



United Steelworkers Canadian National Office

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UNITED STEELWORKERS

**Canadian National Office
Legal Department**

Articling Student Program

United Steelworkers in Canada

United Steelworkers (USW) is an international trade union with some 225,000 members in Canada, employed in all sectors of the economy and in all jurisdictions.

USW's Canadian National Office provides a wide range of services to staff and local unions: strategic campaigns, health and safety, political action, organizing, education, promotion of equity issues, research, communications and legal services.

Advice and Advocacy for the Union

United Steelworkers employs an in-house department of six labour lawyers, dedicated to providing advice to, and advocacy for, the Union in all areas of law. The Legal Department is part of the Canadian National Office, which is located in Toronto. For over 30 years, the Legal Department has employed an articling student.

The Legal Department

Currently, the Legal Department consists of six lawyers and two support staff.

- **Shaheen Hirani** is the head of the Legal Department. She articulated with the Legal Department and was called to the Bar in 1998. She returned to the Department in 2002 after having worked as in-house counsel for two other unions.
- **Debra Burton** was called to the Bar of British Columbia in 2001 and worked for union-side labour law firms before joining the Legal Department in 2015. She works out of the Union's District 3 office in Burnaby, B.C.
- **Erin Epp** was called to the Bar in 2017 and worked for a union-side labour law firm before joining the Legal Department in 2022.
- **Brittany Ross-Fichtner** was called to the Bar in 2017 and joined the Legal Department in 2024. She previously worked for a boutique union-side labour and employment firm.
- **Vinidhra (Vini) Vaitheeswaran** was called to the Bar in 2018 and worked for a union-side labour and employment firm before joining the Legal Department in 2024.
- **Kristina Adhikari** articulated with the Legal Department and was called to the Bar in 2021, at which point she was hired back into the Legal Department.
- **Stephanie Buongiorno** has served as a Legal Assistant in the Legal Department since 2015.
- **Amelia (Mia) Velasco** has served as a Legal Assistant in the Legal Department since 2024.

The Work of the USW Legal Department

The Legal Department is the front line for responding to any legal issue that arises in the life of the Union, from coast to coast to coast:

- Litigation before administrative tribunals, including:
 - grievance arbitration boards
 - provincial and federal labour relations tribunals
 - human rights tribunals
 - employment standards tribunals
 - financial services tribunals
 - social benefits tribunals
 - occupational health and safety appeal tribunals
 - workers' compensation tribunals
 - international labour rights agencies
- Litigation before all levels of court, dealing with civil, criminal, insolvency, and appellate matters, including applications for injunctions, picket line charges and applications for judicial review.
- Advising staff appearing before grievance arbitration boards and other administrative tribunals.
- Providing strategic and legal advice to staff in collective bargaining negotiations, including drafting collective agreement language and providing representation in first contract arbitration applications.
- Preparation of submissions to government on law reform in areas such as labour relations, employment standards and human rights.
- Presentation of educational seminars for staff and local union officers on a variety of subjects related to the filing, investigation, mediation and arbitration of grievances, human rights, bankruptcy and insolvency, and updates on leading cases and amendments to labour legislation.

The Role of the Articling Student

The articling student is an integral part of the Legal Department. Duties include:

- Intake of inquiries and requests from servicing staff
- Interviewing witnesses
- Legal research
- Drafting opinion letters, pleadings, and other submissions
- Attendance with lawyers at mediations and hearings
- Depending on the student's interests, attendance as counsel at mediations and hearings
- Independent carriage of files
- Formulating positions and drafting submissions on public policy matters, such as law reform
- Preparation of materials for educational seminars and assisting in the delivery of seminars

The Mentorship Program

With six lawyers, the Legal Department is a close-knit group. Lawyers work co-operatively and routinely consult on files. The working environment is highly collegial and non-hierarchical. Students enjoy a true "open door" policy, by which they can contact any of the lawyers at any time.

In addition, each year, one lawyer is assigned as the articling student's mentor in order to ensure that the student has a point of first contact for general questions, for assistance with particular assignments, and to monitor the student's workload for quantity and variety. As well, the mentor provides the student with on-going feedback about their work and a more formal mid-term evaluation.

Hireback and Career Opportunities

In choosing where to complete their articles, many students quite properly consider the possibility of future employment as a lawyer.

Like all law offices which serve unions, including private firms, the Legal Department cannot guarantee that an articling student will be hired back as a lawyer.

However, the Legal Department has a long history of hiring lawyers from among former articling students. Currently, two of our six lawyers articulated here.

As well, all students who articulated for the Legal Department and who wished to pursue a career in union-side labour law have been able to do so. The Legal Department has always made every effort to assist its former articling students in finding work.

Wages and Benefits

USW provides articling students with a salary and benefits comparable to other union-side law offices, as well as payment of fees for the lawyer licensing process.

Listed below is a selection of our articling students along with a summary of their careers after they articulated with us.

1995-1996 – David Doorey Upon the completion of his articles, David practised with a union-side labour firm in B.C. He returned to the USW in 1998 and practised with us until 2001. He is now a professor of Work Law at York University.

1998-1999 – Colleen Barrett Colleen is working as a Senior Policy Advisor for the Ontario Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development.

1999-2000 – Travis Kearns Immediately following his articles, Travis was hired by a union-side labour law firm. He is currently a Manager for Mediation at the Ontario Labour Relations Board.

2004-2005 – Kirsten Agrell After articling, Kirsten was hired to work in the Legal Department on a contract for a year. She is presently in-house counsel to the Operating Engineers (IUOE).

2006-2007 – Heather Ann McConnell Following her articles, Heather Ann was hired as in-house counsel to UNITE HERE. After practising at a union-side firm for many years, she was recently appointed as a part-time Vice-Chair at the ORLB.

2007-2008 – John No John practises law in the Workers' Rights division of Parkdale Community Legal Services.

2008-2009 – Michael Urminsky Prior to the conclusion of his articles, Michael was hired by the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada (PIPSC), where he presently works in Ottawa.

2009-2010 – Lesley Gilchrist Lesley is working as a Senior Grievance Officer with the Ontario Public Service Employees' Union.

2013-2014 – Cody Hedman Cody went on to work for two unions in British Columbia.

2014-2015 – Saneliso Moyo After articling, Saneliso was hired back to work in the Legal Department on a contract. She is presently counsel at a union-side labour law firm.

2015-2016 – Lisa Leinveer After articling, Lisa was hired to work as counsel at a union-side labour law firm. She now practises in the area of mental health and human rights law.

2016-2017 – Jason Huang Jason opened his own practice and practises in the areas of labour, employment, and human rights law.

2017-2018 – Amy Brubacher Amy is an employment lawyer at Don Valley Community Legal Services.

2018-2019 – Andrew Link Andrew went on to work for two public-sector unions.

2019-2020 – Amanda Hawkins Amanda is currently working as a Labour Relations Officer (Litigation) with the Ontario Nurses Association.

2020-2021 – Kristina Adhikari Kristina was hired back into the USW Legal Department immediately following her articling term.

2021-2022 – Michelle Huang Michelle was hired by a union-side labour law firm in British Columbia prior to the conclusion of her articling term.

2022-2023 – Breshna Durrani Breshna went on to work as a Grievance Officer with the Ontario Public Service Employees' Union.

2023-2024 – Jacqueline Moizer Jacqueline was hired by a union-side labour law firm in Ottawa prior to the conclusion of her articling term.