

OPSEU/SEFPO TALK

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

00:06 Almeida: Hi everyone, this is Eduardo Almeida, or Eddy as you know me. Welcome back to OPSEU/SEFPO talk. We're going to continue with part two of my chat with the chair of our Provincial Young Workers Committee, Joseanne Job, and the recently elected Chair of our College Support Part-time Divisional Executive, Denise Martinez.

00:25 Almeida: What have young people have done in regards to the fact we're locked down, what have you been involved in during this pandemic to move the yardstick forward in the COVID times?

00:40 Job: Eating, lots of eating (laughter), I'm just kidding.

00:49 Almeida: Not at restaurants.

00:53 Job: I cook at home. I think in terms of initiatives, when you're saying initiatives are you speaking about young people in general or OPSEU members?

1:04 Almeida: I'm talking about young people, when they say there is a crisis there is usually an opportunity, so what opportunity do you see young people taking in regards to this?

1:15 Martinez: This is a great opportunity for young workers to show our tech skills that maybe some in an older demographic may not really have. It's also an opportunity for us to teach others because we're using the social media, we're involved in Twitter and Facebook. With COVID and student meetings it's only appropriate that young workers get involved and we have, so in the beginning of COVID, along with the Young Workers Committee in Region 5, we were part of a solidarity concert that we streamed live on Facebook, we had seven or eight performers who were members of OPSEU. We had guitar players, singers, dancers and this was an initiative that we took upon ourselves to stream online to give people access to a better emotional time.

2:39 Job: A lot of our young workers are still working and are in front-line positions. In Region 5 to Denise's point, we did have a lot of these check-ins with our members. So, we've had coffee chats over Zoom and Zoom is one of those platforms that not a lot of people were familiar with and then we had to get familiar really quickly. So it was really cool to have young workers being able say 'lets meet over Zoom, let's met over Web-ex' or whatever it is what you want to use, whatever platform we'll help you set it up.

3:12 Martinez: We've had young workers volunteer for tutorial videos on how to work Zoom so nobody was left out, things like that, skills like that.

3:21 Job: I think it's really cool, the one thing I would say is that in doing the solidarity concert we got to band together and it did come out of an idea with our coffee check-ins where we've been having conversations about working through a pandemic and being employed during a pandemic and being employed during a pandemic and how that has been for our members in a unionized environment and in a non-unionized environment and the disparities between the two. In celebrating our young workers who are not necessarily recognized because they're not in a quote, unquote front-line essential job, we

do appreciate and that's what the solidarity conference was about, we supported our nurses, our health care professionals, our mental health crisis professionals, all of the people who are on the front-lines during COVID, but then we also have to recognize our young workers who are working in jobs that people may not consider to be essential.

4:21 Martinez: Or not working

4:22 Job: Or not working at all

4:23 Martinez: Because of COVID

4:25 Job: So the layoffs have impacted their ability to go to work so we wanted to give them an opportunity to be seen, be acknowledged and to be celebrated as well and so the Provincial Young Workers committee came up with a campaign, Be Seen, Be Heard because of that. We wanted to show there are people still within our province that help it to run, who keep our water clean, who process our applications for driver's licences and health cards to keep us having health insurance to people who work in mental health wards and people who work in the college sector. These are all young individuals who are still working who are still providing services to the people of Ontario and they also needed to be recognized and celebrated and that's why we came up with this campaign, just in terms of supporting our young workers even when they call us for questions and advice, we're still very active with them.

5:23 Almeida: What advice would you guys give to people starting out in their careers in OPSEU and in their workplaces that we represent, what advice would you give to young workers?

5:36 Martinez: Get involved. Get your feet wet, anywhere you can. Learn new skills, even if it's a skill you don't think you'll use in your long-term career, that's ok, learn it, talk to people, get involved, know what's going on because we all have our perceptions, our experiences so it only makes sense to talk to each other, to see what the common struggles are so we can make this better, educate yourself.

6:11 Job: Totally educate yourself. In terms of getting involved, what you said and you touched upon just building skills, you may not use for the longevity of your career. You will! I promise you that, because at the end of the day the skills that you are building are the skills that every employer looks for. You learn how to prioritize your day, you learn how to communicate effectively with people, you learn how to resolve conflict, these are all things that are transferrable skills, it doesn't matter which job you are in. I think just getting involved is important, but also understanding your collective agreement, the first thing you should do from the day you walk into the office on day one is when you have your onboarding with your management team, 'who is my steward?' I understand I'm in a unionized environment, can I get a copy of my collective agreement? Do you know who my Local President is? Even if they don't want to give you that material themselves, they can point you to the person you need to be talking to because it puts a level of accountability on the management team to report the union that a new employee has started in the workplace.

7:18 Martinez: Even if you are not in a unionized environment, the Employment Standards Act, educate yourself.

7:24 Job: The Employment Standards Act is your best friend if you are in a non-unionized environment, the Occupational Health and Safety Act is also your best friend if you're not in a unionized environment

because it teaches you. With the Employment Standards Act it teaches you about hours of work, it teaches you about the types of pay you can get, it teaches you about how you should be paid, the rates which you should be paid at a maximum or a minimum. The Occupational Health and Safety Act, it teaches you about unsafe work, how you can go about refusing unsafe work, what rights you have what responsibilities you have. These are things that are extremely important. For someone who has worked in union and non-union environments, I absolutely needed to have my Employment Standards Act because I needed to protect myself. I encourage anyone in a non-unionized environment, please, please please, get a copy of it if you can. If you are in a unionized environment get a copy of your collective agreement and start asking questions.

8:20 Martinez: Some advice too that I would give is ... be aware that you live the life you make for yourself. For those leaders who are maybe shy and don't want to step forward, this is the time to do that. We're in a global crisis, there is more opportunity to do good and be a good leader and do some leadership, this is the best time for that.

8:42 Job: Just be bold

8:43 Martinez: Yeah, surround yourself with people who support you and have the same the leadership dreams that you do. Just step out there, be comfortable with yourself and if you're not comfortable, that's where you learn, step you of your comfort zone.

8:59 Job: When you are not comfortable you learn a lot more, trust me.

9:01 Martinez: For sure.

9:02 Job: I think also if you have the opportunity to become a Steward, become a Steward. The reason I say that is because a lot of young workers would come into an environment that is unionized and they say 'I want to make a good impression on the management team so I don't really want to join the union.' And I say to them: 'Listen, most times you have zero to lose because you're coming in with nothing, the least you're leaving with is two weeks salary.'

9:27 Almeida: One of the things I think our listeners would be interested in are your general observations of your workplaces and other workplaces and what you hear from other young workers in regard to their workplaces.

9:45 Martinez: As a part-time worker in the college unit, I see a lot of issues with equal work for equal pay. I'll have members coming to Stewards and telling them how their superiors told them that they don't get paid the same even though they're doing the same work because of part-time. That is something that I think we have to address because just because I work 24 hours a week instead of 40 doesn't mean that the work differs. The work is still the same, so equal work for equal pay, for sure or at least give me some benefits if you're not going to pay me for the same work.

10:26 Job: Absolutely. I think in touching on that, it does happen to a lot of our part-timers, even in the court system where they work their 24, 25 hours a week, but they do much more in certain cases than people who work there 36 and a quarter. So, it does create some disparity there and then it's that competition between workers that creates that divide as well. If they're being given equal work for equal pay or at least equal pay or something that will give them an incentive to say 'ok, yes, I'm willing to do this,' I feel that that will make a big difference.

11:03 Almeida: Anything else?

11:05 Job: I just wanted to make a note because, when I was talking about options when you're coming into a workplace, especially when you're coming in on a contract or you're coming in on a temporary basis, in getting involved and the reason I say that is because even if you are coming in with nothing and leaving with two weeks salary, you're also leaving with a bunch of skill that you probably would not have gained had you not gotten involved with a union. For people who feel that management teams look at you differently because you're part of a union, remember that most of that management team once upon a time was also a Steward. So, they know the playbook for the management side but they also know the collective agreement, so never really discount any time of involvement, it all builds to something, some day.

11:51 Martinez: Put it on your resume, you have additional skills right there

11:54 Almeida: This has been great, this is actually something I think that obviously we have a lot more to actually touch on, you both have a lot more to say, I think. But this is a good start so I'm going to conclude by saying thank you both for taking the time to come to our studio.

12:13 Martinez: We appreciate being here. Thank you Eddy for having us and inviting us.

12:17 Job: Thank you for the invitation, this has been fun, I really did enjoy myself.

12:21 Almeida: It is fun isn't it?

12:22 Job: Yeah

12:23 Almeida: And it's nice because I've been so locked up myself it's nice to see other members and other faces, so this was a real treat for me as well. On behalf of Smokey and the Executive Board and the leadership thank you both for coming here. One of the things I will say before we start signing off and I think the listeners need to be cognizant of some of the big things you touched on and people need to think of some of the things you said. One of the things is there is a difference in between how people are treated, particularly the male perspective and the female perspective. In a lot of work dominated by males they're called apprenticeships and in work dominated by females they're called internships. The difference is when you're an apprentice you get paid to be an apprentice. Internships they typically don't pay to be an intern, there is something morally wrong about that and we need to challenge that, and it needs to change. Another thing you touched on is mentorship. For some of our folks who are more seasoned in the trade union movement, as much as we can mentor our young people, young people have a lot to mentor us with too, they educate us all the time. I know I typically have to turn to a lot of our folks and our staff who are younger and have a lot of knowledge in regards to technology and in regards to knowledge about what they've learned. Education is a big piece, education, education, education. So again, on behalf of OPSEU/SEFPO, I want to thank you for being here.