

Equal Partners for Change: Women and Unions



Women and the Canadian Labour Congress

In 1976, the eleventh convention of the Canadian Labour Congress adopted a declaration of *Equality of Opportunity and Treatment for Women Workers*. The policy statement outlines the targets for change and sets out a program for action on the regional, national and international level. The policy begins:

“The Canadian Labour Congress, as a supporter of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, reaffirms the principle of non-discrimination and proclaims that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and before the law, and declares that all efforts must be made to provide every worker, without distinction on grounds of sex, with equality of opportunity and treatment in all social, cultural, economic, civic and political fields.”

The policy statement goes on to confirm the Canadian Labour Congress' commitment to equal rights and opportunities for women in all aspects of their life. It reaffirms the CLC's support for women's right to gainful employment and recognizes that changing women's status in society will also change the role of men in society.

“All measures shall be taken to guarantee women's right to paid work as the inalienable right of every human being and to revise, as necessary, existing laws, collective agreements, practices or customs which limit integration of women in the workforce on a footing of equality with men.”

The policy statement also sets out certain principles as targets to achieve the equal participation of women in economic life.

The policy statement then goes on through 14 articles

to detail the areas in which change must be made to ensure equality between women and men in working, family and social life: ending all discrimination on the basis of sex, guaranteeing women's right to seek work, improving education, training and vocational guidance, achieving equal balance in occupational fields, equal pay for work of equal value, parental leave, safer working environment, better social services in the community, equal pension rights, and fairer taxation.

Federal and provincial governments are encouraged to implement a ten-point program to improve opportunity in education, training, employment and community services.

Unions also are encouraged to act on the regional, national, and international level. They are required to set an example in their treatment of women workers and to implement programs to promote equality of opportunity and treatment.

A complete copy of the detailed policy on *Equality of Opportunity and Treatment for Women Workers* is available from the Canadian Labour Congress and from provincial federations.

The CLC Women's Bureau

When the Canadian Labour Congress adopted the policy statement on *Equality of Opportunity and Treatment for Women Workers*, it followed the recommendation of the statement to establish a department on the status of women workers. In December 1977, the **Women's Bureau** of the CLC was formed.

The Bureau's main task is to carry out the recommendations of the CLC's policy statement on issues affecting women and men in the labour force, in unions and in the larger community. The Bureau has paid particular attention to the issues of equal pay for work of equal value and the development of equal opportunities in the workplace.

The Bureau provides services to affiliates of the CLC on women's concerns, and works with the affiliates to establish or improve committees on women's issues.

The Bureau undertakes research into equal pay, parental leave and occupational health hazards. A constant flow of information on women's issues is exchanged by the Bureau with affiliates, with government departments concerned about women

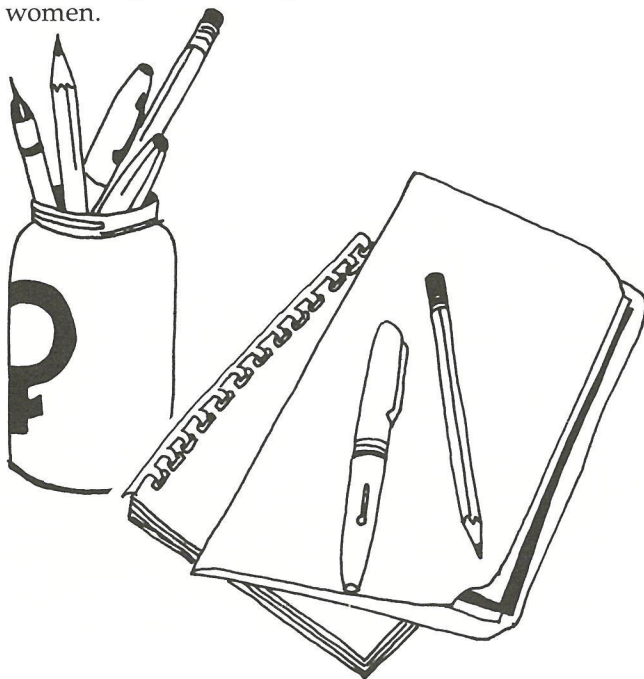




workers and with other women's divisions of affiliates of the ICFTU (International Confederation of Free Trade Unions).

The **Women's Bureau** has a special responsibility to educate trade unionists on the barriers and solutions to achieving equality for women workers. Through labour schools and audio-visual presentations, more unionized men and women are becoming interested in improving the status of women workers.

The **Women's Bureau** works with groups outside the labour movement to bring about equality for women. It helps to prepare briefs to governments on women's issues and pushes for legislative change in the status of women.



The Bureau has established a working group to study the new federal legislation on "equal pay for work of equal value" and the impact this legislation will have on collective bargaining.

The **Women's Bureau** has sought out information from collective agreements on clauses or agreements dealing with parental leave, equal opportunity or affirmative action, existing pay practices, sexual harassment on the job and female job ghettos.

Working with the CLC Labour Education and Studies Centre, the Bureau has collected historical information about women in the Canadian labour movement so that these women will become part of the permanent record of Canada's labour history.

The Bureau helps affiliated unions to tackle the specific problems of equality for women workers. At

the British American Bank Note Company in Ottawa, 25 women went on strike to win equal pay for work they considered to be of equal value to a job performed exclusively by men within the company. The women, who are steel-plate examiners, required two years of training for their job. However they received one dollar an hour less than men who swept the floors and who had no skilled training.

In settlement of the strike, the women submitted the matter to an arbitrator who ruled in favour of the company offer which was still a dollar below the lowest-paid job done by men. The women of British American Bank Note are not yet receiving equal pay for their skilled work.

Through the **Women's Bureau** of the CLC, the six unions involved with British American Bank Note were called together and are working out a collective strategy on equal pay and equal opportunity.

The **Women's Bureau** assists provincial federations to press their governments to introduce equal pay for work of equal value legislation to cover situations such as British American Bank Note.

In addition to the above services, the **Women's Bureau** deals with dozens of letters and phone calls from groups and individuals inquiring about issues and policies on women workers.

The **Women's Bureau** has become the focal point for interest and action on women and unions.

For Discussion:

1. Review the recommendations of the 1976 policy statement on *Equality of Opportunity and Treatment for Women Workers*. How many of these recommendations have been carried out and how many remain to be done? In what way could the recommendations be implemented in your workplace? How many of the recommendations could be implemented through collective bargaining?
2. The workers at British American Bank Note feel they have been denied equal pay for work of equal value. Do you agree or disagree? How should we determine what is work of equal value? Does your province guarantee equal pay for work of equal value in legislation?
3. The CLC's policy statement says that discrimination against women workers is "incompatible with the interests of the economy." In what way do women workers improve or hold back the healthy growth of the economy? Do you feel that the federal or provincial governments' policies clearly support women's right to paid employment?