

HOW TO REVITALIZE UNION WOMEN'S COMMITTEES

Six Challenges and Six Strategies for Change

The project on **"Leadership, Feminism and Equality in Unions in Canada"** explores the current climate and attitudes to feminism, women's leadership and equality in Canada's labour movement through conversations with women activists, leaders and staff from public and private sector unions, central labour bodies, and eight different provinces. Close to 50 women from a range of age groups participated, including racialized women, lesbians, women with a disability and Aboriginal women. All quotations are from the project's teleconferences. Participants requested anonymity.

This is **the last of three articles**. It examines the challenges facing union women's committees, and explores strategies for revisioning and revitalizing women's organizing *inside* unions. Visit the project website at www.womenunions.apps01.yorku.ca or contact us by email at lbriskin@yorku.ca.

AN IMPORTANT MOMENT IN THE struggle for union structures for women took place at the 1990 Empowering Women conference organized by the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC). Attended by 600 delegates, the conference focussed on strategies to increase women's empowerment through collective action in unions, workplaces and communities. The decision by conference organizers to have separate workshops for the men in attendance was controversial. Men were belligerent about what they saw as segregation and reverse discrimination. Some women supported them. But many women were angry about being distracted from the business at hand.

For well over a decade, women activists had already been advocating for women's structures as a way to support the equality agenda within the labour movement. Sustained pressure and grassroots organizing had won some victories. All provincial federations of labour and the CLC had established women's committees, some as early as 1970 (in B.C.). In the late 1970s and early 1980s, most large unions in Canada had set up national women's committees, and many organized conferences for women members. The blow-up at the 1990 CLC conference was not the first confrontation over the right of union women to meet and organize separately, nor was it the last. However, it did provoke

public debate and helped to cement, at that time, some support for such organizing, including among union leadership.

Separate organizing by women now takes a variety of forms within Canadian unions. It includes women-only educational conferences and workshops, and training programs for women activists and leaders, such as the Prairie School for Union Women. Informal women's networks and caucuses also keep activists connected. They often meet spontaneously at conventions or keep in touch through social media. But key to strengthening women's place in unions are the formal, and sometimes elected, national, provincial and local women's committees mandated by union constitutions and by-laws.

In our conversations, union sisters agreed that such structures have played a significant role in transforming Canadian unions and building union equality work. The committees have supported, educated and organized women, and helped encourage new leaders. They have contributed to changing union policies, expanding the collective bargaining agenda, and developing alliances with communities outside unions.

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PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY ADRIANE PAAVO



The loss of women’s committees would increase the risk that union women’s concerns as activists and workers will be marginalized

LEFT: The Prairie School for Union Women remains one of the most inspiring women-only annual educational gatherings in the Canadian labour movement.



PHOTOGRAPH: JOEL DUFF/OFL

For these reasons, participants were troubled by re-emerging challenges to the legitimacy of women-only spaces and the diminishing room for women to come together to build skills, discuss issues and develop strategies. As one woman put it, “*What I’m hearing the men saying now is that the time for women meeting alone in women’s committees is over.*” The loss of women’s committees would significantly increase the risk that union women’s concerns as activists and workers will be marginalized.

At the same time, participants raised questions about the effectiveness of existing women’s committees as vehicles for advancing women’s equality. Many agreed that “*women’s committees are struggling. They’re struggling to figure out what they should be doing, but there’s also a kind of hunger out there to do things.*” It is in this context that we examine the challenges facing union women’s committees and explore strategies for revitalizing, revisioning and reinvigorating women’s organizing inside unions.

CHALLENGE 1: FORMALIZED STRUCTURE AND MEMBERSHIP

The acceptance of women’s committees as official union bodies was a critical step in affirming labour’s recognition of women’s equality issues. However, participants in this project also recognized that the now-formalized structure of many of these committees, particularly at the central level, has meant a loss of autonomy and created barriers to activism. “*Whereas we fought for these committees to*

advance women’s issues and women’s equality, they became very constrained and confined spaces.”

The obstacles are many. The size of women’s committees is frequently restricted and members are often selected by the leadership, raising concerns about who gets — and stays — on. One woman summed up these dynamics, saying: “*You piss them off and you’re not there any more.*” Meetings take place within pre-established timelines and are limited in number. Plans for action must go through “channels” and need to be approved. Committee members are often not involved directly in implementation.

These constraints have often made it difficult for activists to seize the moment, and be involved in their union women’s committees and campaigns in a meaningful way. At the same time, alternative grassroots organizing may be derailed since the formal committees are frequently seen as the only “legitimate” structure for union work around women’s equality. One activist expressed it this way: “[*It used to be that*] there was this wave of women doing really wonderful things and there was no structure. But one structure was put into place — women’s committees — and they forced women to fit into the structure.”

CHALLENGE 2: POWER BASE

Participants were troubled by the fact that formal women’s committees often have little power. As one woman commented, “*Changes in the labour movement mean that the women’s committees now have very little, if any, clout. They have to sort of toe the line as to the campaigns that*



PHOTOGRAPH: JOEL DUFF/OFL

are put out there for them.” The loss of power has also meant a loss of control. “When it shifted to a union leadership that wanted to contain things, it was ‘Let’s just push this work off to a committee and we can control who’s on the committee and we can control what the committee does because we have the purse strings.’”

Women’s committees do not have the authority attached to core union functions such as collective bargaining, health and safety, and member representation: “The fact is, women’s committees have no power in the structure of many unions. You have the health and safety committee, which has the regs and real power at the workplace. You have the grievance committee, which has its own power in the workplace. The women’s committee has no power.” In fact, the power of women’s committees and activists has always been linked to grassroots organizing and support.

Sadly, many formal women’s committees have become isolated from rank-and-file members and do not have a base of power within their unions. “Unless women’s voices are connected to some kind of power base that men understand, they really don’t hear you.” One participant emphasized that, “you need to have a critical mass of women with feminist thinking to have any impact.” Another pointed out that the power to make change is not only vested in top leadership: “It’s not just about leaders. If you just have individuals at the top, you’re not going to have the power to bring about change.”

As a result of this loss of power and control, women’s committees are unable to exert much influence on union strategy and campaigns, or ensure

that women’s equality concerns are addressed. In the current climate, this is particularly troubling, since union campaigns are paying little attention to the impact on women of both the economic crisis and the right-wing political shift, and union leadership has shown little desire to take up women’s and other equality issues. This loss of influence is compounded by the absence of the independent women’s movement. “It was the very vibrant and strong women’s movement that made the labour movement more progressive and we’re really suffering from the overall weakening of the women’s movement.”

CHALLENGE 3: MANDATE AND VISION

Most participants expressed concern that women’s committees are now both less active and less effective in organizing for change. One union sister said, “Most of our unions do have women’s committees, but they’re not really pushing the political agenda.” She was not alone in her concern. And many agreed that women’s committees are also “not moving the feminism agenda forward.” The political organizing of many committees now seems focussed primarily on established days of action, such as December 6th and March 8th. It is less common for committees to initiate and build campaigns on other women’s equality issues. “Women’s committees are expected to organize around International Women’s Day and December 6th, and those are the points that all of our work revolves around. Commemorating these days is very important, but that shouldn’t be the only thing that we focus on.”



PHOTOGRAPH: JOEL DUFF/OFL

Indeed, some observed with dismay that, rather than political action, a growing number of women's committees centre their external efforts on charity work and/or fundraising to support community-based women's organizations, adopt families during holiday seasons, collect clothes for those in need, etc. This work may build ties with local and diverse communities. However, it focusses on helping indi-

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viduals rather than organizing to ensure that necessary services are provided to all. It also does not challenge unions to take action on women's equality issues in the union, workplace, and wider community. In fact, one activist said: "I am shocked that the women's committee was a women's charity-type institute, with bake sales and 'sponsor a family for Christmas' but not much else. They [acted like] Euro-centric, almost Victorian, benefactors giving clothes and gifts to a family, which they continued to look out for. It was a sense of 'we do good for the lesser man and aren't we better for it.'"

Participants also noted that many women's committees now function mainly as support groups for those involved, "to become a sort of retreat and a break and a safe place for women to go and share ideas of common

identity." The importance of validating, mentoring, and educating women to step forward as activists and leaders was acknowledged. At the same time, concerns were expressed: "The work of women's committees doesn't really go much beyond the committee itself to any kind of transformation, other than the sort of inward-directed focus upon mutual support. So the union women's committees could become this kind of isolated, club-like enclave. But I do wonder how far we can get as feminists and unions with that type of focus as a priority."

CHALLENGE 4: EQUALITY LEADERS

Regrettably, the chilly and at times hostile climate many feminists face inside unions, and the dismissal and isolation they often experience, discourage some younger activists from getting involved in union equality work, and in particular, in women's committees. "Women face a constant battle between speaking up on women's issues and knowing that it's possible, if you speak up, that you're never going to be invited to the table again." One spoke of the "ton of feminist casualties in the labour movement. In my darker moments that's how it feels to me." Another said: "I certainly feel that the women who are being targeted are the ones that were more explicitly feminist."

It is not surprising that equality activism is often not seen as a stepping stone for women who aspire to leadership roles. Instead, many seek recognition for their work in health and safety, organizing, or bargaining. "If women want to be taken more seriously within their locals and have plans, either personal ambition or small

'p' political ambition, they're more likely to be involved in other kinds of committees than the women's committee." Another agreed: "What I'm finding with a number of young women — extraordinarily talented, brilliant, future-leader women — is that they do not want to be tagged with 'the women's committee.' They want to be a good organizer. They want to be known as an expert in health and safety. They do not want to be known as a leader on equity." These realities reinforce the isolation of women's committees, and their lack of influence at the leadership level.

CHALLENGE 5: INTERLOCKING OPPRESSIONS

It is important that women active on women's committees and in equality organizing understand and take account of multiple and interlocking oppressions based on race, culture, sexuality, class or ability. For example, racialized women undoubtedly experience discrimination differently than racialized men or white women, just as able-bodied women experience discrimination differently than women living with a disability. As one woman said: "Whether it's the issue of pay equity or child care or the right to choose, it impacts all women. It just impacts women who self-identify from equity groups differently."

Unfortunately, it is still common for unions and their leaderships to treat women's issues as primarily about white women. As a result, the representation of women from other equality-seeking groups on appointed women's committees is tokenistic. "There's this sense of equity tokenism. If you have a lesbian or an Aboriginal woman or a woman with a disability, that is the accomplishment in itself."

Addressing diversity and multiple oppressions in those committees is also sometimes nominal: "For a lot of people, diversity really is tokenism. It means you have one woman of colour, it means you have one Aboriginal woman, but there isn't really a very deep understanding of what it means to depend on diversity and why diversity is still important."

Women who identify as a member of another equality-seeking group are often forced to choose where to get involved, further narrowing the membership and scope of women's committees. "There are the women's issues and then there are the issues of other equity groups. There's been some attempts to bridge that gap, but it was really clear to me that women were being asked to choose whether they were women first or racialized first or whatever other equity group."

CHALLENGE 6: SOLIDARITY AROUND EQUALITY ACTIVISM

The women who participated in this project spoke about the challenges that equality-seeking groups inside the labour movement face in working together to identify, understand and confront multiple forms of discrimination. Since committee structures have become overly formalized, there is a tendency to operate as silos. This undermines the ability of equality-seeking members to come together around a common equality agenda or act in solidarity with each other's issues.



PHOTOGRAPH: JOEL DUFF/OFL

It was disquieting to hear the many reports of growing competition for resources among equality-seeking groups. One activist voiced her worry this way: "It's like there's one pie and there's only so many pieces. And then the minority groups are going after that same piece. I've seen the competition and the stepping on each other and the game-playing to get that one piece." The fact that many unions are adopting internal austerity policies which are being used as a justification for under-resourcing, and often cancelling hard-fought-for equality programs, can intensify such competition.

Growing pressure from central union leadership to combine all equality work into a single structure to save resources is also a source of tension. Many participants thought that merging into one big "equity" committee would be a step backward, despite their concerns about the isolating effects of separate committees. There was agreement that each equality-seeking group continues to need space to define its own issues, and to strategize and organize around them. "We need a space to bring equity groups together to have that dialogue. Yet, you also need the space to self-mobilize and organize and discuss issues separately. There needs to be a balance."



It was the very vibrant and strong women's movement that made the labour movement more progressive

IMAGINING THE FUTURE

All our conversations during this project considered the future for women's equality organizing within the labour movement. While those who participated did not presume to have the answers, we all remain passionate about the importance of this work both for women and for union renewal. History has taught us that women will always have to organize to protect gains and expand our rights. As one sister stated, "In this environment, we are not going to get a lot of help from our institutions. We have to make it a priority to build something ourselves that will facilitate this." It is in this spirit that we conclude this series of articles with some of the strategies these activists offered for revitalizing, revisioning and reinvigorating women's organizing inside unions.

STRATEGY 1: RECLAIM GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING

The critical importance of reclaiming grassroots organizing was a recurring theme in these conversations. "Two conditions are required for women's effective engagement in decision-making and effecting change: there needs to be a critical mass and then women must find a way to connect with one another." A consensus emerged that moving outside established structures was necessary. Said one woman of her recent experience: "Instead of

being confined to the traditional convention women's forum where it's very controlled and where there's speakers from the front, women delegates met as caucus around trying to fight for structural changes. That was a glimmer of hope: women organizing outside the confines of a committee." The union sisters who participated also remembered that "we were always very crafty as feminists, figuring out ways to get things done. Many of us need to get back to that and not rely on the structures that have been put in place in our organizations."

STRATEGY 2: ORGANIZE WITH OTHER EQUALITY-SEEKING GROUPS

Participants emphasized that building co-operation between women's committees and those of other equality-seeking groups is critical. They stressed the importance of working collectively, as opposed to in isolation, in order to advance a broad equality agenda. Such organizing will promote a culture of alliances and enhance inclusive solidarity. It will also advance the union equality project, deepen democracy, and help revitalize unions. Supporting each other in accessing needed resources, rather than competing for them, and intersectional anti-oppression training (including how multiple oppressions interrelate) for leadership, activists and staff were two important suggestions.



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STRATEGY 3: BUILD CROSS-UNION WOMEN'S ORGANIZING

Many reminisced with enthusiasm about the cross-union organizations of women such as Ontario Working Women (OWW), Saskatchewan Working Women (SWW), and Union Sisters, in British Columbia. They called for the reinvention of this form of grassroots organizing. Said one: *"Some of my earliest involvement in and around the labour movement was very much working across unions and we were very much outside the establishment and fighting to become established. And maybe it's like wishing we could go back to some of that. It's more of that bringing women together across unions and outside of the top-down structures. More grassroots organizing again."* Such cross-union structures can also help build ties with communities.

STRATEGY 4: WORK WITH OUR COMMUNITIES

In every conversation, activists acknowledged the significance of the community-based women's movement in reinforcing equality work within unions, and the negative impact of the demise of so many women's organizations. Some suggested that women's committees and activists should now be seeking out opportunities to build new relationships with community organizations in order to strengthen women's committees, build equality activism, and support the renewal of our unions. *"It's an important moment for us to think about where we can build up space and build up the movement."* Participants recognized "the

Building cooperation between women's committees and other equality-seeking groups will promote a culture of inclusive solidarity

opportunity in being away from that power of union hierarchies, opportunity that is more grassroots, more about communities, more connected with coalitions."

In particular, we heard that racialized and Aboriginal women, as well as younger women, are often choosing to organize as activists in their communities rather than inside the labour movement: *"We're going to go work in our communities where we actually see things on the ground happening and we can build up our communities."* Several spoke of connecting with and also within racialized communities, as a way *"to revitalize what's happening within the labour movement."*

STRATEGY 5: BRIDGE THE GENERATIONS

The generation of feminists involved in the establishment of union women's committees are retiring, and so the history of those early struggles and successes is being lost. We need to recover these histories in order to build connections across generations of women union activists. One union activist, who indicated she was *"not young any more but sort of in the middle of my working life,"* said she loved

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the stories that older activists tell about past challenges and achievements. She talked about her own isolation and noted the older generation “*bad a movement to attach those things to.*” Another said, “*There are stories and sharing that could happen for younger women to have a better understanding of the fights and the battles.*”

At the same time, “*honouring the perspectives of younger women coming into the movement,*” and exploring generational differences, is critical to the success of future organizing. In particular, we heard that younger activists are concerned about work-life balance and have seen the toll activism has taken on older feminists in the labour movement. Some are also discouraged by union hierarchies. One woman summed it up: “*What we’ve found is that women are not involved in the union because the union culture is not conducive to them.*”

STRATEGY 6: FOSTER CONVERSATIONS

The value of union sisters coming together and having frank conversations about where we are now and how to move forward is a fitting conclusion to this series of articles. One commented about the impact of the Leadership, Feminism and Equality teleconference. “*I just want to say that, whatever form it takes, we have to keep having this conversation. I’m happy I’m having it with different women and the circle is so large and the interest so large, because I’m sick of just whining to the same people. Not that I don’t love the people I whine to, but it’s nice to hear different voices and different ideas and different experiences. I started out despairing and I still feel despair, but I’m also feeling some excitement.*” Another said, “*I was very struck by how quickly the connections happened when we started talking about what’s really important to us, in a way that there’s lots of listening, lots of respect. And, you know, this is part of our deep heritage. This is what consciousness-raising was all about.*”

Reaching out will be central to building on these conversations. “*When I meet with the members who aren’t involved in the union, there’s lots of great, interesting, feminist women out there. So, it just seems like we’re just not reaching them.*” Another talked about the importance of “*that day-to-day, ongoing work of talking to members and maybe getting back some of those kitchen-table, coffee-break discussions about feminism and what feminism means these days.*”

Such approaches can be used to break down isolation among activists, and to build strong networks. Among younger activists, the widespread use of and comfort with electronic communication and interactive media such as Facebook, Twitter and wiki-pages offers new vehicles for making connections both within and across unions. “*Social media is one of the ways we connect with younger women. We’ve been finding that if we want younger people to be involved, it has to be done through social media — that’s where they are.*”

We look forward to these conversations continuing and to the emergence of new collective strategies to renew the fight for women’s equality in the labour movement. Reclaiming the power and energy of women’s committees which have, in the

past, played a key role in transforming unions, may well be central to reinvigorating women’s organizing inside unions. As Nancy Riche reminded us in *Dear Sister, Dear Sister* (2002): “*We must be ever vigilant, demanding and noisy. Not everyone will like you (it would be easier if they did), but you will get things done.*”



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For more information about the Prairie School for Union Women, visit www.sgeu.org/prairie-school-union-women. For a good, complementary read, check out **Sisters and Solidarity: Women in Unions in Canada**, by Julie White (Thompson Educational Publishing, Toronto, 1993).

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