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After outlining the growing participation of women in the labour movement, **Miriam Edelson** explores the views of women trade unionists vis-à-vis the exercise of leadership, and shows how their vision challenges the traditional hierarchical/bureaucratic union model and how they are creating alternative models for union work. Using examples from the Public Service Alliance of Canada, the country's largest federal public sector union, four themes are explored: exercising leadership from a feminist perspective, applying decision-making by consensus to union settings, dealing with internal conflict in small groups, and developing skills and self-reliance among female union members.

Après une description de la participation grandissante des femmes dans le mouvement syndical, **Miriam Edelson** étudie l'attitude des femmes syndicalistes à l'égard du leadership et montre à quel point leur opinion remet en question le modèle syndical traditionnel de la hiérarchie et de la bureaucratie, et explore les alternatives du travail syndical. À partir d'exemples tirés de l'Alliance de la fonction publique du Canada, le plus gros syndicat fédéral de la fonction publique du Canada, l'auteure examine quatre thèmes: l'exercice du leadership vu dans une perspective féministe, la prise de décision et le consensus dans les questions syndicales, le règlement des conflits internes chez les petits groupes et le perfectionnement et la confiance en soi chez les travailleuses syndiquées.

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# feminist perspectives féministes

No. 8

## Challenging Unions: Feminist Process and Democracy in the Labour Movement

by Miriam Edelson

WOMEN

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**CHALLENGING UNIONS: FEMINIST PROCESS AND DEMOCRACY  
IN THE LABOUR MOVEMENT**

Miriam Edelson

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"If feminism is encouraging women to enter institutions, then it has an obligation to nourish a criticism of those institutions so that women can act to change them."

Jean Baker Miller

During the last several years, unions have become more involved in issues of particular concern to women workers. From recourse against sexual harrassment to equal pay for work of equal value, many such issues now sit on union bargaining agendas. The interest in these issues coincides with the increased numbers of women in the labour force and union movement. In 1982, 32.1% of the Canadian labour force belonged to a trade union. 24.7% of women in the labour force were union members (compared to 37.5% of men). Women comprised 32.3% of total union membership. More significant, perhaps, are the figures which show the increase in union membership for men and women. Between 1977 and 1982, the percentage increase of women in paid employment was 19.9%, while the percentage increase of women in unions during the same period was 26.3%. The percentage increase of men in the labour force for the same period was 1.4%, while their union membership increased 1.6%. Women accounted for 86.5% of all new union members between 1977 and 1982.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This statistical information is from Statistics Canada, Corporation and Labour Unions Return Act, Part II, cat. no. 71-202 (Ottawa: Supply and Services, 1984), p.52; and Labour Canada, Women in the Labour Force, Part III, cat. no. 38-30 (Ottawa: Ministry of Labour, 1985), pp. 6-15.

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Although women comprise a greater proportion of union members than ever before, increase in numbers has not resulted in automatic consideration of women's particular needs. Rather, it is the result of considerable organizing and struggle by members committed to making their unions more responsive to these needs. Many unions, especially those in the public sector, now have "women's" or "equal opportunities" committees. Education programs and government lobbying campaigns for better child care and equal pay legislation, for example, have been launched, often in conjunction with the provincial federations of labour. In 1984, the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) expanded its executive, designating five new positions as affirmative action seats for women leaders--providing an example which has since been repeated in other organizations.

Much has been written about the importance of addressing these issues.<sup>2</sup> We have begun, as well, to record the history of struggles to develop women's participation and attain power in our unions. There has been less debate, however, about how we, as women, would like to see our unions operate. We know, for example, more women are needed in union leadership and staff positions and we organize internal campaigns for affirmative action with the understanding that putting women into positions of power is but a first crucial step in winning equality for women.

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<sup>2</sup> See Further Reading, p. 26.

But what about the second step? As we become organized, new ways of working together emerge and new questions arise. How, for example, do we intend to use the power we are developing? Do we, as women trade unionists, have a different view regarding how leadership should be exercised? Does our vision of unionism challenge the hierarchical/bureaucratic union model in which we often find ourselves?

As has been documented elsewhere, that model both reflects and reproduces patterns of male dominance in union practices and structures.<sup>3</sup> In local executives, union committees and federations of labour across the country, women are working together in ways adapted to their particular needs. And in so doing, they are creating alternative models for union work. Two basic tenets of the women's movement shine through many of these organizing efforts. First, that personal and political issues are inseparable; and second, that the ends do not always justify the means. Rather, the desired final outcome of political work must be prefigured in the process of working toward these objectives. In several important ways, the alternative models being tried at present have the potential to constitute a breach in the hierarchical structures now in place in most large unions.

In this article I will investigate how, in concrete terms, these two basic principles are being reflected in the women's issues program of the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC). The notion of "feminist process" provides a window through which women's organizing may be viewed and analyzed. In particular, as a means of stimulating debate regarding how feminist trade union-

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<sup>3</sup> See Further Reading, p. 26. Articles by Scher and Edelson deal with this issue.

ists (or trade union feminists?) see our current challenges, four themes will be investigated: (a) exercising leadership from a feminist perspective, (b) applying decision-making by consensus to union settings, (c) dealing with internal conflict in small groups, and (d) developing skills and self-reliance among union members. In the current political and economic climate, it is incumbent upon unions to develop creative approaches to mobilizing members. It will be argued that an approach combining a feminist interest in how we work with the goals of class-based, democratic unionism, is one avenue which holds such promise.

#### **What is "feminist process"?**

Most simply, "process" refers to an interest in how we work together in addition to a concern regarding what we work at. Personal relations and, especially, the distribution of power among individuals in a particular organizing context, cannot be abstracted from the goals of the project. While feminists cannot make an exclusive claim on "process" as an issue, certainly it is through the women's movement (and the impact the women's movement has had on political organizations) that process has emerged as a topic worthy of discussion. And perhaps it is not surprising that women, relegated to an unequal position in society, should question the internal power relations operative in organizations devoted to changing that society. For trade union women, questioning the distribution of power between men and women within our organizations is integral to contesting the balance of power between ourselves and the employer.

Examining the process by which we work together means paying attention, for example, to how the negotiating team divides responsibility for speaking at the table, in addition to what arguments are actually made. Similarly, the role of the membership in developing bargaining demands and debating the necessity of a strike mandate is as central to the union's long term prospects as the collective agreement signed at the end of the line. Finally, with respect to a unionization drive, the person interested in "process" would ask questions about the role of the membership organizing committee and the degree to which members are encouraged to debate openly the pros and cons of unionization, as well as wanting to know how many cards were signed at any given time. Questions like these reflect an interest in process. Obviously there are several parallels with what democratic socialists have argued for years. As a feminist and a socialist, however, I believe it is the focus on the personal as political that distinguishes the two approaches. Moreover, as we shall see by looking at the four themes outlined above, the commitment to personal politics enriches potentially the texture and durability of those democratic practices sought by socialists and feminists alike.

#### **(a) Exercising leadership from a feminist perspective**

What does it mean to exercise leadership as a feminist? So much of our attention has been devoted to defining the barriers to women's participation that when a breakthrough is made, the role is not so clear. In this section I will look at four

examples drawn from the PSAC which suggest that the notion of a distinctive feminist leadership lies in providing members opportunities to develop their own power and the self-reliance required to effect democratic changes in the union.

This view of leadership was reflected in the development of a six day in-residence course exclusively for women members, beginning in 1984. The programme, entitled "Women at Work", deals with the sources of women's oppression in society and the workplace and addresses issues such as equal pay, sexual harrassment and affirmative action. Further, it explores specifically the internal barriers to greater participation experienced by women members and encourages them to develop workable political solutions to those problems.

In developing the course, two major political hurdles were encountered. First, feminist leaders argued that the course be open to women exclusively in order to foster an atmosphere in which women could identify their own needs as women workers and Alliance members and, moreover, develop strategies for solving problems. Further, it was recognized that part of the struggle to attain equality required women to meet in a safe environment that would encourage them to value both themselves and their sisters to a greater extent. Restricting the course to women provoked a great deal of resistance because by so doing a distinction was drawn between the experience of male and female union members. For some, such a move threatened union solidarity. Proponents argued successfully, however, that a women-only course constituted an acknowledgment of the historically unequal

position of women in the union and was therefore an appropriate affirmative action measure.

The second hurdle feminist union leaders had to overcome related to the role in-residence education plays in developing union activists. For several reasons, primarily the enormous costs involved, in-residence courses are geared to active union members. Normally, there is a requirement that members sit on the local executive or be shop stewards for a substantial period of time. It was argued with respect to the "Women at Work" course that since the existing barriers mean many women may not (yet!) hold such positions, or be active at all, we needed to reach women with no previous union involvement. This battle too was won, but only after a considerable struggle. At present, the only prerequisite is that members attend a weekend programme which provides a general introduction to the union. Again, this leadership decision constituted an explicit affirmative action measure designed to increase women's participation in the PSAC. While the long term benefits of these decisions are not immediately measurable, indications are that women's participation is, indeed, on the rise. And exercising leadership to this end was an explicit strategy among feminists in positions of influence within the union.

A second example of the exercise of leadership from a feminist perspective is illustrated by a series of PSAC regional women's conferences during 1986-7. Called "Getting Organized: Equality in the Workplace and Our Union", the conferences' main objective is for women members to learn the skills necessary to

become active in the union and thereby make it more responsive to their particular needs. Accomplished through a combination of workshops and guest speakers, women learn about the issues and are encouraged to identify their workplace problems. The "nuts and bolts" of union participation--preparing motions, lobbying and speaking in public--are all addressed in an informal educational setting. A further aim of the conferences is to provide women the opportunity to caucus together on a geographical or cultural basis in order to identify common problems. Each caucus then establishes a realizable goal for itself and undertakes to meet together to carry it out once the conference is over. It is hoped the "networking" among women during the conference will enhance their ability to support one another once they return to their locals and try to put into practice what they have learned. In very concrete terms, these conferences reflect a leadership committed to using union resources toward the empowerment of women as individuals and as a constituency within the organization.

The third example of feminist leadership relates to the kinds of issues considered appropriate for union agendas. At one time (not very long ago) feminists fought hard for sexual harrassment to be accepted as a union issue. At present, as part of the regional women's conference programme, the PSAC is experimenting with a series of workshops exclusively for men. These sessions are designed to explore the impact living in a sexist society has on men and, further, to examine men's role in challenging and confronting sexism. For obvious reasons, the

realizing of these objectives is a hefty challenge, and it is too early to assess the effectiveness of our approach. One thing, however, is clear. The decision to attempt to address such issues in a union context constitutes creative and forward-thinking leadership. As such, the feminist leadership perspective not only recognizes women's particular needs but provides opportunities for male members both to explore their own issues and take responsibility for the development of strategies aimed at supporting their union sisters.

A final example of exercising leadership from a feminist perspective is occurring with respect to sexual harrassment in the workplace. One of the component unions of the PSAC, the Canada Employment and Immigration Union (CEIU), recently developed a course which seeks to empower women to deal with sexual harrassment as it occurs and not rely exclusively on legal solutions such as the grievance procedure or human rights investigations. At bottom, this approach promotes an analysis of patterns of male dominance in the workplace and the development of assertiveness skills on the part of the women concerned. At the same time, it demystifies the usefulness of legal or technical structures in favor of a combination of individual skills and the building of solidarity between women in the workplace.

While the importance of negotiated recourse must be recognized, and the unions' contribution in this regard not underestimated, CEIU's approach is both preventive and an attempt to circumvent the long delays which have occurred in sexual harrass-

ment cases to date. By starting with the difficult and painful individual experience of harassment victims, this approach relies on developing the individual woman's ability to exert greater control over her work environment. Without blaming women for creating situations where harassment takes place, it is important to recognize its impact on the victim at a very personal level. Empowering individuals to deal directly with situations in which they might be harassed constitutes this type of recognition. It is inherently political because it acknowledges the unequal terms upon which men and women interact in a patriarchal society. Feminist leadership thus attempts to embrace both the personal and political levels in defining appropriate strategies for women unionists. In this and the other examples mentioned, it is evident that leadership which may be characterized as feminist attempts to provoke change within the union by providing members opportunities for growth both as individuals and as a constituency. In the remaining sections of this paper, several specific techniques employed to this end are examined.

#### CONSENSUS

How many of us have ever sat in meetings where procedural wrangling seemed to take precedence over substantive debate of issues? Or chuckled upon hearing Arlene Mantle's song in which she mentions using "Roberta's" rules of order? I suspect an investigation into the relationship between the use of rules of order and the maintenance of power within organizations would be

rich with insight. For the moment I would like to address the appropriateness of "consensus" decision-making in certain union settings. It is my contention that especially in smaller settings such as local executives, committees and at small local meetings, attempting to make decisions on the basis of consensus would provoke increased membership involvement and, moreover, ensure greater commitment to the carrying out of decisions taken.

The notion of consensus suggests that every participant in a group has both the right to express his/her opinion, and to have the point of view expressed listened to by the group. Consensus refers to the exploration of a variety of views in a setting that encourages (expects) debate--but without the obligation that one view triumphs over all others. Different views compete with one another for adoption by the group but the approach values the exploration itself as an important part of arriving at balanced, practicable decisions.

Adopting consensus decision-making as a model changes the role of the meeting chairperson. Rather than simply administering the meeting (being a 'traffic cop' as the role is sometimes described in union education), the chair acts more to "facilitate" the participation of all concerned. Keeping order is vital, but not the primary orientation. The facilitator's primary aim is to create with participants an atmosphere where full debate of issues may occur. Creating that atmosphere involves the chair having a firm but supple hand on the meeting procedure while simultaneously encouraging frank debate.



In larger settings, union conventions for example, such a model would obviously be impractical. In most instances, however, relatively small groups of union members meet to carry out union business. Many union locals are characterized by sporadic participation except, perhaps, during the ratification of a collective agreement. Although the locals are the most significant part of our organizations, they often remain the weakest link. In my opinion, members' reticence to participate actively in the life of the union is not due simply to a lack of interest in the issues raised. Rather, I believe it is the way in which members feel their views are received (or ignored) when they attend a meeting that holds part of the explanation. More democratic leadership could be exercised by using the rules of order to involve members in debate rather than quash it--a practice, unfortunately, that occurs far too often in meetings. That involvement would lead to greater commitment to the decisions taken. And particularly in settings where union leaders must motivate their members to take action, attempting to draw out members' views (and listening to them) would likely stimulate greater overall participation.

There are some situations, however, which benefit from combining decision-making by consensus with majority rule. One such example emerged during the unionization drive at the Library of Parliament in 1984-85. During the early stages of the campaign, an organizing committee comprised of workers representing various sections (and functions) within the library was formed. This committee operated on the basis of consensus and

met at weekly intervals to make decisions such as: how to best access all sections of the library; how to approach workers likely to have a positive influence on their colleagues' decisions; and how to gauge the overall rhythm of the campaign.

As the drive progressed, the committee met with considerable success and found itself in the position of submitting an application for certification to the Canada Labour Relations Board. A central issue in question was the division of the Library into appropriate bargaining units. Rather than allow the union's technical experts or the Labour Board to dictate the groups of workers who would eventually bargain together, the issue was debated at length by the organizing committee since they, the members, would have to live with the consequences of any such decision.

The committee decided to solicit the views of the membership by conducting a survey and having one-to-one discussions with all workers who had signed membership cards. As a result of this consultation process, it was decided the application for certification would include all Library workers with the exception of one markedly distinct group. As it turned out, the decision to consult the membership broadly and thereby create discussion over what might have remained a purely legal/technical question provided an important opportunity to build solidarity amongst the different groups of Library workers.

This example reveals how the exploration of views contemplated in the consensus model may be combined with majority rule in decision-making. Clearly the process utilized was not exclu-

sively feminist in orientation; it illustrates, however, several of the elements touched on by feminists. By proposing the desired composition of the bargaining unit themselves, members of the organizing committee maintained control over the campaign. In the process, they developed further their own leadership skills and their commitment to creating a local in which the democratic involvement of the members, desired in the final product, was pre-figured in the organizing itself.

Unions are often faced with difficult challenges. Tangible signs of strong membership support are needed to convince employers and governments of the union's power. In most unions however, developing that kind of support requires the leadership to engage deliberately in ongoing, mobilizing campaigns. Attempting to achieve consensus, understood as the exploration of several points of view before committing to a plan of action, would certainly make members' participation at union meetings more substantial. So long as reasonable time limits for debate could be established, the creative application of this model would help to shift more responsibility--and control--into members' hands. At a time when labour's proverbial back is against the wall, it would be worth exploring the long term effects of this model on unions' abilities to mobilize members against employers' and governments' attacks.

#### DEALING WITH CONFLICT

Feminists are sometimes chided for attempting to avoid conflict and, therefore, "papering over" their differences.

While this may occur in some situations, the challenge lies in finding positive ways of confronting and resolving the conflicts that arise inevitably between people working together. In this section, I will provide an example from an educational setting as a basis for exploring some possible solutions or groundrules.

At the PSAC "Women at Work" six-day in-residence course mentioned previously, one of the most important aspects of learning occurs with respect to how the group functions together. Conflict between participants often emerges since the women have chosen different lifestyles and priorities. They often have diverging opinions about issues such as mothering, being single, relations with men in the workplace, appropriate dress codes, flirting, and the primacy accorded women or men in their lives. In attempting to come to grips with the oppression of women as workers and as women, participants are encouraged to express these conflicting points of view in a "safe" environment where no individual is attacked on personal grounds. Women are encouraged to voice their differences without attacking one another's choices. This can be difficult, obviously, since the issues raised are often quite emotional.

For example, women whose families form their central daily concern may feel threatened by, or angry at, women who are more career-oriented or who openly criticize the men in their lives. Alternatively, single women or lesbians may feel discounted and/or angry at the assumptions about women's lives made by a group which, in its orientation, accords legitimacy exclu-

sively to heterosexual relationships and marriage. It is the clashing of these personal identities that forces reflection, self-examination and exchange--all part of the process whereby participants' attitudes are challenged.

The positive resolution of such conflicts does not normally occur spontaneously. Group facilitators employ certain techniques to encourage the development of an environment in which such exchanges may take place. Two such techniques stand out. First, during the introductory session, participants are asked to outline briefly one accomplishment in their lives about which they feel really good. The only requirement is that they speak positively about themselves. Many find the exercise difficult since it forces them not to put themselves down--a trap all-too-familiar to many women. They are encouraged to share personal experiences and must therefore take risks in a new group. As each woman takes her turn, support for her is developed and expressed. Participants are immediately able to relate to one another on a somewhat more intimate level and, moreover, first impressions and stereotypes are partially eroded. As a result, the group begins to gel as a climate of trust is engendered.

The second technique is the opportunity for participants to "check in" with one another and the facilitator at the beginning of each day's session. Members are asked to express their feelings about the programme, the group and to identify any problems or concerns they may have either at a personal or programme level. While this technique is also used in our mixed courses, the substantive level of debate which tends to develop

among the women on this particular course is notable. Further, because members of the group are encouraged to deal directly with one another and not to rely upon the facilitator as an arbiter, the tensions which inevitably develop tend to be dealt with by the group itself.

Two things are significant about the use of each of these techniques. First, they acknowledge openly the importance of feelings in conditioning reactions and behaviour. The exploration of the issues throughout the course thus anticipates having to deal with participants' rational and emotional reactions. Given the attitudinal objectives of a course devoted to "women's" issues, such integrated learning is crucial.

Second, the learning which takes place with respect to how the group chooses to deal with conflict is integral to the course objectives. Although the classroom remains an artificial setting, "real-life" interpersonal situations are continually approximated. As the women explore working collectively, challenging one another and laughing together, they also learn to value themselves and their sisters more. This self-affirmation is empowering for the individual while the group support developed enhances the women's determination to contest difficult circumstances once back in the workplace.

This approach to dealing with conflict could be adopted by small groups such as local executives or negotiating teams. Over a period of time, a group working together closely needs to develop a basis of trust if the immediate objectives are to be achieved. While differing political views, styles and historical

rivalries are often represented on union bodies and cannot be ignored, at some point the group has to decide whether or not it wants to accomplish certain tasks. If the answer is affirmative, some method of talking out differences productively has to be adopted. In the examples provided above, it is acknowledged explicitly that how people feel conditions their behaviour and, hence, the group's ability to meet its goals. Typical meeting procedure does not address this issue. It assumes people participate on an exclusively rational basis. In many local settings, however, I suspect it is not simply grave ideological differences which hamper the meeting of objectives. Without proclaiming "touchy-feely" trade unionism the wave of the future, I believe attempts to deal with conflict by inviting, rather than discouraging differing points of view and, simultaneously, agreeing to attack the opinion and not the individual, would foster the substantive debate of issues so sorely needed in the present context.

#### SKILLS-BUILDING

An underlying tenet of women's organizing over the last two decades has been to integrate into all objectives the acquiring of skills and knowledge by every member of the group. This approach is consistent with an attempt to work collectively and not reproduce hierarchical organizational structures. Women have developed means of sharing knowledge and rotating tasks in order to become more self-reliant and to avoid situations in which certain people gain a monopoly on information and, therefore, power.

This commitment to skills-building suggests an approach among women's organizations which may be contrasted with union experience. Especially in the period since the Second World War, which witnessed the development of a complex industrial relations system, unions have become mired in legal solutions to members' problems. Members' abilities to confront problems directly has diminished and unionism is less vital at the shop floor level where decisions were once made, for example, to stop production in reaction to intolerable conditions or the unsatisfactory handling of workers' complaints. At present, unions are participants in a legal system in which battles tend to be fought either by paid union staff acting as advocates or by lawyers. While this situation is not of unions' making but, rather, reflects a strategy on the part of capital and the state to channel workers' discontent into manageable areas, most unions do little to combat this model of functioning. One casualty of the highly technical model of representation is that workers themselves are often discouraged from exerting collective pressure against management except within a circumscribed legal framework. The negative impact on combative unionism caused by an industrial relations system in which lawyers have become primary actors has been documented elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> Less debate has occurred, however, over the loss this shift away from direct membership involvement has meant with respect to the self-reliance and, potentially, the ability to exert democratic

<sup>4</sup> See Karl Klare, "Labour Law and the Liberal Political Imagination" in Socialist Review, No. 61 (Vol. 12, No. 2), March-April 1982, pp. 45-72.

control that people learn through engaging together in militant activity.

Union feminists have attempted to transpose into their union work this commitment to helping women develop skills which allow them to exert greater control over their working and living conditions. One group to pioneer this approach was Organized Working Women, a body of female union members which originated in Toronto during the 1970's. Women unionists were invited to attend workshops in which they learned how to speak at meetings and how to lobby their brothers for support on a range of issues, including parental rights, sexual harrassment and affirmative action. It was recognized that women required these skills in order to ensure their particular concerns were addressed by union leaders.

The series of regional women's conferences currently underway in the PSAC, mentioned earlier, constitute a similar attempt by our female members and leadership. Based loosely on the OWW model, participants are encouraged to identify their needs as women workers and to identify the skills they will need to effect desired changes in the workplace and union. Through a series of workshops, participants learn to prepare resolutions on women's issues for union meetings, to speak in public and to lobby their fellow union members for support. The conferences culminate in a simulated local union meeting where members are given an opportunity to debate the motions they have written, thereby putting into practice the skills they have learned. The learning that occurs appears to be two-fold: women develop a

greater degree of confidence about their own ability to effect change as they learn the rules of order and procedures that govern union activity. In addition, knowledge of the issues per se is enhanced because the motions prepared and subsequently debated focus upon topics such as technological change, affirmative action, childcare and sexual harrassment.

A further objective of the conference is the building of a network of women activists across the country. To this end, members in each region are encouraged to come together during the planning stages of their conference. Working with a model agenda developed nationally, the local organizing committee is encouraged to take the model and modify it to reflect the character and needs of their region. This is accomplished through the selection of guest speakers, the raising of particular regional issues, and the organizing of cultural events. Of course, this type of organizing involves both a great deal of discussion and the development of new skills as different women take responsibility for carrying out various parts of the logistics and programme. Since the aim of the conferences is to "get organized", the planning process itself provides both a useful learning opportunity and an event around which women in the region may focus their energies.

In both the planning stages and at the conference itself, therefore, the emphasis is on members developing the tools required to participate effectively in their union. It is hoped the knowledge and abilities developed will help these members exert pressure toward having the union deal with their concerns.

No doubt, this is a difficult and long term undertaking and it is expected resistance will be encountered along the way. By endorsing this approach, however, the union leadership has agreed to experiment with the skills-building orientation proven effective during several years of women's organizing. As a result, the prognosis for the development of an informed and, hence, powerful base of active women members is quite hopeful.

### CONCLUSION

Throughout this paper, various examples of women working together in unions have been examined and analyzed. Those examples reflect to varying degrees two underlying principles of feminist organizing: that personal issues are part of the political realm and that in undertaking political work, the objectives envisaged must be reflected in the process by which they are achieved. Although no leadership style, organizing or decision-making model is perfect, the examples provided suggest some objectives against which we may evaluate our work.

Leadership along these lines is being offered at present by women at all levels of the union movement. The interest in decentralizing power to members and, thereby, democratizing unions' practices is not, however, a goal shared by all. For some people (and, I would suggest, for white males in particular) the current practices and structures which govern union activity have worked well. Typically, people who wield power do not ask many questions about its distribution. The patterns of male dominance in our society, reproduced and reflected in our unions,

are not going to simply disappear. Just as resistance to taking women's issues to the bargaining table was (is) encountered, so too can we expect resistance to attempts to modify how we work together. My contention is, that although taking new approaches to the way we work cannot hope to solve all the problems facing trade unions in the current conjuncture, we can no longer afford not to examine the lessons and experiences other movements have to offer.

As women in unionized sectors become more involved in their organizations, new approaches to old problems are occurring. Moreover, as unions undertake to organize the masses of women clustered in the retail and financial sectors of the economy, unions might well benefit from discussing and integrating aspects of this orientation into their approach. At a time when fully fifty percent of the Canadian Labour Congress' executive inner circle is female, it is crucial that trade unionists not be lulled into believing equality has been achieved. Role models are significant, but concrete measures are still required to break down the barriers to women's involvement in their unions.

Feminists active in unions have sought to confront those barriers by looking internally at the power relations which characterize our organizations. As employers' and governments' attacks on working people continue, however, it is important we not lose sight of the reasons which prompted us to look inward in the first place. Our goal is to build strong unions capable of defending women and all workers. As such the strategic challenge

facing us now as trade union feminists is perhaps somewhat different than it was ten years ago.

At present, the language of women's issues has gained a great deal of currency among labour leaders. But although unions now negotiate for many of the improvements women have sought--childcare, paid parental leave, equal pay, to name a few--gains of a substantive and, not simply rhetorical, nature are still relatively few in numbers. As we continue to push for these items to be priority issues at the bargaining table, we must keep in mind what has been coined the "capital W woman" trap; that is, that "sisterhood" always transcends class differences. If, for primarily strategic reasons, the fight to achieve equality within our organizations has emphasized the commonality (rather than differences) between all women, we must now more than ever ensure that feminism of a liberal variety not be the only perspective to inform unions' analysis and strategies on these issues.

It is in this context that trade unionists committed to effecting fundamental social change may benefit from the kind of organizing successes their union sisters have been experiencing. Those achievements rest, in part, on the recognition that union members have interests and preoccupations that go well beyond workplace issues. In very concrete terms, this recognition has meant that the realm typically considered to constitute "union" issues has been forced to expand.

The recognition of union members as more than simply "workers", reflects feminism's commitment to personal issues as part of the overall political project. As a result, paying

attention to the individual's desire and ability to effect change becomes a central consideration in developing strategies for collective action. While a complex array of historical and ideological factors influence each person's decisions, individuals remain, nonetheless, responsible for their own actions. The creation of genuine democratic practices in the present, and ones that will endure into the future we envisage, require that union strategies to exert collective pressure reflect a healthy respect for members' capacity to make decisions concerning their own destinies. It is that message, precisely, which informs the processes and models many union feminists are experimenting with in their work. And so long as the approach is situated in the traditions of militant trade unionism, it has much to offer efforts to build the democratic, combative unions we require.

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TRADE UNION RESOURCES

Canadian Labour Congress (CLC)  
Women's Bureau  
2841 Riverside Drive  
Ottawa, Ontario K1V 8X7

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Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE)  
21 Florence Street  
Ottawa, Ontario K2P 0W6

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National Union of Provincial Government Employees (NUPGE)  
204 - 2841 Riverside Drive  
Ottawa, Ontario K1V 2E1

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Ontario Federation of Labour  
Women's Committee  
15 Gervais Drive, Suite 202  
Don Mills, Ontario M3C 1Y8

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Organized Working Women  
555 Bloor Street West  
Toronto, Ontario M5S 1Y6

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Public Service Alliance of Canada  
Equal Opportunities Coordinator  
233 Gilmour Street  
Ottawa, Ontario K2P 0P1

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## MEMBERSHIP INFORMATION

### CANADIAN RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN

The Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women was founded in April, 1976, as a response to International Women's Year and at the beginning of International Women's Decade (1976-1985). CRIAW's creation met the need for an organization for research on women and women's experience in Canada.

#### STRUCTURE

CRIAW is a non-profit organization with members across the country and abroad. The Board of Directors works on a voluntary basis. Each province and territory is represented by an elected member; in addition, there are six directors-at-large. The Executive Committee is composed of the President, Past President, President-Elect, Secretary and Treasurer. CRIAW's bilingual national office and staff are located in Ottawa.

#### PURPOSE

CRIAW's purpose is to encourage, co-ordinate and disseminate research into women's experience. In the past, generalizations about Canada, its people, its economy, its politics, have too often been based on research by men about the experience of men. Until the experience of women has also been studied and evaluated, until we know just where it is different from and where it is similar to the experience of men, we will have a limited view of Canadian reality.

#### OBJECTIVES

- To promote the advancement of women through feminist research
- To encourage and facilitate communication and information exchange among academic women, community workers, women's groups, and concerned individuals
- To disseminate research results through publications such as The CRIAW Papers, Feminist Perspectives and conference proceedings
- To sponsor and assist research in areas of vital interest to Canadian women

#### ACTIVITIES

**CRIAW BANK OF RESEARCHERS:** A computerized bank of résumés, listing researchers from all disciplines who are committed to the advancement of women.

**RESEARCH GRANTS-IN-AID:** Small annual grants to innovative proposals promoting the advancement of women.

**RESEARCH ASSOCIATE STATUS:** To assist unaffiliated researchers applying to funding agencies.

**THE CRIAW PAPERS:** Original research papers and review articles drawn from various disciplines, advancing the knowledge and understanding of women's experience.

**FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES:** A series of topical, provocative issue-oriented papers exploring women's experience and concerns.

**NEWSLETTER:** A quarterly publication that offers information and opportunities for communication among individual and group members.

**PRIZES:** Three prizes are awarded annually: the **Marion Porter Prize** for the year's best feminist research article; the **Robertine Barry Prize** for the best feminist article in the popular press; and the **Muriel Duckworth Award**, presented to the feminist woman, who, through her action-research in the field of social justice, including peace work, has contributed significantly to the advancement of Canadian women.

**HONORARY MEMBERSHIPS:** Lifetime memberships in CRIAW presented annually to persons who have made a significant contribution to feminist research or promoted research furthering the advancement of women.

**CONFERENCE:** A national general meeting and conference held annually, including research networking sessions.

**OTHER ACTIVITIES:** Collaboration in organizing events such as the 1982 national conference on "Women and the Impact of Microtechnology" and various research seminars.

FOR MORE INFORMATION OR TO OBTAIN A PUBLICATIONS LIST PLEASE CONTACT:

CRIAW/ICREF  
408-151 Slater St.  
Ottawa, Ontario  
K1P 5H3

(613) 563-0681 or 563-0682

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