

## STRONG UNIONS NEED WOMEN



# Leadership, Feminism and Equality in Unions in Canada

### Impact of the current economic and political climate on equality organizing

Participants agreed that the current economic and political climate is putting tremendous pressure on workers and unions. At the same time, it is disturbing that union campaigns have paid little attention to the impact of the crisis on women, and union leadership has shown little desire to take up women's and other equality issues.

#### A. THE BIG PICTURE

- A new reality

New economic and political challenges have emerged over the last ten years, placing tough burdens on workers and undercutting the ability of unions to represent their members. These challenges include:

- significant loss of jobs as both private companies and government "downsize"
- rise in precarious, part-time and casual employment
- increase in employer demands for concessions in bargaining
- growth in the use of migrant workers
- focus on austerity through government legislation
- conservative attacks on public services and the role of government
- federal and provincial governments hostile to labour
- legislation limiting and eliminating free collective bargaining and organizing
- federal government legislation limiting women's rights: pay equity, choice, child care
- anti-immigrant and refugee legislation encouraging racism and ethno-centric responses

- Impact on union women

Job losses mean a reduction in membership which affects women's involvement in unions. Younger workers, many of them women and members of racialized groups, are the first to be laid off and it is increasingly difficult for them to be part of a union let alone be actively engaged. Cuts in the public sector have also disproportionately affected women who are losing access to well paid, unionized jobs.

*"This is the biggest attack I've ever seen on collective bargaining in this country and in this province and other provinces. There's the federal government and their new fascist policies that-I mean, there's a tremendous amount of stuff to fight and I guess that is sort of a reason why we hear 'Yeah, yeah. We'll get to the women's stuff later' ... But maybe there is some way that we can use this as an opportunity to try and mobilize women."*

The rise in precarious and casual employment also significantly affects women and members of equality seeking groups who form the majority of those working in this sector. Not only are these jobs already less secure and poorly paid, the current anti-union environment makes it even more difficult to organize these workers into unions. And those in precarious employment frequently have more than one job and little time for involvement.

Women are also negatively impacted as right wing governments slash funding and make cuts to childcare, healthcare, pensions, and other public services. And there are direct attacks on women's equality rights, including choice and pay equity.

*"What we've seen most recently around austerity is ... employers taking advantage as well as governments to lower the bar ... And this is clearly having an impact on women's situation."*

## B. LABOUR'S RESPONSE

*"The impact of austerity on equality is a reality with governments and employers and also within unions."*

- Marginalization of equality

The federal government's stimulus program provided funds for infrastructure development, in construction for example, with no support for social infrastructure, like child care, where women work. It appears that unions are also giving higher priority to campaigns when job cuts hit the manufacturing sectors where men predominate. And even the reaction to cuts in public sector jobs seldom addresses the huge impact on women both as public sector workers and as recipients of services being lost. There is also little recognition of earlier job losses in sectors where women predominate or of how women have been affected by the shift to precarious and part-time work.

*"The labour movement made a big issue –a huge campaign –when mostly men ... started to lose their jobs in large numbers. 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."*

There is also little effort to develop an integrated gender analysis or equality lens to ensure union statements and campaign content address women's distinct concerns. The prevailing message seems to be: "we're all the same when it comes to job loss and retirement". For example, the campaigns to protect and enhance pensions rarely speak of the fact that women receive on average lower pensions, or work in jobs with no pension plans and rely more on public pension plans.

*"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 now become an aside again."*

Unions' funds are increasingly directed to fighting on the "big" issues. With fewer staff, work on equality issues is seen as expendable or secondary. Fewer women's conferences, women-only courses and resources for women's committees and equality campaigns is paralleled by reduced support for the work of other equality-seeking workers.

*"The economic realities I do believe have made it difficult for women at all levels ... I think it's given the leadership at all levels an opportunity or an excuse as to why they can't fund programs which support women's equality."*

Reduced membership is reflected in changes to union staff positions. Many new hires are the first to go. There is also more hiring on a short term contract basis: this is frequently how workers of colour and women are now hired into union jobs.

- Loss of democratic space

The perception among most participants was that the labour movement is mirroring the broader trend to social conservatism rather than presenting a progressive alternative based on an equality/gender lens. Many noted more centralization of decision-making and a consequent reduction of democratic space in unions and central labour bodies, often under the guise of "modernization" and "efficiency". This leaves much less space for engaging in grassroots debate and organizing which reduces the ability of women and equality-seeking groups to have an influence on the directions taken.

*"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' ... It's a shame but I don't see people coming forward that are going to challenge that at the moment ... And I see that the people who want to challenge are really being denied opportunities."*

This trend to greater centralization is also reflected in an increased focus on top-down lobbying and electoral strategies rather than on engaging and mobilizing the membership.

*“There has been a real shift to conservative thinking and acting in the labour movement ... There’s a major focus on legislation. A major shift in ... how unions see the possibility of change.”*

In addition, sisters noted the entrenchment of a white, male hierarchy in the leadership of the labour movement. There appears to be little commitment to developing wider base of leadership and representation from equality-seeking groups or women.

*“What the labour leaders don’t get is if we don’t start talking about these things we are going to be irrelevant. It’s in their best interest that they should pay attention to this stuff. Not just because they want to keep some of us women quiet but because they really do need to pay attention to this stuff.”*

- Strategies for Union Renewal

The current climate poses real questions of union renewal and growth. However, rather than understanding the importance of raising equality and encouraging diversity as key elements of renewal, we heard that union leaders concentrate on “succession planning” – which most often means finding people who look like them. With a workforce and membership that is increasingly racialized and feminized - the majority of union members in Canada are women – promoting equality is still not understood as a critical component in renewal strategies.

*“When we raise the bar and say, ‘Listen, we can’t have a discussion about union renewal without talking about equality’, it gets mistaken for ‘we’re all the same when it comes to fighting for good jobs’ ... That’s part of this real shift about ‘we don’t have time to talk about equality. We have to talk about saving unions, saving workers and saving jobs’. The conversation about equality gets put on the backburner because ... the people who are at the decision making tables, don’t see ... that equality is part of that discussion and that strategy.”*

### C. THE LOSS OF OUR ALLIES

In every conversation, sisters noted and mourned the decline of the independent women’s movement and the closing of women’s organizations. In the past, women’s groups were able to define and popularize issues of importance to working women – issues like child care, violence against women, reproductive rights. They offered an integrated feminist analysis which focused on the particular impact of policies on women of colour, Aboriginal women, women with disabilities and lesbians. Union women were able to take these issues to our unions to win recognition and support. External feminist activity and organizing helped put pressure on union leadership to support women’s equality.

*“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.”*

Feminist activists in outside organizations played a role in encouraging and supporting women in the labour movement. They were able to offer a venue for women from unions to meet and strategize together with women in feminist groups.

*“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, of course, reduces the power of women within the labour movement because we don’t have the kind of leverage that helped us make some of the moves that we did before.”*

Some sisters recalled the importance of feminist groups of union women which operated autonomously from the labour movement. Groups such as *Organized Working Women* in Ontario, *BC’s Union Sisters*,

and *Saskatchewan Working Women* brought together women from different unions who were able to strategize and work together to win labour support for issues such as pay equity and child care, and to push for the creation of women's committees, departments, courses and conferences. Many suggested that such organizing might be a way for women to come together to move forward.

Feminist and equality activists are experiencing the decline of the left and the weakening of other social movements. There are fewer resources "out there" to support our work inside.

*"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"*

#### SOME QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

*"The trade union movement is one of the few organizations in society with the capacity to make changes on behalf of working people. And so the labour movement is important, but how do we bridge that gap?"*

The relationship between the current economic and political climate, labour's response and equality organizing is obviously a huge topic. The implications for advancing the equality agenda or falling further behind are severe. But, it's important to begin the discussion.

We've developed a set of questions to get us started. Please comment about whatever aspect of this topic concerns you. If there are areas we've missed, please raise them.

- How do your experiences compare? Do you agree the current crisis is having a conservatizing effect on the work of unions? What impact is this having on women's equality work? Is it more difficult for women to "come out" as feminists?
- What are the connections between organizing around women's issues and organizing around a progressive view of labour's role?
- Is there real space within our unions for democratic discussion of labour's direction and strategies?
- How do limitations on democratic space inside unions impact women's equality struggles?
- Are unions ignoring equality and diversity when it comes to union renewal strategies?
- Women made some significant gains through political action in the streets, through the courts and lobbying (pay equity, extended maternity leave etc.). Are women's issues still a focus for union activism?
- Has bargaining for equality been replaced by lobbying and electoral politics? Is your union still trying to bargain improvements in collective agreements for women and members of equality-seeking groups?
- How important was the role of the independent women's movement to our work in the labour movement? How are we experiencing its loss in continuing our work on equality issues?
- In the past, union feminists were able to point to the work of other unions or federations to push women's issues forward. Does this continue to happen? And does it now happen in reverse? (e.g., if the CLC stops holding women's conferences, what influence does that have on affiliated unions?)
- How important was and is the role of feminist academics in our work on women's and equality issues? What kind of research and backup do we need?