

Seeing Equity as Labour Justice

Special Issue Guest Editors

Momin Rahman Trent University

Alison Hearn Western University

Abstract

Introduction to the CAUT Journal special themed issue on seeing equity as labour justice.

Keywords equity, labour justice

Interprétation de l'équité comme étant une justice en matière de travail

Rédacteur et rédactrice invités du numéro special

Momin Rahman Université Trent

Alison Hearn Université Western

Résumé

Présentation du numéro spécial du Journal de l'ACPPU portant sur l'interprétation de l'équité comme étant une justice en matière de travail.

Mots-clés équité, justice en matière de travail

Introduction

As we write in the summer of 2025, Canada is in the midst of a trade war with our neighbour to the south, and our recent federal election prioritized this economic crisis above all else; equity issues and post-secondary education were generally absent from the campaign. We hope that the return of a (minority) Liberal government signals a continued commitment to equity initiatives, especially in the federal research funding councils, but we should take nothing for granted. While the Conservative Party lost the immediate opportunity to implement their anti-EDI agenda, several provincial governments are promoting 'anti-woke' politics and we have seen some universities obeying in advance by moving away from equity policies (Liddle, 2025).

Rejecting equity remains front and centre in the United States of course, a central part of the multi-faceted attacks on the independence of universities and other public institutions that we have seen over the past six months. These attacks accuse 'radical left' ideology of undermining merit-based processes and argue that even thinking about equity is 'ideological.' Rather than recognizing the widespread consequences of social inequalities, they demand that any equity, diversity, and inclusion policies, programs or courses be abolished. We have seen these demands repeated over and over again in relation to American universities, specifically Harvard, Columbia, and the University of Pennsylvania, where they have been smuggled in under the guise of fighting antisemitism (Habeshian, 2025; Blinder, 2025). All are intended to undermine the freedom from political interference that public institutions need to operate without bias and replace it with government diktat, a plan that has been decades in the making (Harcourt, 2025).

Attacking equity in this way is clearly a power play for more control over academic independence and collegial governance, and in Canada, the same is true when conservative arguments reduce the complexity of social inequalities and institutional responses to a smear campaign against universities or more precisely, faculty and unions and then call for more oversight or intervention from governments. As history clearly shows us, vilifying left-wing and marginalized faculty in universities in the name of "free speech" has long been a go-to right wing strategy (Prokop, 2025). With Trump, we are seeing the full-blown return of virulent anti-equity discourses that not only threaten our academic freedom but are central to the 'post-truth' politics that infect current political discourse, always and everywhere using the stigmatization of 'minorities' to further authoritarian impulses and conjuring up academic and professional experts as a core part of the equity problem (Galpin & Vernon, 2023). In a world bereft of any need for evidence or its

production and interpretation by professional experts, why should anyone support the independence or funding of post-secondary education and research?

The existential sense of threat that anti-equity discourses provoke is certainly being felt by our colleagues in the U.S. but is also affecting our profession in Canada. Much of the informal talk at the recent CAUT Equity Officers Forum in May 2025 echoed these fears about the crisis facing those who fight for and promote equity. There is a feeling, sometimes explicitly tangible but more often than not simply 'in the air,' that the current backlash is particularly animated by racism, often anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism, and anti-trans sentiment. No doubt this backlash is a reaction to the social movements of the last few years, from #MeToo and Black Lives Matter to the mainstreaming of Truth and Reconciliation discussions and the significant rise in gender diversity practices. Canadian culture is being transformed by these public debates, as are our colleagues, administrators, and students; our own institutions are being impacted by, both, progress around equity and the backlash to it. While social transformation is inevitable, in this moment, we may be more prone to thinking about it negatively, questioning whether academic freedom and indigenization, equity, diversity, inclusion and social justice efforts will survive.

We cannot promise to dispel these anxious feelings in this special issue of course, but what we can do is remind ourselves and our colleagues that equity is more embedded in the Canadian post-secondary system than in most other countries. For example, although the Tri-Agencies' equity targets for Canada Research Chairs (CRC) were initially the result of a legal case (which CAUT supported), the subsequent expansion of thinking about equity has moved beyond a legal reflex. Even the targets are a form of labour justice in that they are based on statistical evidence about the under-representation of equity-deserving groups in the academy and effectively assert that we cannot be a fair labour force if the evidence suggests that particular social groups are systematically excluded. That alone should be enough to see equity as important, but many inside and outside our profession too often see equity as a zero-sum game with winners and losers, a game based on a consistent appeal to 'merit' as the foundation of our profession. While we agree with the need for merit, we argue that what constitutes 'merit' is not self-evident but a product of history, socially and contextually determined, and connects to the broader neoliberal myth of meritocracy, which "rests on the idea of a level playing field, conveniently ignoring systemic inequality" (Littler, 2018, p. 3). Indeed, we see equity initiatives as a necessary corrective to the flawed operationalization of merit in our universities, whereby affinity bias from the dominant group of straight white men has resulted in unrepresentative faculty cohorts and policies based on their career pathways, values, and life experiences.

Hence, many different unions fought for paid maternity leaves, for example, and many in the academic sector recognized that all-male shortlists were not based purely on merit but reflected institutionalized forms of bias. While the solutions to the absence of significant social groups and their lack of inclusion once they are in the profession, are still contentious in many ways, the arguments for these issues are solidly grounded in what labour justice should be. We must be aware of who is excluded and how if we are to be a fully accessible labour force.

As our academic union struggles have repeatedly shown, equity gains are collective gains, benefiting all of us in the long run. Meaningful equity and inclusion will actually enhance our profession by helping to redefine what it means to be fully 'meritorious.' The funding councils already acknowledge this to some extent, particularly in their CRC training resources, which stress that research excellence suffers when entire groups are largely absent from research conceptualization, design, and analysis. In this approach, they share the same view of 'diversity' as the corporate world, who, at least until recently, recognized that a diversity of experiences correlates strongly with better outcomes by widening our understanding of the world beyond a single set of experiences. In our profession, this insight should be central to any definition of merit or excellence; research and teaching cannot be at their best when we willfully turn a blind eye to different ways of knowing, relating, and being. Knowledge and teaching are damaged by closed minds and fearful reactions and are clearly enhanced by an embrace of differences. We can't access different views and experiences, however, if the people who have them aren't there.

The contributions to this volume provide compelling stories and ideas for how we might keep the struggle for academic freedom and equity in the academy alive in these challenging times. As all of them show, we have to start with discussions that confront these issues and thus 'call in' our colleagues who are less aware of the reasons to see equity as labour justice. Then the practical work of embedding our principles into our collective agreements, university policies, and everyday professional culture begins. This practical work is the focus of many of these essays: the concrete ways we can learn from past experience and keep fighting for indigenization, disability rights, social justice, and economic fairness in our workplaces. Moreover, all of the contributions show why we should not and cannot leave equity discourses and practices to our employers' brand management concerns and tokenistic solutions which leave structural inequalities in place.

The volume starts with Katherine Breward's important essay about integrating inclusive design into our collective agreements. "From Post-Hoc Accommodation to Inclusive Design: Bargaining for Policies that Truly Include Workers with Disabilities" argues that our universities continue to approach disability in a reactive

way, providing ad-hoc accommodations after the fact rather than “focusing on the removal of barriers through inclusive design.” Inclusive design, a term imported from architecture, involves consulting end users in every stage of a design process, considering a wide variety of needs, offering choice, and providing flexibility in the application of policies. Breward identifies processes included in our collective agreements that can be improved to counteract barriers in the workplace for people with disabilities, including a promotion path for those who work part-time, more flexibility in scheduling and in timelines for tenure and promotion and mandatory neurodiversity awareness training. Brian Green, Derek Sahota, and Jennifer Scott add to Breward’s concrete suggestions for bargaining in their essay “Bargaining for Salary Equity: General Wage Increases and Equity in the Academic Labour Market.” They provocatively argue that too often we “fail to examine our own salary bargaining norms and assumptions from an equity lens, and to ask ourselves: do the approaches we take as unions build greater equity or exacerbate existing inequities?” Framing their discussion as a “thought experiment,” the authors use data and practices from Simon Fraser University to provide a detailed analysis of the ways percentage salary increases reinforce inequality, primarily because they are predicated on variable starting salaries and market adjustments, both of which have been shown to reproduce race and gender hierarchies. As they write, “salaries that start unequal will generally become more unequal over time.” With convincing evidence, Green, Scott, and Sahota argue that unions should oppose the implementation of market adjustments and explore fixed rate salary increases in their bargaining in order to constrain the effects of an inequitable labour market and salary system.

Several of our authors recount their own experiences bargaining for Indigenization and equity, all of them calling out the performative nature of their administrations’ equity commitments. Geneviève Boulet, Tammy Findlay, Michael Gillis, Diane Piccitto, and Kelly Resmer, members of the bargaining team at Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU), describe their efforts to hold the university, known “as a champion for social justice,” to account. Hoping to formalize MSVU Faculty Association’s (MSVUFA) feminist, anti-racist, and decolonial values, the team was repeatedly met with disrespect and stall tactics from the administration. In their most recent round of bargaining, MSVUFA were forced to strike for 23 days in order to advance their equity goals. While eventually winning some important gains, their experiences with a recalcitrant administration and a Board who delayed ratification of the new contract for six months led them to important conclusions about the urgent need for “gendered social unionism,” the democratization of university governance, and broader legislative reform. Similar to MSVUFA’s fight for decolonization and social justice in their workplace, the University of Victoria

Faculty Association (UVic FA) sought to bring about true decolonial indigenization during their last round of bargaining. As Lynne Marks and Christine O'Bonsawin describe in "Bargaining for a Transformative Vision of Decolonial Indigenization: The Critical Role of University Faculty Associations," the University of Victoria Faculty Association saw the need to move beyond "an Indigenous 'inclusion' framework," toward decolonizing university practices more broadly. Noting that "the question of actual indigenization (had) become too destabilizing for most university administrators to accept," the association established an Indigenous Advisory Committee to the Negotiating Team to create an innovative approach to collective bargaining. Happily, the employer agreed with the approach, and the round produced "broadened appointment, reappointment, promotion, and tenure language in recognition of the work of Indigenous members." The bargaining experiences of these authors provide much-needed inspiration for all equity struggles in universities.

Nick Mulé continues the focus on social justice in his essay, "JEDDI as Labour Imperative." Drawing from his own experience as an Equity Officer and Co-Chair of the Joint Committee on the Administration of the Agreement in the York University Faculty Association (YUFA), he argues that justice, as "a foundational condition of fairness," should qualify and contextualize all our equity, inclusion and diversity work and should be explicitly included in the name (hence JEDDI). He describes the struggles YUFA faced when confronted with the reluctance of the administrators on the Joint Committee to educate themselves about and implement the university's own EDI initiatives. He concludes that this contradiction or "broken link" between what the university avows publicly and what its own administrators fail to acknowledge or enact requires ongoing monitoring and vigilance on the part of our associations. The final essay in this issue takes up Mulé's concerns about administrative passivity, unpacking another central contradiction with EDI initiatives in our universities. In "Seeing through whiteness: the particular formation of academic institutional racism as 'professional snowblindness,'" Momin Rahman focuses on the "promotional framing" of university EDI initiatives as "inclusive excellence." In this high-level structural critique of systemic racism, Rahman calls out several problems with the deployment of the rhetoric of 'excellence' in university EDI efforts, arguing that it reinscribes an ideal of merit that masks an unspoken assumption that our profession is "both very intelligent and neutral or objective in our approach to generating and assessing knowledge," and therefore unlikely ever to be racist. Rahman contends that the embrace of a rhetoric of excellence is an inherently "white" epistemology. This leads to what he calls a "'professional snowblindness'" whereby systemic racism can be ignored or rejected as a problem "precisely because racism is seen as too regressive to fit within our

professional analytical skills of knowledge production and knowledge assessment.” Rahman’s analysis concludes by encouraging associations to get involved in collegial governance and policy formation at their institutions, warning that the promotion of equity via the deployment of ‘excellence’ “limits our ability to reflect upon, change, and improve our professional practices” overall.

The essays included here all highlight the challenges of moving equity struggles at our universities beyond the performative and rhetorical. Current ‘post-woke’ conditions in the U.S. and in some places in Canada will only exacerbate these challenges; and we have already seen the University of Alberta has already begun a retreat from EDI commitments and discourses in 2025. Our job as scholars and labour activists in the years ahead is, first, to hold each other accountable to what we know best serves everyone—a plurality of different ways of knowing and being—and second, to relentlessly hold our administrators to account for their lofty words and subsequent inaction. Finally, and most importantly, we must advocate for equity and dignity for all in our wider communities, working wherever and whenever we can to counter the growing attacks on our universities and public institutions.

References

- Blinder, A. (2025). "Penn Agrees to Limit Participation of Transgender Athletes." *New York Times*, July 1. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/01/us/penn-title-ix-transgender-swimmer-trump.html>
- Galpin C. and Vernon P.J. (2023). 'Post-Truth Politics as Discursive Violence: Online Abuse, the Public Sphere, and the Figure of 'The Expert'', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Vol. 26 (2).
- Habeshian, S. (2025). "Columbia caves to Trump demands to regain \$400 million in funding." *Axios*, March 21. <https://www.axios.com/2025/03/21/columbia-trump-federal-funding-protests>
- Harcourt. B. (2025). "Trump's war on Harvard was decades in the making. This letter proves it." *The Guardian*, June 11. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/jun/11/trump-war-on-harvard>
- Liddle, H. (2025). "Inside the University of Alberta's move away from equity, diversity and inclusion." *University Affairs*, January 28. <https://universityaffairs.ca/news/inside-the-university-of-albertas-move-away-from-equity-diversity-and-inclusion/>
- Littler, J. (2018) *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Prokop. A. (2025). "The right-wing conspiracy behind Trump's war on Harvard." *Vox*, April 22. <https://www.vox.com/politics/409600/trump-harvard-rufo-yarvin-grants-nonprofit-tax-exempt>