

Some people want a cure for my existence

— Union member talks about racism, life away from Six Nations Reservation

By Paula Stromberg

"I wish I could be 10 years old again, the way I was before I experienced racism. I was a carefree girl who never looked at someone's colour. We had so much fun growing up, it was easy to love and trust. I never had to worry that someone was going to say something shameful about being an Indian that would tear my heart out."

Born in Ontario and raised on the Six Nations Reservation, OPEIU 378 member Frances Powless is part of the Mohawk nation. Over the course of her life, she has held a briefcase-rupturing array of jobs in both the United States and Canada and along the way has honed a piercing insight into racism and its eventual toll on a person's psyche.

Powless talked with our union newspaper, *OPEIU 378 News* about her experiences dealing with racism and how personally difficult it has been to face off against discrimination. She also explains what it's like to be an Indian working in a predominantly different culture.

"I first became aware of racism when I was bussing off the reservation to start high school in Ontario. It was 1958. We were 12 Indians among 400 students in the school. It was a shock.

"For the first time in my life I was treated as if there was something wrong with me because we were Indians. We couldn't belong to the school Glee Club or join any extra curricular activities. No reason was ever given. I found out quickly what I was allowed and not allowed to do.

"When you're Indian, you can't fade into the walls, you can't hide. Your skin colour and your race are obvious.

"In high school there was something ugly hanging over my head. I was told that Natives are stupid, that I was nothing but a drunken Indian, a lazy Indian. In fact, my dad was an ironworker, one of the Mohawk 'skywalkers' who work on high-rise construction. He'd worked all his life, we all worked. I had my first job at nine years old. To be called these names in school was a shock.

"I was 14 years old so I had no choice except to attend school. I felt angry. Because other kids picked on me I had to fight every day. If I didn't stand up for myself, it just got worse.

"Canadians like to imagine we have a multi-cultural and non-racist society. From my point of view, that is hardly true. I have had restaurant servers, store clerks and co-workers ignore me or look past me. Sometimes it's coincidence. Other times it's personal. I brush these things off again

"Racists see something wrong with me right across the room. They decide this without speaking to me."

— *OPEIU 378 member Frances Powless is part of the Mohawk Nation*



Racism — it hurts

"So often I'm not seen for who I am. I wish that people would take the time to get to know me," says OPEIU 378 member Frances Powless.

and again but after a while you feel invisible and of no consequence."

Feeling invisible has exacted a dreadful price on Frances Powless and her family. Right after high school she married a non-Native in the hope of finally being acceptable to society. "By marrying out of my own culture I robbed my daughter and my grandchildren of their heritage. My grandchildren are just 25% Indian and will never be accepted as Native people.

"I was 17 years old when I married and had my daughter. If I had my life to live over, I would never have made those choices just to be acceptable."

The onslaught against her spirit continues. Powless has found herself in the surrealistic situation of discussing current issues with acquaintances when they aired the opinion that if only white explorers had shot all the natives, Canadians would not have land claims problems today.

"Comments like that completely dehumanize me, as well as my chil-

dren, my siblings, my whole family unit and my social structure." Her voice catches, "I am put in a place where I have no value. I am barely tolerated as a human being.

"I wish people knew that as an Indian, I can't be myself when I leave my home. I have to put a mask on. My defenses are always up. The utmost thing in my mind is 'how am I going to deal with well-meaning but ignorant comments or incidents of discrimination today?'

"If I overhear a racist remark, how will I reply? I'm always on guard. Too often all Indians will be judged on how one Indian responds to a cutting or hurtful remark.

"I never feel comfortable until I'm back inside my house. There, I won't be on the spot to speak for my whole race. I don't have to worry about being made to feel different."

Many of us have made terrible remarks without considering the impact. Powless elaborated, "For example, some still call Indian women 'squaws',

a term used on old TV shows. They appear to have no idea 'squaw' is degrading and offensive. Calling every Indian 'chief' is also an insult. We all aren't chiefs. We haven't earned the right to be a chief. It is the same as calling someone, 'doctor' or 'premier' when they haven't earned that position.

"Years ago I was working in a restaurant when a customer asked me, 'Is it true all Indian women have hot pants?' The comment was so humiliating. I didn't know what to say. I felt like crying. I was being paid to be courteous to diners so I couldn't react honestly. I just walked away.

"You can shrug off the hurtful comments but hearing them week after week, month after month for years takes a toll. Eventually it gets to you. It hurts."

"Stopping racist comments can be very hard when you have lived with the innuendo that you are nothing, no matter how hard you work. Fear sometimes has made me wait a long time before I tell the person their remarks are offensive.

"People don't realize how damaging their thoughtless comments can be. Over time, cruel remarks destroy my soul and wound my spirit. My only solution is to try to show these people that I am a human being."

She has some advice for well-meaning folks who believe they do not want to discriminate. "Don't expect one person to answer questions on behalf of the entire Indian race. I am not a debating headquarters about the Nisga'a treaty. If you are



Ignoring racist comments takes a toll and eventually they get to you. "It hurts," says Frances Powless.

curious about Native issues, read a book or take a course.

"Treating Native people as a novelty is still not seeing us as human beings. We each have our own nature, our own character. Some people think it's trendy to be seen with Native people. This too can be degrading."

Perhaps in an effort to establish rapport, well-meaning Caucasians tell Indian or Black people, 'I know what it's like to be discriminated against. Kids used to tease me because I had to wear funny hand-me-down clothes' or 'My parents were immigrants so I was bullied because I didn't speak English.' The difference is that they were able to leave their oddities behind in the schoolyard. Now they fit in with mainstream White culture. Visually, that will never happen for people of colour.

Powless has held many jobs over the years both in Canada and the United States such as running a spinning machine at Harding Carpets in Ontario and working at Space Command for the US Air Force in Colorado Springs. In California, she worked at a Heinz factory canning tomatoes and at a sweatshop sewing disposable paper products. "The sweatshop was the worst job I've had in my life—I lasted two weeks," she chuckles.

At Ontario's Northern Telecom she worked as an assembly line inspector and in Buffalo, New York, she worked for a windshield wiper manufacturer. She has also made precision screws for the aerospace industry, run a pen barrel molding machine and spent 12 years with a sprinkler manufacturer.

She came to B.C. in 1989 to attend school and work for the Federal prison system. Part of her job was to act as a prison liaison for Native inmates in federal prisons.

She recalls years ago being the only Indian working in a company and having gauche co-workers react by asking, "Wow, are you a real Native?" Powless explained that although their response seemed positive, it still categorized her as something different, slotting her into a stereotyped group instead of treating her as a regular human being. "At times, co-workers have made me feel I was from Mars or as if I'd fallen

out of a space ship. They didn't see me as a person."

Powless points out that she does have many non-Native friends. "We've taken the time to know each other, remain curious about each other and accept the differences. That's how we developed trust and friendship."

She ended our meeting with a thought that lingers in the chest like thumping bass notes at a rock concert. "The wounded part of my spirit never heals because so often I'm not seen for who I am. I wish that people would take the time to get to know me."

7 nasty facts about racism

By Paula Stromberg

Racism and discrimination divide workers and thereby weaken the labour movement.

Racism can be defined as is reacting to another person on the basis of race alone, believing that the person is inferior or fits stereotypes of a particular group. Racism is not seeing someone as an individual.

The term 'visible minority' is a misleading term. A glance at a world map shows that people of colour are the visible majority.

Some believe that a bid for power and control is at the root of all racism and harassment.

People with insecure self-images are more inclined to be chauvinist, sexist, homophobic or racist than people with self-confidence and good self-esteem.

Racist feelings are ugly and particularly uncomfortable to acknowledge within oneself.

Many people are not aware of their prejudices. Unless we have examined our own beliefs in-depth regarding groups different than ourselves, we're probably racist, sexist, homophobic or ageist. Soul searching is essential.



OPEIU 378 President Jerri New commented, "Frances Powless has told a compelling story. Her courageous effort should provide OPEIU members with an intimate understanding of the hurt caused by racism and thoughtless comments.

"We don't want to live in a society where people are exploited, oppressed and abused. Unionists want equality and fairness. We believe everyone should be treated with dignity and respect. Some ways to achieve this is to openly discuss discrimination and racism in unions and negotiate employment equity language into collective agreements. Join our OPEIU 378 Human Rights Committee."

CLC takes anti-racism initiatives

The Canadian Labour Congress publishes the *Anti-Racism and Human Rights Newsletter* so that union and community activists can find out about each other's initiatives. For example, the CLC mentors young Aboriginal workers, monitors implementation of labour's anti-racism resolutions, tracks hate literature on the Internet and is hosting a triennial Aboriginal/Workers of Colour Conference in 2001.

For more information or to subscribe to the newsletter fax (613) 521-3113 or e-mail: anti-racism@clc-ctc.ca