

Rebel Girls' Rag

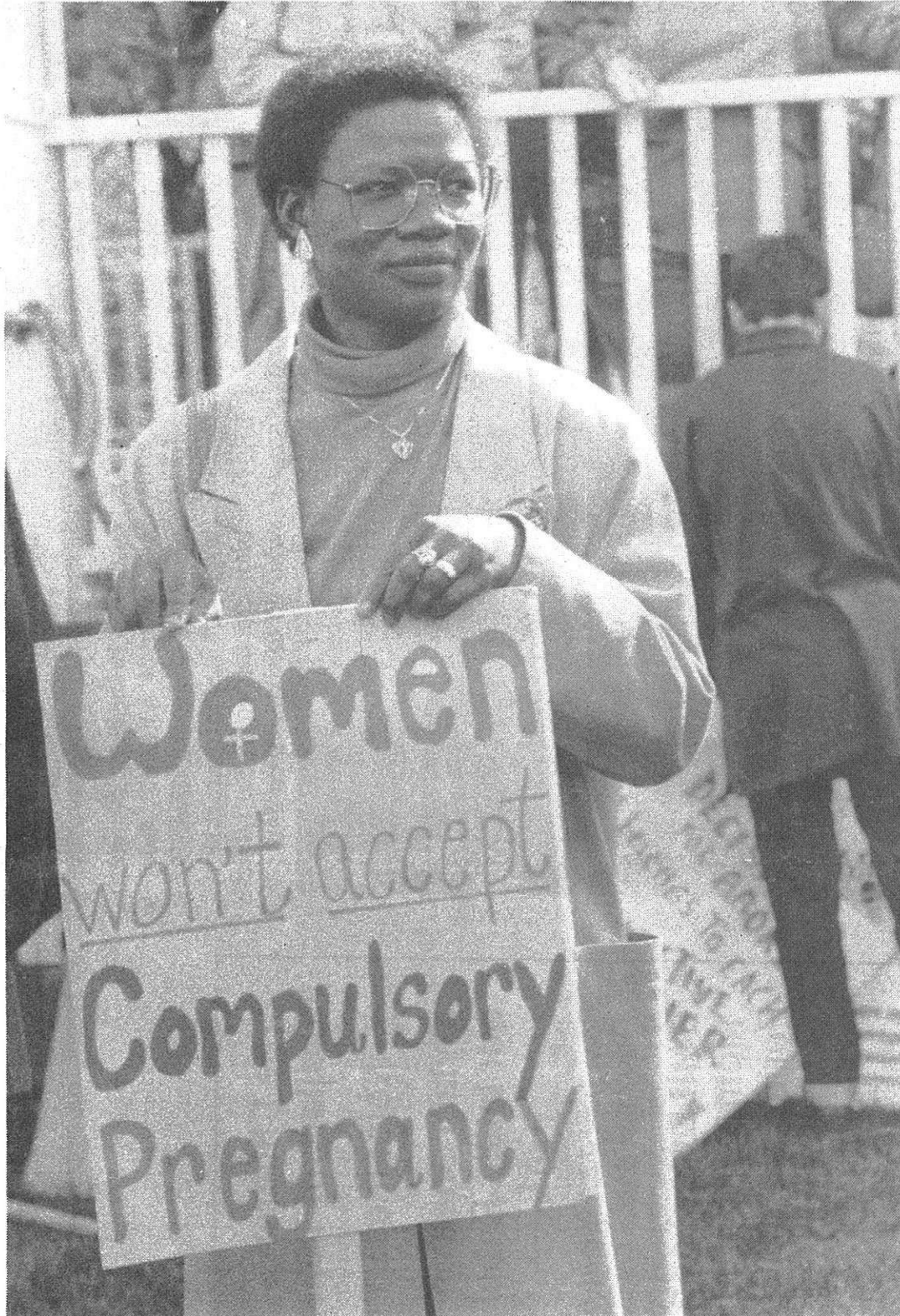
A FORUM OF WOMEN'S RESISTANCE

Vol. 4, No. 4

75¢

JULY/AUGUST 1990

News & Views from Toronto Socialist Feminist Action



3/7

Inside:

- Sinking in Meech
- No Peace, No Justice
- Lesbians in Print
- New Abortion Law:
- African Women Choose
- GST Fight Back
- Heterosexuality Revisited

Rebel Girls' Rag

A FORUM OF WOMEN'S RESISTANCE

Vol. 4, No. 4

75¢

JULY/AUGUST 1990

News & Views from Toronto Socialist Feminist Action

Self-Determination Sinks In Meech Debate

by Carolyn Egan

Toronto Socialist Feminist Action has long supported the right to self-determination of both the Québec nation and the aboriginal peoples. It is critically important that we reaffirm that position today in light of the constitutional debate that is taking place. As we go to press, Elijah Harper, a Cree Chief and Member of the Legislative Assembly from Northern Manitoba, is holding up the Meech Lake vote in the legislature in Winnipeg. This strategy has the strong support of the Assembly of First Nations and other aboriginal organizations who feel that their legitimate demands have been ignored. It brings to the fore many of the contradictions of the

constitutional process we are witnessing. This process is orchestrated by "eleven white men of privilege", as one aboriginal leader stated, and is fundamentally anti-democratic.

It is important to understand that the Canadian state has been built on exploitation and oppression. Colonial powers subjugated the aboriginal peoples of this land. Quebec is an oppressed nation defeated on the Plains of Abraham by Britain. Immigrants and people of colour face systemic racism every day of their lives, from immigration controls to police violence. Women have been historically denied their equality and reproductive freedom. Workers are exploited.

The legitimate national aspirations of the Québécois and

aboriginal peoples should not be in contradiction, nor would the rights of immigrants and people of colour, and those of women. We must be very clear in this debate who are our allies and who are our enemies. The bourgeois politicians who were closeted in a room in Ottawa certainly did not have our interests in mind. Their machinations will not end national oppression or build unity. The unity that must be built is one among oppressed and exploited peoples, and at the same time we must respect the right of Québec and the aboriginal peoples to determine their own futures and recognize them as distinct societies.

Our goal must be to overturn capitalism through self-emancipation and revolutionary

socialist organization, and finally end class exploitation, racism, sexism, heterosexism and national oppression in all their manifestations. Today we must link the struggles for reproductive freedom, land claims, national self-determination, and against police violence. We must continue to build Pan-Canadian campaigns against the new abortion law, the GST, and in support of workers struggles such as the upcoming CUPW strike. We must be strong in our opposition to the virulent anti-French sentiment which showed itself in the Meech Lake process, and support aboriginal self-government. It is the Canadian government and the capitalists it represents that are our enemies, and it is only in their interests that national oppression continue.

No Peace, No Justice



The Toronto police have shot another Black youth. Marlon Neal, a sixteen year old from the east end suburb of Scarborough, was shot two times in the back while driving a vehicle. The Black Action Defense Committee lead an immediate series of protests which brought people into the streets and onto the doorstep of the downtown headquarters of the local police division.

Black leaders refused to meet with police officials, noting that there has been years of talk but no action. Their stance sparked racist accusations from Metro Chairman



Alan Tonks and Police Chief McCormack. The anti-racism movement stands firm in its demands for :

- 1) An independent civilian review board
- 2) Attempted murder charges laid against Constable Robson
- 3) The resignation of Police Chief McCormack



Rebel Girls' Rag

A Forum of Women's Resistance

Vol. 4, No. 4

July/August 1990

Published by:

Toronto Socialist Feminist Action

P.O. Box 70, Station F

Toronto, Ontario M4Y 2L4

Date of issue: June 21, 1990

Published five times a year in
Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Second class mail registration
number 7769.

We are a socialist-feminist group which operates on the principle that mass action is our most effective instrument of change. We believe that the oppression of women touches every aspect of our lives and that the liberation of women will require fundamental changes in the structure of society.

We hold bi-weekly meetings where our policy and overall direction are determined. Smaller committees work on specific events or issues or in different constituencies.

We welcome new members. For more information, phone 531-2369.

This issue was put together by:

Laurie Bell, Julia B., Karen Chappelle, Kristina Saier, Carolyn Egan, Nancy Farmer, Mary Gellatly, Shelly Gordon, Miriam Jones, Susan Kazarak, Gillian Morton, Sharmani Peres, Jocelyn Piercy, Maureen Phillips, Cindy Ripley, Jennifer Stephen.

Signed articles do not necessarily reflect the views of the Toronto Socialist Feminist Action, but those of the author.

New Abortion Law -- A Crime Against Women

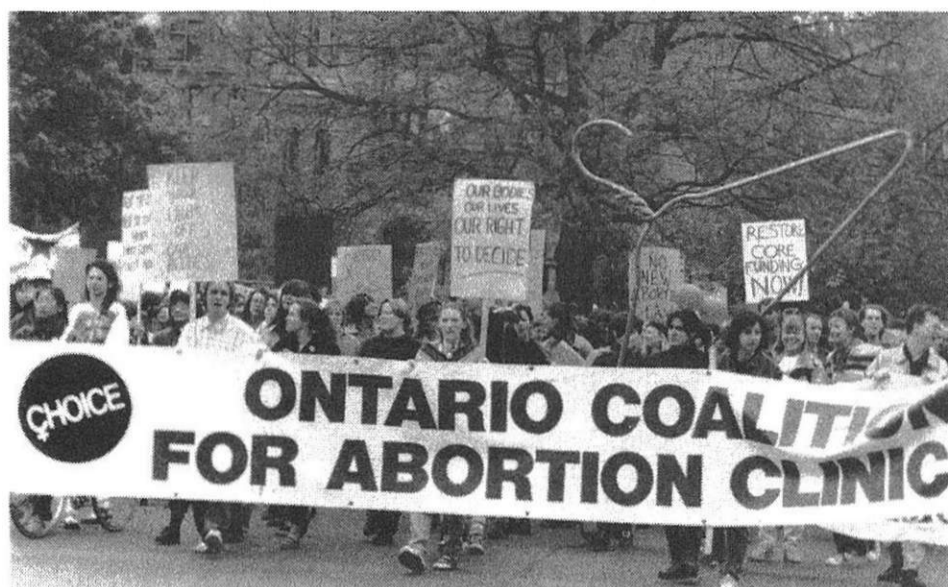
by Khristina M. Saier

The new abortion law passed final reading in the House of Commons on May 29, 1990. It was another in a long list of blows to Canadian women by the Tory government. This year it has already cut funding to seventy-five women's centres across the country, to women's health care, to childcare, and to native and women's publications.

The new abortion law, passed with a margin of only nine votes, denies women the right to decide about abortion for themselves. If approved by the Senate and adopted into the criminal code, it will make abortion a criminal offence unless a doctor determines that a woman's mental or physical health is at risk. A healthy woman who obtains an abortion and her doctor are both liable to prosecution with a penalty of up to two years in jail. Charges could be brought by a disgruntled or vindictive husband or boyfriend or they could be brought by a third party such as an anti-choice group.

The Pro-Choice movement fought this attack with mass demonstrations across the country. Women and men marched, rallied and lobbied to defend their right to choose and defeat this unjust and unnecessary law which is so ruthlessly unconstitutional, denying women safety and security of the person by taking away a our democratic right to control our own bodies.

The new law violates our very basic right to say Yes or No for ourselves to a safe, simple medical procedure.



The Tory government has sent a clear message to Canadian women that their bodies, their decisions are not to be trusted—that laws must be passed to keep women in her place. In reply, the women of Canada have declared war on this new law. We will fight a government that insisted on introducing this bill as a so-called compromise to both the more than seventy per cent of Canadians who are in favour of choice on abortion and the handful of right-wing religious fanatics who use violent tactics to create the superficial appearance of mayhem. It was clear to the Tory government from the tens of thousands who have taken to the streets over the last year in support of woman's choice and from the submissions to their own hearings on the bill that to recriminalize abortion was unwanted and unnecessary by all sectors of Canadians. Still, they arrogantly pressed forward with their own agenda, not giving a damn about what the majority of Canadians want nor about what is best for women. The only compromise has been to the health and safety of women.

The terrifying constraints imposed by this law create an atmosphere of fear, confusion and panic that will drive women to back-alley abortions or to desperate acts of self-induced abortions. The most vulnerable women in our society will suffer the most. For immigrant women, women of colour, native women, young women and rural women, this law is nothing less than life threatening.

In the first two weeks since the bill was passed two women have taken matters into their own hands. One, a sixteen year old in Kitchener, Ontario was injured by an unsafe abortion performed

by a friend. In Toronto a twenty year old university student died of a self-induced abortion. The World Health Organization estimates that 200,000 women die each year from botched abortions. Safe and legal abortion saves women's lives.

Women in Canada demand free and equal access to abortion. This right should be protected under the Canada Health Act. Federal and provincial governments should provide a full range of reproductive health services including access to birth control and abortion.

Our immediate priority must be to rescind the new abortion law. Women demand that the Tory Government withdraw the abortion bill immediately. We ask doctors to defy the new law and continue instead to guarantee access to abortion for all women in every part of Canada.

We know that a strong force on the streets leads to increased availability of safe, legal abortion. Our united strength kept the clinics open in Vancouver, Winnipeg, Toronto, Halifax and Quebec. We will continue to organize opposition to this law and to the unequal and limited access to abortion in this country. We stand united with the labour movement, the anti-racist movement, women's organizations, the movement for Aboriginal self-determination, students, men for choice and the vast majority of Canadians—determined to defeat this law and increase access to safe and legal abortion.

Fight back! Build the National Day of Access in your community on October 13, 1990.

Contact the Ontario Coalition for Abortion Clinics at 416-969-8463 for information and meeting times.



photo: Left Eye

"We Remember: African American Women are for Reproductive Freedom"

by Billye Aver, et al

Choice is the essence of freedom. It's what we African-Americans have struggled for all these years. The right to choose where we would sit on a bus. The right to vote. The right for each of us to select our own paths, to dream and reach for our dreams. The right to choose how we would or would not live our lives.

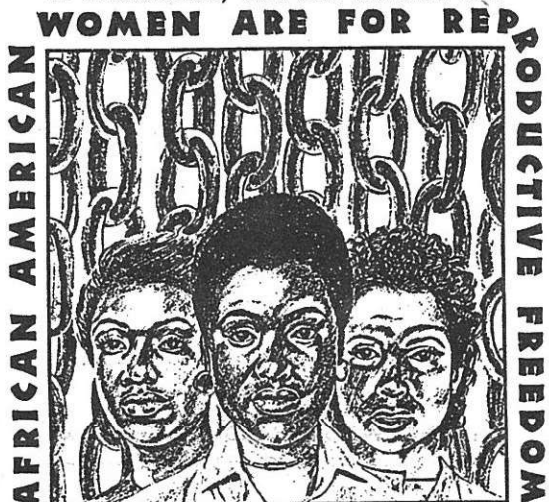
This freedom- to choose and to exercise our choices-is what we've fought and died for. Brought here in chains, worked like mules, bred like beasts, whipped one day, sold the next-for 244 years we were held in bondage. Somebody said that we were less than human and not fit for freedom. Somebody said we were like children and could not be trusted to think for ourselves. Somebody owned our flesh, and decided if and when and with whom and how our bodies were to be used. Somebody said that Black women could be raped, held in concubinage, forced to bear children year in and year out, but often not raise them. Oh yes, we have known how painful it is to be without choice in this land.

Those of us who remember the bad old days when Jim Crow ruled and segregation was the way of things, know the hardships and indignities we faced. We were free, but few or none were our choices. Somebody said where we could live and couldn't, where we could work, what schools we could go to, where we could eat, how we could travel. Somebody prevented us from voting. Somebody said we could be paid less than other workers. Somebody burned crosses, harassed and terrorized us in order to keep us down.

Now once again somebody is trying to say that we can't handle the freedom of choice. Only this time they're saying African-American women can't think for themselves and, therefore, can't be allowed to make

serious decisions. Somebody's saying that we should not have the freedom to take charge of our personal lives and protect our health, that we only have limited rights over our bodies. Somebody's once again forcing women to acts of desperation, because somebody's saying that if women have unintended pregnancies, it's too bad, but they must pay the price.

Somebody's saying that we must have babies whether we choose to or not. Doesn't matter what we say, doesn't matter how we feel. Some say that abortion under any circumstances is wrong, others that rape and incest and danger to the life of the woman are the only exceptions. Doesn't matter that nobody's saying who decides if it was rape or incest; if a woman's word is good enough; if she must go to court to prove it. Doesn't matter that she may not be able to take care of a baby; that the problem also affects girls barely out of adolescence; that our children are



having children. Doesn't matter if you're poor and pregnant-go on welfare, or walk away.

What does matter is that we know abortion will still be done, legal or not. We know the consequences when women are forced to make choices without protection-the coat hangers

and knitting needles that punctured the wombs of women forced to seek back-alley abortions on kitchen tables at the hands of butchers. The women who died screaming in agony, awash in their own blood. The women who were made sterile. All the women who endured the pain of makeshift surgery with no anesthetics, risked fatal infection.

We understand why African-American women risked their lives then, and why they seek safe legal abortion now. It's been a matter of survival. Hunger and homelessness. Inadequate housing and income to properly provide for themselves and their children. Family instability. Rape. Incest. Abuse. Too young, too old, too sick, too tired. Emotional, physical, mental, economic, social-the reasons for not carrying a pregnancy to term are endless and varied, personal, urgent, and private. And for all these pressing reasons, African-American women once again will be among the first forced to risk their lives if abortion is made illegal.

There have always been those who have stood in the way of our exercising our rights, who tried to restrict our choices. There probably always will be. But we who have been oppressed could not be swayed in our opposition to tyranny, of any kind, especially attempts to take away our reproductive freedom. You may believe that abortion is wrong. We respect your belief and we will do all in our power to protect that choice for you. You may decide that abortion is not an option you would choose. Reproductive freedom guarantees your right not to. All that we ask is that no one deny another human being the right to make her own choice. That no one condemn her to exercising her choices in ways that endanger her health, her life. And that no one prevent others from creating safe, affordable, legal conditions to accommodate

women, whatever the choices they make. Reproductive freedom gives each of us the right to make our own choices, and guarantees us a safe, legal, affordable support system. It's the right to choose.

We are still an embattled people beset with life-and-death issues. Black America is under siege. Drugs, the scourge of our community, is wiping out one, two, three generations. We are killing ourselves and each other. Rape and other unspeakable acts of violence are becoming sickeningly commonplace. Babies linger on death's door, at risk at birth: born addicted to crack and cocaine; born underweight and undernourished; born AIDS-infected. An ever-growing number of our children are being abandoned, being mentally, physically, spiritually abused. Homelessness, hunger, unemployment run rife. Poverty grows. Our people cry out in desperation, anger, and need.

Meanwhile, those somebodies who claim they are "pro-life" aren't moved to help the living. They're not out there trying to fight the stranglehold of drugs and violence in our communities, trying to save our children, or moving to provide infant and maternal nutrition and health programs. No-somebody's too busy picketing, vandalizing and sometimes bombing family-planning clinics, harassing women, and denying funds to poor women seeking abortions.

So when somebody denouncing abortion claims that they're "pro-life", remind them of an old saying that our grandmothers often used: "It's not important what people say, it's what they do." And remember who we are, remember our history, our continuing struggle for freedom. Remember to tell them We Remember!

Heterosexuality Revisited

by Miriam Jones

The following presentation was given at the RFR Forum on Heterosexuality (March, 1990).

The ambivalence I felt about writing on the subject of heterosexuality in part reflects the current situation around the issue: there is not a lot of literature or organizing going on right now, at least that I am aware of. There are a few exceptions, however: there are some texts by both gay and straight writers, which would indicate a growing recognition of our common project to explore the social construction of sexuality.

In the seventies, feminist analysis meant analysis of the patriarchy. All the ground-breaking texts dealt with it, all the consciousness-raising groups dealt with it, all the discussion and the political practice seemed to relate to women redefining their roles under patriarchy. Lesbian organizing was taking place to an unprecedented degree, and the politics of sexual practice were being widely debated. Heterosexuality was revealed as a nor-

mative and oppressive institution. To feminists of my generation, that work is erroneously presumed to be to an extent already done, and so we have felt that we could "move on" into the specifics of our own particular issues, to working in what are seen as "broader" political or solidarity movements, and to discussing race and class, since we have "taken care" of gender. In many senses this is a positive development. Effective political work more and more happens in coalition, because there is strength in numbers, and because we are coming to realise the commonality and interrelatedness of our specific struggles. But there remain unanswered questions and problems. Gender relations still define all of us, and we are perhaps even in more danger, if our attention is focused elsewhere.

Heterosexuality must of course be understood as the dominant discourse, and its practitioners as privileged. Such an understanding relates to the broader political questions.

But for people who practice it,

heterosexuality is also a private sexual practice in need of a re-evaluation which can only be fruitfully undertaken within the broader historical context.

There was a poem printed in the current issue of *This Magazine* (Vol. 23, No.8, 1990) which is apropos to the subject of heterosexuality. It's called "Reminders to straight girls contemplating Getting Laid," by Meredith Levine:

Every straight woman should sleep with at least one woman

Otherwise, he gets to be the authority on your sexuality

Think about it

what do you know about how most women respond

when the only woman you've slept with is yourself?

Girl talk, although explicit usually stops short of Step by Step goes instead for broad details: "on top," "on bottom," "oral," "anal,"

"small," "large," "came," "didn't come"

but he, he's slept with lots of women he knows what he's talking about when he says "most women are like this" or "aren't" "do this" or "don't"

somehow you end up feeling you don't quite measure up

Once at a dinner with twelve women after too much wine a poll was taken

It was discovered that everyone present had been told by at least one male lover

that her clitoris is smaller than average The text raises an interesting point about the ill-defined nature of heterosexuality for feminist women. Even if we are not defined by men, we are still defined, inevitably, in relation to them. Or in relation to our relations to them.

continued on page 7

Organize & Mobilize --

by Jennifer Stephen

This presentation was given at Toronto Socialist Feminist Action's forum on the GST and Social Cutbacks, June 13, 1990.

The GST is one plank in the broader programme designed to defend capitalism against recurrent and deepening crisis. As we know, corporate capitalism acknowledges no national boundaries in the search for cheap labour and capital. Nor does it adhere to nationalist paradigms in the political arena, except where accommodation can be reached. The GST represents an important shift in revenue policy, and also forms part of the current continental economic programme. The governments of Canada and the US were the brokers of this programme under the Free Trade Agreement. As such, the GST signals the Mulroney government's shift from an incomes policy based on revenue derived through income tax, to a consumption tax. This policy parallels the economic transformation of which the FTA is also a part. Both must be read as part of the global restructuring of capital and the international division and redistribution of both labour and capital which has been developing over the past two decades. What has been referred to as 'off shore' production means, as we know, the exploitation of so-called cheap labour in Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Mexico and other countries controlled by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, agents for US, Canada and the EEC. The crisis confronted in Canada translates into a flight of manufacturing capital, combined with the rapid

growth of the service sector. We can see the results here in Toronto, in the acceleration of plant shut downs, the erosion of the city's manufacturing base, the permanent loss of full-time jobs in manufacturing, and the growth of low-paying non-union jobs in the service sector, many of which are part-time. The service sector has been the fastest growing sector in the Canadian economy. This is why the US fought for its inclusion under the FTA, and this is why the GST is so important now. At the same time, the key to revenue collection lies in a consumption tax, one which facilitates the consolidation of capital and shifts the burden in generating revenue from income to consumption. Not that the current income tax system ever laid any great burden on corporate interests in the first place.

These policies are, as I mentioned, part of a broader business agenda, and it is crucial that we approach the GST as part of that larger package. This agenda includes a frontal attack on the working class, on trade unions and the collective bargaining process, a fight to increase management rights, and to assert individual rights over collective rights, thereby undermining for example the basis for demands for employment equity. Instead, the so called 'free market' will be the arbiter of all political, economic and social issues. Among the items included on this agenda are monetary policy and taxation policy. At the forefront of monetary demands is lower inflation achieved through higher interest rates to restrain economic growth, high unemployment to 'discipline'

workers, and demands for wage cuts and concessions at the bargaining table. Taxation policy, according to capital's proponents, must be redesigned to enhance capital accumulation by lowering, if not eradicating, corporate taxes, providing tax concessions for business, reducing personal income taxes for the wealthy, abandoning the principle of taxation based on ability to pay, and increasing direct - or consumption - taxes. Cut backs in social services is in some ways a misnomer for the business demand for an overall *reduction* in services and restructuring the way the few remaining services will be offered: for example, through demands to implement user fees, again as part of the gutting of the principle of universality and collective rights. Alongside increased military spending goes massive increases into police force budgets and penal systems. Deregulation, privatization, the gutting of UI, pensions and

backs to social programmes serve two purposes: to reduce social expenditure while cultivating a climate of crisis, arguing the necessity to control national debt and foster prosperity through competitiveness - a familiar enough refrain. Secondly, these cutbacks have the express political purpose of weakening, demoralizing, and, in the end, demobilizing opposition.

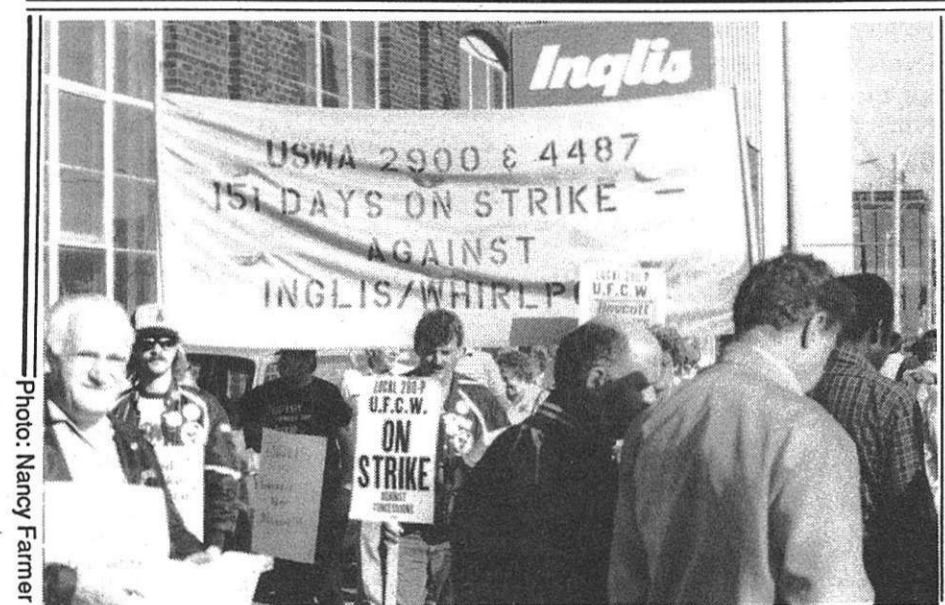
Preparing the General Strike

The labour movement, like the women's movement and other progressive social movements, is under attack. When we discussed the question of strategy in TSFA, we thought of two important historical precedents for how such a fight back can be organized: Solidarity in BC, and the 1976 General Strike against wage and price controls. It is our belief that the general strike is one of the most effective political and economic tools in the hands of the working class. Of course,



workers compensation: these are all signals to the dismantling of the post-war welfare state and are part of the scrambling attempts of capital to respond to deepening crisis. The business agenda is international in scope, as we know. Where the welfare state represented a post-war accord between labour and capital, the raft of attacks we have seen over the past decade indicates that, not only has that accord broken down, but so too has the business agenda formed the basis for economic and social policy. At the same time, the state has used the political space created by economic crisis to attack the gains made by First Nations, people of colour, trade unions and women. That is, cut-

there are problems: a general strike has been thought possible only among those whose rights as workers are secured through trade union representation. This leaves out those outside of organized labour, including immigrant workers, women, part-time workers, disabled workers, and unemployed workers; all of whom are people progressive trade unionists recognize and are attempting to include in trade union organizations. The general strike makes it clear that the business agenda of which the GST, free trade and the slashing of social services are part, is at the heart a class war. A general strike expresses the intent to fight back politically by workers collectively withdrawing their labour



Gainex workers join USWA, Local 2900 and Local 4487 on Inglis picket line during the summer of 1986.

Build the General Strike

power. A general strike must include the political leadership of those who are not represented in trade unions, to build a broader coalition of progressive social organizations and movements who are under attack. We have two examples which demonstrate this.

First the General Strike. This was a one day work stoppage directed against the Trudeau government's introduction of wage and price controls. It didn't prevent wage controls from going ahead, and judged in terms of social democratic interests, it had no electoral effect. However, it is not necessary for a fightback strategy to translate into electoral victory in order that it be judged successful. That is, electoral success is not a necessary, or the only, criterion involved in our strategy. Our concern is for a strategy of mobilization, one which involves the direct participation and leadership of people whose interests are directly opposed to all aspects of the business agenda. A general strike declares such an opposition and provides the organizational and political opportunity for such a mobilization. The General Strike built on, and grew out of the Quebec Common Front. As a mass mobilization, it was successful.

Our second example is Solidarity, a major mobilization which represented and directly involved the vast majority of working class interests in BC. Solidarity included trade union, community, and women's organizations organized in coalition across the province. Again there were problems, particularly the failure of these progressive movements to address their own racism, thus reproducing the racist exclusion of people of colour and Native people from leadership and participation. From the start, Solidarity held the promise of a major fight back against the SoCred government. The strategy included direct actions, street theatre, work stoppages, rallies -- all through a campaign which made the point of fighting around economic, political and social issues. The NDP remained firmly in the electoral arena, literally closeted in the legislature throughout the entire campaign. The failure of Solidarity was the failure of

leadership, or the victory of conservative trade unionism which chose to demobilize the movement by concentrating on a narrow set of demands which were limited to the collective bargaining process. That tactic shifted the fight to the bargaining table, and cut off the rest of the mobilization from the power brokerage which was occurring behind closed doors. Such a tactic not only demobilized Solidarity, but ensured that there would be no way to sustain, or recoup the lost momentum. The fight was over.

The Fightback!

We have used these examples to show that strategic organization and leadership must be counted among the objective conditions which can either enhance or inhibit mass mobilization. TSFA must work with our allies to raise participation and recognition of how we are involved in a struggle which is rooted in oppression based on race, gender, and class. The potential, for example, of coalition politics lies in integrating race and gender in our methods for organizing and in our demands, if our objective is to challenge ruling structures and practices of both the state and business. This is not simply a fight for 'fair taxation' or protection against US corporations. The current cross-class alliance, like the anti-free trade alliance before it, can't seem to agree on a strategy to defeat the GST. Relying on Liberal Senators is not, ultimately productive of an effective means for mobilization. Furthermore, a nationalist argument against either the GST, or free trade, or even social 'cutbacks' as anathema to some sense of social justice which is peculiarly Canadian or perhaps peculiar to Canadian capitalism, not only misrepresents working class interests, but is also racist. It sets workers in opposition to each other based on nationality; it denies, in fact ignores, the national liberation struggles engaged in protracted war against Canadian and other corporate interests in countries where capital has secured so-called cheap labour; it divides and classifies workers on the basis of citizenship and migration status while obscuring the

oppression of native people and people of colour in Canada ... I could go on. A strategy based on nationalism is not only bankrupt tactically, but is also incapable of challenging the business agenda. A fightback which we would hope to build must begin from the recognition that we are facing an international restructuring of capital. Our strategy must link us up with progressive social movements internationally.

Finally, what do we do when the GST is passed? Do we stop fighting? Will electoral change make the difference? Again, a strategy which relies on defeating this or that piece of legislation, while important, is not productive if that is the only priority, or the only focus. An electoral programme is not ultimately democratic in the broadest sense. It does not involve, nor does it encourage, the

leadership of people who are directly oppressed on the basis of race, class, and gender. It is myopic. It does not seek or move toward building through coalition the permanent oppositional strength which is capable of bringing about the radical change we think necessary to end such oppression. Of course, we are not saying that a general strike will overthrow capitalism. However, a general strike is capable of building and mobilizing a broader oppositional movement, of highlighting, rather than obscuring, the ideological hegemony of capitalist, racist and patriarchal interests, of challenging - head on - the business agenda. It is important strategically to organize to win concrete political demands. It is also empowering by organizing to transform the material conditions of our lives.

Plant Closures

by Laurie Bell

This song is inspired by and dedicated to the United Steelworkers, Locals 2900 and 4487 from the Inglis plant in Toronto. They all lost their jobs when Inglis closed its doors in late 1989 to move south - for good.

Takes a body and soul to work this line

Oh, the plant is closing

Decision's yours but the work was mine

Oh, the plant is closing

Move production, take the machines

Rob our future, steal our dreams

Oh, the plant is closing

All these years we've stood our ground

Oh, the plant is closing

Built this union strong and sound

Oh, the plant is closing

Walked the picket, marched the strike

Stuck together, fought the fight

Oh, the plant is closing

Hard to make ends meet as the times get leaner

Oh, the plant is closing

Bossman moves where the grass looks greener

Oh, the plant is closing

Make the trade deal, raise the tax

Cheaper labour, break their backs

Oh, the plant is closing

There's one week's pay for every year

Oh, the plant is closing

No U.I. will make it disappear

Oh, the plant is closing

Lock the bolt, turn the key

Shut the door on you and me

Oh, the plant is closing

Your work is more than drawing pay

Oh, the plant is closing

Your bloody life's what you do all day

Oh, the plant is closing

What makes me and what makes you

We're who we are by the work we do

Oh, the plant is closing

I need the work and I need the wage

Oh, the plant is closing

Who's gonna hire a woman my age?

Oh, the plant is closing

Carmen, Bev, Nancy, Flo,

Where will women like us go?

Oh, the plant is closing

Lesbian Anthology Misses Mark

Lesbians in Canada, Edited by Sharon Dale Stone, *Between the Lines*, 1990, Canada.

Review by Gillian Morton & Maureen L. Phillips

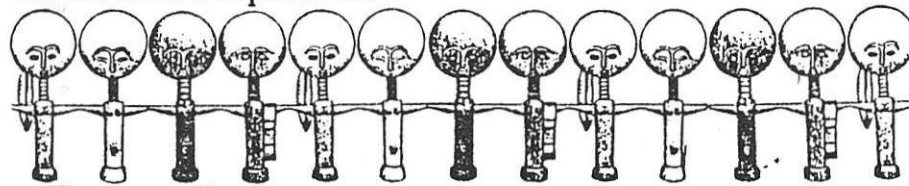
"*Lesbians in Canada*? What is it? A list of names and telephone numbers?" a friend asked, upon hearing that we were reviewing this book. We were forced to admit that *Lesbians in Canada* is not a directory, but is instead a non-fiction anthology. According to the editor, Sharon Dale Stone, the book was "compiled to bring Canadian lesbians into public view, to correct stereotypes and assumptions, and to present lesbianism as a viable alternative to hetero-sexuality". Correcting stereotypes and presenting lesbianism as a viable alternative seems to us an inadequate starting point for an anthology by and about lesbians in 1990, given the groundwork laid by issues of publications such as *Fireweed*, *RFR*, *Broadside*, *Rites*, and *The Body Politic*, as well as non-Canadian, non-fiction anthologies such as *Lesbian Psychologies*, *Out the Other Side*, and *Living the Spirit*, and lesbian work included in collections such as *Home Girls*, *This Bridge Called My Back*, and *Charting the Journey*, written by women of colour. Our guess is that the primary readership for this book is lesbians and gays and those familiar with the relevant issues and struggles, a readership who will be disappointed by the failure of the anthology to offer new challenges and insights.

Had the book picked up ongoing discussions, we might have expected to see articles about pornography, battering, AIDS, s/m, butch/femme, health issues, and lesbian cultural production, among others. Sharon Dale Stone notes some of these omissions in her introduction and comments that the book

provides a starting point for further explorations.

These gaps in content, however, are less discouraging than the lack of an anti-racist perspective and class analysis throughout most of the book. For instance, although a strong piece about Afro-Caribbean lesbians by Makeda Silvera is included, with few exceptions the other articles neglect to mention the issue of race except in footnotes, and fail to address the impact of systemic racism on lesbians of colour. Although many of the writers comment on the social and economic privileges enjoyed by heterosexuals, there is little discussion of class as a significant factor in the lives of individual lesbians or as a factor when lesbians organize. These absences obviously limit the claims to diversity made by the editor and several writers, as well as the usefulness of the collection.

Among the articles included in the book are chapters dealing with lesbians and aging, organizing, legislation, lesbians with disabilities, lesbian mothers, and a number of chapters on lesbians and the educational system. Some effort has been made to represent Canada's various regions, including articles about lesbians in Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, British Columbia, and Quebec, although the work of Ontario-based writers is over represented.



There are four types of articles (and some hybrids): personal experiences or autobiographies, academic 'arguments', histories of organizing, and interview-based studies. Sharon Dale Stone notes that most articles in the book are based on interview data, supposedly "giving voice to those interviewed", rather than engaging in "unrelenting analysis and theory".

What this often means is that the author constructs assumptions, implies that these assumptions are generally held, and then counters these stereotypes with 'real experience' in the form of generalizations backed up by quotes (ie. the voices of lesbians). For example, in "Lesbian/Mother" Dian Day writes "Real lesbians don't have children. This is proclaimed with equal loudness by both straight women (and men) and 'real' lesbians. Real lesbians have never been fucked (perhaps rape is the exception). Real lesbians have never had sperm inside their bodies. The thought of sperm makes them sick. Real lesbians are not interested in children—especially male children... Real lesbians have much more important work to do".

Having set up this kind of caricature, without any context (who has these ideas, who says them, where, why, to what end), she implies that "Real lesbians" in some way dominate and marginalize all the fakes (ie. in this scenario lesbian mothers). She goes on to write about the daily existence of lesbian mothers, from getting pregnant to custody battles to co-parenting, offering a series of observations that are substantiated by quotes from her interviewees. It is difficult to see how this type of article allows "the women to speak for themselves"; we do not know the

questions that elicited their responses, or the format of the discussion/interview, and their comments are usually cited as confirmation or demonstration of the authors own observations.

Reading this kind of piece brings to mind an anecdote about the exasperation of a documentary filmmaker, who was

fed up with following her subjects around and waiting for them to say what she wanted to hear. In many articles the 'voices of lesbians' who were questioned do not get much air time. For instance, Sharon Dale Stone's and the Women's Survey Group's "Lesbian Life in a Small Centre" focuses on the Survey Group's discussion of the thirteen responses to their questionnaire: the questionnaire is not included in the article, nor is much information about it, and the voices of the respondents are subsumed by the Survey Group's.

Not all the interview-based articles are so riddled with problems. Didi Khayatt's "Lesbian Teachers" quotes the teachers at length, giving their experiences some depth. This piece also lives up to the book's promise to offer "survival strategies" as teachers explain how they cope with their vulnerability, coming out, and other issues. Didi Khayatt draws out contradictions in the interviews not noticed by the subjects themselves, for instance describing how some women see themselves as non-conformists in their work environment yet say that they guard "every word, every gesture, on every occasion" that they are not in the company of other lesbians.

The best autobiographical piece included in the book is Makeda Silvera's "Man Royals and Sodomites", which has been published previously in *Fireweed* and in *A Space's Sight Specific: Lesbians and Representation*. This evocative piece works as an oral history, with her grandmother's, mother's, mother's friend's, and other voices interwoven to produce stories about lesbians in the community of Makeda Silvera's childhood. She connects these stories to her experiences working in the Black and feminist communities in Toronto.

continued on page 7

continued from page 3

We know about the concept of compulsory heterosexuality: heterosexual relations, sometime towards the end of the Victorian period, came to be reified as an inarguable, natural, biologically based and rigidly enforced social model, against which other practices were defined as deviant. How then do we women who sleep with men evaluate our sexual orientation as evolving and "genuine" and not entirely socialized or prescribed? No matter how innate one feels one's sexuality, to live a lesbian existence is a conscious choice, made in the full knowledge of the consequences in a homophobic society which perpetrates violence against even those women who conform. There is no such self-reflexivity built into the practice of heterosexuality. As Adrian Rich (in *Compulsory Heterosexuality*) points out, heterosexuality is not seen to be in need of explanation. If heterosexual relations were as stigmatized and punished as are homosexual ones, would we risk so much to pursue them? Those of us who do not accept conventional, naturalistic or religious arguments, have possibly never articulated or even pondered whether or not we have a commitment of any sort to functioning as heterosexuals, or in what terms we would define that commitment. The very label is only useful in relation to other practices.

Heterosexual people who do not accept the normative definitions must define themselves against them, and as those relations are so pervasive and slippery, much energy goes into the project: questions of marriage or not, whose name to use, the division of labour, and whether or not to have children and how to raise them. Then there are all the more subtle elements of

everyday behaviour: how does one refer to one's mate? As "husband"? "Partner"? "Boyfriend"? "Lover"? "Main squeeze"? All these alternatives have their drawbacks, which may very well stem from the possessive form itself.

Heterosexuality, for feminists, comes to be defined by what it is not -- it is not lesbianism, and it is not Barbie and Ken, happily-ever-after. We never talk about what it is. It is forever defined in the negative.

Lesbians can often readily articulate the benefits of lesbianism and why it appeals to them, beyond the basic reference to sexual attraction. Can heterosexual women do the same, if we reject all the old tired notions of the naturalness of penile-vaginal penetration and the necessity of male role models for children? Heterosexuality is not monolithic, though it is often constructed as such by gays and straights alike. If we do not want to accept the essentialist clichés that violence is the ultimate consequence of heterosexual relations, and that masculinity intrinsically equals violence, then we need to think about the many things that heterosexuality is, or can be. We can never ignore, however, the historical construction of heterosexuality. as a political institution, and how violence has traditionally been at least potentially inherent in normative heterosexual relations. I presume that most of us experience our sexual preferences as innate. For feminists, what does it mean to be innately attracted to people whom we also fundamentally feel to be our oppressors? Is it identification with the oppressor, a widespread version of the Helsinki phenomenon?

Sexuality has historically been defined as a male phenomenon or prerogative. Lesbians have redefined

it, and reclaimed it, as female. Heterosexual women have had to define our sexuality in relation to men, from the Wife of Bath to Moll Flanders to Erica Jong's "zipless fuck" to Kim Basinger in *9 1/2 Weeks*. This is a much more troublesome and fraught terrain. Where is our sexual response located? Have we internalized the values of the colonizer? Recently, any re-evaluation is something we have had to do individually, and not as part of the feminist project. One response to these troubling questions is the validation of "sexual play" and "jouissance." In other words, it becomes a question of attitude, rather than of practice. If one enjoys wearing black lingerie and dancing for one's partner, or being tied to the bedposts, one is only "playing," and subverting normative heterosexual values, by one's very consciousness of them. But how do we avoid what Adrian Rich termed "synapses in thought, denials of feeling, wishful thinking, a profound sexual and intellectual confusion"? Those of us in couples work to subvert "Barbie and Ken," but how do we as individual women deal with the inevitable disjunctions? We must move towards a stronger understanding of the historical construction of our sexuality as a discursive practice.

Being a heterosexual is analogous to being a WASP in Canada. Other people have "culture" and "ethnicity." WASP culture is invisible since it is practically in the air we breathe. It is a given; it does not need to be defined or even thought of. Part of our project as whites doing anti-racist work is to recognize our privilege and decentre our perspective. As heterosexuals, we face the same necessities, for two reasons: In order to help fight the oppression of our sisters, and in order to understand our own

construction. We must locate ourselves within a series of potential responses to hegemonic social practice: i) non-questioning acceptance, ii) an oppositional response to the normative construction of our sexuality; a response of resistance, and iii) a recognition of the dangers of co-optation. It is easy for us to "play the game" -- there is less of a slippage for us than for lesbians -- and we need to take responsibility for our privilege and resist co-optation.

Within our other struggles, we are realizing the need for further work on heterosexuality. AIDS activists have pointed out that they have had to confront the politics of heterosexuality in their outreach work to heterosexual women and prostitutes, for whom it is often very difficult to negotiate the use of condoms. In my own work in the pro-choice movement, I realised long ago that the anti-choice were not nearly so concerned with protecting the "pre-born child," as they are with enforcing, with violence if necessary, a restrictive, retrogressive, and highly codified view of women's sexuality. We cannot simply categorize the pro-choice struggle in the liberal terms of freedom and personal choice, or of a fight-back against a right-wing backlash, real as the backlash is; we must also discuss it in the context of heterosexual power relations, and of redefining the possibilities for women within those relations, especially for those women of colour or of the working class, who are most restricted. Women are in danger in contemporary sexual cultures, and new explorations of heterosexuality will have practical implications for us all.

continued from page 6

Another strong chapter is M. Julia Creet's "A Test of Unity" which outlines the participation of lesbians in the British Columbia Federation of women, showing how lesbian identities and internalized homophobia are brought to bear on feminist politics and organizing. The article is an abridged version of a longer study, and more details about the internal debates-- of how many "differences had been fought out over the lesbian issue", and how issues of class and race were related to the issue of sexual orientation (or not)-- would have been useful.

Despite the stronger work included in *Lesbians in Canada*, the book makes for less than compelling reading. Given the training of most of the writers as scholars, mostly sociologists, many of the articles read as if they were produced within (and in order to challenge) the academy. Although accessible, the work is for the most part flat, not engagingly written, and often dull.

Because of the failure of many articles to put forward an anti-racist perspective and class analysis, the book works to construct a homogenous lesbian subjectivity. An exception to



this is "Redefining Difference" by Joanne Doucette, about the resistance of lesbians with disabilities, which explicitly includes the perspective of Native and Metis Canadians who make connections between homophobia, racism, and how they are oppressed because of their disabilities.

Although the book represents a variety of opinions about a variety of issues, the 'diversity' is largely limited to a particular lesbian constituency, ie. lesbians who go to workshops and who

therefore can be interviewed/quoted, lesbians the authors/academics know, and, perhaps most tellingly, the perspectives and experiences of the authors themselves.

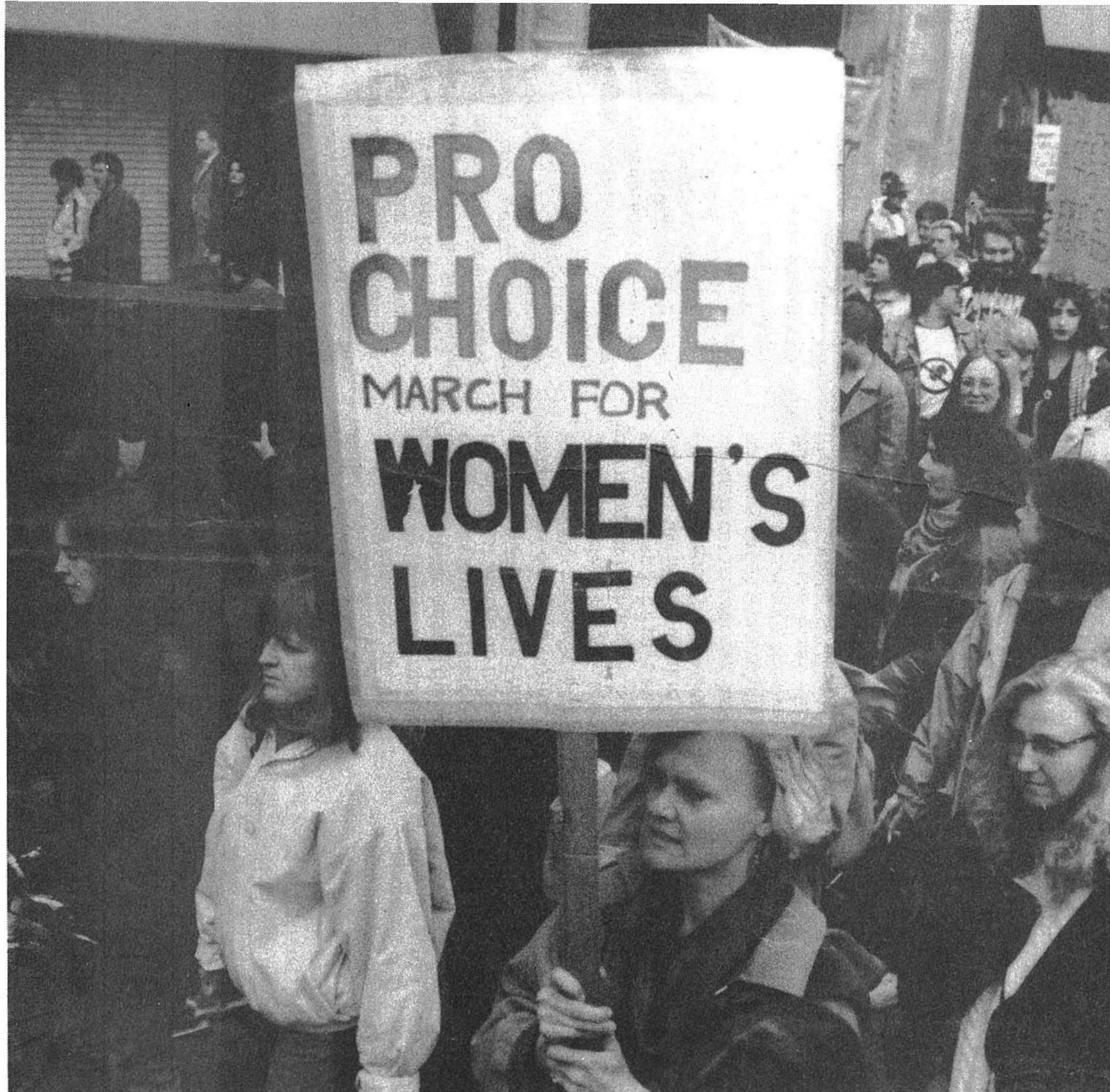
The Children's Auxiliary of TSFA

Welcomes:

**Dylani Shea as
our latest Rebel
Girl**

*Born June 12, 1990 at 6
lbs. 8 oz.*

**Both Dylani and
Mom, Sharmini
Peries are doing
great!**



SUBSCRIBE TO THE REBEL GIRLS' RAG

Rebel Girls' Rag provides a vehicle for socialist-feminist activists to analyze, discuss and report on our political work and our visions. It is the voice of an activist organization. Subscribe now! Donations will assist us in our work.

I wish to subscribe to Rebel Girls' Rag and enclose \$10 for a one year subscription (4 issues): and enclose a donation of _____.

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____

Postal Code: _____

Phone: _____

Send cheque or money order to: Toronto Socialist Feminist Action
P.O. Box 70, Station F, Toronto, Ontario M4L 2L4