

TOWARDS A FIGHTING ORGANIZATION OF TRADE UNION WOMEN

It was almost a year ago, at a conference on Women in the Workforce at Humber College, that we decided to build an organization to fight for the rights of working women.

The problems we wanted to tackle are still with us. We haven't won equal work for equal pay. The wage gap between male and female workers is still increasing. Adequate childcare is less available than last year. Dr. Morgentaler continues to be persecuted; abortion continues to be restricted. Gay women workers have it even harder.

The union movement itself has still not seriously begun to take up the fight for equal rights of women workers. It has not seriously sought to organize the unorganized, nor encouraged the full participation of women within its own ranks by providing childcare during union meetings or by fighting for the right to hold meetings during work hours so that women who are responsible for domestic labour after their work hours can become involved.

These issues are not new. They have confronted women workers for decades and it is precisely because they still demand a response that we have long needed to build an organization, such as the Organized Working Women, which will engage in a clear fight for the rights of women workers both within and outside the trade union movement. We see the tasks as being a defence of the specific demands of women, such as free universal childcare, free abortion on demand, equal pay and equal work and organizing women workers, as well as helping women workers articulate their specific oppressions on the job, (how many secretaries have to be "sexy" in order to get a raise) as well. An organization, like OWWTA, should seek to guarantee that the labour movement as a whole takes up both of these fights, thus neither isolating "women's issues" from the demands of the labour movement nor taking them up in only a superficial way.

But now, more than ever, we need such a fighting organization. The international economic recession has prompted governments around the capitalist world to try to resolve the crisis at the expense of labour. In Britain, in France, in the United States, the policies of the governments have been designed to attack the standard of living of the working class by one means or another - wage freezes, "social-contracts" to limit wage demands, cutting back on social services and so on. Now that the crisis which has been characteristic of the capitalist world for the past several years has caught up with the Canadian economy, the response of the government's programme of wage controls, the provincial government's cutbacks in social services, the growing restrictions on our lives - all these are part of the package to restore the sagging corporate profits by lowering the standard of living of the working people in terms of wages and available social services. For the bosses and their governments - in Canada, as in the rest of the capitalist world - there is no alternative to attempting to get out of this crisis by making the working class pay.

ALL OF THESE ATTACKS HIT WOMEN WORKERS HARDEST.

WAGE CONTROLS AND WOMEN WORKERS

Wage controls have been with us for several months and their meaning is increasingly clear to all of us - they are an outright attack on the right to bargain collectively and on our living standards as workers. Our wages are controlled but prices are not. Roll backs on price increases are 'secret' so as not to embarrass the corporations. But the increases can't be hidden. Bread, drugs, gasoline, the

transit are only a few of the necessities which have increased in price in the last few months. In B.C., a 300% increase in auto insurance rates was declared non-inflationary by the so-called Anti-Inflation Board. But the AID has been very effective in controlling wages, the most recent example being the roll back in the settlement with the teachers in the OSSTF.

But while wage controls are an attack on all workers, they hit women workers especially hard. Most women workers are at the lower end of the pay scale. The strict percentage increases of the wage control package not only limits increases and means that we have an even more difficult time coping with the inflationary spiral but it also ensures that there is no possibility of equalization of pay. In fact, the gap will continue to widen between the highest paid and the lowest paid, many of whom are women.

Continuing inflation with lower wages puts more pressure on women to intensify and increase their labour in the family unit too. Whether it is our own wages or those of our companions or both that are being held down, it means more work for women in the domestic sphere in order to make ends meet - more time looking for bargains, carefully planning and making cheaper meals, patching clothes, not eating out, etc. Also more women will be seeking employment. With the total family income decreasing with inflation, women will try to find outside work to cover the increasing costs. We must try to integrate these women into our struggles rather than see them as competitors for limited jobs.

The federal government is not just trying to clamp a temporary ceiling on the wages of organized workers; it is attempting to inflict a fundamental defeat on the entire working class. The lines are sharply drawn with the working class on one side and the bosses and their governments on the other. But it is the trade union movement - the section of the working class which is organized and best able to fight - which is at the centre of the battle. If the wages of the best organized sector are beaten back, if the full rights of trade unions to bargain, to strike and to organize are not won back, if the trade unions allow themselves to be defeated then the living standards of the unorganized workers, the poor, the unemployed will be lowered even further.

How can the union movement fight the controls? What should OWWTA do? The March 22 demonstration in Ottawa was a beginning. However, the CLC leadership was unable or unwilling to pick up on the militancy of the workers at the rally. The workers were there to clearly express rejection of wage controls and cutbacks. The CLC leadership just talked. The contingent from Quebec displayed most clearly this sentiment for a mass response to the wage controls. We should follow their lead. In Canada, this could take the form of a 24 hour general strike as a first demonstration against the wage controls, and in support of the Quebec working class if the general strike takes place. Political strikes of this kind can be launched on a regional, provincial or national level. Thoroughly built and coordinated such a mobilization in Canada and Quebec would have an enormous impact and pave the way for a general strike fought until the controls have been withdrawn.

We also need to go on to develop full, active solidarity with any and every union striking against the controls. Their struggle is ours. The success of all negotiations and strikes will depend on the backing and support of the entire labour movement. Such solidarity includes supporting workers on the line, organizing solidarity pickets and demonstrations, raising money to support them - as CUPE 1660 did for the pulp workers by pledging \$1.00 per member or \$11,000. This would require developing rank and file participation in actions and decision-making with a view to developing a real struggle against the controls. OWWTA because of our

aim to defend women workers, because of the special impact of the controls on women, because of the rank and file position of women workers, has a special responsibility to push for this active fight against the controls. We must fight for this approach in our locals, our unions, at the labour councils and right on up to the CLC.

CUTBACKS IN SOCIAL SERVICES

10 more hospitals to close--18 required to reduce number of beds
TTC fares increase 100% over year
Welfare mothers required to take jobs
Daycare budget slashed
No new old age homes, services cut
Tuition fees to be hiked 65%

Everyday we are confronted with headlines like these. Cutbacks make labour pay in a number of ways: 1) They shift the cost of non-luxury services--like hospital care or transit--back onto the users. In this way they are a defacto cut in wages. 2) They convert paid labour in the public sector into unpaid labour in the home--daycare and health care cuts, for example, force women to work harder in the home taking care of children and the sick or finding alternative arrangements. 3) They increase unemployment. The swollen number of unemployed are then forced to compete harder with each other to get hired and avoid being fired.

These cutbacks intensify the oppression of women workers. Women are already last hired and first fired. Their unemployment rate is increasing compared to that of men. The cutbacks are in areas which have become female job ghettos--from secretaries to nurses, from childcare workers to cleaning "ladies", from file clerks to social workers--the number of jobs available for women workers is to be drastically reduced. At the same time, the provincial government announced that welfare mothers must "get up, get dressed up and be somewhere on time", that is, they must work at any job, temporary or permanent, part or full time, at any wage offered them or lose their eligibility for benefits. Far from being a positive step by the government to encourage women to find meaningful work--it is a gimmick to reduce welfare cost--if they cannot take the job because they cannot find childcare or afford the transit costs--a very real problem--cut them off!

All of this increases the pressure to stay in a lousy job; to work harder; to not rock the boat. Like racism and national chauvinism, sexism is used to keep working people from uniting. Inescapable parts of capitalist society, all these divisions in the working class are intensified by the economic crisis. By playing on these divisions ("big" labour against the "little people"; employed against the unemployed; women vs. men; natives vs. immigrants; etc.) and by using the "pie" argument--money for childcare=no money for education; money for pensioners=no money for hospitals--the ruling class hopes to keep us from uniting to fight back.

What the government "saves" by these cutbacks, it then gives to the corporations and industry to boost their rates of profit--through exploration grants, tax rebates and cheap goods and transport to name a few.

The cuts must be and are being seen as an attack on basic social rights won by the working class and the women's movement in past decades. A potentially massive response is beginning to develop. Across the province groups and committees have sprung up over the past few weeks to oppose the attacks on our standards of living. In Toronto, we have seen organized opposition to transit fare hikes, hospital closures, childcare cuts, student fee increases, cuts in services to pensioners. We have seen the growth of a Coalition Against Cutbacks, which has the endorsement of a number of unions--CUPE 79, nurses associations and CUPE hospital workers among others. The Coalition has set itself the tasks of organizing a response so unified and massive that the government will be unable to impose its solution on our backs.

We in OWWTA should make our position clear. Our responsibilities to women workers demands that we oppose all cutbacks. We should endorse and actively participate in groups and committees like the Coalition Against Cutbacks. We should organize a contingent from this conference to join the April 3rd march against the cutbacks from City Hall to Queen's Park at 11: a.m. We should fight within our unions to participate in the fight in an active way. Only if the trade union movement takes up the fight against the cutbacks can it be successful. As workers we must realize that the fight for our rights if it is to be successful, is inseparable from a fight against the current attacks on the working class.

The fight for our rights cannot wait. It is necessary to begin now.

That is why we think it is important to support and participate in OWWTA, the struggle for the right to abortion, childcare and the rights of gay workers, But the oppression of women workers, like the exploitation of all workers, is an inescapable part of the capitalist system. It cannot be wiped out without sweeping away class society through a socialist revolution. Each step workers take in defense of their rights is a step in the struggle for a society democratically controlled by the working class, a socialist society.

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The authors of this leaflet support the politics of the Revolutionary Marxist Group. The Revolutionary Marxist Group and the Groupe Marxiste Revolutionnaire are sister organizations in Canada and Quebec. Composed of workers and students we identify ourselves with all of the struggles for human emancipation against the capitalist system which exploits and oppresses us--with the struggles of the working class, of women, of national and racial minorities, of gay people. In this battle to fundamentally transform society, it is the working class which must play the central role. We are members of the Fourth International, a world wide organization of revolutionaries in over fifty countries, who work together on the basis of a common programme, in the common project of advancing the socialist revolution.