

# Equal Partners for Change: Women and Unions



## To Seize the Good The History of Women in Unions

“The restrictions and prohibitions of women’s work will testify to the shortcomings of our social and economic organization and to the failure of us all, regardless of sex, to seize the good that is within our reach.”

from the  
*All Canadian Congress of Labour, 1920’s*

Canada’s 750,000 organized women workers are the heirs to a century of work and struggle. The participation of women in unions goes back to 1886 when Elizabeth Wright of the Knights of Labour became the first woman delegate to the Trades and Labour Congress (TLC) convention in Toronto. Before 1900 women were active in locals of the United Garment Workers in London and Winnipeg. In 1906, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers organized a local of telephone operators in British Columbia. In 1913 the Home and Domestic Employees Union was formed in Vancouver, and in 1916 the women clerks of Woolworth’s in Winnipeg struck for better wages.

From the beginning, equal pay was a hotly debated issue. As early as 1882, the Toronto Labour Council supported the principle but when the Trades and Labour Congress drew up its first “Platform of Principles” in 1898, it advocated the abolition of female labour “in all branches of industrial life.”

It was not until 1915 that the efforts of a Vancouver trade unionist named Helena Gutteridge changed this policy. Gutteridge was actively involved in organizing laundry and garment workers, and she was active in the women’s movement of the time. By bringing together labour and women’s groups, she was responsible for B.C.’s first minimum wage act in 1918.

Throughout the 1920’s, a minimum wage was the main issue. The TLC supported the minimum wage for women because they “need protection,” but opposed the same for men. The TLC also opposed the introduction of family allowances in 1929 on the grounds that government payments should not substitute for a fair and adequate wage. The All-Canadian Congress of Labour (ACCL) favoured a minimum wage for all workers and supported family

allowances as a step towards the redistribution of income.

Although women were very active in various unions throughout the Depression, the economic slump provoked disagreement within the labour movement about the role of women in industrial society. The TLC condemned married women who worked but supported single working women. The ACCL held that men and women should be admitted to industry on the same basis.

The end of the Depression brought with it World War II and the rise of the Congress of Industrial Organizations and a dramatic increase in the number of women in the work force for obvious reasons. The CIO, committed to industrial unionism, aimed largely at the manufacturing sector but also included white-collar unions. In Canada, this activity was particularly evident in the first Canadian bank strike in 1941. Eileen Tallman of the Steelworkers, one of the organizers of the strike, went on to become one of the most active organizers of her time. She led the long but unsuccessful battle to organize the T. Eaton Company in Toronto in the late 40’s and early 50’s.

More women became leaders in the labour movement during this time. With the increased participation of women during the post-war years came an increased awareness of the problems they faced. “Equal pay for equal work” helped to end some of the most blatant forms of discrimination but said nothing about job ghettos and lack of opportunity for women. Unions were beginning to tackle the question of separate seniority lists for men and women, but little was said about the subtle discrimination in fringe benefits.

In 1956, the TLC and the CCL merged to form the Canadian Labour Congress. Issues of concern to women had very low priority for the first ten years of the new organization’s existence. But in 1956, the election of Huguette Plamondon of the United Packinghouse Workers of America from Montreal, as a regional vice-president, put a woman in the top ranks of the organization. In 1968, when the executive was re-organized, Plamondon became a vice-president at large in the CLC.

A new initiative began in 1966 when the Human Rights Committee of the CLC called for an end to discrimination against women through collective bargaining and effective legislation. The CLC amended its own constitution to include sex as a prohibited





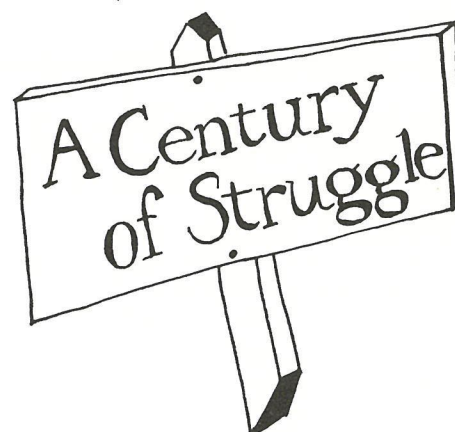
ground for discrimination. In 1967, a committee of the CLC prepared a brief to the Royal Commission on the Status of Women. The brief looked into some of the real problems of discrimination: equal pay, access to education and training, income tax, child care, "protective legislation". Although the brief was well received by the Royal Commission, and most of the CLC recommendations were incorporated into the report of the Commission, it was not until 1972 that these issues became a priority for the CLC. At the convention, the CLC Executive was directed to draw up a programme of action to encourage unions to assist in the improvement of the status of women.

As a result, a special report on the rights of women was put together for the 1974 convention. At this time, Shirley Carr of the Canadian Union of Public Employees was elected to the full-time position of executive vice-president, making her one of the four top officers of the Congress. She was the first woman to hold this position.

In July 1975, a subcommittee of the Human Rights Committee was formed to deal with women's rights. In March 1976, this committee held a national conference on women's issues, both as an educational tool and as a forum for policy planning and recommendation. At the conference, a statement of Equality of Opportunity and Treatment for Women Workers was drawn up, based on the standards of the International Labour Organization. This statement, accepted by the 1976 convention, became the cornerstone for future policy development. Among its many recommendations was a call to establish a "Department on the Status of Women Workers" within the CLC, and in December 1977 the CLC's Women's Bureau was formed.

Individual women continued to gain recognition in their unions and in the CLC. It is no longer uncommon to find women as presidents of local labour councils. With recent changes in federal legislation, the CLC is examining ways to implement the principle of equal pay for work of equal value through the collective bargaining process.

Today active women are found in almost every union, often in positions of authority and responsibility. These women, heirs to a century of struggle, are working hard to finally establish equality for women workers.



- 1882** Toronto Labour Council supports equal pay for equal work.
- 1915** Helena Gutteridge has equal pay written into constitution of Trades and Labour Congress.
- 1919** Kathleen Derry is part of Canadian delegation to founding convention of the International Labour Organization.
- 1936** Mrs. Finch, National Clothing Workers, elected to the executive of the All-Canadian Congress of Labour.
- 1941** First Canadian bank strike organized by Eileen Tallman of the Steelworkers.
- 1948** Mabel Mayne becomes the first woman president of the Oshawa Labour Council.
- 1956** Huguette Plamondon is first woman in top ranks of the CLC.
- 1966** Human Rights Committee of the CLC calls for an end to discrimination against women.
- 1971** The B.C. Federation of Labour is first provincial federation to form a women's committee.
- 1972** CLC Convention calls for programme of action on the status of women "as a matter of top priority."
- 1974** Shirley Carr is the first woman to be elected as executive vice-president of CLC.
- 1975** Grace Hartman elected President of CUPE, the first woman to head a major union.
- 1976** CLC holds national conference on women and draws up statement of Equality of Opportunity and Treatment of Women Workers.
- 1977** CLC Women's Bureau formed.
- 1978** Nadine Hunt, president of the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour, becomes first woman to head a provincial federation.