workers progress towards? I think you guys have touched on it quite a bit here. But what are you viewing the progress of young workers in this day in age?

18:10 Joseanne: I think for me, it's more of them pushing back against the status quo. It's about than standing up and saying, you know what, I worked an 8 hours day, this is my 8 hour day, the end. It's not to say they're not willing to work. It's that they know what their boundaries are. I feel that now a lot more young workers are more strict in setting boundaries for themselves, which is great because then employers can't take advantage of them. And they're willing to walk away from a job if it does not fit. Health and safety is one; we talk about health and safety for young workers. We talk about how many young workers are being injured on the job or dying on the job because they're so grateful to have a job. They would overlook, or their employer will tell them, oh, don't worry about safety, don't worry about protection, just do the job, and we'll give you extra money. They're like, I'm not risking my life for an extra dollar. Because that extra dollar isn't going to be worth anything to me if I'm dead. So I think them pushing back and fully enforcing their rights under the law or under their collective agreement is a big deal. And they're getting more and more involved in social justice within the workplace. I think that that part of it when I see our young workers coming to our conferences, a lot of them are pushing the "we want to know more bout our collective agreement." We want to learn more about the union structure because it's important to us to have that in our arsenal for when we have to push back against something that we don't agree within a workplace, which I think is amazing.

19:47 Eddy: Denise, where do you see the initiatives of young workers? Where have you progressed in regards to young workers? Where do you view young workers moving the yardstick forward?

20:02 Denise: I think we're a very diverse demographic for sure. We're in the communication era the knowledge era. And everything is at our fingertips. We know we have certain rights, and we know we

should be represented in a certain way. If I don't want to identify as a 'she,' there are certain things that have changed. In identities overall, that should be implemented in the workplace. And to your point, I feel like young workers are not specifically afraid to speak up, which is great because I feel like we're all about raising awareness. So I feel like young workers are the ones that are coming out seeking for mentors and seeking for advice to move the world forward.

20:59 Joseanne: I think for me, it comes down to this phrase that I've heard a lot during 2020, "it served you well back then; it doesn't serve you well now." So whatever structures or rules or whatever that served your parents' generation well, it doesn't serve us well. And so we have to find ways to make those changes and to move the needle forward for people coming up behind us. Because if we can set the bar...

21:28 Denise: Yea, we're like the next level of leaders, coming up.

21:30 Joseanne: Absolutely, and I feel like if we can definitely at least set that really firm foundation for young workers coming up behind us, then their work wouldn't be as hard as ours was.

21:43 Denise: Yea, I feel like that's where we progress most in the activism type of work. I really do think we drive for equity. We're just so diverse.

21:57 Joseanne: There are different cultures, different people and different identities and different things that maybe our parents' generation didn't have necessarily interact or encounter with when they were coming up. So for them, it was pretty much black, white, grey. For us, it's a mosaic of colours. So it's not necessarily the same. Again going back to the original phrase "what served them then, doesn't serve us now," so we have to make those changes, so things do serve us well now.

22:31 Eddy: Thanks for joining us, and join us next week for part 2 of our discussion with Joseanne and Denise.