



NOVEMBER 13-16, 1978

A WOMAN'S PLACE IS IN HER UNION



For more than a decade now, the women's movement has echoed the voice of the early suffragettes in a new call for economic equality. Organizations of women have raised a variety of demands: for recognition of the value of work in the home; for equal opportunities in the job market; for equal pay and conditions once they get a job; for adequate care of children. Some of these demands have been met with new laws; more have been ignored or diverted by governments which have no real commitment to the equality of women.

This Federation has consistently supported the general principle of economic equality for women and has advocated a variety of measures to turn this sound principle into a widespread practice. Too many of our recommendations have not been carried out.

Equal access to jobs for women requires a system which will give mothers confidence that their children are being adequately cared for while they work. It requires a system to maintain family income while one parent is out of the labour force bearing and rearing young children. If governments in Ottawa and Queen's Park had demonstrated their commitment to equality for women by pursuing these objectives rather than applying the cutback mentality to undermine established programs, there might be more equal sharing of work in the family home.

Equal pay for work of equal value requires a new law which does not deliberately cloud the language as does the legislation in Ontario. That law allows employers to pay women less for doing the same work as men in a

different location. The case of the Steel Plate Examiners Union (employees of the British American Banknote Company in Ottawa) demonstrates that the law will not even help women receiving less than men for work requiring more training in the same establishment. All jurisdictions must also adopt a policy of requiring companies with which they enter into contracts to adhere to equal pay principles and to adopt affirmative action programs which will **bring women into jobs from which they have traditionally been excluded**. We must also recognize that there are many occupations in the labour market that are generally assumed to be women's work — secretarial, nursing, certain types of assembly work, and others. These jobs are done for lower wages than if they were also commonly done by men. An effective equal pay law will have to provide a means of improving the economic position of women in these "job ghettos."

Equal access to jobs and equal pay for equal work will not **eliminate cultural prejudice about what work women should do**. The sex and job stereotypes which are developed by the education system will still trap many women in unsatisfying, low-paying jobs once their child-rearing responsibilities are complete. Schools must make every effort to eliminate these stereotypes from instruction materials and from teachers' attitudes if women are to obtain the early training they will require for full equality in the labour market.

Broadening the occupational possibilities for women will also require direct efforts to bring women into jobs which have not been viewed as open to them and programs to train women in the skills required.

A society which does not provide the social and economic support required for women to carry out the dual roles of mother and wage earner has no right to blame those same women for its own crimes. **Abortion must be removed from the criminal code** as part of a commitment to make every child wanted and well cared for whether its mother must work or not.

Much of the new interest in women's rights has centred around the United Nations International Women's Year. 1979 is the International

Year of the Child; in the interests of children, our governments would do well to make their theoretical commitment to the economic equality of women more substantial.

Without the measures we have advocated, the actual daily lives of most working women will remain little affected by government action on women's rights. This is illustrated by developments in pensions for women. The Liberal government in Ottawa recently amended income tax regulations to allow anyone declaring income to contribute to a Registered Retirement Savings Plan on behalf of his spouse. The only major effect of this change is to increase the available tax deductions to high income families in which the mother does not work. A proposal to allow a parent to exclude any period spent caring for children under age 7 from calculation of Canada Pension Plan benefits is being blocked by the Conservative government of Ontario. The major effect of this proposal would be to increase the pensions of mothers who spend a significant part of their lives in the labour force. **Our governments reward the rich for keeping mothers in the home but penalize working women because they lose wages while working as mothers and because there are no acceptable alternatives for the care of their children.**

A fair deal for working women will clearly require a new kind of government and the full participation of trade union women in the NDP to make that possible.

The present government's general economic strategy of undermining the real living standards of working people has found women in the front lines of each new assault. The latest is no exception. The deliberate policy of depressing the economy to discipline wage demands with the fear of unemployment means workers in the lowest paid jobs and weakest industries are the first to go — more often than not, that means **women** without jobs.

Armed with the artful fiction that unemployment is high because people do not want to work and the convenient sub-plot that women only work for "pin money," the Unemployment Insurance Commission is using every regulatory and administrative measure at its disposal. Married women are automatically put in the

"high abuse" category and mothers must prove they have child care arrangements in order to be "available" for work.

Women are not all choosing to leave their jobs because they would rather be full-time mothers. When women apply for UIC benefits it is usually because — like all of us — they live with an economy which cannot provide enough jobs for the people who want to work. The only differences between a woman's experience of losing her job and a man's are that she will probably be harassed more by UIC and stay at home longer before having the "opportunity" of a new job with lower wages and poorer working conditions.

Labour has always been organized on the principle that all people who work for a living have basically the same interests and that is never more clear than in times of high unemployment. Over the past five years, the general attack on organized labour and the living standards of all working people have shown that **we never needed our unions more than now and women need them most of all**. They have learned that economic equality and the most basic rights of dignity on the job will not be conceded by government and employers without a fight. Women cannot even enter into the battle without working together and for working women that means being in a union.

Fortunately women have been willing to fight the basic struggle for union recognition and give us reason to believe that the small plants, offices and stores can be organized. The women at Fleck showed that it can be done and reminded us all that the solidarity of the whole trade union movement is what makes such victories possible.

Some people have been reluctant to see the women's movement infiltrate the ranks of labour, believing it to be a diversion from the common interests of all working people. Perhaps they have failed to see that the spirit of equality for women is transformed when it is

taken up by women in our own ranks. It can become a new source of vitality and growth at a time when we will need all the strength we can muster. The interests of all our members will be served if our ranks are opened at all levels to the full participation of women.

The Federation will continue its program to local unions requesting assistance in the establishment of women's committees. These committees can be effective means for bringing measures to improve the position of women into the collective bargaining process and for introducing women members to the structure of the trade union movement. They provide a framework in which active women can work together on issues of common concern and initiate political action. We have initiated a special project for the training of twenty women to work as instructors in labour education programs; this project is being funded by the National Labour Studies and Education Centre. By placing women in a more prominent role in this aspect of union activities, we hope to give the less accommodating among our male members a better appreciation of the contribution women can make to our mutual benefit.

The Federation will organize a special conference on the equality of women in the new year to give new impetus to the full involvement of women in the trade union movement. We will make every effort to ensure that as many trade union men as possible participate in the conference.

Wherever trade unionists have taken up the cause of the economic equality of women, they have regularly had to confront the intransigence of employers and inadequate legislation. These obstacles mean we must intensify our efforts to raise the demands of the women's movement through trade union structures. We can achieve immediate improvements in the economic position of women through collective bargaining and we can win the public measures which are essential to their full equality with the trade union movement as a whole committed to their demands.