

STRONG UNIONS NEED WOMEN



Leadership, Feminism and Equality in Unions in Canada

Feminist Organizing in the Union Movement: Lessons and Limitations

Feminist organizing in the labour movement in the 1970s, 80s and 90s focused on winning support for women's equality issues and building union structures that would provide a strong and enduring foundation for moving an equality agenda forward. Significant gains were made: women's committees and caucuses; affirmative action/designated seats; women-only training courses and conferences; women's departments and dedicated staff; core policy statements supporting women's equality issues such as choice and pay equity; and practices such as anti-harassment statements and procedures.

In our conversations, sisters acknowledged the important role played by these structures and policies and are troubled by renewed challenges to the legitimacy and need for women-only spaces, whether they are committees, conferences or training. There seems to be less and less room for women to come together on their own to build skills, discuss issues and develop strategies.

At the same time, there were questions about the continued effectiveness of existing approaches, especially in the present climate. As we turn our attention towards developing strategies to renew the fight for women's equality in the labour movement, it's time to assess these initiatives.

A. THE ROLE OF WOMEN'S COMMITTEES

Early activists saw union women's committees as a key element in moving women's equality forward. Winning recognition as legitimate union bodies did not come easily, but over the years women's committees have provided a safe space for union women to meet collectively and organize for change. These committees have also been the training ground for many women to move into other union activism and leadership roles at both the local and the regional/national levels.

Sisters felt these committees continue to provide important opportunities for women to shape labour's involvement on women's equality issues, but also expressed some uneasiness about their evolving role and direction.

- Formalized structure and membership

The acceptance of women's committees as official union bodies affirms labour's recognition of women's equality issues and provides access to resources and support. However the formalized structure and membership of many of these committees, particularly at the central level, has also created barriers to activism. Meetings take place within established boundaries and limited resources. Plans for action must go through "channels" and be approved. Committee members are often not involved directly in implementation.

"One of the things that happened with the creation of [women's] committees is that whereas we fought for these committees ... to advance women's issues and women's equality, they became very constrained and confined spaces."

The number of seats on many union women's committees is generally limited, particularly for those beyond the local level, and representation is often determined by the union's leadership. This makes it easier to sideline outspoken or critical advocates.

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

Frequently this same leadership also sees “women’s issues” as primarily for white women. As a result, the representation of women from other equality-seeking groups on women’s committees is nominal.

“There’s this sense of equity tokenism where if you have a lesbian or an aboriginal woman or a woman with a disability that is the accomplishment in itself.”

These constraints have made it difficult at times for women’s equality activists to become meaningfully involved through their union women’s committees. At the same time, other grassroots organizing is often derailed as these committees are seen as the only “legitimate” structure and responsible for all the union’s work around women’s equality.

“My understanding of the feminist movement, and particularly in the labour movement, was there was this wave of women doing really wonderful things ... there was no structure. But ... one structure was put into place – women’s committees ... and it forced ... women to fit into the structure.”

- Lack of Power

Women’s committees often do not have a base of power within their unions. Typically there is no direct link to core union functions, such as collective bargaining, health and safety or member representation. This limits the role women’s committees can play in addressing issues that impact women members.

“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. “

Women’s committees have also become increasingly isolated from rank and file members and support. This makes it more difficult to raise challenging questions and confront issues within the union. The loss of the independent women’s movement further decreases the influence that committees can exert.

“Unless [women’s] voices are connected to some kind of power base that men understand, they really don’t hear you.”

Equality issues are rarely integrated directly into central union campaigns. Yet women’s and other equality committees are frequently redirected away from organizing around equality concerns and into supporting such campaigns.

“Changes in the [labour] movement meant 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 are put out there for them.”

It is also worrying that equality activism is seen as limiting for women who aspire to leadership roles in their union. Many seek recognition for their work in health and safety, organizing, or bargaining instead.

“If women want to be taken more seriously within their locals and have plans - either personal ambition or small 'p' political ambition - within their local union, they’re more likely to be involved in other kinds of committees than the women’s committee.”

- Narrowed mandate and vision

Concern was expressed that women’s committees are now less active and effective in organizing for change. Sisters noted a growing tendency for committees to become inwardly facing and function mainly as support groups for those involved.

“Women’s committees seem to not be taking on women’s issues more so than taking time for each other, which is very important but still it’s not moving the feminism agenda forward.”

Activity has become heavily focused on established days of action, such as December 6th and March 8th. Many also centre their efforts on charity work and/or fundraising to support community-based women's organizations. This work certainly has its place, but does not break new ground and directly challenge unions to move forward on women's equality issues in the union, workplace, and wider community.

"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."

- Pressure to amalgamate with other equality committees

There appears to be growing pressure to bring all equality work into a single structure. Equity "silos" need to be challenged and ways of working together to advance a broad equality agenda developed. However, sisters also recognize that different equality-seeking groups will continue to need separate spaces to define and lead the work on their own issues.

B. AFFIRMATIVE ACTION/DESIGNATED SEATS

Affirmative action positions or designated seats are one way to ensure diverse voices are represented in the decision-making bodies of unions. Women activists argued for creating these seats when union leadership was almost exclusively male, and it was thought that such positions would help break through the "glass ceiling" and build a climate to support more women moving into leadership. They also hoped women leaders in affirmative action positions would be effective advocates for moving the equality agenda forward within the labour movement and provide strong role models for younger women.

Sisters conveyed continued support for affirmative action/designated positions, but question the extent to which this approach has been effective. We have not seen many doors open and women have yet to achieve any real breakthrough in terms of representation at leadership tables. In fact, there has been an overall decline in the numbers of women in top positions in recent years. It was also pointed out that most of those put forward to fill affirmative action seats for women are white.

- Ceilings rather than floors

The room for women as leaders in the union movement remains very limited and there is concern that affirmative action seats have become one of the blocks to electing more women into leadership. Even though the number of these positions is quite small, they are still often seen as a solution that "takes care of the problem" rather than as a step towards opening doors. The expectation is that women will step into "their" designated spots, and leave the other leadership roles open for men to fill.

"There's this proliferation of designated seats for equity-seeking groups, but there's only one seat and then people think they've taken care of the problem."

- Barriers to effective involvement

Women in affirmative action seats face other obstacles to playing an effective role as leaders. They are frequently appointed by union leaders rather than directly elected, particularly in central labour bodies. This usually means the places are filled by allies of union leaders, and not necessarily by women equality activists. The process also makes those in affirmative action positions accountable to their union leaders instead of seeing themselves as representatives for women's equality and able to act independently.

The fact there are still so few other women at union leadership tables makes it even harder for those in affirmative action positions to get heard and be taken seriously. As a result, the role easily becomes tokenistic.

"Sitting in a designated position, it's tiresome to take on that role by yourself and it's also tiresome that you're the one that always has to take on that role."

The ability of these women leaders to be effective change agents is further weakened by the diminished role of women's committees and a decline in rank and file involvement on women's equality.

"It's not just about leaders ... because if you just have individuals at the top, you're not going to have the power to bring about change."

C. WOMEN'S PROGRAMS AND DEDICATED STAFF

Concerns were voiced about the decline in funding and staff dedicated to women's programs and women's equality organizing. Long-time feminist staff members who are burnt out or retiring are not being replaced. It also appears that resources and staff are increasingly being redirected to central union initiatives, even though little is being done to integrate an equality perspective/gender lens into this work.

Sisters pointed out that racialized, Aboriginal and younger women have been especially impacted and marginalized by the decline in resources and staff for women's programs. There is reduced capacity to reach out and engage these women.

D. TRAINING, CONFERENCES, CAUCUSES AND WORKSHOPS

Fewer union resources are being allocated to hold equality conferences and training and/or they are held with reduced frequency. The political direction and content is "toned down" and/or the agenda must be closely aligned with priority union campaigns. Often, the union's leadership makes the decisions on who can participate, which may further limit opportunities for more vocal and engaged activists to be involved.

It was noted that organizers for these events are experiencing more pressure to include men, rather than hold women-only events. There is also a growing tendency to bring all equality groups together under one "roof" and organize a single event for all.

SOME QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

"It feels like we're tinkering around the edges of systemic discrimination when we really haven't found a good answer for that."

- Much of the early feminist organizing in the labour movement was around developing structures, such as women's committees, affirmative action positions, and mandated women's conferences and training, which would enable ongoing work on women's issues. To what extent are these structures still effective? What direction should they be taking?
- Are these structures secure? If threatened, how did this happen? Is this a common development across different unions?
- Are equality policies and procedures still followed and enforced?
- Have women's equality structures engaged young women? If not, why not?
- Is there a decline in rank and file feminist/women's organizing inside unions? What impact does this have on the ability of individual women leaders and staff to advance women's equality issues?
- Has there been a reduction in resources and staff allocated for equality work in unions? If so, how significant is it? Where are the effects most visible?
- How has the existence of staff dedicated to work on women's issues fostered and/or limited rank and file organizing? For example, how much reliance is put on staff to ensure that the work continues?
- In your union, what is the impact when existing feminist leaders and/or staff members leave?

The project on *Leadership, Feminism and Equality in Unions in Canada* is co-ordinated by Linda Briskin, Sue Genge, Margaret McPhail and Marion Pollack. This summary is based on conversations with 44 union women, activists, leaders and staff from across Canada. Please contact us at lbriskin@yorku.ca. ©2012