

WOMEN, UNIONS AND WORKPLACE STRUGGLES  
OR

"WE'VE COME A LONG WAY BABY"....BUT WE'VE GOT A LONG WAY TO GO

INTRODUCTION

This paper is a reflection on the almost two years I have spent working in small Toronto plants with large numbers of women workers. It is divided into three sections. The first section is about Federal Pacific Electric, a factory I worked in for a year and a half. A good part of the paper is a description of the contradictions there among the workers and between the workers and capital. I spent so much time on description because first of all, I think it is important to become specific about different sectors of the working class, as I have found that one can't relate politically to all sectors in the same way. One obvious difference is between men and women. But the life experiences -- class origins, family structure and relationships etc. -- of each immigrant group and between immigrants and native-born Canadians are so different that it may necessitate a different approach to struggle with each group. For example with immigrant men, community struggles based in their own national group may be of more immediate significance than workplace struggles, whereas Canadian men may be more prepared for struggle in the workplace. The second reason for so much description is that the struggles that did develop at Federal, as well as the ones that didn't, must be related in part to the type of workforce.

The second part of the section on Federal will deal with the process of my being elected steward and my evaluation of that means of developing struggle. I wrote it because I had so many questions about becoming a steward as a tactic for developing autonomous struggle before I became one; by going through the experience I have been able to answer some of them. It's a problem that everyone will face who is attempting to organize in the workplace, and a very important one. We must have many discussions about relating to Unions, if only to spare militants from becoming a steward "just to see what potential is in it."

I don't want people to generalize from my experience at Federal that there is "no potential" in small plants. The second section, on Collins Radio, is an attempt to be specific about different national groups and their different consciousness in the workplace and other areas.

It isn't sufficient to base an evaluation of potential for struggle simply on my observations of the workforce. More important I think is an evaluation of my assumptions and approach -- to see how these affected struggle. This is what I have tried to do in the last section. Because I have only begun to relate the workers' autonomy perspective to my experiences and how I think it relates



generally to women who work outside the home, the "Conclusion" is one in name only. In fact it should really be called the Beginning. It is the product of my thinking and discussing with many women and men, but is only tentative. Certainly it is incomplete as a perspective without developing a great deal more what we mean by "community" struggles and how struggles in the community and workplace are linked. In order to solidify what workers' autonomy means for women (and as a central part of that I include the wages for housework perspective) we must have many more discussions and a much broader practical experience with women's struggles both in the workplace and in the community.

## FEDERAL PACIFIC ELECTRIC

### The Company

Federal is one part of the U.S. Steel Conglomerate, with production facilities in five provinces across Canada, and factories in the United States, Jamaica, Italy, Australia and Mexico. The Toronto plant produces electrical equipment such as heaters, circuit breakers and fuses.

### The Workforce

It's a plant not untypical of many in Toronto. Relatively small -- 200 men and 100 women, with about 80% of the workforce immigrant, predominantly Greek-Cypriot and Guyanese. The major reason for the disproportionate numbers of these national groups was the personnel policy of posting all vacancies, with the result that friends informed friends who informed their friends etc.

For many of the Cypriots, Federal was their first job in Canada. Most of them had high school education or more but couldn't get "better" jobs for lack of "Canadian experience" or language difficulties. Few of them had worked in factories in Cyprus. The women had worked in offices or as salesclerks, and the men had worked in the Civil Service and several of them had been policemen. Because most of them don't have a chance of ever getting out of a factory in Canada, they seem to have accepted their "fate".

The West Indians at FPE, on the other hand, were very into upward mobility. Many of them came from rural areas and their jobs in Canada represented their first collectivized proletarian experiences. Most of them hadn't graduated from high school at home and were doing retraining courses in Toronto. Anything to them was better than working in a factory. Some of the women were



doing secretarial courses and RMA courses; the men were into trades. Almost all of them believed that anybody who tried hard enough could "make" it. They operated in a very individualistic manner for the most part, and when challenged on that expressed distrust of the other workers, black and white. In the year and a half I was there I saw some development of black consciousness, but generally they felt little solidarity with American blacks.

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There were almost no young Anglo-Canadian women, and only a few young Anglo men. There was a large core of "stable" workers (2/3 had worked there for more than three years); and most were in their 30's and up, with a significant number younger. None of the workers that I knew of were involved in any kind of struggle, national or class, in their native countries or in Canada.

Racism

The racism among the various ethnic groups overwhelmed me at first. After numerous fruitless discussions with workers about government immigration policies and "preaching" constantly the necessity for workers' unity, I came to the conclusion that racism will continue as a major contradiction until class struggle forces its practical resolution. Just as it isn't an "ideological" problem, it can't be resolved ideologically. One of the major arguments the English-speaking workers (mostly Canadian and often West Indians) used against other ethnic groups (especially Greeks, Italians, Portuguese whom they would usually lump together) was that they acted as "scabs" by keeping wages down and working conditions bad. At the more subjective level, English-speaking workers reacted strongly, sometimes almost violently, to anybody speaking another language. In part it reflected people's paranoia that if you don't know what they're talking about, they must be talking about you; and in part the reality that when you're tired and tense, listening to half a dozen women chatting in Greek can be rather annoying. There was also racism between whites and blacks, which came out mostly in the whites' patronizing attitudes towards the blacks. This was being broken down significantly by the social interaction between the two groups over an extended period of time, and also by the "united front" against non-English speaking workers. I talked to several of the blacks (who were all West Indian and Guyanese immigrants) about racism; a few wouldn't admit to me that it existed, and others said that blacks objecting to racism in Canada should return to the West Indies.

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Fear of Authority

The deference to authority is another major obstacle to struggle. It's more understandable that women would be afraid of the bosses because of the subservient role they're forced to play



everywhere in society. (One instance of this was at Christmas time when the women in my department insisted on buying a gift for our foreman). But only in one department of men did I ever see any signs of struggle. Even the very close bonds of nationality didn't hold when individual workers were being given shit by the foreman. One example was the question of overtime. Although the contract states that overtime is strictly voluntary, and in most departments it really is in practice, in one department of mostly Greek-Cypriots, men were working 64 hours a week regularly. If a Cypriot refused to do overtime when the foreman went around asking men at their stations on the floor, he would subsequently be called into the office (with the Cypriot steward acting as translator if necessary) and "asked" again. Invariably he accepted. Seldom were non-Cypriots subjected to this harrassment. The Cypriots were forced to eat so much shit at work, that I wondered how they could maintain any self-dignity. I came to the conclusion that one way must be by maintaining their authority in the family. And perhaps the overwhelming "machismo" of southern European male immigrants in Toronto is not only a part of their culture, but a necessity for their self-esteem after their 8 to 12 hours a day of humiliating wage labour (given that work is supposed to provide esteem for the male in our culture). It strikes me that women's struggles for equality will be even harder until their men gain more self-respect -- through struggle -- at work.

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I have a few tentative hypotheses as to why the men were so unprepared to struggle. The first is, of course, the racism that separated each ethnic group and that management did its best to foster (I heard stories about foremen responding to complaints from English-speaking workers by telling others to shut up or speak English). The fact that so many couldn't speak English and had to rely on their steward to translate put them at a disadvantage in any dealings with the bosses (especially when their steward was a comprador of the highest order). Being immigrants too, they were afraid of losing their jobs and being deported. During the height of the "crisis" of illegal immigration last year the RCMP came and checked through all the personnel files and went away with several of them for further investigation. I'm sure that struck fear in the hearts of many.

I think the production process itself had an effect on struggle as well. Almost all the production takes place in the one plant, but there are only a couple of short assembly lines (of 4 to 8 women) doing the final assembly. The rest of the work is done individually on machines in different departments (there is no bonus -- workers are paid on straight time), so the collective tension that is always present on an assembly line doesn't exist at Federal. In the paint shop the process is a little different, however, with different results. The men there have to work as a team, and that, combined with the intense heat, resulted in a couple of walk-outs

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last summer, which never spread to other departments. (About 10 men were involved in this, half of whom were Canadian and most young. They were demanding extra breaks during hot weather, but the union succeeded in getting them back to work before the company came up with any concrete proposals. The next day when nothing was done, several of the Canadians walked out again (the union president having frightened the others -- immigrants - into staying on the job) and were fired on the spot).

### The Women

The majority of women at Federal were married with children. There were a significant number who had had broken marriages and were single parents. Every woman I met there was working because she needed the money. Most of them had worked since the age of 15 or 16, with time out for babies. Few if any saw their primary role as workers outside the home -- their "duty" as wives and mothers kept them too busy for that. The women's movement had certainly had its impact on everyone however. For some it meant challenging their relationships to their husbands and boyfriends; and for those who believed the division of labour in the home to be "sacred" (and there were a lot), it allowed them to at least challenge the inequalities between men and women at work.

### The Young Immigrant Women

The women whom I found the hardest to work with politically were the young single immigrant women. They had little interest in work, seldom discussed politics in any sense, and were concerned mostly with "getting a man". In other situations I've found chatting about boyfriends etc. can lead into fantastic discussions, but the intense loneliness and disorientation these immigrant women were experiencing in Canada led to dynamics I found hard to deal with. The most extreme was an on-going fantasy several of them engaged in about non-existent boyfriends, babies etc. Conversations in the washroom would go like this: "I saw your boyfriend. He's so handsome. When are you getting married?" (the boyfriend exists only in their imaginations). "Oh, very soon. July I think. How is your baby?" (One West Indian woman pretended to be pregnant. She was "expecting" during the Christmas holidays, and when one of her friends asked when we got back to work if she'd had her baby she lamented that it had been stillborn. A logical way to resolve this segment of the fantasy). As any of these women found a boyfriend or husband in reality she was of course out of the circle and would become the object of much discussion, often vicious. (I found out just recently that one of the women who did a lot of this fantasizing, a Cypriot in her mid-30's, is going to be married next month. She had gone out with her fiance for two weeks before becoming engaged to him).

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The Union

The plant was unionized about 15 years ago by the International Union of Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers (IUE). There apparently had been a lock-out and strike for recognition, but I never found anyone who knew much about it. The IUE was a product of the Cold War in the United States. The CIO financed its initiation in the late 40's to smash the Communist-led United Electrical Workers (UE). (See Appendix I). The Canadian Congress of Labour, composed mostly of American unions affiliated to the CIO, did likewise, using blatantly unconstitutional procedures to rid itself of the "red menace" and affiliate the IUE. (For further information see Irving Abella, Nationalism, Communism and Canadian Labour, pp. 154-163, and Richard Boyer and Herbert Morais, Labor's Untold Story, pp. 350-365). Over the years the IUE has become less rabidly anti-Communist and has taken a number of "progressive" stands, such as support for the NDP, and Canadian exemption in the Hartke-Burke bill. Recently it and UE have undertaken joint consultation before negotiations with companies with whom they both have contracts (General Electric, Westinghouse). The IUE also pushed for UE's reaffiliation with the CLC this year.

For many of the immigrants it was the first time they had worked in a unionized plant. They said the only difference they noticed was the monthly deduction from their paycheques. And that was about the size of it. Many unions attempt to defend the workers' interests at least; this one acted consistently to defend the bosses'. The people who took office were, with the exception of two Guyanese and one Cypriot all Canadians. Most took office as a means of gaining personal prestige. I sometimes wondered if some weren't being paid off by the company, but that may not be the only explanation for their blatant class collaboration. Because the union was so isolated from the workers, the union's strength boiled down to the gutsiness of the President, Chief Steward etc. as individuals. And they were completely gutless.

There was seldom any interest in union elections. Most positions were won by acclamation, and eight people held something like 14 "elected" positions. Occasionally one of them would express fear of a trusteeship being slapped on the local because of lack of membership support, but I'm sure head office is quite content with a no-trouble local.

Process of Becoming a Steward

I was one of about 30 people (mostly women) hired in two departments to start up a new afternoon shift. Starting together as new workers was the basis for the equality and unity of our shift which allowed things to get moving much more easily than would have been possible on the day sh'f.. It took a while before the "apathy" characteristic of the day shift set in.

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The most frustrating aspect of the afternoon shift was that we were so isolated from the goings-on of the factory. The work we did was auxiliary to the dayshift's --- finishing up orders and often doing the jobs they didn't like (or so we suspected). And we only picked up tidbits of Federal gossip. We never got enough information about what the company was doing, production schedules, who was being promoted, demoted etc. etc. that are the basis for so many conversations that workers have. We also never heard a word about the union. Our only contact with it came at Christmas time when they gave us all chocolates.

It was in this context that we talked a few times during the first few months about how we should have a steward. (There was an afternoon steward in the metal shop, but he was a Cypriot and a man, so the only person who ever consulted him was our foreman). At first I didn't really see how it would relate to developing autonomous struggle, but then began to see it as an occasion to attempt to develop a certain collective process. I visualized it as a means of developing a rank and file struggle, not of revitalizing the grievance procedure or lending the union credibility in any other way. People talked about how a steward might help break down the communication gaps between the day and afternoon shifts. I thought that by getting to know the balance of forces between management, workers and union, we might be in a better position to develop autonomous struggle ourselves. And also, in a small plant like Federal the role of steward isn't as clear-cut as in a large place. Capital doesn't have the same need for "workers' policemen". Most stewards in fact played a very cosy game with the bosses, but it wasn't because conditions forced them to. I expected the union to resist the idea from the start, so I foresaw the necessity of fighting against the union initially.

I began by talking to a couple of women who seemed the most militant -- one Scottish woman in her 40's with trade union experience back home, and a 28-year old Jamaican woman with no previous experience with unions. I was really counting on these women; if they hadn't agreed I wouldn't have continued. In fact, they responded very positively to the idea and were responsible for initiating many of the discussions that took place.

Things actually moved much faster than we expected. After we held a meeting of our department one lunchtime to talk about it, we went to the union. Not only did they agree, but they insisted on holding an election the following night. In fact the President was so eager that he arranged to get his own candidate put up for the election -- a man, of course, whose most striking characteristics were dull-wittedness and sucking up to the bosses.

The disadvantage of all this was that a genuine collective development hadn't had time to really take roots, and we were told that the steward was to represent another department as well as our



own -- the other department that had started on afternoons at the same time as us but which was composed of immigrants who spoke little English.

We held another lunchtime meeting that night to talk about what had happened (a group of about 10 women) and to talk about who to nominate for steward. Although I hadn't taken it for granted by any means, the other women assumed that I would be their choice. (I have since realized that it's inevitable that anybody who is vocal, knows the contract and has managed not to alienate too many people is going to be considered good material to be the workers' "representative". The next night I was elected steward.

From then on the two other women and I raised a number of issues and had them dealt with. We pushed for a safety monitor and elected the Scottish militant at another lunchtime meeting. Then we began to fight management on a number of safety issues -- nothing spectacular, but common complaints. What we didn't do, however, was to continue the collective process we had begun to develop. I got into an "exemplary mentality", i.e. show the workers what can happen if you struggle and then everyone will begin to struggle. (See Sojourner Truth, "Reflections on Organizing" in Radical America, March-April 1972 for further discussion of common methods of operating that leftists use). The consequence was that when management began to react by taking away some of the workers' "privileges" (such as bringing in radios, watching our trips to the washroom) some of the women began to react against us by saying that we were going too far and we would all be laid off (because the shift was thought to be temporary that was seen as a possibility). I really think in retrospect that our own "vanguardist" method of operating was responsible for that polarization. I see now that we should have continued our practice of shopfloor meetings (for some reason the company never objected to our using the lunchroom for this purpose) to discuss what working conditions should be our priority for action, how we would act on them, and to generally allow the workers to be responsible for decisions that, after all, affected them. I'm not sure, however, if this would have broken down people's fear of direct confrontation with the bosses.

From that point on, until the question of the contract came up some time later, I didn't see any issues come up that people were really ready to struggle over.

Being a steward definitely resolved certain problems of identity (as a political person, a militant), but none that wouldn't have been resolved anyway over a longer period. People came to see me as a militant, and certainly dependable and ready to help -- a social worker. We could never overcome the traditional way a steward is seen -- as the person who you delegate to take care of your problems. People expected me to take care of even collective



problems individually, without their active support. (One example of this was last summer. Leaving work at midnight, women were getting increasingly hassled by men on their way home. So we began to talk about this and how according to law the company is supposed to provide women with transportation home between midnight and 6:00 a.m. A group of about 15 of us decided we should demand that management pay our taxifares. We then came to the question of how we were going to demand it. It was assumed by everyone but me that I as steward should deal with it. I talked about how much more effective it would be if we all went in to Personnel, but the women insisted I go alone. Of course management refused. But as a "lesson" to me for being so uppity -- I talked about laying a complaint with the Department of Labour -- they threatened to let us off a few minutes before midnight each night. That of course wouldn't deal with the problem itself, but it would get the company off the hook legally; and because it represented a loss in pay for the women, was an attempt on the company's part--and the union which consented because they were pissed off that I hadn't gone through "proper channels" with my request -- to isolate me from the other workers. When the group of women met again to talk about it all, I tried to draw some of the lessons of strength in numbers etc., but people's reactions were mostly ones of discouragement and "Oh well, we tried our best."

I don't think it was a question of personal failure. I think it's the logical extension of that process. If you don't think the power of a group of workers can be embodied in the shop steward alone, then you have to start thinking of alternative forms of organization that express that power. The union structure certainly doesn't.

I always took a critical approach to the union as a whole, and the people I worked with never identified me as part of the bureaucracy (all the other stewards were integrated into it). When we talked about the union they talked about it as a third force, and would always say the "union should do this or that" and not associate me with their criticisms of it. I tried to avoid going through union channels wherever possible (partly out of necessity because the union consistently screwed us) and take direct action, but the passivity of the women was never really broken through. I did manage to gain the wrath of the union bureaucrats however. On a number of occasions they lied to me, co-operated with management behind my back on issues that concerned my department, and unsuccessfully attempted to discredit me. A few times people said that we needed a new executive, and once a couple of them suggested I run for president. But for the most part the alienation and cynicism about the union was pretty strong -- I would have had to struggle extremely hard against people's better instincts if I'd wanted to develop a union reform thrust.



### The Contract

The most significant struggle we undertook, in both its positive and negative aspects, was the one that came up around the contract. I went to a union meeting at which the executive stated its strategy for negotiations. It was basically that, given that the women got relatively high wages for the electrical industry, and that the men's were low, the union was going to trade off high wage increases for the men with next to nothing for the women. When I reported this back to the women there was a reaction such as I'd never seen before. Not only were they livid, they also insisted on doing something about it. First of all they wanted me to be on the negotiating committee. I was hesitant, partly because I had no intention of playing any conciliating role with the union (by this time I saw the union almost as much the enemy as management) and didn't know how that would work out, and also I was considering quitting. In fact the nominations were held at a union meeting when I was out of town and none of the women could go as meetings were held when they are working, so I wasn't nominated. However, when I came back to work the following week they wanted me to demand nominations be re-opened (one of the many examples of how my "leadership" seemed to stifle rank and file initiative). Because nobody had been nominated from the night shift, we decided we had to have our say somehow. So we held a series of lunchtime meetings to discuss proposals and a final list was compiled. (For the demands, see Appendix II). Some of the demands I think represented a solid sense on the part of the women that they must push for equality with men on the job, and that classifications and pay differentials are major obstacles. (It's probably easier for women to recognize that because they're at the lowest end of every scale and can only gain from equality). We then demanded that the union president come to a lunchtime meeting we were holding to present him with our list of demands.

What had happened by this point however was that I had gotten another job and had given notice at Federal. I had told women a month previously that I was intending to leave, but I don't think they really believed it until I gave notice. I had thought of leaving for a long time because I wanted to get into a collective organizing situation working with other leftists and Federal didn't appear to have very much potential for development. By leaving at that time I both halted any further development of the struggle and confirmed in my mind that when it came down to it, I had played such a central role in everything that except for the two militants who worked with me to elect a steward etc. and who had long since quit, there was nobody else willing and able to take leadership. I don't think that was because the women didn't want to fight, particularly on this last issue; but they didn't know how.



Before I left the women elected a new steward, but she was a woman who clearly wasn't a militant and in fact resigned the position a few weeks later. It was a half-hearted attempt at maintaining some control over negotiations, but my quitting left a vacuum of leadership that hasn't been replaced. In fact, in the four months since I left the women haven't heard a word from the union.

When I left Federal, my conclusion about the experience was basically that the form of collective struggle autonomous from the union was a sound one, but that because of the lack of history of struggle in the plant and amongst those women, it would make more sense to try to develop it in another factory under what appeared to be more promising conditions.

#### COLLINS RADIO

I won't go into the same detail about Collins as I was only there for a couple of months before I was laid off. It is interesting because it had a very different kind of workforce with a very different level of consciousness. As a result, it began to challenge a great many of my conceptions of how to organize women in the workplace.

The vast majority of women were either English-speaking Canadians or British (many Scottish). There was a very small number of East Europeans, but they spoke excellent English. The reason for this appears to be related to the type of industry --aeronautics and telecommunications. The work was quite technical, and because we were considered unskilled it required a lot of supervision. It would have been very difficult for someone who couldn't speak English fluently. In fact the company made it impossible by requiring stringent written and practical tests as a precondition for permanent employment.

I don't think I have developed an adequate analysis yet to account for the different levels of consciousness between workers at Federal and Collins. I was much more upfront about my politics and my life generally, and that of course provided the basis for many discussions about women, marriage etc. Certainly the fact that people spoke English made a difference. It meant that they watched TV, read papers and magazines and generally were much more aware and interested in politics in Canada and elsewhere. We had many talks about Watergate, Vietnam (Collins being tied into the war industry made this especially relevant), American imperialism in Canada and elsewhere, and relations of production at Collins itself. And this was with quite broad sections of women, not just one or two.



But what excited me the most were the discussions we had about women: the family, husbands, boyfriends, sex, birth control, the women's liberation movement etc. These struck me as the topics that were of the most interest to women. When I told some of that that I was involved in some way in the "movement", several immediately asked if they could come to meetings. I began to see that this was perhaps the way of mobilizing people that I hadn't seen before -- around the specific questions women have as women, not trying to force them into seeing their work outside the home as the primary contradiction in their lives.

Much of the "progress" I've made in clarifying and putting the last couple of years of working in a factory into a political context has come out of the Collins experience and many discussions with a wide range of people about workers' autonomy as it applies to women and the wages for housework perspective more specifically. Some of these reflections will follow in the Conclusion.

## CONCLUSIONS

### The Steward Position as an Instrument for Developing R. & F. Autonomy

There are two basic ways in which the role of steward is played. The first one is the business union one of the "go-between" between management and the rank and file workers. In this situation the union acts as a buffer, preventing direct confrontation between labour and capital. Technically the steward is there to police the contract for infringements on the part of the rank and file or management. But the contract itself can at best only control the rate of exploitation; it does nothing to abolish it. When a dispute arises between the boss and the workers, the steward steps in with the grievance procedure, the major impact of which is to take the struggle off the shop floor and away from the rank and file. (Men involved in the National Steel Car wildcat in Hamilton say that they had more power before they had a union. "We used to stop the boxcar line. If things weren't going right we'd just shut down and sit. The company didn't do anything -- they came down there and talked to us so they could get it going again. We were our own representatives and we got more done. And we'd soon start back up again when they'd start talking. They'd have to talk." For the rest of the article see "Inside a Wildcat" in On the Line, July 5, 1973.)

The second conception of the steward's role -- common to both militant trade unionists and to the traditional left -- is that of the steward as the "representative" and leader of the rank and file vis-a-vis both the boss and the Union bureaucracy. The traditional left, which views the union as the workers' organization in workplace struggles, usually tries to take over steward positions to use them



to lead shop floor struggles (and often to prove too that "communists are ready to fight for the workers"). Sometimes this means in fact fighting vigorously for the workers, but seldom does it mean contributing to workers themselves developing the capacity to fight collectively for themselves. And often such leftist stewards end up objectively playing the same "cop" role vis-a-vis the rank and file as business unionist stewards, usually rationalizing this by arguing that "the workers don't know any better", "this isn't the right time to struggle" etc. (see M. Glaberman, The Left-Wing Committeeman).

I attempted to work outside both these conceptions. I tried to use the stewardship as an instrument to encourage people to fight for themselves, to put their actions where their analysis and anger were. The fact that for the most part this proved impossible in practice reflects the objective structure of unions, which allows only a delegated form of struggle rather than mass struggle which workers directly develop and control. I wouldn't make a principle of never running for union steward, but I think it has severe limitations as part of the process of developing autonomous rank and file struggles.

#### Women's Autonomy and Workers' Autonomy

Women who work outside the home do not see that work as the major focus of their lives. This goes for young/old, married/single, Canadian/immigrant. For women who have husbands and kids it is obvious. But even for single women, they see their jobs as a necessary means of survival. Period. This is for several reasons. The first is that society defines women's work as being in the home, and the bourgeois media ensures that everybody is constantly bombarded with this notion. Society also says that only men define themselves by their work outside the home. The more basic reason for women's attitude to work outside the home is rooted in the historical development of the working class. Women have never developed a "producer's consciousness" or a strong identification with their work because they have always been excluded from the skilled sectors of production where such consciousness originated. Nor have women ever been integral to the Unions, which developed historically among skilled workers. (See G. Viale's paper on unions which will be translated shortly). Because the jobs that women do are the most boring and the most menial, it is difficult for women to take much pride in their jobs. (Of course, many men feel the same way, but talk to a transport driver or an auto worker and you'll be surprised at how such work does relate to their male egos).

I used to think that until women are forced to take jobs outside the home, their revolutionary potential is secondary to that of women in the labour force. Equally, I felt that women workers



had to "get serious" about their role as producers. I am absolutely not now saying that we should ignore the work women do outside the home, or the fact that increasing numbers of women are being forced to take jobs outside the home. I continue to see struggles in the workplace as essential. But I do think that we must challenge the traditional left theory that the power of the working class lies only at the point of production -- defined as the factory/workplace --presumably the only place where surplus value is directly produced. The workers' autonomy perspective, by analyzing modern capitalist society as the social factory, is saying that every aspect of life must become part of the struggle. Exploitation occurs everywhere, and among broader sectors than simply the industrial working class, and struggle must take place everywhere that exploitation is to be found.

This perspective implies that just as different sectors of the proletariat are exploited, so are different aspects of people's lives. Exploitation doesn't cease when workers punch out at night. It follows them along the expressways in their cars or on the public transit, into the grocery store and then into their homes and relationships with their spouses and children, and finally into their bedrooms where the woman pretends she's not feeling well and the man then either "rapes" her or goes to sleep feeling frustrated and depressed.

This analysis has major implications for women who work outside the home. It is not sufficient to relate to them simply as workers. To do so is to ignore the potential for struggle in every area of their lives, as well as to ignore the potential for common struggles with women in other sectors of the class. (And this isn't reformist politics, as so many traditional leftists think. One of the most significant examples of class struggle in recent years in North America is the struggle of women on Mothers' Allowance and welfare recipients to receive a living wage independent of waged labour).

Also, from my experiences of working with women workers, their interest in struggles in the factory is limited. They want their work to be as safe and as easy as possible. They want the same pay and benefits as men, because they have to pay the same amount for rent and food. But they don't want to rotate their jobs, they are not particularly interested in "equal opportunity" for advancement, and they certainly don't want "workers' control". What they want most is to get out and go home. At Collins an "obvious" struggle at first seemed to me to be around the annual lay-offs. The only obstacle to that struggle was the majority of women who couldn't wait to be laid off. (To be clear, these women didn't want to abolish their jobs, because they needed the money. But as long as they could collect pogeys or otherwise have an assured income they would definitely prefer not to work).



This consciousness indicates to me a tremendous potential for women workers. They have no stake at all in waged work in capitalist society. As one of the most exploited sectors of the workforce, they have no stake in the classification and seniority system. For all workers, classifications and seniority rights are points of division. Most classifications are meaningless -- there only to give the appearance of upward mobility. Seniority is a system of giving some workers more rights than others -- basic rights that all workers should have. But women, who are at the lowest end of the classification scale (even though the work they perform is obviously of equal value to capital) and who have little interest in promotions, have the potential of leading the struggle to abolish unequal pay and benefits (pension, group insurance) etc., for all workers, and thereby attack the weapons the bosses use to divide all workers. This to me is a whole crucial context for women's struggles in the workplace. Other areas must of course be issues that arise about working conditions, safety etc.

The traditional left demands in the workplace (an end to "discrimination" against women in the form of demands for equal pay and equal opportunity as examples) and the traditional structure (Unions) must be surpassed because they are totally inadequate -- and often antagonistic -- in the struggle against wage labour. The fight to end discrimination is in fact a fight to equalize the conditions of exploitation -- not to abolish them. The demand of equal pay for equal work must be replaced by the demand of equal pay for everybody. In other words, an end to classifications and divisions between men and women, skilled and unskilled. So too with "equal opportunity". Not only do most women not want to acquire more responsibility for production, but to demand it is only to perpetuate the distinctions the bosses (and Unions) make between jobs, responsibilities and therefore pay. I am quite sure that if women really wanted "equal opportunity", they would have begun to struggle for it long ago.

I also think it's important to see that women's cynicism and disinterest in the union is not a reflection of lack of class consciousness, but rather of advanced consciousness. They, like most workers, can see how the union consistently defends the interests of the bosses, and to a lesser extent, those of a small number of skilled (male) workers. The union's role is to help develop classifications and seniority systems etc., not to fight against them.

Equally important in workplace struggles are the questions that affect women specifically as women. Is it conceivable to begin struggles for a four-day week for women in recognition of the time



they need to reproduce the labour power of their families? Struggles for day care that say that where capital benefits capital pays? Wages for housework so that women don't have to work outside the home at all? Generally, as well as struggles that unite women and all workers in one workplace, struggles must develop that unite women in different workplaces in their common struggle against capital, and with women whose work is primarily in the home. Recognition of the importance of the autonomy of women's struggles is only beginning. Discussions and practical work must continue and expand.

POWER TO THE SISTERS AND THEREFORE TO THE CLASS

- Francis Gregory



APPENDIX

Appendix I

A quote from the IUE's Code of Ethical Practices:

"Like the beginnings of industrial unionism during the Depression, the origins of the International Union of Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers AFL-CIO during the later 1940's were rooted in another ethical revolt -- this one against the perversion and corruption of democratic unionism by Communism.

Consequently, the IUE possessed from the beginning a deeply ingrained heritage of ethical responsibility. To IUE members and leaders alike, individual and organizational rights are doubly precious because they were won, to an unparalleled extent, in a long and self-sacrificing struggle against the largest and most powerful Communist-controlled labor organization ever to appear on the American scene."

Appendix II

Proposals for Negotiations Submitted by a Group of Workers From Stab-lok and Assembly:

1. In keeping with the tradition of the IUE and the Ontario Human Rights Code, we would like to see an end to the discrimination against women in the present contract. We have two proposals in this regard:

(a) Abolishing labour grades 2,3 and 4 and upgrading these classifications to grades 5, 6 and 7.

We feel this demand is justified by the fact that the work in labour grades 2, 3 and 4, commonly done by women, involves similar skills and responsibilities to these of the higher grades, commonly done by men. We feel that the principle "Equal pay for equal work" should be replaced by "Equal pay for work of equal value". The worth of a job shouldn't be determined solely by the physical effort involved, but also by the skills and responsibilities involved.

(b) Abolishing the separate categories for single and married women in the group insurance plan. Instead, determining the amount of weekly disability benefits and life insurance by the basic weekly earnings. This proposal and the above must be seen in the light of the fact that women's financial needs are the same as men's. Many women are supporting themselves or families: no woman works just because she wants to, but rather out of economic necessity.

Strengthening the position of women workers does not weaken any other group of workers, but strengthens the whole.



2. A straight cents per hour increase rather than percentage increase. We feel this is in the best interests of the majority of workers so that the gap between the more highly paid and less highly paid workers doesn't grow any larger. We also feel that the increase should be in addition to the present cost of living allowance. We shouldn't accept any proposal by the company to absorb the cost of living allowance into a wage increase. Needless to say, we expect the union to demand equal wages increases for men and women.
3. The company should pay 100% OHIP.
4. Many other unions have negotiated for denticare plans, to be paid partly by the company and partly by the workers. Given the high cost of obtaining adequate dental care, we feel we should begin a similar program at Federal.
5. We feel that if a qualified medical doctor recommends that a worker should have a change of job for health reasons, then the company should agree to place the worker in a suitable job in consultation with the union.
6. Regarding production standards, in the present contract article 22.05 states, "It is agreed that estimated or temporary rates may be changed or withdrawn at the discretion of the company." We would like this amended so that no rate can be changed without a thorough time study being done.
7. Also on production standards, we would like a clause in the contract to the effect that no worker is expected to produce a full hour's production rate during break hours.
8. We wonder whether the company is paying adequate attention to workers' safety. This is especially questionable in regard to fire drills. At one point the night shift discovered that several of the fire exits were either locked or inaccessible. We think it is reasonable to demand that the company perform a fire drill at least once every three months, in order to familiarize all workers with fire exits and routine.
9. There have been a number of instances in the Stab-lok department in the last year of probationary workers being "laid off" for a period of time and then recalled, because they have been unable to make the hourly production rates. We feel that this intimidation of workers is intolerable, and feel that one way in which it might be stopped is to have a provision in the contract for probationary workers to file grievances. If probationary workers cannot gain the same rights as workers with seniority, then they should not have to pay union dues.
10. There should be a number of sick days off with pay each year, as is provided for in the Federal Civil Service and many other companies.