

Women's Strike Support Coalition

Date: May 28, 1985

Place: Queen's Park

STATEMENT ON CHANGES NEEDED IN LABOUR LEGISLATION

The Women's Strike Support Coalition includes women's groups and labour unions[1] representing a broad spectrum of concerns related to women. We came together in support of the organizing drive at Eaton's because we saw this effort as central in improving the situation for all women in paid work. Three fourths of the part time labour force are women and a large majority of unorganized workers are women.

What happens to people on the picket line is increasingly a women's issue. Most of the long, difficult first contract strikes in the last five or six years have been women's strikes. Women workers at Radio Shack, Fleck, Irwin Toys, Mini Skool have all been subjected to vicious anti union tactics in their efforts to organize and get a first contract.

1. The Women's Strike Support Coalition includes representatives from the following organizations: Organized Working Women, National Action Committee on the Status of Women, International Women's Day Committee, Ontario Federation of Labour Women's Committee, District 6 Women's Committee - United Steelworkers of America, Confederation of Canadian Unions, Toronto Area Caucus of Women and the Law, Ontario New Democratic Party Women's Committee, Executive, Metro Toronto District Council - Canadian Union of Public Employees, York University Staff Association, Congress of Canadian Women, York University Faculty Association.

The Eaton's employees who organized a union in six Ontario stores and stayed on the picket line throughout this long, cold winter displayed an impressive courage and commitment in the face of the terrible imbalance in power between working people and a large corporation such as Eaton's. The outcome of the strike, as well as the experiences of recent years made us realize that labour legislation in this province is archaic when it comes to addressing the needs and concerns of women in the 1980's. We have come here today to lobby for changes in the labour legislation that will more accurately fit the present realities of women's work. There are three areas where we need changes immediately:

1. We need strong strike breaker legislation. The lack of such legislation has served to seriously undermine strikes and has had a tremendous impact on reinforcing the existing imbalance of power. This affects every worker in this province. Current legislation legitimizes strikebreaking by allowing employers to hire people to replace striking workers as long as they are not professional provocateurs. These strikebreakers can then vote on the ratification of a union contract for which legitimate employees have risked their jobs and financial security. This violates every principle of fairness and justice.

Even in our own province, workers in all parts of the construction industry are entitled to vote on contract ratification only if they were at work before a strike began. We

can look to our neighbouring jurisdiction, Quebec, for a model of decent strike breaker legislation. In Quebec, employers are prohibited from using other people to discharge the duties of striking employees.

2. We need first contract legislation to oblige an employer to agree to a basic union contract when an impasse is reached in bargaining for a first collective agreement. Such arbitration must be on request by the union alone, and not be contingent on proving unfair labour practices on the part of the employer. This has been a long time demand of the entire labour movement and a major obstacle in first attempts to organize a union.

We must recognize that the effort to negotiate with a company such as Eaton's bears some resemblance to David's confrontation with Goliath. He at least had a sling shot. The Goliaths of today are corporate giants with almost limitless resources at their disposal to evade responding to the collective concerns of their employees. By its ability to wait out a prolonged strike, a rich and powerful company such as Eaton's has a major advantages over its workers. Quebec, Manitoba and British Columbia have all recognized the principle of affirmative labour legislation and first contract arbitration. In Ontario we want a just law, first contract arbitration by application of a union, to help compensate for the unjust economic advantages employers have over workers.

3. We need legislation to compel the Ontario Labour Relations Board to include both full time workers and part time workers in the same bargaining unit when requested by the union. Unlike the federal jurisdiction and many other provinces, the Ontario Labour Relations Board routinely allows employers to veto the inclusion of part-timers in a full time bargaining unit. This practice serves to weaken both groups in bargaining with the employer.

Part time work is growing at rates much higher than full time work because it is beneficial to employers to create jobs at rates of pay and with benefits that are impossible to live on. The recent Air Canada strike illustrates how employers attempt to eliminate the gains full time workers have managed to win by creating part time jobs at the expense of full time workers.

Employers increasingly attempt to treat women as if they were economic dependents on wage earning husbands to keep their profits up. Women cannot and do not want to have to depend upon men for their support. Labour legislation must reflect a contemporary economy in which the need for women to do waged work is a fact of life. Part time workers, like full time workers need the full protection of collective agreements and labour legislation. The roadblock set by employers to separate workers needs to be made an illegal obstruction to be set aside to promote the successful organization of women workers.