

I am going to say a few words about unorganized workers, with a specific emphasis on unorganized immigrant women workers and the need to unionize all workers.

Immigrant and Canadian born women of all races are the predominant workforce in some major areas of the economy, such as factories, banks, domestic and farm workers, parttime workers in department stores, cleaning staff and in other service occupations such as restaurants and hospitals. Only a small percentage of these women are unionized.

When we speak of immigrant women, we are talking about women that represent a diversity of cultures and experiences. For example:

- Spanish speaking women, many of whom have extensive organizing and political experience, often under difficult circumstances of dictatorships and repression.
- Domestic workers from the Caribbean and the Philippines with depressed economies and high unemployment.
- Chinese women, who even if they are Canadian born are treated as immigrants.
- Women from the Middle East and Europe.

It is not possible for me to speak for all immigrant women, simply because I do not know the intricacies of women who for example are Italian, Greek or Portugese.

I shall speak primarily about Indian women with whom I am most familiar. The examples I will use to illustrate the working lives of these women are in some respects common to all immigrant women.

I have roughly divided unorganized working women into 2 sectors:

- A. To use the term broadly, Canadian born women who work primarily in the service industry such as banks, offices, sales staff, hospitals etc....
- B. Immigrant women who work primarily in factories, farms, as domestics, cleaning staff and also other components of the service industry. The women usually speak little or no English and may also be what we call 'visible minority' women of women of colour.

I will speak primarily about immigrant women with the understanding that both these sectors need to be unionized.

Immigrant women are not necessarily recent immigrants. Many of us have been here for many years and have to be recognized as a major and permanent part of the Canadian workforce. We have to see immigrant women beyond the confines of multiculturalism as developed by the Canadian government, where we are presented in the context of a 'song and dance' and denied any other dimension to our lives in Canada.

There are also many other misconceptions about immigrant women, especially if we do not speak English and are also non-white. Not the least of these is that we do not have a trade-union history or militancy and that we are passive women locked in our oppressive cultures.

Poor and working-class women in India tend to be more militant than middle-class women, when they are mobilized. For example, and this is especially true in the villages.....

- a) If word gets around that there is a certain man in the village who beats his wife, what happens is that some older women in the community will go to visit him and tell him to behave himself. If he continues to disregard their warnings they will then go to his house, grab him, tie him to the back of a donkey and parade him through the village streets with a running commentary of his unacceptable behaviour.
- b) Similar actions have been used against men who spend all their wages on alcohol and there is no money left to feed the kids. In such cases women have also been known to go to the local breweries and break all the clay pots used for making liquor.
- c) In the famous Railroad Workers Strike of 1974 in India, the government declared the railways an essential service and the workers were not allowed to go on strike. The wives, sisters and mothers and daughters of the workers formed the front line of the strike and had to face the brutality of the military.

So what is the immigrant women's life like in Canada?

If she works in food processing or manufacturing, she usually has to work odd hours or do shift work. The hours are not only 9 to 5. Because food is grown seasonally she may end-up working 10 to 12 hours a day. The wages are usually minimal or paid by the flat or by the piece. There is no overtime pay. The working conditions are abysmal, a high rate of accidents, inadequate protective clothing and almost no provisions for first-aid.

Immigrant women fill the Canadian economic demands for unskilled or low skilled workers. These jobs require little or no training. The women are exploited on the basis of them being female and get lower wages than if men filled these positions. Because they might not speak English, or even if they do, they are not familiar with labour laws and are not able to do anything about the working conditions. Many employers hire these women specifically because of these factors.

Since women are a large part of the reserve labour force and in these days of high unemployment, they are hesitant to confront management for fear of losing their jobs. These jobs become even more precious because often women's wages are the sole income of the family. These days it's often easier for women to get work, because it is low paying and many of their husbands, brothers and fathers are unemployed.

If women do not fill their quotas or question the speed of the machines, they are threatened with the usual statement of "You can leave if you don't like it here." This situation creates an atmosphere of insecurity and competition among the workers.

So we come to the question of why organize the unorganized?

It is essential to organize women because that is the only way we can ensure a living wage, job security and control of the working environment. Immigrant women

are here to stay as active participants in society.

The building of unions and trade-union consciousness among women has the long-term benefits of creating a stronger labour movement in Canada. These women will be able to share their experiences with others in their communities, create a more favourable environment for further unionization. And if they do get laid-off due to plant-closures their next place of employment could well be another unorganized plant.

One of the major difficulties in organizing immigrants women is that the organizing of workers in low skilled areas has not been a union priority, and also presents enormous organizing obstacles.

Furthermore, Canadian union staff and organizers are often white, English speaking men or even women with little or no exposure to the diversity of immigrants, their languages, cultures.....

One way of addressing this is for unions to build relationships with immigrant womens' and community organizations. For example, women in community service organizations are hired to work with and for their communities. They are also in touch with other women in their communities, who could possibly be hired by unions. This will enable them to become aware of the immigrant labour force. Specifics of language, translation of union material and interperation of cultural norms and values will be simplified.

Building relationships with these organizations will generally provide for a more successful union drive.

There are other complicating factors which make these union drive different than if the workers were English speaking.

There is the consistant need during the drive and after to provide an orientation to labour laws and the need to establish English classes, so women can strengthen their position in relation to management.

It is crucial not to gloss over the differences and try to treat everyone as equal workers, because in fact there are some very unequal situations. In the case of women workers we have to deal with sexism and all its inherent manifestations of lower wages and ghettoized jobs. And for many of us there is the added humiliation and exploitation of racism, which too relegates us to low paying jobs with extremely dangerous working conditions.

We also feel that it is absolutely critical that the process of unionization be accompanied by an added effort to develop a trade-union consciousness among women. A greater emphasis on developing technics to facilitate this, by using cultural and religious structures in conjunction with immigrant community activities. Using ethnic radio, T.V. and newspapers to expose trade-union history and principles. Of course this is valuable in the context of organizing any worker. And this is also how we will build a stronger labour movement in Canada.

The case of domestic workers is a clear illustration of women workers organizing themselves with assistance from their sisters who are Canadian citizens

and landed immigrants. To-day even though domestic workers have a contract with the Department of immigration and the Employer, they are still not covered by the Workers' Compensation Board or the 8 hr. day Act. Domestic workers pay into income-tax, Canada pension and U.I.C., but are not allowed to benefit from these since they are still struggling to get landed immigrant status.

Immigrant women have been strengthened through the knowledge that the Womens' Liberation Movement is actively struggling around the universally important issues of an end to violence against women and sexual harassment, for reproductive rights and childcare.

Again these are issues that immigrant women could actively support through their unions.

The economic crisis can in effect weaken the labour movement, by the many attacks against the organized labour force. It is thus even more crucial to organize the unorganized and the unemployed to defend the gains made by the labour movement.

Thank-you!

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March 1st 1983

International Womens' Day Forum on:

Womens' Liberation and the fight against wage controls, concessions and unemployment.