

A RESPONSE FROM THE EQUAL PAY COALITION
TO A STATEMENT BY THE HONOURABLE ROBERT G. ELGIE, MINISTER
OF LABOUR, TO THE INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY RALLY QUEEN'S
PARK, MARCH 8 1979

The Minister of Labour suggests that the joint labour-management committee he has established is an "appropriate" response to demands by labour and women's groups for equal pay for work of equal value legislation. We disagree.

The committee, whose purpose is to address the "common problems" of labour and management with regards to equal pay, and to "take the government's equal opportunity message to the boardrooms and union halls of Ontario," follows a long tradition of attempts by the Government of Ontario to convince working women that the problem of unequal pay is an attitudinal one. Union women and men - including the government's own employees - who have tried to close the wage gap through negotiations with their own employer know otherwise.

The need for months of hard collective bargaining - and often strike action - to make even minor adjustments in the traditional rates of pay for the male and female job ghettos have demonstrated that the low salaries paid

to women is not one of those "common problems" shared by labour and management.

The Minister raises the problem of female participation rates in the labour market, arguing that employers might show preference to men if forced to provide equal pay to men and women for work of equal value. By this the Minister seems to imply that his government is unable to protect women and minorities from discrimination in employment, and that the present Human Rights Legislation which purports to give such protection is a farce. Such a statement also seems to suggest that if women want to work, they must resign themselves to forever doing so at a wage that is unfairly low simply because they are women.

The Minister also asks if "it is possible to fashion the appropriate measurement techniques to ensure that the equal value concept is applied universally?" The existence of the federal and Quebec legislation ensuring equal pay for work of equal value would seem to suggest that such techniques are indeed available.

The Minister is reluctant to look at wage discrepancies based on sex when there are other "wage and salary

differentials which some may argue are difficult to justify." This is the same as saying that, because the world cannot be made perfect overnight, we should do nothing to make it a little better. We recognize that "for better or for worse market forces have established general wage and salary differentials." Nevertheless, many of the differentials between male and female-dominated work exist because of past and continuing discrimination against women. In urging the government to adopt equal pay for work of equal value legislation, we are saying only that the sexually discriminatory aspect of the labour market be eliminated. Surely this is not inconsistent with provincial legislation which makes sexual discrimination in other areas of employment illegal.

With regard to the importance of equal opportunity programs, we agree that "equal value is no substitute for equal opportunity." We would add, however, that equal opportunity programs are no substitute for equal value. The two must go hand in hand if either one is to succeed.

There is little point in introducing women to work traditionally done by men if, as happened in the secretarial

field, their participation in this work results in a lowering of the relative value of the new job. And men will not go into work traditionally done by women as long as it continues to be low paid. In short, equal opportunity programs, however necessary, do not address the low pay of the female job ghettos relative to male-dominated work. This can only be done by an examination of the relative skill, effort, responsibility and working conditions of these jobs.

The lack of success by equal opportunity programs in closing the wage gap between men and women is so well known we can only assume that the government's preference for these programs is based - not on any record of their efficacy - but rather on the certainty that they will not cost anywhere near as much as paying women what they're worth for the work they're already doing. Nor are we unaware of the fact that the Ontario government is one of the largest employers of women in the province.

There have already been a countless number of committees brought together to study equal pay for work of equal value. The government has studied the problem to death. The time has now come to act.