

STRONG UNIONS NEED WOMEN



Leadership, Feminism and Equality in Unions in Canada

*New and recurring resistance to feminism in the labour movement, or
“Waking Up in the Men’s Room”¹*

This summary is based on conversations with 44 union women, activists, leaders and staff from across Canada. During the course of our conversations, sisters identified examples of resistance to feminists and feminist ideas inside unions. There was a clear sense that, at best, progress on women’s equality in the labour movement is stalled; at worst, there is evidence of outright disregard and active pushback.

IN THE OLDEN DAYS

Women started organizing as feminists in the labour movement in Canada in the 1970s and met considerable resistance to taking up campaigns for women’s equality and to changing the internal orientation of unions themselves. Then, we heard arguments such as:

- Feminism is a middle class movement. It has no relevance for working women.
- Feminism will divide the union movement when what we need is unity.
- Child care is not a union issue; reproductive choice is not a union issue; (fill in the blank) is not a union issue.

Women also faced injustice and harassment directed at them personally or as a group. It was not uncommon for union brothers to use derogatory language about women, workers of colour, or gay and lesbian members. Nor was it unusual for women to be inappropriately propositioned, touched and harassed.

NOWADAYS: WHAT WE HEARD

Feminists still face resistance, although it is usually more subtle and sophisticated. Some of the identified patterns seem to be new, while others have just changed form. Many described disturbing examples of discriminatory treatment and harassment directed at women leaders and activists. We also heard about resistance to feminists and feminist ideas; a failure to integrate equality into the analysis and campaign work of unions; and the marginalization of women’s equality concerns within unions’ own internal operations.

A. UNION CAMPAIGNS

- Sidelining the issues

Women’s equality issues such as childcare, equal pay, violence against women and reproductive rights still remain largely sidelined. We heard they are rarely given priority as separate organizing issues, directly integrated into central campaigns, or profiled in public statements and interventions. This is reflected in limited resources, including staff, research, and funding.

“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.”

¹ *Waking Up in the Men’s Room* is the title of a book by Catherine Mcleod, a feminist trade union activist, poet and author.

- Shifting the language in statements and campaigns

We are seeing the words “equality” and “equity” replaced by “fairness”. For example, the fight becomes about “wage fairness” rather than equal pay or pay equity. This shift hides women’s equality concerns and obscures gender and other forms of discrimination. And certainly “feminism” and “feminist” are rarely used in union statements, speeches or publications.

“We weren’t to use the word ‘equity’; we were to use ‘fairness’. I think it was so we didn’t get too crazy about trying to compare women’s wages.”

B. INTERNAL DIRECTION

- Closing the Circle

There was a strong sense that male leaders are “closing the circle” and actively or inadvertently excluding women and members of other equality-seeking groups. The centralization of power and decision-making within many union structures is seen as part of this process. There is less room for democratic discussion and diverse representation which reduces the potential for women and other equality-seeking activists to have influence.

“I believe that women’s equality took a back seat a long time ago - particularly in the union movement. We’re back at a time where the only time you seem to get noticed as a woman, even if you are a leader, is either when you’re a shit disturber - and when you’re a shit disturber you get dismissed or marginalized – or you behave like one of the boys.”

Concern was also expressed about the selection of some women leaders to represent women’s equality work, despite the fact that they do not come from a background of equality activism – and may not even define themselves as feminist. This pattern is linked to the growing centralization of power which has not only limited the numbers of women in leadership bodies, but has also strengthened the ability of union leaders – overwhelmingly male – to bring forward those who will support them and not rock the boat.

“From who I see are moving forward into leadership positions, coming on as staff, many of them would not utter the word ‘feminist’, and others ... may say the word but they’ll look at the male in the room to make sure it’s okay.”

- Appropriating the language /”Reinterpreting “ equality

Harassment policies and training often focus on sexual harassment in a narrow, traditional way and do not address comprehensive gender harassment issues. This limits our understanding of the ways in which harassment is used to “put women in their place”.

Alternatively, harassment policies are broadened to such an extent that they are no longer rooted in an understanding of systems of oppression and power. One result is that women have been accused of “harassment” when presenting feminist critiques of men’s politics or responding to sexist comments.

We are again hearing that elections and hiring should be determined on “merit”. Despite years of work to advance our understanding of employment equity principles and the impact of discrimination on disadvantaged groups, treating people differently is being equated with treating people unfairly. Commitments to representing an increasingly diverse membership, and to ensuring that diverse voices are heard within our unions, are falling off the agenda.

- Devaluing women’s leadership, “space”, voices and self-organizing

Male leaders often take over ownership and leadership on women’s equality issues when such issues gain a high profile. Women reported doing all the background and day-to-day work on these issues, but having to step aside as the union spokespeople.

We have also seen the emergence and promotion of self-proclaimed “feminist men” who claim they understand the issues and can represent women. They argue that unions don’t need to elect women into leadership, or ensure that the voices of women are heard. This understanding of the role of “allies” is troubling and has also been used to support replacing activists and leaders from other equality-seeking groups with white, straight men.

“It’s like do we need a brother coming to tell us this is really good? We can do that ourselves.”

These developments are reflected in the declining numbers of feminists in central leadership and staff roles. They also become part of the justification for reducing resources for equality committees and staff, devaluing equality-based initiatives, and holding fewer conferences, courses and training sessions for women activists.

“What I’m hearing the men say now is that the time for women meeting alone in women’s committees is over.”

C. DISRESPECT AND HARASSMENT

- Treatment and isolation of feminist leaders and activists/issues

Sisters talked about the undermining, isolation and dismissal of feminists at all levels, especially when they are outspoken or critical.

“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.”

There were numerous examples of male leaders treating feminist leaders, staff and activists with great disrespect. Not only is this behaviour not being “called”, there is a “trickle down” effect and it becomes a model picked up by others. Women leaders also reported being undermined and having limitations put on their roles and autonomy, being ignored in discussions, and not being invited to participate in key meetings. In some cases, deliberate campaigns have been organized to ensure outspoken women are not re-elected, or are forced into not running or early retirement.

“And our integrity and our reputation and our sex is really brought into the picture a lot - in the elections I’ve run in it has nothing to do with the skills I’ve brought - I mean it just gets so dirty ... I can turn your hair grey with some of the stories.”

Women leaders talked about the development of a culture of fear and the chilling effect it is having on emerging activists. In fact, many women we contacted who expressed great interest in the project told us that they were afraid to be associated with it because of the consequences they might face in their organizations.

“I’ve been seeing women thinking there’s no place for them in the union because they have seen what happens to women. It’s not pretty.”

Women of colour, Aboriginal women and young women also spoke about the isolation, disrespectful treatment and marginalization they experience. Few are represented on leadership bodies. The combination of sexism, racism and ageism has increased the barriers for these sisters.

“It feels to me like there’s a ton of feminist casualties in the labour movement ... In my darker moments that’s how it feels to me. A huge number of them are women of colour and I guess most people have – like me – that list of women - women of colour, particularly - who either haven’t had their contracts renewed or who have been cut.”

Feminist staff are also given little or no support for their work, re-assigned to duties other than equality work, or assigned so much work that they have little time or energy to work on equality campaigns or education. Those working on equality issues often find themselves left out of the loop when major campaigns are planned, suggesting a lack of commitment to integrating these perspectives. And outspoken member activists find they are no longer sent to conferences and workshops, or they're removed as representatives to women's committees.

"You piss them off and you're not there anymore."

- **Cyberbullying**

Cyberbullying of women leaders and staff was also raised as a new and pressing concern. These attacks are often focussed on sexuality, personal relationships and moral character. Cyberbullying is especially pernicious since it can reach a wide audience quickly and its anonymity makes it extremely difficult to address, change or stop.

"People feel freer to attack women in very much more personal ways than they attack men."

THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES

Despite this resistance, women continue to organize on women's equality issues, promote action in their unions, and support each other. Women also talked about the ways they and others are challenging anti-feminist acts within their unions and working to break down recurring resistance to women's leadership and equality activism. Networks of feminist women in and across unions continue to exist and to pursue collective responses.

SOME QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How do your experiences compare?
- Are there other forms of anti-feminism and resistance to equality? What do they look like?
- Is the argument that unions have to hunker down in the face of the current onslaught against workers' rights and organizations a new or old form of resistance?
- How are women leaders and activists coping with a climate of resistance and disrespect? What strategies for "survival" have been effective?
- How are feminist and equality activists challenging resistance to feminism and the devaluing of women leaders and women's voices?
- What spaces exist for women leaders and activists to talk about these issues? Are they formal or informal? Private or public? What spaces do we need?
- What is the impact of these forms of resistance on emerging women activists and leaders in the union movement?
- Are women more wary of being involved in feminist work in the unions? Are women turning to activism in their communities as an alternative? Is there a way to use these experiences to challenge unions and the resistance to women?