

Special Issues For Union Women Today



Women workers in the 80's face challenges that are both old and new. Today, women are concerned about pressing for equal pay and opportunity in a time of economic depression. Affirmative action programs that had allowed women to move ahead in the workplace have been thwarted by lay-offs and cutbacks. Non-traditional areas of work remain closed to women as unemployment reduces job opportunities. Part-time work with part-time benefits is being offered as an alternative to badly-needed full-time jobs. The impact of technological change is affecting those areas of work traditionally dominated by women. All union members are hurt by blocks on the right to organize and bargain collectively.

This discussion paper provides a brief look at some of the issues that are of particular concern to working women today.

No Time Like the Present

As the impact of economic crisis is felt across the country, lay-offs, plant closings, wage controls and limits to collective bargaining threaten all workers, male or female. Many workers are concerned about the effect of pressing for equal pay for work of equal value and equal opportunity. Some workers feel uneasy about demanding equality when so many are unemployed.

The causes of the depression are not found in women workers' demands for equality of pay and opportunity, any more than the demands of workers are to blame for unemployment, inflation or high interest rates. Our economic crisis cannot be blamed on workers' request for a fair return for their labour.

Discrimination in pay, hiring and job opportunity is as unfair in times of economic difficulty as it is in better times. Justice for working women cannot be postponed until the economy improves, nor can recovery from depression be built on inequality between men and women workers.

Unions across the country have recognized the need to affirm their commitment to equal treatment for women workers. The Ontario Federation of Labour's 1982 statement on affirmative action called for affiliates to negotiate "affirmative action programs and clauses of specific benefit to women." These contracts might include equalization of base rates for women's and men's jobs, equal opportunity for women to advance, in the workforce and no-discrimination clauses. The Quebec Federation of Labour, in a 1981 policy statement on the status of women, recommended that its affiliates set up committees on the status of women with a mandate to determine "the full extent of the problems faced by women." Unions are recognizing that equality postponed by depression is equality denied to working women.

One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

Unions have been active in assisting women to find employment in non-traditional areas and in fighting discrimination in hiring practices. Two recent examples illustrate the kind of support that unions can provide.

In Fort Erie, Ontario Lodge 171 of the International Association of Machinists determined that only 35 of 500 people hired at Fleet Industries in the previous two years were women. The union put an ad in the local paper asking women who had been refused employment with Fleet to come forward. Over 200 women replied, and the IAM, with the support of the Ontario Federation of Labour, took the case of eight of the women workers to the Ontario Human Rights Commission. Unfortunately, although the eight women were given some compensation, they were not hired by Fleet, and no affirmative action program was put in place.

In 1979, Local 1005 of the United Steelworkers of America found that the Steel Company of Canada (Stelco) in Hamilton had hired only one woman since 1961 for blue-collar production jobs. During that period, 33,000 men had been hired and 30,000 women had applied for work.

The union, supported by the Ontario Federation of Labour, assisted five women who felt they had been denied work with Stelco to go before the Ontario Human Rights Commission. The USWA Local 1005 also asked that Stelco, as a minimum first step require that at least 10% of new employees be women. In 1980 all five women were hired by Stelco, and the company came close to reaching the 10% level in hiring women for blue-collar jobs.

Although the numbers of women hired were small, these hirings represented a breakthrough in a traditionally male area of employment. But even these small steps were thwarted when the depression hit Hamilton, and hundreds of workers, including women workers, were laid off. As the last hired, women are particularly vulnerable to lay-off. There are now virtually no women in blue-collar jobs at Stelco.

Union women must look for and discuss ways and means of guaranteeing that long-overdue gains in hiring practices will not be eliminated by lay-offs and cutbacks. Women must explore strategies for ensuring that they do not lose their hard-won chance in non-traditional areas, while at the same time, protecting the rights of all workers to seniority and job security.





Part-Time Work: the Unwanted Alternative

One out of every four women works part-time. As in full-time work, part-time jobs for women are concentrated in the female job ghettos — two-thirds of all part-time jobs are clerical, sales or service jobs. As a result, almost three-quarters of part-time workers are women.

Part-time workers are usually confined to the lowest job levels, with little opportunity for training or advancement. Most part-time workers earn less than full-time workers on an hourly basis, and part-time jobs offer inadequate benefit packages — reduced sick leave, poor pensions and lack of disability or medical insurance.

The number of part-time workers has grown dramatically. Since International Women's Year in 1975, the number of part-timers increased from 988,000 to 1,477,000 in 1981. Almost one-third of new jobs created since 1975 are part-time. Part-time work now comprises 13.5% of the labour force. As three-quarters of the newly created part-time jobs are in service, sales, clerical and health areas, it is not surprising that women also take over three-quarters of the new part-time positions.

While a majority of part-time workers choose to work a reduced work week, a large minority (40%) have taken part-time because they couldn't find full-time jobs. A significant number of female part-time workers would take on full-time work if good child care and community supports for working parents were available.

The Canadian Labour Congress, in its submission to the federal government's inquiry into part-time work, urged that "Part-time work . . . be integrated into a full employment policy so that it is complementary to, rather than conflicting with, full-time employment." The CLC also reiterated its 1976 commitment that "Special measures shall be taken as necessary and appropriate to ensure equality of treatment for workers employed regularly on a part-time basis, the majority of whom are women, particularly with respect to pro-rata benefits."

Blocks to Collective Bargaining

The reaction of the federal government and several provincial governments to the economic depression has been to impose harsh and unjust legislation, such as Bill C-124, on all public sector workers as an "example" to the private sector.

Bill C-124, which puts six and five per cent wage ceilings on public workers and severely limits the right of collective bargaining for two years, has a particularly harsh effect on women workers:

- The standard of living of all workers in the public sector will be reduced by 10 per cent. Female workers, already in the lowest paying jobs, will be hard hit as prices rise and wages fail to keep up.

- No progress will be made in bringing about equality in the terms and conditions of employment of men and women workers.
- No improvement will be made in negotiating issues of special concern to women such as maternity leave; protection against the effects of technological change; day care; as well as health and safety conditions; medical and dental plans; paid educational leave; vacations; etc.

Bill C-124, with its provincial offspring, sets back years of struggle by the labour movement to establish the process of free collective bargaining by allowing governments and crown corporations to renege on contractual commitments voluntarily entered with their workers.

This legislation must be vigorously opposed by all workers. As Dennis McDermott, President of the CLC, said in his statement to the federal government, "The economic policy of which Bill C-124 forms a part is a prescription for continuing recession and economic misery for millions of Canadians. . . (The bill) is so fundamentally unjust that the only reasonable way to deal with it is to get rid of it completely."

Living With the Chip

Micro-electronics in the workplace can be both beneficial and harmful. It can free workers from time-consuming, monotonous or dangerous tasks, but it can also create unemployment, limit responsibility and opportunity, increase health and safety problems and decrease the quality of working life.

There is no doubt that micro-electronic technology is in the workplace to stay. The impact of this profound change will be largely felt by women workers. The micro-chip revolution is felt most in those occupations traditionally held by women — clerical, sales and service. These areas are major employers of women without advanced skills, education or training. These are also the areas with little protection from unions. In the private sector, only 16% of office workers are organized.

Even for unionized workers, there is insufficient protection from technological change. Many contracts or agreements do not include clauses that anticipate the effects of micro-electronic advances.

Workers must be guaranteed "security within change" through a joint effort of unions, government and industry. Improved legislation, consultation and collective agreements together with appropriate retraining are needed to protect workers from the harmful effects of technological change. Because micro-technology has such an impact on female workers, unionized women must encourage their unions to make it a priority in negotiations.

Finally, women in the workforce and young women still in school must be encouraged and supported by appropriate education and training to develop the skills necessary for the new technology.