

UNDER THE RAINBOW



Equality During Times of Austerity

The project called **“Leadership, Feminism and Equality in Unions in Canada”** explores the current climate and attitudes to feminism, women’s leadership and equality through conversations with women activists, leaders and staff from public and private sector unions, as well as central labour bodies. Close to 50 women from eight different provinces and a range of age groups participated, including racialized women, lesbians, women with a disability and Aboriginal women.

This is **the second of three articles** exploring what these activists had to say about unions and women’s equality issues today. It focusses on how the labour movement is addressing equality concerns created by the current economic climate and politics of austerity. Union sisters agree the situation is challenging, but avoiding a discussion of labour’s commitment to advancing an equality agenda would be a mistake.

For more information on the project, visit our website at www.womenunions.apps01.yorku.ca or contact us at lbriskin@yorku.ca.

THE MID 1970s AND ‘80s WERE HEADY times for feminist trade unionists. We thought the world was our oyster and were determined to attain the pearls of justice and equality for women. We pressed our unions to take up the fight for women’s equality in bargaining and through campaigns for pay equity and child care. We demanded acknowledgment of our reproductive rights, and action to end violence against women. And we won recognition inside the labour movement through affirmative action seats, women’s committees, anti-harassment policies and other equality initiatives.

This feminist activism got results and, for many years, unions stepped up to play a growing role in pushing doors open for women. In the face of the current political and economic climate, however, the “pearls” we fought so hard to secure have become more difficult to find in our workplaces and within the labour movement itself. Equality gains are now at risk.

A NEW REALITY

These are tough times. In every corner of Canada, well-paid, full-time jobs are rapidly disappearing and being replaced by precarious, low-wage, part-time and casual positions. Employers are demanding concessions on wages, hours of work, job security, benefits and pensions. Businesses are closing. Thou-

sands of workers are being laid off and for longer periods.

Governments have supported this anti-worker agenda by enacting back-to-work legislation and imposing restrictions on collective bargaining and organizing rights. There are threats to bring in “right to work” measures. Since May 2011, for example, the federal government has moved at lightning speed to end or forestall job action by postal, Air Canada, and railway workers. Last August, before strike votes had even been taken, the Ontario government took the provocative step of rushing through Bill 115 and stripping teachers and education workers of their right to free collective bargaining.

At the same time, public services are under relentless attack. Federal, provincial and local governments regularly use the mantra of “austerity” to justify spending cuts, axe social programs and services, shrink the civil service, lay off workers, and increase privatization.

Both the economic crisis and austerity agenda have hit women hard. But that’s not all. Right-wing

BUTTON ILLUSTRATION: NORTHLAND POSTER COLLECTIVE

By Linda Briskin, Sue Genge,
Margaret McPhail,
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In the late '70s and early '80s, unions and women's groups, like Organized Working Women, played an important role, together, in building support for strikes at predominantly female workplaces, including Fleck, Radio Shack and Blue Cross. Left to right: Wendy Cutherbertson (United Auto Workers), Shelley Acheson (Ontario Federation of Labour human rights director), Deidre Gallagher (United Steelworkers) and Cathy Duhaime (United Steelworkers Local 6500).

governments have also taken direct aim at women's equality. At the federal level alone, attacks by Harper's Conservatives include threatening reproductive rights, cutting support for child care, eliminating pay equity for federal government workers, shutting down the gun registry, and ending funding for activist women's organizations. "What we've seen most recently around austerity is both governments and employers taking advantage of it to lower the bar," pointed out one union sister who took part in the project. "And this is clearly having an impact on women's situation."

The right-wing shift is further reflected in anti-immigration and refugee legislation that has fostered racist and ethnocentric backlash. There has also been an exponential growth in the use of migrant workers who lack any real access to asserting their rights. According to the *Vancouver Sun* (November 17, 2012), fast-food chains such as Wendy's and McDonald's are among the biggest employers of temporary foreign workers in the country.

LABOUR'S RESPONSE

There is no question that the ongoing economic crisis and right-wing political climate are putting tremendous pressure on workers and on unions. In our conversations, union sisters spoke again and again about the serious challenges that unions face

today in setting priorities for action, protecting members, and defending workers' rights.

Yet, these discussions also highlighted the disturbing reality that union campaigns are paying scant attention to equality issues or the impact of the austerity agenda on women. A participant commented, "The impact of austerity on equality is a reality with governments and employers, and also within unions." Another went further, saying, "It feels like the union movement these days is mirroring the broader conservative trends in society, as opposed to challenging them."

There is real concern that earlier progress made by the labour movement in advancing women's equality is not secure. One union woman voiced her worry, saying: "I don't want to say we've made no gains, but it has been brought home to me in the last four or five years just how fragile those gains are."

MARGINALIZATION OF EQUALITY

Many sisters noted that union leaderships have responded to these aggressive corporate and right-wing government attacks with campaigns focussed more and more on "core" issues of jobs, wages and benefits. Women's and other equality issues are being sidelined; the long-fought-for gender lens is disappearing. Even when there is some attempt to include equality, it is just an add-on: "Oh, and women

are hit hard, too." One of the sisters spoke for many, when she said: "When I started, there was a gender lens on almost everything. And it seems like now there is nothing: there is no gender lens, there is no equality lens. We've become an aside again." Another despaired, "There was an analysis done of the federal budget and I read it and, so help me God, I almost started to weep. If I'd had time to cry, I would have. There wasn't one mention of women in that analysis."

Labour's prevailing message seems to be: "We're all the same when it comes to fighting for good jobs." Union women and equality activists know this is simply not the case. Decades of feminist research and struggle have shown that the experiences of women differ significantly from those of most male workers.

The campaign to protect and enhance public pensions is one demonstration of a weak commitment to addressing women's distinct concerns. This timely and important initiative rarely highlighted the important reality that women, on average, receive lower pensions, work in jobs with no pension plans, and rely more on public pension plans. Similarly, unions have not linked their resistance to attacks on sick leave plans to the fact that women, especially those with children, rely on sick leave more than men. Nor has the fight around Employment Insurance really taken up the implications for women with respect to part-time and casual work, and accessing EI maternity/parental, compassionate care and sick leave benefits.

There is also growing concern that unions are replacing the words "equality" and "equity" with a more generic reference to "fairness." This disturbing direction has taken many union women by surprise. Said one: "All of a sudden ... we weren't to use the word 'equity,' we were to use the word 'fairness.'" It's bad enough that this shift in language obscures gender and other forms of systemic discrimination and hides women's specific equality concerns. What's even worse, one sister pointed out, is that it mirrors the path Harper Conservatives took in 2006. They claimed that women were equal and expunged the word "equality" from all government programs. "You know, when Harper came in, he decided the word 'equality' needn't be in things. I never thought I would have the same debate within my own union to maintain a word like equality!"

Even when it comes to the "core" issues of jobs and wages, there seems to be no gender analysis. Take job loss, for example. Unions and central labour bodies moved quickly to mobilize when the wave of job losses and plant closures hit the manufacturing and resource sectors, where the work force is predominantly men — as they should have. Yet, we have not seen the same "pull out all the stops" central campaigns over cuts to health care, educa-

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tion, social services, and public administration. These cuts have a particular impact on women, who are losing what are not only well-paid and, usually, unionized jobs, but also much needed supports for themselves and their families. "The labour movement made a big issue — a huge campaign — when mostly men started to lose their jobs in large numbers," emphasized one participant. "Well, that's been happening with women's work for a very, very long time but there was no campaign that was pursued. Nothing to stop the bleeding."

The labour movement wore similar blinkers in responding to the federal government stimulus programs, which provided funding for infrastructure development in construction, for example, but offered no support for social infrastructure such as child care, where women work.

Ditto for labour's campaign on the steep rise in precarious, part-time and casual employment. Generally these jobs are not well paid and have few, if any, benefits. Unionized workplaces are rare and workplace protections weak. Nearly 20 per cent of Canadians work part time and for a quarter of these, it's involuntary. They simply cannot find full-time jobs. But what is also true — and less acknowledged — is that young, racialized and women workers predominate in this sector. At a recent Union Sisters dinner in Vancouver, one woman spoke movingly of her struggle to survive despite working three jobs. Her situation is certainly not unique.

REDUCED SPACE FOR ACTIVISM

Aggressive employer and government attacks, coupled with declining membership and dues, have also taken their toll on equality work inside unions. There were numerous reports that unions are responding with their own "austerity" policies, in which women's and other equality programs are often seen as expendable. Funding is reduced, staff cut back, and programs "streamlined" or eliminated outright. As a result, there are now fewer women's conferences and women-only courses and training. Women's committee meetings are smaller and less frequent. Equality initiatives and materials are more limited. Many echoed the sentiment expressed by this comment: "I feel that we've gone backwards. It's all about money. It's all about funding. It's not about including women."

Participants noted an increased centralization of decision-making in unions and central labour bodies, often under the guise of "efficiency" and "modernization." The loss of democratic space means there is much less room for grassroots debate and organizing, which limits the ability of women and other equality-seeking groups to exercise influence. One activist commented, "I'm seeing a more hierarchical union now. There's more hoarding of information, there's more 'we're the board, we make all the decisions.'" Another reported that "It's just incredibly centralized and the power has been taken away from the demands of women."

The current leadership is also focussing on lobbying and electoral strategies, rather than educating and mobilizing union members. Strong criticism was voiced about the effectiveness of this approach: "There's a leadership that has taken an approach which is a strategic failure for the labour movement, which is to focus on polling and electoral politics and the occasional policy statement, without any real effort to engage the base of the labour movement in what is a huge challenge."

Many believe these trends reflect the shallow commitment the current union leadership has to equality and inclusion. As one activist expressed it, "The economic realities I do believe have made it difficult for women. I think it's given the leader-

ship at all levels an opportunity, or an excuse, as to why they cannot fund programs which support women's equality."

But opportunistic or not, sidelining equality is just not a smart strategy. One look at the changing demographics of the workplace and union membership makes it clear that the "big issues" of everyday survival cannot be separated in any meaningful way from issues of equality. An integrated focus, along with the input and leadership of women and other equality-seeking groups, is essential if labour is to mobilize around a progressive alternative and build a successful fight-back campaign. "If we're going to attract women to be really engaged in the union movement, we have to do everything we can to shift their perceptions [so they] see unions as vehicles for social justice. We need to push unions in every way we can to be engaged in bigger social justice issues."

LOSS OF ALLIES

In every conversation, union sisters acknowledged how significant the community-based women's movement has been in reinforcing equality work within the labour movement. Independent organizing by women helped define and popularize issues of importance to working women — issues like child care, violence against women, and repro-

THISTLE

ductive rights. Activists from different communities offered feminist analysis that integrated the concerns of women of colour, Aboriginal women, women with disabilities and lesbians. And groups outside the labour movement offered venues for union women to come together and strategize alongside other feminists. This assessment expresses it well: "Women got a lot of strength and support from these community-based organizations and, strategically, they were important. Based on my experience, the labour movement was more willing to listen to women inside the movement because they knew some pressure would come from those outside structures."

Participants were clear about what the demise of so many women's organizations — many of these under the Harper government — has cost us. "Once we lost NAC and started losing a number of the other national women's organizations, women in the trade union movement also started losing support," was one observation. Another voiced our loss this way: "We do not have the women's movement that we had when most of us got engaged in advancing women's equality within unions. The movement, as a women's movement, is far weaker. And that reduces the power of women within the labour movement, because we don't have the kind of leverage that we did before."

FINDING RAINBOWS

Those of us involved in this project believe labour can strengthen its fight against the hostile anti-worker and anti-union agenda of business and governments by reaffirming its commitment to equality organizing. Equality must be understood as an integral part of labour's perspective and its work.

And while we all share deep concerns about current trends on equality organizing, we also see grounds for optimism. Recalling the importance of groups such as Organized Working Women (Ontario), Union Sisters (British Columbia) and Saskatchewan Working Women, participants pointed to the recent revival of Union Sisters as an example of renewed self-organizing by union feminists. Following their first dinner last fall in Vancouver, where over 90 women engaged in spirited discussion, this group continues to meet. Last October, the NDP Women's Forum in Ottawa brought together women activists and organizations, including union women, to restart a conversation on moving women's equality forward. This January, over 150 union and community women participated in a provincial women's forum on issues affecting Saskatchewan women. And most recently, following the Ontario Federation of Labour's Women's Leadership Summit on current challenges facing union women, it was exciting to see the OFL International Women's Day statement put equality as a central task of the union movement.

There are now fewer women's conferences and women-only courses and training



PHOTOGRAPH: GEOFF BICKERTON

Marion Pollack, seen here last year at a pro-choice rally in Vancouver, is a retired postal worker, and member of the Canadian Union of Public Employees. She is also one of the authors of this article.

Union sisters also highlighted situations where labour has stepped up on women's equality issues. They are telling illustrations of the difference it can make when our unions put their collective strength behind an equality cause. For instance, the Equality: Once and For All! campaign organized by the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) Women's Department in 2008 demonstrated how the labour movement can build a co-ordinated campaign on women's equality issues. The Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) helped raise awareness of the Harper government's attacks on women's equality with its campaign against stripping pay equity rights from the federal public service and closing Status of Women Canada offices. And the union movement joined with feminists to organize support for the campaign to save the gun registry.

There have also been union campaigns to defend women workers. In British Columbia, for example,

the Hospital Employees Union (HEU) stopped the contracting out of mostly women's jobs at a veterans care facility by launching a comprehensive media campaign and working directly with both residents and family members to galvanize support. The strike by education support staff employed by the Edmonton Catholic School Board is similar. As reported in *Our Times* (March 2012), the largely female membership of Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP) Local 52-A organized a successful strike against attempts to "shift from full-time positions to more precarious part-time and casual work." The strike highlighted how austerity often means balancing the books at the expense of women whose work is undervalued.

These signs of rekindled activism give us hope. A sister captured this spirit of possibility, saying: "As much as things seem very bleak, there's some rainbows out there, sisters!"

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Linda Briskin and her colleagues are presenting their work on "Leadership, Feminism and Equality in Unions in Canada" at the 2013 United Association for Labor Education (UALE) conference.

Our Times welcomes feedback. Send yours to editor@ourtimes.ca.



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