The PSAC Social Justice Fund: We’re Making a Difference

We are members of the Public Service Alliance of Canada. We are family members, we are members of our communities, we are neighbours, friends and relatives. We are citizens of Canada.
The union creed is “solidarity,” but this isn’t just a bedrock union principle. It is a value we share across the country.
From coast to coast to coast, communities pull together when needs arise. We give to, and campaign for, the United Way. Strangers help strangers in times of disaster, as we did during the Ontario and Quebec ice-storm of 1998, the floods in Badger, Newfoundland in 2003, and the massive forest fires in BC in that same year.
And the same impulse, the same spirit of generosity and solidarity, has marked the PSAC response to recent international disasters—the Asian tsunami of 2004, the Haitian earthquake in 2010.
Canada’s long tradition of international outreach begins and ends with individual Canadians. As union members and as citizens, we want to play an active, hands-on role in continuing this tradition, and at home we want to do our bit as well.
In 2003, responding to this desire to get involved, the PSAC created the Social Justice Fund.

The Fund presently supports initiatives in five areas:
Emergency or humanitarian relief
International labour development
Worker education
Worker-to-worker exchanges
Anti-poverty initiatives here at home
Initiatives supported by Social Justice Fund

WORKER EDUCATION

WORKER-TO-WORKER EXCHANGE
The SJF is funded by our members, and by a number of their employers. The PSAC, as approved by Convention, provides an annual amount, and our Components and Locals have also contributed directly to specific projects. Individual members and union staff have done so as well. And 69 of our bargaining units have negotiated employer support for the SJF.
This is not a new concept. Other major Canadian unions such as the Steelworkers, UNIFOR, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers and the Canadian Union of Public Employees have established similar funds. Through collective bargaining, the Big Three auto companies, Nestle Canada, Sears, Canada Post, Siemens, Bombardier and other major employers have come on board.

Well, what do we do with the money, internationally and here at home? A few examples from the scores of projects we have been supporting under the five SJF programs just mentioned, give an indication of the scope and usefulness of the work we are doing.

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A good illustration of our approach to international humanitarian relief is our response to the Haiti earthquake in January, 2010. Thanks to the generosity of members and staff at all levels of our Union, we were able to contribute $222,000 in emergency relief assistance, including medical aid and housing reconstruction. We channelled our assistance through Doctors Without Borders, an organization that has been active in Haiti since 1991, and knows how to deploy relief quickly and efficiently.
But we didn’t stop there.

We invested in long-term partnerships as well, committing to ongoing assistance to strengthen local unions, farmers and women’s groups in the reconstruction of Haiti, and working with unions like the Confederation of Public and Private Sector Workers (CTSP) to establish quality public services.
In other words, our emphasis is not on charity, which is often done at a distance and changes very little in the long run. Rather, we have put our emphasis on worker-to-worker links, with direct involvement by our members. Our aim is to enable working people at the grassroots level to develop the skills and knowledge they need to participate actively in their societies and to make a difference.

Put simply: “solidarity—not charity.”
We took the same approach when we responded to the devastation caused by the Asian tsunami in India. We began our long-term involvement in 2005, establishing a partnership with the Union of Fish Harvesters, Agricultural and Forest Workers of Andhra Pradesh (APVVU). Our project was specifically aimed at empowering women, including measures to improve access to markets for fish workers, and enabling women agricultural workers to buy a tractor to work land they had acquired from the state for resettlement.
As of 2011, the tsunami relief fund was nearly exhausted, but we have been continuing our partnership with APVVU under our international labour development program. In fact a number of other important projects are currently underway in this area.
The PSAC, with our Component the Union of Postal Communications Employees, and Canada Post, have been assisting the Nigeria Labour Congress with an HIV/AIDS awareness initiative since 2005.
We have also been engaged for some time in a literacy program in Bolivia aimed at women in the hard-scrabble mining industry.
The nightmarish situation of women and girls in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where mass rape has been a feature of a brutal civil war, has by now been well-covered by the media. In what we consider a particularly important initiative, the PSAC has joined with KAIROS to maintain a Legal Clinic Against Gender-Based Violence in South Kivu province of DRC, a place where women who have been raped can secure legal and emotional counselling, as well as physical assistance.
Our support of quality public services has been given international scope through the SJF as well. With CUPW, the PSAC has supported the Nicaraguan union FNT to conduct workshops for public sector leaders in Nicaragua, carry out popular education on the need for quality public services, and develop educational tools to build leadership capacity in the public sector.
The heading Worker Education may be somewhat misleading. This isn’t a matter of instructing people in a classroom setting, but involves actually rolling up our sleeves and working with local people on practical projects—we call it Education in Action. A good example of this is a housing project that we undertook in one of the poorest areas of Guatemala. A PSAC member named Roberto Miranda, a Spanish instructor at Health Canada, took several of his students there to work with a local indigenous rights group, Comité Campesino del Altiplano (CCDA), building badly-needed houses. The local people learned carpentry skills from the volunteers, and soon took the lead.
The SJF also supports what we call worker-to-worker exchanges. An excellent example of this work is a venture we called "Defending Public Services: Canadian and Colombian Workers on the Front Lines." Colombia is a dangerous place for trade unionists. 70% of all assassinations of union activists in the world have taken place in that one country—literally thousands have been killed since 1989. Our on-going series of visits and exchanges is intended to build solidarity between public sector unionists in Colombia and in Canada. The PSAC has joined with CUPW and CUPE to offer long-term support in the areas of education, capacity-building, communications and networking.
The SJF is also active in Canadian projects across the country aimed at alleviating poverty. An excellent example of a small project that has involved our members has been taking place at the Mustard Seed inner city mission in Calgary. As many as 31 PSAC members have worked there as volunteers, dishing up more than 400 meals for the homeless on each of three visits, as well as doing numerous other tasks, including helping residents of the shelter prepare resumes.
In our vast northern region, encompassing the Yukon, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut, many of our members live in small hamlets where a strong sense of community prevails—which may help to explain the strong membership support that the SJF has attracted there.

The Fund has provided support to the Yukon Anti-Poverty Coalition to organize a week of action against poverty and homelessness, with recent emphasis on affordable housing and public awareness. In the NWT, SJF funding has enabled trade unionists, community leaders, social justice groups and those affected by poverty to develop anti-poverty strategies together. The SJF also supports a school breakfast program, Breakfast for Learning, for over 3500 students—one-third of all students in the NWT.

In Nunavut, one important on-going initiative is our support for the Nunavut Literacy Council, part of the SJF Literacy Program that we have promoted in Canada and around the world. Literacy levels in Nunavut are the lowest in Canada—in fact, more than half of Nunavut’s working-age population is affected. The Council produces training and materials used in literacy courses in colleges and adult education programs throughout the territory, as well as conducting policy work and outreach. Also, since 2005, the SJF has supported the YWCA Agvvik Society based in Iqaluit, the only women’s shelter in Nunavut that provides safe shelter, crisis intervention and victim advocacy for Inuit women and their children who are impacted by violence.
Anti-poverty initiatives, in fact, have been funded in every region of the country. In the National Capital Region, for example, the SJF has supported a program of stress management for program participants at the Amethyst Women’s Addiction Centre, where some of our members are employed; in Burnt Church, New Brunswick, funds have been provided for an aboriginal healing circle, and in Montreal, for an Immigrant Workers Centre that provides information about workplace rights, as well as practical computer training. We have provided support to “École citoyenne”, an intergenerational literacy program in the Trois-Rivières region, a women’s centre in BC, to an on-campus student food bank in Ontario—and the list goes on.
Large or small, the projects we have supported and will support in the future make a real, practical difference at home and abroad. Our emphasis on active member involvement not only educates the members who take a direct part in the various projects funded by the SJF, but creates a growing, rich resource of spokespeople who can be called upon to share their experiences with other members. And the links forged with the wider communities in which they work have allowed our Union to be a force for positive change.

At home, we build communities. Abroad, our members are ambassadors, weaving global cooperation at the grassroots. Our Social Justice Fund makes possible our collective participation as a union in our own society and in the international community. We have done much since the SJF was created in 2003—but there is much more still to do.

Making a difference matters. And we plan to go on doing just that.