

## Equality, Radical Unionism, and Safer Spaces

### Why Safer Spaces?

Totally safe spaces would be good, but are probably not possible under capitalism and patriarchy. A Safer Spaces policy is the next best thing.

As a radical union that engages in both workplace organising and community campaigning, a primary goal of the Industrial Workers of the World is to make all members feel as safe as possible and to effectively deal with the equality issues which are part of Safer Spaces-- truly a necessary part of the health and safety mission of every trade union.

Equality, solidarity, and Safer Spaces are principles basic to industrial organising, not optional extras. Practice based on safer spaces-- and actions in coalition with other anti-authoritarian groups-- strengthen our ability to make connections with other workers, since people are unlikely to join an organisation or participate in it if they do not feel safe, or if the organisation's perspective is too narrow. Solidarity, whether on picket lines or anti-war marches, is the heart of radical unionism.

In contrast, divide and conquer is a common tactic of the bosses and oppressors. In the past, unions have kept out women, Jews, and Blacks. Without Safer Spaces we create a climate that excludes members of some groups, setting us up to serve the interests of the bosses -- not a good idea. United we are strong. Divided we are weak.

### What are safer spaces?

There are general ideas of what is meant by safer spaces, but not an agreed definition. The initial and still frequent focus is gender. Women are still undermined, ridiculed and inappropriately touched in many organisations. Often serious incidents of sexual assault are not responded to properly. Instead, the woman making the complaint and her supporters are blamed. This is totally unacceptable. We need to

actively oppose belittling and violence in our organisations and in society as a whole.

However, Safer Spaces gender issues are wider than the treatment of women. They also cover respect for trans people (many of whom identify as members of a particular gender rather than trans) and anyone who does not identify with binary gender divisions. Trans and non-binary people experience discrimination in the workplace, so this is clearly a union issue. It is also one of defending rights and transforming society-- basic principles of a radical union.

Building and maintaining a culturally and ethnically diversified membership is a goal for the IWW and many other organisations that are predominantly White. Are there cultural assumptions which make members of colour and those from ethnic minorities feel excluded? What measures are in place for ensuring that speakers of other languages can participate effectively and are not marginalised? These are all Safer Spaces issues that are barriers to full participation in an organisation or campaign.

Another major issue is accessibility. Physical accessibility is an important part of this, but lack of access goes beyond this. It includes access to documents and information, participation in discussion, and an environment that accommodates people with a particular need, such as a low level of sensory stimulation.

Access to social events is just as important as meeting-place access. This means treating all disabled people with respect, including those who look and/or behave 'differently', for instance not staring at them or ignoring them.

Safer Spaces is not about gloom and guilt, but it does require that 'fun' not be at the expense of others.

### Creating Safer Spaces

Safer Spaces starts with education. It includes learning from other groups and individuals about different ways of organising and involving people; about their experiences with Safer Spaces and what has worked, or gone wrong.

There are different approaches to Safer Spaces, so a group interested in creating a Safer Spaces policy should find or create a model that feels right for them-- preferably one that aims to prevent safer space violations before they occur, rather than deal with them afterwards.

Union organising, human rights campaigning, and Safer Spaces are all works in progress-- from agreement on basic principles for action, to appreciation of personal, political, and cultural differences, to agreeing policies and being ready to implement and monitor them.

Our goals for the Industrial Workers of the World are equality, solidarity, and action for workers rights and social change. We realise that reaching these goals requires organisational strategies. The first of these is individual and collective commitment to relating to others as equals, in an honest and compassionate way. That is the essence of Safer Spaces and human rights campaigning, and the right path for radical unionism.

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